Summary

Bellamione / "Remember when I told you I'd read her mind? I saw something peculiar. Bella," she went on urgently. "I think there's a possibility she could be— she could be a venor floccus." AU, centred around Hermione Granger, a very best friend of Draco Malfoy, back when she was just a fifteen-year-old kid dealing with her inner demons, trying to deny the growing interest in a mysterious Bellatrix Lestrange.
About Reverse Psychology

Disclaimer: From the beginning to the end, all the original characters and settings belong to J.K.R. I'm just exploring for the sake of my own sanity.

Summary: "Remember when I told you I'd read her mind? I saw something peculiar. Bella," she went on urgently. "I think there's a possibility she could be— she could be a venor floccus." AU, centred around Hermione Granger, a very best friend of Draco Malfoy, back when she was just a fifteen-year-old kid dealing with her inner demons, trying to deny the growing interest in a mysterious Bellatrix Lestrange.

Pairing: HG&BL /femslash/

Rated: M/MA for future chapters

Warning: I'm bringing such a slow burn your hearts are going to suffer in agony. I also want to point out I'll try to keep the original characters as much authentic as I can, but because the events take place in a completely different dimension, some of them just have to differ at least a little.

Changes worth mentioning: Hermione's grandparents, Eleanor & Victor Watson were muggles. Their firstborn child, Jean, is a witch, married to a muggle, a policeman, John Granger; that being said, the girl is a half-blood. The purebloods, however, don't see any difference between muggle-borns and half-bloods.

She is a Ravenclaw student that has no relation to Harry Potter & Ron Weasley other than sharing a few classes with them.

Lord Voldemort is an unknown term—no man with such a name exists in this particular AU—or does he? *evil grin*

Beta Reader: Irymia
"So tell us, Weasley, what is it that you can smell again?" Professor Snape asked, making all the Slytherins chuckle in spiteful joy.

It was one of those potion lessons students of the fifth year shared together. They were standing around a cauldron, inhaling the steam coming off of the pearly surface of Amortentia.

"Silence!" The wizard's eyes flashed with glee as he raised his voice. "We won't be able to guess his love interest if he doesn't give us a clue, even though I think I might get the name right on the first try," he finished maliciously.

Ron, too embarrassed to say a word, kept his mouth shut. He wasn't really keen to give the professor any more chances to humiliate him. It was already too bad as it was because Snape was obviously planning on milking even this tiny bit of a presumption for all it was worth.

"If I heard correctly, you said books," professor narrowed his eyes as if trying to put one and one together, "and... since you're not particularly bright," a new wave of laughter followed, "plus, considering your stuttering anytime Granger asks you something, I think we all know who it is that you love," he emphasized the last word casually and smirked as the mass of green roared with mirth.

Turning his gaze towards a pretty girl standing by her Ravenclaw's classmates, he added, "Miss Granger, you must be flattered."

Hermione's face turned the colour of a ripe tomato. She furrowed her brows, ready to say something, but a dark-haired boy with round glasses was the first to react.

"Why don't you tell us what it is that you can smell, professor?" he asked cheekily, earning a few gasps from the students. Snape's pallor turned grey and it was clear the young wizard had crossed the line.

"Potter, why don't you tell us how it feels to lose fifty points by asking stupid questions?" he let out slowly, making all the Gryffindors murmur in protest.

Harry, ready to push his luck once again, opened his mouth, but Ron nudged his arm. "Let it be, mate," he muttered, still red. Surprisingly, the black-haired boy took his advice but still gave the professor an angry look.

Hermione, who was watching the scene with the same embarrassment as Ronald, couldn't decide whether to admire Harry's bravery or feel sorry for his dullness. Sure, it was very nice of him to stick up for his friend, but having to deal with the angry professor wasn't much of a bright idea.

She did not know what to make out of Ronald's Amortentia either—it was most probably just one big misunderstanding. They didn't even belong to the same faculty—talking to each other only during classes when working in groups; however, it was true he often lost his voice whenever Hermione looked at him…

She gave the poor boy a searching look, but her train of thoughts got interrupted by Snape's voice announcing the homework.

"...I expect to see all the essays on my desk on Monday! The same applies to you, Potter, don't go thinking everyone's in awe of you because of your little scar," professor called out, looking for another reason to strip Gryffindor of a few points. The end of the year was close and he was trying his best to secure his faculty a victory. He was so eager to win he had granted ten points to Goyle
for the answer he didn't even get correctly.

Harry, perfectly aware of Snape's intentions, only bit his tongue, leaving the classroom as soon as the class ended. Hermione too, having no desire to stay here any longer, grabbed her stuff and swiftly walked out of the potion room.

Climbing the stairs from the Dungeons, she heard a familiar voice behind her. "Hey, Granger, ready to get married?" Draco jogged after her, joining in.

"Stop it!" She shook her head, not really in a mood for his teasing.

"Honestly, I had no clue! Just imagine, tons of ginger babies running down your garden, asking for food! Isn't it cute?"

Hermione shot him a dirty look but instead of striking back, she just lengthened her steps.

"What? It's funny! The Ginger boy is in love with you!" he said laughing and pushed some first grader passing by just because he could.

That made Hermione stop and turn to him. "Why did you do that?" she snapped indignantly, but since he didn't answer and only kept smiling annoyingly, she just sighed. "Draco, you know we're friends, but sometimes you're being such a giant arse it hurts my whole being!"

Her statement had no effect on him though, only made him smirk wider. "Weasley and Granger, sitting in a tree—"

"What are you, four? If I didn't know you, I'd say you're jealous." She decided to change the strategy because her intention to lead a mature conversation didn't seem to work.

"Yeah." She tilted her head as his smile faltered.

"Oh, please! I'm not jealous, don't you see I only want you to be happy? You and him—it's a perfect match. On the other hand, you and me—that would never work. I'm not into relationships." He winked at her and shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint."

"You know awfully well about reverse psychology, don't you?" Hermione turned away from him, the left corner of her mouth lifted in amusement. She started walking toward the exit, leaving Draco behind, but he made his way back to her in a second.

"What did you say to me? Don't use your muggle vocabulary on me, Brain!" he said in an exasperated tone.

"It's not a muggle term... and stop calling me Brain!" she snapped, slowly losing her patience.

"You should be flattered," he said, mimicking Snape's voice.

"Would you shut up already?!" Hermione hit his shoulder.

"No."

"Do you want me to hex you?" she asked, reaching into her pockets.

"Are you trying to threaten me?" Draco laughed but decided to end his little teasing game as Hermione raised her eyebrows in one final warning.

"Fine." He put his hands up as a sign of surrender. "Merlin, you're so uptight these days, Granger..."
"What's gotten into you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione replied flatly, avoiding his eyes.

"Well... whatever." Fortunately, Draco decided not to pry and changed the subject instead. "Listen here, mother asked me to invite you over for the summer vacation."

Hermione choked on the air halfway through her lungs. "Sorry?"

Draco only rolled his eyes. "It's not a big deal. I've always had people coming over, it's usually Crabbe, Goyle, and Zabini, but the two morons cannot make it this time."

"But... how... when?" Hermione stuttered, paralyzed.

"When what, Granger? When did I tell my parents I befriended a mud— I mean a half-blood?"

She was in so much of a shock she didn't even flinch when he almost said the word. Since they had become friends, Draco was trying his best to avoid saying anything offensive regarding the blood status.

"Well, long story short, I pretty much explained the whole thing to them. Father wasn't thrilled, mind you," Draco admitted, his ice-cold eyes focused on a huge window that was channelling the late afternoon sun rays into the room. "But mother took it quite well. So well, she agreed to have you over."

"She agreed?" Hermione emphasized the last word, not really sure what to make out of it. "It wasn't her idea then? But you said—"

"No, it was mine, actually," Draco said simply as if it was nothing.

Hermione couldn't believe her ears. This snobby boy who wouldn't even look in her direction without pretending to be throwing up— he did—

"Draco, I can't express how much this means to me, but— I don't want you to get into trouble with them!" She breathed out heavily.

"Don't worry about it, just say you'll be there. I cannot spend another summer listening to Zabini's stories about his mother anymore. He's got issues."

Hermione only raised her eyebrows and laughed.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" Draco asked and frowned.

"It's nothing. I'm just so proud of you," Hermione confessed and suddenly threw her arms around him, catching the blond boy off guard.

"Granger, what are you doing?" he whispered in a shocked voice. "We're in the middle of the corridor."

"I don't know. I'm just," she let go of his unresponsive frame, straightening her robes, still smiling. "I'm just flattered," she said finally, imitating Snape's voice the same way Draco did just a few minutes ago.

The corners of his mouth lifted.

"Come on, or else Weasley might get jealous." He joked and playfully nudged her arm.
"You're hopeless." Hermione shook her head as they made their way out of the castle.
"I beg your pardon? I don't think I heard you correctly." The cold voice of Lucius Malfoy echoed through the parlour of the palatial manor.

"Quite the opposite, father, you heard very well," Draco assured him, folding his arms. He had anticipated the news would not conjure up a smile on his father's face but still, the iciness radiating from his words made the young boy's confidence shudder.

He'd come home for dinner, as he did from time to time when his parents hosted an important assembly with a bunch of magnates from the Ministry. His job was simple: shaking hands and repeating he couldn't be prouder to be the son of such an admirable man. It bored him to the core of his bones but it was something all kids of his status had to put up with.

Through the years, Draco had attended many events, but this particular one was by far the most ridiculous of them all.

It was only him, his parents, and the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge—a tiny man of no solid opinions, whose vocabulary seemed to be shrinking inversely proportionally to the amount of wine pounding down his throat.

"Lucius, I'm tellin' youah," Fudge said slowly, trying to focus his hazy eyes on the blond man sitting opposite him, "you abso... absouloutuleley... " He furrowed his brows as if trying to figure out why the word sounded so funny, but eventually gave up. Holding up his hand, he started again with a much more convenient choice of words. "Youweh speaking the truth, my friend!"

Lucius yawned, forcing a tired smile in the Minister's direction in the hope that he would take the hint and leave already. It was pointless trying to discuss important issues while the man's blood was boiling with alcohol.

Unfortunately, Fudge not only failed to notice but looked as if somebody had breathed a new life into him, changing the course of the conversation to his childhood memories, which not a single soul at the table seemed to appreciate. After a few exhausting moments of his incoherent talk, Narcissa Malfoy decided to take matters into her own hands.

Having cleared her throat, she began. "I am so sorry for interrupting, Minister, I'm sure it's an immensely delightful anecdote, but I'm afraid Draco needs to be back in his dorm before eleven. It is so embarrassing, but you know how Dumbledore is." She smiled apologetically in her own charming way, making the poor man blush under her gaze.

"Of course, of course!" Fudge blurted as he tried to stand up, but only managed to hit his knee.

"Bloody— I mean—"

Narcissa let out a deep breath as she watched the man struggle. "It's been an honour to have you here." She looked at her husband, whose face radiated pure relief and gratitude.

"My exact words, Minister." He stood up, coming up to Fudge to help him to his feet.

"My pleasure, Lucius... Madame Malfoy," Minister bowed his head, gripping the back of the nearest chair. When taking the first few careful steps, he paused, catching Draco's bored gaze.
"Son, knowledge is the greatest weapon. Take your education seriously and one day you—!" The end of his sentence got swallowed in a loud hiccup.

Draco frowned, not really knowing how to react. If he hadn't just wasted five hours of his life, he'd actually laugh at the sight of his father supporting the drunk Minister, but his sense of humour seemed to have gone missing.

When Fudge finally vanished in the burning fireplace, all the three members of the Malfoy family sighed in relief.

"What a pathetic excuse for a man!" Lucius shook his head as he rubbed his eyes, sinking into the chair nearest to the window.

"Well, next time you wish to discuss the elimination of Weasleys' department, try not to offer any alcohol." Narcissa pointed out, sitting back down herself.

Draco too, mirroring both of his parents, plopped into his chair. He knew this wasn't the right time for bringing up his friendship with Granger, but he had no idea when he'd have another chance to talk about it. This evening was probably his only option because he surely didn't plan to discuss it through letters.

"Draco," Narcissa interrupted his thoughts with her soft voice she rarely let anyone hear, "do you want me to send Ailey for anything before you leave?"

Draco shook his head, preparing for the big announcement. His palms got all of a sudden sweaty as he nervously rubbed them together. *Come on, it cannot be that hard. He encouraged himself. Just need to think of a good way to sell it. Right... now or never.*

"I want Granger to come over." *Shoot. Draco mentally slapped himself.*

He watched as his father froze with his hand halfway to his hair. Slowly turning away from the window, Lucius raised his eyebrows as a laugh escaped through his pursed lips. "Funny, I've heard elf-made wine could do strange things to a man, but what I'm hearing is a pure Utopia," he let out, looking over to his wife who, however, didn't seem to share his amusement. Quite the opposite: Her already pale skin became almost translucent as she widened her eyes.

"I want Granger to come over this summer," Draco repeated slowly, aiming to sound confident, but couldn't really tell whether he succeeded.

"I beg your pardon? I don't think I heard you correctly." Lucius' voice suddenly lost all the traces of laughter.

"Quite the opposite, you heard very well," the blond boy answered, standing up from the chair once again.

The expression forming on his father's face did not look good. Not good at all. "Granger? That mudblood Granger?"

Draco frowned, not really pleased with the choice of words. "She's not a mudblood. Her mother is a witch," he corrected.

"Her mother is a mudblood witch and that father of hers is nothing but a dim muggle. So much the same, maybe even worse," the man said loftily, lifting his chin. "It should be illegal to mate with such varmints."
That statement was all it took to make Draco understand. Every insult he'd ever granted Granger with suddenly sounded wrong. So very wrong his stomach twisted in disgust, making everything he'd ever believed in disappear in the smoke of perception.

He took a moment to calm down. It wouldn't be wise to lose his temper. "I'd very much appreciate if you didn't use this kind of expressions when it comes to my friends," he let out finally.

Lucius' eyes widened. "Your friends?" His laugh was forced and soon turned into a dangerous sneer. "Since when does my only son fraternize with scum?"

"She's not scum!" Draco snapped, no longer in control of his tone.

His father's sharp countenance emitted perplexion and disgust at the same time. "Draco, what is this about? Don't tell me you took a liking to the filthy—"

"No, Merlin! It's not that. I just..." Draco stuttered in exasperation.

Lucius stood up from the chair, turning his back to both Narcissa and his son. "Listen, I don't want to hear another word about it."

"Father, I..."

"You're not allowed to talk to that girl. Is that clear?"

"Excuse me? It is my life! You can't just tell me who I can or cannot—" Draco retorted but Lucius spoke over him.

"You are NOT going to disrespect me like that! I am your father and there are certain rules you simply have to follow! Merlin, I thought we raised you better than that," Lucius added, disbelief reflecting in his eyes.

Draco shook his head. "You've never talked to me in such a way. What happened to you?"

"You've never given me any reason," the man said coldly, turning back to look at his son.

"And what reason is this? Granger is just as much of a human as I am. She saved my life, for Merlin's sake!" The secret slipped out of his mouth as if it was nothing.

"What did you say?" Narcissa finally decided to join in.

"Nothing." The boy dismissed the question, though he knew that sooner or later he would have to tell the truth.

"Answer me, Draco," Narcissa said firmly, making him sigh in uneasiness.

"What's the point? You wouldn't believe me, anyway," he replied, disappointed by the lack of understanding.

"Well, a few moments ago I wouldn't believe it's possible to be betrayed by my own son. Try me," the blond wizard said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Lucius!" Narcissa finally came to Draco's rescue. "Please..."

He didn't say another word, only directed his eyes to Draco in expectation. The boy, realizing he didn't have any other choice, took a deep breath and reluctantly started talking.
He remembered the day as if it was only yesterday. That idiot, Filch, caught him in the corridor after the curfew. Under the influence of his stupid ideas, the man took him out of the castle straight to Hagrid's cottage.

"You're breaking the rules! Do you even know who I am?" Draco protested as the man pushed his back to encourage him to walk faster. "Wait till my father hears about this!"

"I am not afraid of your father, boy! You're a student. A student out of bed at night! If you want to roam outside, I'll give you a good reason." He sneered.

"This is unacceptable! Take me back at once!" Draco ordered but was only met with one final nudge on his shoulder.

"We're here." Filch wouldn't stop smiling as they stopped in front of the wooden ruin the caretaker used to call a house. There was no need to knock because a huge frame of Rubeus Hagrid just came out from behind the colossal pumpkins.

"Who is it? What are you doing here?" he yelled, almost annoyed, once he caught a sight of them.

"Hagrid, good evening! I'm bringing help. This one volunteered, isn't it just... generous?" Filch called back in a voice full of happiness.

"Are you insane?!" Draco shrieked as he pulled away from the skinny caretaker. "I wouldn't do it even if you offered me a first-class ticket out of this stupid school with an option to transfer to Durmstrang."

Hagrid's dark eyes were jumping from one male to the other. "Filch, who told you to bring the boy here?"

"Nobody! It was his stupid idea!" Draco blurted, almost crying.

"What? Take him back, this instant! Do you know who that is?!" Hagrid's eyes widened as he recognized the aristocratic features of the Malfoys' offspring.

"Don't listen to him, Hagrid! Professor Snape allowed it." Filch lied like a dog.

"What?! That's not true! Snape doesn't have a clue I'm here!" Draco cried out desperately.

Hagrid pushed the man aside, whispering, trying to shake some sense into him. "Filch, this is a son of Lucius Malfoy, do you know what will happen to us if something happens to him?"

For a split second, Filch looked unsure but seemed to recover pretty quickly. "Well, do what you want, but I wouldn't risk having Snape on my bad side, either."

"Then let's go see him," Hagrid suggested flatly.

"Professor was not in a good mood when I met him. You know, he's got a lot of work, it wouldn't be smart to interrupt him with something he once agreed to. You're a professor, Hagrid, act like one!" Filch, however stupid he might have been, used a clever trick.

"I dunno..." Hagrid seemed hesitant.

"Look," the old caretaker whispered, "Lucius Malfoy doesn't have any power over here and Dumbledore would never let anything happen to you. Moreover, you know the forest. Nothing's going to happen if he stays with you."
Hagrid sighed heavily, giving in to Filch's manipulation.

"All right, come along!" he said, walking back to the boy, who had heard every single word they so foolishly uttered.

"No! This squib is lying! I refuse to stay here!" Draco yelled, pointing at Filch.

"Oh, but you won't stay here. You're going down there." The spiteful man sneered as he nodded toward the Forbidden Forest.

"What?! Are you mad?!" Draco was panicking.

"Take care, heard there are many creatures hunting at night," Filch whispered as he walked past them, heading back to the castle.

"FILCH! Don't you dare leave me here!" Draco yelled after him, but since he didn't get any response, yelled even louder. "You are going to pay for this! Do you hear me?!"

"Don't worry, Draco, we won't go far." Hagrid tried to calm the boy down but it was no use.

"I am not going anywhere!" he replied loftily, folding his arms.

"Come on, it's not as scary as it looks." The half-giant tried to smile as he took the first few steps toward the thick mass of blackness. "I wouldn't stay here on my own if I were you," he called over his shoulder, having Draco running after him.

The first half an hour went surprisingly well. It really wasn't that bad of a place once one stopped paying attention to the strange sounds coming from all the directions.

"Draco, I need you to stay here for a sec, I'll be right back, 'kay?" Hagrid suddenly stopped, searching for something in his pocket.

"Sure, just leave me behind, there's nothing to kill me." Draco turned his back to the caretaker, sarcasm lacing the words full of fear. "I'm not staying here alone, okay?!" Since the boy did not hear any response, he turned back, only to realize he was alone.

"Shoot! Hagrid!" he yelled without any thinking. It was already too late when he realized his mistake. There was a strange sound behind his back that made him run for dear life.

'I won't get killed for the lame giant!' He thought as he jumped over a bunch of rocks. He ran and ran until his feet collided with a crooked root of an old tree, making him fall flat on his face.

"Ouch!" he let out dimly as he slowly sat up, holding a hand to his nose. It was bleeding.

"Hagrid, you're gonna pay for this!" Draco whispered to himself as tears of fear mixed with blood streamed down his cheeks. He looked around and it finally dawned on him. He was alone in a forest full of dangerous creatures.

There were trees all around him, all identical. "This can't be happening!" He quickly stood up, taking the wand out of his pocket. "Lumos!" he whispered, trying to locate something familiar. Unfortunately, there was not a stalk he could recognize.

"What do I do?!" Draco was panicking, still looking around. He didn't know whether to stay and wait for Hagrid to rescue him or try to find the big moron.

'I won't possibly survive the night staying in one place,' he tried to reason.
'I need to figure out the way to find the idiot.'

Bravely, he took the first careful steps toward an overgrown mass of bushes he had a feeling he had passed on his way here. As quietly as he could, he jumped over them to find a narrow path lined by a shining bed of moss.

No...

Draco made his way back, trying a different path and luckily, found the right one on the second try. The hope of surviving this messed-up night let him tame his striking fear. That was until a sudden sniffing sound hit his ears.

He felt hot breath against his nape, which spawned a rash of goosebumps down his spine. Slowly, as if time had stopped, he turned around and froze. Just mere inches away from his face, yellow teeth with dripping saliva glowed in the moonlight.

Draco couldn't move or breathe. He had no idea how long he stood there. It felt like months, whole years, while in reality, it was probably just a few seconds.

He knew this was the end. A painfully long one.

As if coming out of a trance, he jumped as the beast pulled away, turning its giant head upon hearing an odd sound. A human sound.

Draco couldn't believe his eyes. Right behind the huge wolf-like beast stood Hermione Granger, trying her best to distract the monster.

Like a coward, Draco took his chance to turn around and sprint with all his might away from the huge creature. He ran and ran until one thought sprung inside his mind. It was insane, but—

'The stupid Granger is there all alone— but no! There's no way I am going back. If she wants to play brave, it's her fault she's going to serve as a late dinner.'

But still, the thought of abandoning her while she risked her own life for saving his wouldn't stop haunting him.

Desperate and against his own will, he stopped and looked around.

Another creepy noise filled the air, crippling the boy, but as if out of pure luck, it wasn't another monster. It was—

"Hagrid!" Draco yelled as he ran into his huge front, "Granger! There's a... COME ON!" He tried to push the giant but he stood no chance.

"What?" Hagrid asked, his voice full of fear.

"Move already!" the boy yelled again and suddenly Hagrid did, making Draco fall to the ground. He quickly got back to his feet, pointing in the direction where he had seen the beast.

Hagrid hurried into the labyrinth of trees, disappearing before Draco's eyes.

It was probably too late. Granger must have been dead already.

Granger... dead. He couldn't explain why he felt a strange emptiness inside his stomach once he imagined the girl's lifeless body lying on the ground.
Suddenly, he heard Hagrid's roar and a howling of the beast... and then silence.

'That's it. Hagrid's gone as well,' Draco thought desperately.

'I'm finished.' The tears of fear started pouring once again until he saw Hagrid's huge body coming back with Granger jogging in front of him. Her face expressed horror but other than that, she seemed to be quite all right.

Pure relief filled his whole being upon seeing both of them. Quickly, he wiped the tears away.

"Come on, we need to get back!" Hagrid announced as if it was their idea to roam here at night.

"What happened?! Is it dead?" Draco asked.

"No, but it's not going to do us any harm for now," Hagrid replied mysteriously, "there are much more interesting questions to ask, though... Right, Hermione?! Explain to me what for Merlin's sake you were doing here?!" Hagrid suddenly started all accusing as they were making their way back.

"I got a detention from Professor Snape and he told me to find you and help with anything you'd need. I couldn't find you outside so I went looking for you," she replied as if there hadn't been a beast trying to kill them just a few minutes ago.

"Merlin, Granger! How could you be so STUPID?! You'd rather get yourself killed than refuse to comply?!" Draco tapped his temples and shook his head as he jogged by Hagrid's huge belly.

"If I were you, I'd be glad I was SO stupid! It could have ended pretty badly," Hermione replied bitterly.

"Says you," he shot back, but somewhere deep, deep, deep down he agreed.

"That's it! I've had it up to here with Dumbledore, that giant, and the stupid squib!" Lucius' eyes were shooting daggers when Draco finished his talking.

"It wasn't Hagrid's fault." Draco tried to defend the caretaker.

"What?! Are you friends with him too now?!" Lucius snapped, making the boy jump.

"No, I just, it's all the squib's fault. He's mental!" The boy shrugged.

"Take your stuff, Draco, I'm going to have a word with Dumbledore." The man stood up, ready to leave.

"Not unless we finish the conversation!" Draco protested. "Father, please, I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for her."

Lucius slowly came back. "Unlikely story. You should have thought of something much more believable. The Beast of Gévaudan." Lucius raised his eyebrows, not even trying to hide his disappointment. He looked at Narcissa as if hoping for an exchange of looks, but his wife was cold stone frozen.

"Son, even little children know the Gévaudan's monster is a fairytale! It's always been werewolves—not mentioning that the legends say such a beast was enjoying its victims in France, hunting for women and children. Tell me, Draco, do you consider yourself a child?" Lucius asked in a low voice.
"You've never doubted me." The blond boy frowned, hurt by all the interrogation.

"Well, nor were you telling stories before. You know, I've always supported even the most questionable tales of yours, but this is just ridiculous. Tell me you haven't talked about this with anyone. I don't want to know what would our friends say if my only son..." Lucius stopped just in time.

"If your only son what?" The boy challenged him to finish, but Lucius only smiled, completely changing his behaviour.

"Nothing. Draco, let's sit down and talk about this as grown-ups, shall we?" He pointed at a nearby chair, prompting his son to sit down.

"Fine, let's talk." Draco complied, choosing Fudge's abandoned seat, opposite to his father's.

"So let's say Granger did save your life. Do you feel like being in debt? We can give her gold and forget that it's ever happened," Lucius suggested.

"No, it's not that! After that incident we somehow became friends. She's quite smart and I'd appreciate being able to have such people in my life... mother?" Draco turned to her, looking for some support.

"Draco, It's certainly not a good idea." She shook her head disapprovingly.

"Why not? I just—if you'd even listened, you'd have heard that I owe my life to her. This is the least I could do to repay her." He frowned again. It was a completely new feeling for him to hear his parents say no.

Lucius took a deep breath. "All right, but even if we allowed it, are you forgetting about your dear aunt?"

"Who? Andromeda?" Draco shot cheekily, hitting the nerve.

"How dare you mention that woman, Draco!" Narcissa snapped. "She's nothing to us!"

"I'm sorry! I'm just really surprised by your lack of gratitude toward Granger just because her blood—well, is not like ours." He let his words sink in and then continued. "And when it comes to aunt Bella, she doesn't have to know."

"Do you think she's stupid? Look at that Granger girl, for Merlin's sake! She's got mud written all over her frame. It just takes one look to tell!" Lucius protested.

"Well, there has to be a way! She's the only real friend I have. Do this one thing for me. I'm not asking for much." Draco turned to his mother, who seemed to have let the Andromeda subject go.

Her freezing eyes melted and turned the teal shade of blue. "We'll think about it," she let out finally, surprising both Lucius and Draco.

"So you..?"

"I didn't promise you anything!"

"Maybe we could arrange—"

"I said we'll think it over!" Narcissa raised her eyebrows but gave him a small smile as she came over to kiss his cheek. "Take good care and promise me to stay out of trouble, all right?"
"All right." Draco nodded, not saying anything else. He knew he'd won her over.
The brainiest of the brains,

allow me the pleasure of inviting you to spend a whole month of this glorious holiday in my magnetic presence at Malfoy Manor.

Seriously, Granger. Your parents must have already received the formal letter, sent by my mother herself, so no backing out! I'll kill Zabini if I'm left alone with him one more day.

Now, move it and tell your mother to owl us a note announcing your acceptance.

I guess I'll see you in a few days.

P.S. Stay out of trouble.

P.P.S. Stop worrying!

- D. Malfoy

"Oh, no!" Hermione sighed heavily as she tossed the parchment on the bunch of books occupying half of her bed. She had really hoped this was just another bizarre dream of hers but alas, it was as real as the whole absurdity of the situation.

What was he thinking?!

She clearly remembered the day he spat out this nonsense. Of course, Hermione was flattered and unbelievably proud of him for standing up to his family, but she didn't seriously expect him to truly act on it—and that was okay, it was the gesture alone she cared about.

Honestly, the idea of setting a foot in his house gave her a certain level of anxiety comparable with the height of Mauna Kea. She was perfectly aware who was the true source of Draco's misleading beliefs, so the thought of spending the rest of the holiday in such company didn't really excite her.

"How on Earth could I possibly survive a day, let alone a whole month, at a place like Malfoy Manor?" The girl threw a rhetorical question in the air.

If only she could refuse. No—she valued her friendship with the blond boy too much to disappoint him. Sure, he acted like a brat most of the time but it was just the way he had been brought up. Hermione doubted he'd ever heard a no from any of his parents and this huge mess was just a proof of it. However, he wasn't as bad as he tried to be—and Merlin did he try, but there was this side of him, funny, smart, and sensitive, which Hermione admired so much. No, he definitely wasn't a bad guy.

And she definitely couldn't do this to him. Hermione knew Draco's parents wouldn't be pleased with her company, but she wasn't doing it for them.

"'Mione, let me know if anyone, listen, anyone treats you the way they're not supposed to!" Jean Granger urged her daughter.

"Don't worry, mom, I will! I promise!" Hermione nodded reassuringly despite her own pervasive
unease.

"And remember, you're no less than any pureblood!" She brushed a curl away from her daughter's face. "What was it that your grandma used to say?"

Hermione smiled, knowing perfectly well this little trick. "'You're a miracle for your magic bubbled up from nowhere'," she recited, pouting. "But she used to say that to you!"

The truth was, Granny was so proud to have a witch in the family that she had written an article for the local newspaper. Fortunately, it had mysteriously disappeared before it was delivered and Granny had had a lot of explaining to do when certain ministry workers had appeared at the door.

"True, but you are my miracle, Hermione. Don't ever, ever forget that!" Jean pulled the girl into a crushing embrace.

"I love you, mom!" Hermione murmured a few magical words into her shoulder as she closed her eyes. She'd miss her. She'd miss her so much.

"I'll miss you too!" Jean replied to the unspoken words, eventually letting go of her daughter.

"Wish dad could be here, too," Hermione confessed but tried to tame the disappointment in her voice to the minimum. She hadn't seen him for three days straight. It was clear something was going on.

"I know, honey, but he has a lot on his plate right now," Jean replied casually, but there was this tiny bit of hesitation in her voice which just didn't sound right.

Hermione's dad worked as a policeman and the girl often found herself worrying about his safety. "Like what?" she asked.

"He was in such a rush he didn't have time to explain," Jean let out, looking anywhere but at Hermione.

"I see. Well, hopefully, they'll figure it out. Uhm, just tell him I love him." She decided to leave the subject for now. There was no point in stressing her mom out and it was about the time to go, anyway.

"I will, honey, I will!" Jean promised, granting the girl one last smile.

"Well, I should be going," Hermione announced and hugged the woman once more.

"Right."

"I'll be okay!"

"I know you will, you're a Granger after all."

"Oh my—!" Hermione almost choked as she stumbled out of the huge fireplace, seeing not a room but a majestic hall of a gothic cathedral instead. It was a well-known fact the Malfoy family was wealthy, but this was just—

"Granger!" Draco's voice penetrated her ears. She looked to the left and saw the blond boy smiling from ear to ear. Her heart jumped upon seeing her friend so cheerful.

"Draco, hello!" She returned the smile happily. It was rather strange seeing him without the school
uniform, dressed in an elegant robe instead. She must've admitted, he'd break a lot of witches' hearts with such a look.

Hermione was about to reach out and give him a good old hug when a cold voice interrupted their little reunion.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione turned to the sound, her gaze falling upon a beautiful, tall woman approaching. Without questions, that must have been Draco's mother. Locks of blonde hair came down to her shoulders and as she came closer, Hermione was able to recognize a completely identical arctic blue, dominating Draco's face as well.

"Welcome," Narcissa Malfoy stopped next to her son, the tone of her voice suggesting the girl was anything but welcomed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Madame." Hermione reached out her hand, trying to appear confident, even though her stomach was bubbling.

Narcissa put on a cold smile but didn't really respond. For a tiny moment, Hermione got an impression she was not going to shake her hand, but the girl wasn't about to back off.

Finally, after a few embarrassing seconds, a soft manicured hand brushed against her own. "Draco, show your friend around, please," Narcissa spoke as she let go, gazing down at Hermione with her freezing eyes.

"Sure," he responded, visibly relieved the tension was about to be over, "come on, Granger."

They both disappeared from the parlour as quickly as they could.

"Merlin, you've got some balls," he noted as they climbed the marble stairs and smiled, "but don't try it with my father!"

Hermione let out a soft laugh. She herself was surprised by her temerity, but she'd made herself a promise not to show how small she actually felt.

"Still think this is a good idea?" she asked significantly.

"Yes, why not?" he turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

"Seriously, Draco?! This is the worst idea you've ever had and let's be honest, you've had plenty already," she let out a little louder than she meant to.

"Oh Granger, don't be such a spoilsport!"

"Look who's lecturing me! Don't make me remind you of that day I punched you in the face," Hermione snapped back teasingly.

"Careful or else you may sleep in a dungeon," he sneered as they finally climbed the never-ending staircase.

"You've got dungeons? Of course, you have, 'cause you live in a sodding castle." Hermione shook her head, stopping, marvelling at the sight in front of her.

"Glad you like it." Draco winked as he led the way through the long dark corridor.
"Are all of these people related to you?" Hermione asked curiously, looking from side to side, taking in the enormous portraits of noble-looking aristocrats.

"Yes, all of them are my ancestors," he pointed vehemently at the walls as if he was introducing the next act in a circus.

"Bet they wouldn't like to have me here," Hermione paused, looking at the pair of two Victorian-looking women that were whispering to each other.

"Forget about them. I'm fine with it, my parents are fine with it—there's also Zabini but he's an idiot so forget about him as well." Draco summarized, making the corners of Hermione's mouth lift.

"Granger, what a surprise!" A tanned Slytherin boy suddenly appeared in front of them out of nowhere.

"Nice to see you too, Blaise," she said in a completely neutral tone.

"I bet. Funny you didn't burn when you appeared. I'm almost sure Malfoy once bragged about having ancient magic grounded in the house so that no scum would be able to enter." He sneered at the blond boy, who surprisingly laughed himself.

"That's right, Zabini, my friend. But you see, your mom begged us that you spend the summer at our house, so we had to remove it. We wouldn't let anything happen to her precious boy," he shot at the dark boy who was gritting his teeth.

"Don't you dare talk about my mother!"

"All right, I won't, that's your field, after all," Draco replied, waving the boy goodbye. Hermione jogged after him, trying to suppress laughter. He was an arse, but sometimes it was all worth it.

"This will be your room." Draco suddenly stopped at the end of the corridor. "Nobody but you will be able to enter once you place your palm on the handle."

"All right." Hermione squeezed the cold metal.

"Come on, don't be shy," Draco nudged her shoulder as the door suddenly opened on its own.

Hermione entered, looking at the spacious bedroom in awe. It was three times bigger than her own little kingdom back home. Everything from the walls to the floor was covered in silver and green, clearly representing the preference of the Slytherin house.

"Hope you don't mind the colours. I know you are more of a blue and bronze type of girl." Draco leaned in, smiling at her widened eyes.

"Sure, I mean—Merlin, are all of the rooms as huge as this one?" she asked, still unable to tear her eyes from the snake-like tapestries.

"More or less," he said, looking around. "I should probably leave you to unpack—no, don't panic! Your suitcase is already here," he added, seeing the horror on Hermione's face.

Blimey, she didn't even think about her bags until he pointed it out—actually, she couldn't quite remember carrying anything in the first place.

"How...?" she asked, perplexed, glancing over to her suitcase, which was waiting next to a
beautifully carved wardrobe.

"Well, it's simple, really. The baggage is immediately transformed once you set foot in this house. Magic." Draco snapped his fingers in front of her face and laughed as she punched him slightly.

"Right then, I'll be back in an hour or so. If you need anything, just call Ailey, she'll bring you whatever you wish." Draco informed her, already backing away.

"Is Ailey a house elf?" Hermione asked with a tilted head.

"Yes."

"Is she getting paid?"

Draco only raised his eyebrows, clearly amused.

"Then I won't need anything." The girl lifted her chin. No, she refused to contribute to this barbaric way of living.

"Seriously, you'd rather die of thirst than ask a house elf for a glass of water?!"

"Yes."

"You're bonkers, Granger," he tapped on his temples but laughed anyway. "Well, I'll see you in a bit—figured I need to show you the kitchen first." Rolling his eyes, he closed the door behind him.

Hermione only sighed, making her way towards the dark wardrobe. She touched the smooth surface of the wood but quickly pulled away as it opened with a soft clicking sound, showing her a huge vastness of its black entrails.

Hermione took out a few of her t-shirts and they flew out of her hands right into the darkness, stopping in the midair one next to another.

"Magic," she whispered, smiling to herself.

The whole unpacking activity took her less than fifteen minutes so she decided to utilize the remaining time by exploring the corners of the bedroom. She had never been a fan of fancy things but this gothic furniture was quite something to look at—just like the beautiful labyrinth of gardens that was glowing in the last evening sun rays and could be seen from the enormous window.

Hermione'd never been to such an elegant place before, that one was clear.

She turned her wandering attention from the green, perfectly groomed bushes towards the stack of books she'd left on the bed earlier. Taking a few steps, she carefully sat on the dark green silk, grabbing 'Advanced Arithmancy Studies'.

Just as she was about to read the first words, Draco's subdued voice came from behind the door.

"G-R-A-N-G-E-R!"

Hermione jumped from the bed and swiftly made her way to open up.

"All good?" he sneered.

"Sure."
"Excellent. Now, come on, there's a lot I need to show you!" Draco hurried, snatching the book out of her hands and throwing it across the room back to the bed, completely ignoring the horrified expression on her face. "Merlin, I'd bet ten galleons you were born with a book glued to your fingers."

As promised, Draco showed her the kitchen first, followed by the most important room. The library.

Hermione felt like being in a dream; the room was almost as huge as the Hogwarts library.

Her shining eyes didn't miss Draco's amused ones. "If only you could see yourself," he laughed.

He gave her a quick tour and assured her that she could read any book she wanted. The excited girl couldn't stop herself from smiling.

They made themselves comfortable on nearby chairs, briefly talking about their summer when Hermione's eyes fell upon a bunch of framed pictures on a japanned table. The first one to catch her eye was a photo of baby Draco—and she really tried not to comment on the level of his cuteness but failed miserably.

"Just look at those cheeks!" She laughed while Draco, red as a tomato, tried to hide every remaining picture out of Hermione's sight. She managed to grab the last one though.

"Who is this?" she asked curiously as soon as she caught her breath and stopped laughing. She was holding a photograph of two exceptionally beautiful young women, both dressed in quite expensive-looking dark robes.

"I mean, surely, this must be your mom, but who is it with her?" Hermione's eyes travelled from the younger version of Narcissa Malfoy to the girl next to her.

"Oh, that's auntie Bella."

"Really?!" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

She took a closer look, trying to find any resemblance between the two, but except for the equally proud looks on their faces, they were nothing alike.

While Narcissa with her silvery blonde hair and blue eyes was the perfect depiction of light, her sister was a total opposite. Dark, shining hair, tamed in a Victorian-like hairstyle, and her eyes, completely black, piercing through Hermione like a dagger.

"Wow, they're so different." The girl pointed out as she handed the picture to Draco, her eyes still lingering on the pale face of his aunt. She remembered him talking about her occasionally. According to the boy, she was an extremely skilled and powerful witch.

"Will she come for a visit?" Hermione asked curiously.

"No, Merlin! She'd kill us all if she knew—I mean, no, she's eh—" Draco tried to save the situation but the harm had been already done.

"Oh, I get it," Hermione tried to smile. Of course, the witch must have shared the family's beliefs.

"No, I didn't mean it like that!" he tried to explain himself, but the girl understood.

"Draco, I know what I've gotten myself into. I'm quite aware your family is not pleased with my
staying here, and I don't care. My value doesn't depend on their opinions."

"I'm glad you're so smart, Granger. This is probably the first time I'm not finding it annoying."

She woke up with droplets of sweat on her forehead. It was another absurd dream of that sort that made her whole body tremble with unease.

Unfortunately, Hermione wasn't back home and couldn't just go strolling around the streets whenever she'd dream about the death of Myrtle Warren or worse, having feelings for Ronald Weasley.

*Oh, wait!*

Actually, she could. There was this huge garden after all.

Without a second thought, Hermione slipped into her robe, tiptoeing towards the door. The dark manor seemed uncomfortably haunting during the night. Shadows cast by metal torches were making the girl shiver, especially when she saw one of them move.

Hermione paused but concluded it was probably just her imagination, which was already running wild. Taking a deep, controlled breath, she was about to step out when—

*Wait— what was this?*

She froze upon feeling a sudden cold breeze that made her hair bounce softly against her skin. She turned around, only to be faced with the darkness alone. The lights seemed to have lost all traces of life, leaving her for the unknown.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Hermione heard a soft, almost baby-like voice from behind her back. Jumping, she swiftly spun around, backing away until her spine collided with the wall.

There was deep laughter that chilled every living atom in Hermione's trembling body.

"I—" she wanted to say something but her voice suddenly decided to give up on her.

Another wave of breeze and a soft rustling sound made the torches sparkle with flames again.

And there she was, like a female version of Dorian Gray, leaning against the wall opposite to the stunned Hermione.

Draco's auntie Bella.
"Clearly, somebody's forgetting about good old manners." The woman pointed out arrogantly, completely ignoring the fact her very own actions were far from polite. She was watching the frozen Hermione, awaiting any reaction, but the girl was just staring back at her, unable to form any sort of reply.

"You didn't introduce yourself, little one." The older witch lifted her chin and smirked, quite enjoying the fear reflecting in the widened eyes of the smaller witch.

"I-I'm sorry, I-I just—" Hermione finally forced the first few words to slip past her lips, but it came out as nothing but a mess of I-s and sorry-s. She was positive this was the woman whose picture she had seen in the library earlier that day. Of course, she was facing an older version, but as much as dancing shadows allowed her to see, Hermione could tell the witch hadn't changed that much. No, she was still sporting the same smug expression, radiating from every inch of her face—the lips in particular—Merlin! She's talking and I'm not listening!

"Oh, come on, it surely cannot be that hard to assemble a basic sentence." The older witch inched closer, smiling even wider when she noticed the girl was trying to step back but the wall behind her wouldn't let her.

"I'm s-sorry," Hermione stuttered once again, trying to disperse the fog crawling through her mind.

"Well, we've already heard that, haven't we?" The woman tilted her head to the side.

Taking a deep breath, the girl closed her eyes, trying to tame her irrational feelings. Hermione Granger, you surely haven't lost the ability to talk! There's nothing to be afraid of—nothing apart from this witch who, as Draco claimed, shared the same pureblood belief nonsense as the rest of their family. There was something about the way the boy's eyes flashed with fear when he mentioned the words 'kill' and 'aunt Bella' in the same sentence. Something that made Hermione's heart beat rather frantically.

She acknowledged the odd feeling rising inside of her chest, clutching the soft walls of her lungs and scratching her throat with unease. It was shame. Shame eating her up alive, the only thing she'd promised wouldn't get to her. No... I cannot feel this way. I'm not anyone's inferior!

The older witch was watching the inner battle, completely aware of every little thought the girl's head flowered with. What a pathetic little one.

Finally, Hermione seemed to take a grip. She opened her eyes and caught the sight of the smirking witch once again.

"Right," she let out, "I apologise, ma'am. I'm Hermione Granger," she spilt with fake confidence, meaning to end it like that, but before she could stop herself, she reached out her hand.

There was an awkward pause followed by soft but lofty laughter. The witch's dark eyes travelled to the palm that had become shaky under her gaze, and she stepped close enough to grasp it. Her own hand slowly reached out as well but as Hermione's moved so did hers, changing the angle in the last second. It reached for a curl of her own dark hair to push it behind her ear, so Hermione ended up gripping plain air instead. The girl immediately lowered her hand, a soft shade of pink creeping
up to her cheeks at the rejection.

"Hm," The older witch narrowed her eyes as if nothing had happened, pretending to be hunting in her memories. "Granger, Granger—I don't think I've ever heard of that name before. It is odd, you know because I'm quite familiar with all the wizarding families." The way she emphasized the word let Hermione immediately know that the woman knew. About everything.

"I—" Hermione felt a slight pinch of panic. 'She'd kill us all if’—thanks, Draco. She mentally smacked an imaginary Draco across the face for giving her even more anxiety.

The girl was sure the older witch had already had a clue but still, it was quite terrifying to say it in her face—but hey, there was nothing to be ashamed of! "You probably haven't heard of my name because I'm a half-blood."

For a split second, the look on the witch's face hardened, creating a haunting image, chilling all the remaining pieces of bravery left in Hermione's veins—but then, quite unimaginable happened. The corners of the crimson lips curled upwards, showing perfectly white teeth.

"A half-blood you say?" she repeated, her eyes never leaving Hermione's.

"Y-yes, ma'am." The girl tried her best to shake the fear off of her words but for some reason, that smile was making her even more anxious if that was still possible.

"That is quite interesting." That one actually came out as whisper penetrating the girl's skin, biting her bones cold.

"Actually, I'm a friend of Draco's. He invited me ove—" She tried to explain further, but her voice failed her.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I—" Hermione tried to come up with a reply but paused, not really knowing how to finish. After seconds of silence, the woman's patience ran cold.

"Well, I'm sure you've got plenty to say, but unfortunately I don't have the whole night. I still need to have a conversation with my sister."

It was quite late at night and everyone else was certainly asleep but Hermione didn't feel like pointing this little detail out. No, she could barely keep it together as it was.

"Of course, I didn't mean to waste your time! Eh— it was a pleasure to meet you," Hermione lied, trying to get out as quickly as she could.

"Yes, I'm sure it was," the woman replied haughtily.

"Goodnight, madam."

"Oh but wait, deary! You're invited as well."


"To the girl's talk, of course," the witch answered the unspoken, smiling dangerously and nodding towards the stairs.

The library had never felt so cold and uninviting as this particular night. Heavy clouds outside the
Manor were guarding its haunting image, preventing even the tiniest of the stars from casting a
tinkle of hope into Hermione's big frightened eyes.

She was standing amidst the shelves that were crammed with heavy books, clutching at her
dressing gown tightly. The room was illuminated by dim light coming from the fireplace, already
losing all the traces of sparks and leaving the space shrouded in shadows.

A few feet away stood Draco's aunt, facing the girl with her back and a waterfall of shiny curls
blossoming all the way down to her waist. Not a word had fallen between them since they left the
corridor and Hermione suddenly had a strong urge to talk. About anything, because this horrible
silence was only adding to the thick atmosphere, making her nerves bounce against her ribcage like
a troop of tiny little monkeys.

She was hypnotising the dark figure until the witch glanced over her shoulder, catching Hermione
staring at her. Frowning, she opened her mouth but at that very moment, Narcissa Malfoy came in
between them, giving her sister an astounded look.

"Bellatrix! What is this? You didn't—" The blond witch failed to finish.

"Good to see you too, Cissy," Bellatrix stated coldly, folding her arms.

Narcissa's eyes softened as she pursed her lips together. "I'm sorry, you know I'm happy to see
you!" An apology cut through the heavy atmosphere as Narcissa moved towards her sister, who
was standing still without any movement.

"You know, I could swear I was having a similar conversation with this one just mere minutes
ago," Bellatrix inclined her head at Hermione, stopping the woman just as she was about to lean in
and place a kiss on her cheek.

Narcissa froze, turning her wide eyes towards Hermione, who was playing with a thread coming
out of her collar, wishing she could just blend into the mass of books behind her back.

Due to her shock, the woman hadn't noticed the girl when she'd come rushing into the library.

Bellatrix came closer, resting her chin against her sister's shoulder.

"Narcissa, dear, tell me, what is this about?" A low voice escaped the dark witch's lips, coming out
sweetly, but the hidden bite didn't miss anyone's ears.

A hand found its way to the blonde one's forehead as Bella pulled away. Narcissa rubbed her
temples as if trying to come up with a good excuse but there was not enough time and Bellatrix too
wasn't the one with patience made of gold.

As she closed her eyes, it took her only a moment to recover. "This, Bella, this is Miss Granger,
she's in the same year as Draco." She let out stiffly, her voice slowly gaining the usual coldness.

"Yes, she's already told me they are good friends—so good, actually, that my sweet nephew invited
her over." Bellatrix continued, strong confidence radiating from every syllable of her words,
showing she was the one with the upper hand.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

The silence was almost tangible; Hermione would bet that the air around them had become so
much thicker that if she moved her arm, it would leave a trace of fog swirling with shame emitting
from Narcissa's guilty eyes.
"And the point is? Draco's always had friends over during summer." The blond witch decided to change her tactics, using the same tone of voice as Bellatrix. Hermione secretly admired the woman's guts—it was her house though, so no wonder she wouldn't let anyone walk over her. Not even her sister.

"Well, not this kind of friends," Bellatrix smirked, walking over to the fireplace and pointing her hand at the dying sparks, which made them burst into a hell of flames, mirroring the aggravation growing inside her chest.

Hermione jumped as the light illuminated the whole library.

"Bella, we won't be having this conversation in front of the girl," Narcissa turned to face her sister, using a low whispering voice, which however still managed to find its way into Hermione's ears. "Miss Granger," she continued louder, "I think you should head back to your room, it's quite late."

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione was more than happy to comply, already turning on her heel, practically jogging out of the library, but Bellatrix's angry voice still bit her before she could shut the door behind her.

"Why is it you're sheltering a mud in your own house, Narcissa?! And no, this time I'm not talking about your husband."

"Bellatrix!"

These were the last words Hermione heard before she closed the door, running her way up straight to Draco's room.

She stopped in front of the massive wooden pattern, knocking frantically. When the bright blonde hair finally greeted her widened eyes, she pushed past the boy, making her way into his room.

"Merlin, Granger. It's like one thirty! I know I'm charming, but this is just the first night, I thought you'd wait for at least a few—"

"Shut it, Draco, your aunt is here!" Hermione interrupted him, cutting straight to the chase.

The perplexion in his eyes changed into pure horror in no time.

"What did you just say?" he asked, the last signs of sleepiness fading away.

"I said—" Hermione started but he didn't let her finish.

"I heard what you said! But— how do you know?! Don't tell me you've confronted her—no, of course, you haven't, you're still alive." He was talking more to himself then Hermione as he paced across his room.

"Actually, I did." Hermione let out, her nerves finally deciding to settle down.

These three simple words made the boy stop. He ran his hands through his hair nervously.

"What?! But— but how did this happen?"

"Well, I needed to get some air 'cause, you know, I couldn't sleep." Hermione started, having Draco hanging on her every word.

"The nightmare again?" He asked, frowning.
"Yes, I've been having these strange dreams lately, always the same kind, continuing like a sequence. Once I wake up I'm not able to fall back asleep until I take a walk outside. Tonight it happened again so I wanted to at least for a moment just go out to calm down. I hardly even left the room when I met her." Hermione finished, feeling quite vulnerable talking about her night terrors.

"We'll get back to those dreams in a moment." Draco took a deep breath, plopping down onto his bed. "First, I need to know everything you told her."

"I— nothing much, she almost scared the very old soul out of me, for Merlin's sake," the girl confessed, sitting down next to her friend. "She asked about my name and when I told her, it was clear she knew I— she practically forced me to go to the library with her, where we waited for your mother. I believe they are having quite an argument right now," Hermione finished desperately, looking at Draco's ghostly transparent face.

"She is going to kill me!" The boy raised his eyebrows, gazing into the distance, his blue irises unfocused.

"It's going to be okay, Draco!" she tried to calm him down, but the thoughts inside her mind had quite a similar tune.

_I knew this was a bad idea! I should have never accepted the invitation in the first place. But it was already too late to cry now._

"I need to see her." Draco suddenly jumped from his bed, tearing Hermione's inner conversation apart.

"Draco, let your mom handle it!" the girl objected, tugging at his sleeve, but he didn't listen.

"No, it's my business and I need to take care of it!" He lunged for the door, only to be slowed down by Hermione hooked to his elbow.

"Stop, this is not a good idea!"

"Granger, let go of me!" He tried to shake the girl off but she was clutching his arm with all her might.

"Or else what?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Let me see... I'll tell Zabini you like him!" Draco came back to his humour, which meant Hermione'd won the battle.

"You wouldn't dare!" Her hands slowly let go, ready to attack again in case Draco would change his mind.

"Merlin, you're quite strong for a girl," he noted, massaging the reddening skin of his arm.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Hermione frowned, her inner feminist pride screaming at her to flick his nose.

Draco only laughed. "Oh Granger, you see, this is what I was talking about earlier. Finally not a boring summer and—" he slowly moved towards the door. "There is no way I'm letting anyone ruin it." He grabbed the handle and smiled sadly. "I really need to talk to her and explain."

"But— I don't want you to get into the fight with her, I know how much she means to you!" Hermione protested, quite desperate she'd be the cause of Draco's troubles. "Moreover, she's quite
terrifying, I wouldn't—"

That made Draco laugh. "Look, Granger. She's really my favourite, but I can't respect anyone who doesn't respect my friends."

Hermione opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"Merlin, stop looking at me like that!" he rolled his eyes, annoyed.

"I'm just thinking why do you always have to act like a jerk when there's so much more to you." Hermione let out, smiling softly.

"That was definitely a compliment!" he narrowed his eyes, smirking.

"And my second thought was... why did you end up in Slytherin when you clearly belong to Gryffindor." She let out cheekily and burst into laughter when his smile faded quicker than lightning.

"You take that back!" he snapped, shooting imaginary daggers in Hermione's direction.

"I know what you're trying to do," he added when he realised what'd been the purpose of this whole mocking show. "But it's not going to change my mind!" Draco shook his head, opening the door.

"Wait then! I'm coming with you." Hermione could not believe what nonsense her mouth had just composed but she just couldn't let him go on his own.

The boy paused, turning his gaze towards his friend. "Well, if I'm not supposed to be in Slytherin, you definitely missed the criteria for Ravenclaw. You're supposed to be smart, you know."

"I'm coming with you," Hermione repeated, ignoring his remarks.

Draco took another deep breath. "When will you stop saving my life?"


Both Hermione and Draco were showing far more bravery than they felt inside their own little worlds of flickering thoughts and nerves. Hermione would swear she could feel her own pulse trying to escape through her skin and run for dear life into somebody like Cuthbert Binns, their history teacher, whose ghostly life didn't require any sorts of emotions.

Okay, Hermione, calm down! It's all going to be all right. She tried to relax but no inner motivation could persuade her growing rush of blood to just come back to normal.

Draco nudged her arm when they both stopped in front of a double-winged door leading into the library.

"Ready?" he asked firmly.

"No."

"Me neither." With that confession, the boy bravely reached out, pushing the door open. He was the first to step in, looking for any sights of his aunt or mother, but didn't have to search for too long.

There they were, sitting next to each other on the sofa, calmly discussing only Merlin knew what, completely destroying Hermione's concept of their argument. Hers and Draco's as well.
Both women turned their faces to the pair of unnerved teenagers standing just mere steps away from the open door, with their eyes wide from all the anxiety bubbling under the surface.

Hermione couldn't help but thought that the scene must have looked like an old grotesque painting consisting of two graceful women with a cup of tea resting on the table in between them and a couple of scared children waiting to be eaten alive.

"Auntie Bella!" Draco greeted the witch, taking a few unsure steps toward the sofa. His heart rate increased when her piercing eyes found his own gentle ones, softened by all the hope he had in their relationship.

She didn't say a word, just waited for him to come close enough to be able to see all the disappointment written all over her face.

"It's so nice to see you, really." His voice was quiet, hiding the guilt which didn't have any right to settle underneath his skin.

Standing up, Bellatrix lifted her chin, looking down at her nephew. She was still stubbornly silent, wanting to give Draco some time to think about his recent actions.

"Bella, don't be like this." Narcissa mixed in, gently touching her sister's forearm.

The dark witch gave Draco one last poisonous look but then resigned. "You're a lot taller than I remember." She shook her head, a left corner of her lips curling upwards.

Draco sighed audibly. He leaned in, letting her kiss both of his cheeks.

Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. Such an idyllic night after all. She smiled, thinking whether this was just one of her absurd dreams, but that thought lasted only for a short moment. In a second Bellatrix's smile disappeared, changing into a contemptuous look when she glanced over at Hermione.

The girl gulped, not really knowing what to expect. Her eyes jumped from the dark witch to Draco, then to Narcissa and back to Bellatrix.

"Well, don't just stand there, muddy." The dark woman forced a smile at Hermione, who frowned at the nickname, although what really hurt her was that neither Draco nor his mother said anything about it.

Disappointed, she looked down and made her way towards them, stopping a few steps behind Draco, ready to fight all the insults coming her way.

"Well, I've heard you are quite a brave little witch," the woman stated, making Hermione meet her eyes, "my dear sister was just telling me how all this—" a hand pointed vaguely at them, clearly trying to hint on the word friendship, "happened." She tilted her head, a haughty smile still playing tricks on the girl.

"I can't even say how grateful we all are," Bellatrix continued but this time, the sarcasm overpowered every single word rolling off of her tongue.

"That's enough, Bella!" Narcissa stood up, coming over to stand next to her sister. She defended the girl but her voice was lacking any sort of emotion, so all the effort came in vain.

"Aren't you proud, Draco?" The dark witch ignored her sister. "You're probably the only pureblood with a mud—"
"I said that's enough!" Narcissa turned to Bellatrix, her voice finally finding some firmness. The woman only snorted but didn't say anything else. She shook her head, pushing past Draco, but stopped in front of Hermione, who tried her best not to back away.

The girl was finding it rather difficult to breathe when the witch pierced her bare soul with those glowing eyes. Bellatrix was a lot taller than her and having her looking at her like that only added to the power of her terrifying aura.

Blinking, she was unable to hold the gaze any longer. The dark witch smirked and without another word left, taking the cloud of dreadful feelings away with her.

Hermione exhaled loudly when she heard the shutting of the door behind them.

"That went quite well, don't you think?" Draco stated, his eyes flickering between his friend and his mother. "What?! I'm just trying to lighten up the situation!"

"Not now, Draco." Hermione and Narcissa replied simultaneously. They looked at each other, perplexed.

"Weird," Draco noted, raising his eyebrows, while his mouth curled downwards.

The older woman rubbed her forehead, not giving it a second thought. "You two get back to sleep and I'll go finish the conversation with my sister— no, I don't want to hear anything, Draco," she added when she noticed he wanted to protest, "I've told you this was risky." She glanced over at Hermione with a disapproving look.

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered, "I didn't mean to cause any inconvenience. I'll go pack." She turned around, the feelings of guilt eating up all the remaining pieces of optimism still left in her.

She took barely two steps when a warm hand closed gently over her elbow prevented her from leaving. She turned around only to realise it was Narcissa.

"It's really not as bad as I made it sound," she restated, the coldness of her voice kept at the minimum. She stepped even closer, giving Hermione a perfect view on every tiny freckle beautifying her pointy nose. "Next time just don't drag my son into this," the woman whispered only for Hermione to hear. The words didn't sound as an accusation, though, it came out more like a request, clicking perfectly into the girl's logic.

Hermione nodded as the witch let go of her arm, leaving.

"Don't even think about it! I'm telling you, this went much better than I would have expected!" Draco tried to reassure the girl, already making his way out of the library, waiting for her outside the door.

"Oh, but this wasn't the end. This was just the beginning," Hermione whispered to herself, looking at the raging flames still portraying Bellatrix's anger.

Finally tearing her eyes from the fireplace, she too walked her way out, hoping tomorrow would bring much better beginning.
"Why is it you're sheltering a mud in your own house, Narcissa? And no, this time I'm not talking about your husband."

"Bellatrix!" The blond witch snapped angrily, looking over her shoulder to see the heavy door closing. The half-blood was already gone but without any doubts, she must have caught both the utterly outrageous insult and the humiliating remark addressing Draco's father. "How dare you —?!

"How dare I?! How dare you, Narcissa!" the other one barked fiercely, not caring one bit whether the girl would hear this or not. "I cannot believe you're befouling our name in such a way!"

"I'm not befouling anyone's name! Just calm down and let me explain," Narcissa let out coldly, making her way towards the dark green sofa.

"Oh, please do explain, because I cannot wait to hear your excuses." Arrogance was dripping from every word Bella's mouth uttered. She made her way to the blond witch, looking at her from above. "Explain to me," she continued in a low voice, "how's it possible your only heir is making friends among mudbloods and similar scum of such sort—because dear Cissy, I cannot think of one single reason I'd ever allow this to happen had Draco been my son!"

'May I if he was yours, you'd actually understand,' Narcissa thought to herself before she spoke. "Sit down." She tapped the empty seat beside her.

"No." Bellatrix shook her head stubbornly exactly the same way she used to do thirty years ago.

"I'll tell you everything you want but I can't have you standing over me like I'm under some kind of an interrogation!" she nagged.

Taking a deep breath, the dark witch moved closer and sat down, crossing her legs, giving Narcissa a look full of expectations. "Well?"

"Believe me, until recently we had no idea this was going on," the blond one started. "How could we? Draco's been at Hogwarts and the only time we could actually see him or talk to him was during holidays and those exhausting Ministry assemblies." Narcissa shifted nervously, gripping her upper arms. She could clearly see the muscles in Bellatrix's jaw tensing up but other than that, the woman kept quiet.

"A few months ago, we had Fudge over, so you understand Draco needed to attend. After that fiasco of a dinner, when the man had finally left, Draco startled us as he calmly announced he wanted to invite the half-blood for the summer holiday. You can imagine our reaction. Lucius was furious!" Narcissa took a deep breath as her eyes were unfocused at the memory.

"What about you?" Bellatrix asked quietly, aiming for some firmness in her voice, but it betrayed her as the last syllable faded in fear, she so desperately tried to mask it behind anger.

Narcissa looked at her, confused, but then opened her mouth at the realisation.

"Bella, no! This is not— I'm not like her. You know that!" Narcissa stuttered as she understood what this was really about. It seemed that a penumbra of Andromeda was still haunting her sister
"Listen!" She moved closer to the witch, grasping her hands. "I'm not thrilled about this either! I too am angry! Don't even think for a second I enjoy having her here, but—"

"But what?" Bellatrix released her hands from Narcissa's own warm ones. "How is it that she's here when you feel this way? I don't suppose she was holding a knife to your neck when she appeared at the doorsteps."

"No, of course not. Just let me finish, will you?" Narcissa adjusted herself in her seat and continued. "Lucius had a nasty argument with Draco. Never in my life had I seen them talking like that."

"Got it. They had a fight." Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "But the muddy's here anyway. What kind of quarrel was it then? I don't need to remind you how arguments between us and our parents went back in the day, need I?"

"Oh, but—" Narcissa let out a soft, incredulous laugh. "I hope you're not suggesting I should have beaten my own son senseless. I think you remember I promised never to touch anyone in my family that way." Narcissa gazed into Bellatrix's dark eyes. "We both did."

"All I am saying is," the dark witch started as her glowing eyes roamed over the wild flames larking in the fireplace across the library, "it wasn't explained clearly enough for him to understand that people of her class are far below ours." She looked back at Narcissa with a dark expression. "Maybe I should talk to him. The girl will be gone before you know it. What do you say?" The corners of her mouth curled into a small but frightening sneer.

"No, Bellatrix! You don't have to talk to anyone!" The blond one leaned back, her eyes widened at the notion of her sister chatting with Draco.

"Do you want to get rid of the girl or not?!" The dark one raised her voice again.

"I do, but I can't— ugh, you don't understand!" Narcissa buried her face in her hands.

"Then explain already! Cissy, speak!" Bellatrix was obviously losing her patience.

"It's just— the half-blood saved Draco's life. I can't just let it pass as if nothing happened, can I?!"

There was a moment of silence so Narcissa looked up, finding her frowning sister gazing at her with puzzlement. She used the moment to elaborate. "They both got a detention and were sent to the Forbidden Forest where they met some kind of a wolf-like creature and I know what you're thinking, it really does sound a little too fabricated and ridiculous, but—"

"'A little'?" Bellatrix snorted. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that the girl who got all scared by my mere presence battled a werewolf or something and saved my nephew along the way?"

"To be fair, Bella, there are quite a few people who'd rather face a werewolf than you being in a bad mood," Narcissa pointed, quickly carrying on and not giving her sister another chance to interrupt her, "but the point is, I've read the girl's mind. She's not lying."

Bellatrix furrowed her brows, clearly pissed. "Fine, let her be a hero, but why did they get the detention together in the first place? This must have been going on for quite some time," she added darkly.

"It wasn't like that. Whilst the half-blood got the detention from Snape, Draco got his from that
caretaker, the squib. Lucius has been to school and required that Dumbledore fire the scum, but you know how he is." Narcissa clarified, shaking her head.

Bellatrix nodded. "So, the thing is, Draco's in debt to the half-blood. All right, I understand—but why didn't you give her something to repay her? Why do all this?!" Bellatrix gestured vehemently.

"You think I haven't tried that?! Of course I have, but Draco's too stubborn." The blond witch shook her head again.

"Excuse me?! Draco's too stubborn? I think you and Lucius are both too soft! Cissy, you must shake some sense into the boy while you still can! This isn't something you can compromise on. We cannot let him gamble with our reputation! Tell me, who else knows about this?" Bellatrix asked, a slight drop of panic lingering in her tone.

"Well, " Narcissa gulped.

"Well, everyone' or well what?" Bellatrix barked.

"Look, Bella. They're in the same year, have classes together. The rest of the students must have noticed that he stopped insulting her, that they somehow grew closer over the past few months."

"Stop right there, you're making me sick," Bellatrix growled, scrunching her nose in disgust. "Listen, the boy likes the muddy one, it's clear as day! You have to stop it before it's too late!" She stood up abruptly, having Narcissa follow her.

"Bella, however much I dislike it, I cannot dictate my son whom he can or cannot like! It's just not possible. I know and I'll try my best to end this while it's still innocent, but I can't promise—"

"Did you really just say that?" Bellatrix widened her eyes in disbelief. "Cissy, what is it with you?! Why are you still defending this whole situation! She saved the boy's life, so what! Give her some gold and that's it! He'll forget about her pretty little face in no time!"

"It's not that easy and you know it! I had some time to think about this. I'd forbid him to talk to her and what do you think would be the first thing he would do? Once he'd be back at Hogwarts, he'd run straight to her!" Narcissa theorised, gesturing with her hands. "We'd grow apart over the years. He would eventually stop talking to us and run away. Just like Sirius did—just like she did, and I cannot lose him, I can't! He'd be the first one to go if there ever was a war." Narcissa tried to turn away to hide tears creeping into her beautiful eyes but Bellatrix stopped her, seizing her left arm.

"Get a grip on yourself! You're exaggerating, Cissy...

"You must have heard the rumours!" Narcissa lamented as she tried to release her arm.

"No, stop, nothing like that is going to happen so suck those tears back!" She managed to swing the blonde around. Narcissa lifted her chin to look at her sister—she had never been an emotional one. Of course, an awful temper was a whole other story, but tears? Never.

"What I wanted to say," the dark witch started as her eyes locked with those blue ones, "I don't enjoy seeing you like this," she added in a calmer voice. Bellatrix really did love her sister and even though she would never admit it, she was scared of losing her the same way she had lost Andromeda; the same way Narcissa was afraid of losing Draco.

The blond witch's lip quivered as she let out a barely audible sob. She moved closer, putting her arms around Bella, tugging her into a warm embrace.
The other woman reciprocated the hug, gently stroking Narcissa's back—and suddenly they both felt like they were small girls again, comforting each other over all those years before it became perceived as pathetic.

Bellatrix waited for her to pull away: She wanted to give her sister some time to calm down. After a few seconds, her grip loosened and the witch took Bella's hand into her own and lead the way back to the sofa.

They sat down, facing each other.

"I," Narcissa wanted to say, but Bella held out a hand.

"It's all right. I understand, but don't expect me to hop around pretending—"

That's when they heard the sounds of quiet footsteps. They both turned around, only to see Draco with a very nervous girl budging behind him.

Narcissa let go of the girl's arm and hurried after her sister.

She alone wouldn't keep the half-blood from leaving—quite the opposite—but she couldn't help herself upon noticing the expression creeping up Draco's face.

A feeling of déjà vu slipped into her mind when she remembered the exact same disappointment and hurt painting Andromeda's eyes years ago when mother had forbidden her to see that mudblood, Tonks.

The witch's steps carried her through the dark manor, leading her away from the past into, unfortunately, a very unpleasant present. Narcissa had a strong feeling where she'd find Bella—and she wasn't mistaken. Solar had always been her favourite part of the house, so it was obvious the witch would be heading right there.

The door had been slightly opened, urging the blonde to enter, so she slipped into the room causing no more sound than a plain wind. Bellatrix was there, facing a huge window illuminated by silver light that was slowly easing away with a forthcoming promise of a dark morning.

"I didn't hex the filth, what more do you want from me?" Bellatrix grumbled, annoyed when she sensed the presence of the blond witch.

Narcissa took a moment before speaking. She slowly approached a wooden chair and sat down facing the woman's back. "To be patient with him, be not so cold," she answered quietly. "He loves you very much in case you haven't noticed."

Bellatrix frowned, taking a small golden apple resting on the cabinet next to her into her slim fingers. She, too, cared about the boy, but what he'd done was just unacceptable.

"How are you, Bella?" Narcissa cut through the silence when no reply found its way into her ears.

The witch turned around with her eyebrows raised. "Are you seriously asking me that?"

Narcissa exhaled loudly. "Look, let's forget about this whole catastrophe for a while. Merlin, I haven't seen you for one whole year, so what's so wrong with asking how you've been?"

"I'll tell you exactly what's wrong. It's inappropriate!" Bellatrix hissed with an incensed look. "You expect me to drop—" she aimed to continue but Narcissa spoke over her.
"No, you know what is really inappropriate? You showing up here at one a.m. without any word, but I'm not calling you out for that!" Narcissa snapped back.

"Well, you just did." Bella frowned, but the other woman only sighed.

"I don't want to fight anymore. If you—if you care about our family, then stop being so exasperated, we can talk about it later." She gave out the ultimatum.

"Or I could just leave, I know when I'm not welcomed," the dark witch stated and took a few steps towards the exit.

"No, you take one more step and I forget about that little oath we took!" The blond witch stood up, walking straight to her sister, who looked too perplexed to move any further. "What are you playing at?" she finally got out of herself.

Narcissa only lifted her chin. "Stop acting like a child! Come on!" She dragged the witch to a pair of chairs, pushing her slightly onto one of them, and sat down herself on the other one. She was perfectly aware that if it were somebody else handling Bella in such a manner, they'd be damned. So damned.

Her eyes found the black ones and she had to put a lot of effort to stop herself from forming a smile.

The dark witch looked like a rebellious child with her arms folded across her chest, squinting at Narcissa from underneath the thick mass of curls as if she'd been deprived of something she wanted so badly.

"I promise we'll talk about it later!" Narcissa's eyes, that were lacking that frosty feeling once she had thrown her pride aside, showed so much urgency Bellatrix just couldn't protest.

"All right," she growled, annoyed, pursing her lips together.

"So?" Narcissa asked carefully as Bella went back to playing with the apple, twisting it on the table with a mere shift of her index finger.

The dark witch gazed away from the item, rolling her eyes. "Merlin..."

"Can you at least try? For me?" her sister asked softly.

After a long intense silence, Bella's lips finally moved. "Apart from this— no wait!" She held out a hand as Narcissa opened her mouth. "Apart from this, it hasn't been so bad," she grunted.

"That doesn't give away much." The blonde pointed out with a barely visible smile.

Throwing her head back, Bella issued a sigh of frustration. "What else do you want me to say?"

"Well, I don't know, maybe some details? Merlin, you're harder to talk to than Draco— and he's a teenager."

The dark witch addressed her sister with a nasty look, but Narcissa only raised her eyebrows.

"All right," Bella resigned, "I've visited a lot of countries, met a lot of wizards..." Her head was tilting from side to side as she counted her blessings from the journey.

"And have you found anything?" The blonde cut to the chase, a little annoyed her sister wasn't taking it seriously.
“Yes and no,” Bellatrix replied cryptically.

Merlin, this was harder than she expected. "Could you be more specific?" Narcissa asked, eyeing the apple that was now twisting a little bit faster.

"Actually, I can't," Bellatrix spoke as she glanced over at her sister, adding quickly, "it's not that I wouldn't want to tell you, I just don't have enough information right now."

"It's been four years. Are you sure you want to continue?" Narcissa implied cautiously.

"I'm not a coward, Cissy. I'm not going to abandon the task the same way Rookwood and Nott did!" She lifted her chin proudly.

"I know you're not, but you're all alone in this, it just seems like a waste of time! You cannot possibly get all the seven items on your own even if you lived a double life," the woman said openly.

"I know what I've gotten myself into, all right? I'm positive I'm capable of finding the last five of them before I die.” Bella emphasised the number as her lips curled upwards.

The statement left Narcissa speechless. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out of it.

"I told you once, those idiots were just slowing the progress and my, wasn't I right again?" Bella caught the apple in her palm and let it melt into golden liquid slowly travelling down her skin but leaving no trace whatsoever.

"Are you trying to tell me you've already found two of them?" Narcissa finally found her voice.

"I'm not trying to say anything." The dark witch smiled mischievously as the liquid turned into powder, disappearing in the midair.

"But..."

"Oh dear Narcissa, it's been a long day, well—night I should say. I'm sure we can discuss it later, can't we?" She leaned in, kissing her sister's forehead. "We have all summer, after all." She got up from the chair, leaving the stunned Narcissa alone.
The crooked wand, digging directly into her pulse point, kept vibrating with an increasing force, ready to release the spell.

The unbearable tension penetrated the shivering skin, creeping into the lungs, making the soft walls shrink. There was no oxygen left, no blood flowing, no time to be counted.

She just stood there, unmoving, with her eyes shut so tightly the phosphenes started to appear, slowly erasing the horrible sight in front of her.

It'd been days. Days since her arrival, and the thick atmosphere was merciless, too reluctant to leave the cold hallways of Malfoy Manor. Quite the opposite: It came stronger every single day, as if feeding off of the residents' sleep, in the moments they kept forgetting and remembering at the same time. Time.

A parasite rooted from the very beginning.

Every second spent surrounded by the dark walls felt just so very wrong. It was sticks and stones at its finest and Hermione was doing everything she could to avoid adding any fuel to the fire, which was, however, bursting at number fifteen on the scale from one to eleven.

Sure, there was Draco, trying to ease the tension as much as he could, but the majority of three other souls made his effort go completely in vain.

Blaise, she'd never minded much. His mocking smirks and coarse insults were nothing new, but being in such a vulnerable state as she was right now, even the slightest remark pierced through her like a sword. It had become a habit of his, humiliating her every time they stumbled upon each other.

Knowing any better, Narcissa wouldn't even insist on keeping them in one place. She didn't care one bit for the half-blood's feelings but her son meant everything to her, so she had to swallow her pride and at least try to appear supportive.

But what an effort it took, because it wasn't just Zabini boy. It was Bella and Lucius as well, all grouped up against the girl. The blond witch had to become a mediator and deal with the most trivial of complaints from both parties. At first, neither her husband nor her sister wanted to eat in her company, whilst Draco refused to eat without her. Under different circumstances, Narcissa would have been elated with the fact they finally started to get along, but having Lucius lose his relationship with Draco and gaining Bellatrix's acceptance instead was less than a pyrrhic victory.

It was a desperate situation. Instead of having just one child to take care of, Narcissa suddenly felt like the mother of all five people present in the house.

She tried to shake some sense into them and even though it took all her wisdom and charm, she got them where she wanted at the end. At least partially.

Lucius, playing deaf, wouldn't utter a word while silently eating his meal, completely ignoring the existence of the girl, never glancing her direction, let alone replying to any greetings. Sure, it wasn't polite, but there was somebody else with such an attitude that Lucius' behaviour was
exquisite manners compared to it.

Which was, of course, Bellatrix, always nagging her in the most inappropriate ways. Narcissa had to step in numerous times when she noticed Draco's open mouth ready to defend the half-blood. She didn't want him to get into a fight with his aunt. Bella had too much of a temper to handle it smoothly.

Hermione, however knowing the real reason behind the support coming from the blond witch, was extremely grateful anyway.

It wasn't actually that long ago when she had had to leave the breakfast table earlier. She had found herself sitting with Narcissa alone, sipping the tea in uncomfortable silence when Bellatrix, normally never present so early, had strolled past them, pausing just for a while to throw a rhetorical question in the air.

"I've always wondered, doesn't the tea taste filthy when—?" Catching Narcissa's gaze, she hadn't finished, but the devilish smile forming on her face spoke volumes as she glanced over at Hermione, whose stomach had dropped all the way down into hell, the very birthplace of the woman opposite her.

Narcissa had only closed her eyes, praying for Bella to finally grow up and stop bullying fifteen-year-old children. She had put the teacup aside, turning to the pale girl.

"Miss Granger, let me have a word with my sister, you can finish your meal upstairs."

"Of course, excuse me." Hermione, crumpling the napkin, had quickly stood up from the table, leaving the snow-white cloth next to her untouched plate. She hadn't spared anyone a single look as she turned her back to both witches.

She should have been grateful to be leaving the scene but at this point, it really didn't make any difference. No matter where she'd go and in what company she'd find herself, a flutter of nerve-crazed moths wouldn't leave her stomach however much she'd want them to.

It was an insane way of living. Her heart ached at the memory of her loving mom, smiling, waiting for her at the breakfast table.

Merlin, the girl couldn't even remember when was the last time she'd had a proper meal. Anytime she'd try and force some food down her throat, it would come back, leaving her all dizzy and weak.

One would think sleep would do it, but dreams wouldn't let Hermione have her peace either. She'd wake up in the middle of the night with her heart pounding and sweat lingering all over her forehead, odd images only adding to her already stressed out mind. There was no potion or spell that would make it better. The only possible cure was leaving. It was as simple as that. And there was somebody who needed to know. She was aware Draco would get upset, but he'd have to understand eventually. Nothing was worth losing her mental health.

It was a rare sunny day and Hermione had persuaded Draco to go for a walk outside the whole glory of the property.

"Still cannot believe you made me do this!" The blond boy panted, climbing the narrow hill in the nearby forest Hermione had chosen as their destination.

"Oh come on, it's just a small mound, not Mount Everest!" She was a good seventeen feet ahead but stopped just to wait for his lazy arse.
Struggling, he finally joined her, clutching his left hip. "If you wanted to kill me, you should have said so. Had I known any better, I would willingly drink Weedosoros instead."

"You couldn't because the main ingredient—" Hermione began automatically, but Draco rolled his eyes, stopping her in the middle of the sentence.

"All right, all right!" He clasped his hands together as if praying. "Granger, just stop being a smartass and enjoy the conversation for a change, will you?!"

A small smile formed on the girl's face but she didn't say anything. She'd decided to take Draco out and just talk through everything with him and explain why it would be for the best for her to leave.

"Okay, let's just sit here for a while and rest." Hermione stopped when they reached a large golden field full of the afternoon crickets' melodies.

"Thank Merlin! I really started to think you wanted to drag me away from my house and kill me in the middle of nowhere, but there's still a chance to run away if needed." Draco plopped into the grass, lying flat on his back, not really noticing the huge anthill below him.

"No! Draco, stand up!" The girl quickly tried to save him but he already realised what he'd done and leapt to his feet. Yelling out, the boy started running across the field, taking his robe off and throwing it away from him on the go.

Hermione, watching the scene with a hand over her mouth, suddenly couldn't help it any longer. She burst out laughing, clutching at her stomach. Tears were waling her cheeks when she saw the blondhead disappear as he fell down while shouting over at her. She laughed and laughed until her cheeks hurt and there was no anxiety left.

When Draco finally made his way back to her, she was kneeling down, trying to catch her breath. His cheeks, softly pink from all the running, twitched as he glanced down at her. The girl looked at him through her teary eyes and threw her head back in a new wave of laughter. He was missing a t-shirt and his naked pale chest glittered brightly in the afternoon sun rays.

"Think this is funny, do you?! You just wait!" he hissed and lunged for her. He seized her arms and forced her to stand up.

"No, I don't, I just—" she let out, trying to stop herself from giggling, but the laughter immediately transformed into a yelp of surprise when he bent down, putting his arms around her thighs and hoisting her over his shoulder.

"Nooo!" she yelled as he spun around, making her hug his torso for better stability. "Still funny, Granger?!" Now it was Draco's turn to laugh.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry!" She apologised as all the blood rushed to her head.

Draco let out a soft laugh and put her down. Hermione steadied herself, nudging his arms. And there was a moment the eyes locked and the smiles faltered.

They could almost taste the tension. Hermione gulped. No, this couldn't be...

"Eh... you're missing a t-shirt, Mr pale chest!" She pointed, faking joviality to hide her panic.

Draco blinked once and raised his eyebrows. "Thanks for noticing, now help me find it or you'll be hanging upside down for laughing until tomorrow!" He sneered and lunged for her again. Hermione exhaled with a surprised laugh and started running, not wanting to give him another
chance to fool around like that.

They found his robe within two minutes and while she waited for him to shake all the ants away, she couldn't help her mind from wondering.

'Now, that was silly, Hermione! Of course, Draco's not interested in you...! But what if...? No, you were just imagining things!'

She wasn't sure what'd just happened but hoped it was nothing but her mind playing tricks on her. She'd never...

"Great, we should get back before you get any more ideas!" Draco suggested as he put the light robe over his head, interrupting Hermione's train of thoughts.

"What?" She blushed nervously. "Oh, right... No, wait! Actually," blurting, Hermione shook her head, "I wanted to talk about something."

"Okay, go on." Draco prompted her to continue.

"Well, " Hermione started, looking over at the swaying trees in the distance, "first of all, Draco, I can't express how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. I mean, you, standing up to your family's beliefs—it's certainly something!" she continued, her thoughts suddenly a mess. "But you must have noticed this whole thing—it's not getting any better. It's actually worse every single day." She smiled sadly. "I just think I should go."

"What? But Granger, I can talk to—!" he started, frowning.

"Oh, Draco, I've already told you I don't want you to fight with your family!" Hermione shook her head disapprovingly. "You've done enough, all right?"

"I'll talk to my mother about this, she must shake some sense into my aunt." He glanced at her with a firm gaze.

"No! Can't you see she's doing her best? Leave her out of it. Look, she's been fighting with the whole family over this and honestly, I think she's had enough and... so have I." She admitted, tearing apart a stalk of wheat.

There was a murmur, but Hermione couldn't really make out what exactly it was.

"I beg your pardon?" She frowned.

"I said I'm sorry." Draco let out after a while, turning away to hide his expression from Hermione.

"What? You don't have to apologise! You haven't done anything!" She quickly put a hand on his shoulder.

"Exactly, I've never intervened when aunt Bella insulted you. Not once."

Hermione didn't know what to say. She kept opening and closing her mouth until the words came back to her. "Look, Draco, it's all right! I've never asked you to defend me, it's not your job to do so."

"It is! I know my family. I know how they are and how they think. I promised you, remember? I promised everything would be fine and I've failed," he replied, moving away from her touch.

Hermione kept hypnotising him for a while before her lips curled upwards. "Look at you, Mr
"Malfoy!"

He turned to her, perplexed. "What?"

"How can you say you've failed?" she asked softly. "Just take a good look at yourself. Go back two years ago. You were an insolent little git, cursing anyone just because you could, insulting whoever crossed your way. That was a failure—not yours, I guess, but it was. But you—you've changed. You've stood up to everything you believed in your whole life! And that, Draco, makes everything fine." Hermione finished breathlessly.

Silence fell between them like haze. He was looking at her with a slightly opened mouth, too speechless to say anything.

"Come on, say something." Hermione let out nervously, too impatient to wait for him to start on his own.

"It's you," Draco blurted finally, his cheeks getting two shades redder.

"Sorry?" she asked confused, not really catching the drift.

"I mean, it's all you. You've made me change... Hermione." The way he spoke her name was too soft and hopeful, too sweet and innocent, like the taste of new beginnings. It was all girls her age hoped for. Them but not her. She couldn't explain why, but something odd twisted in her stomach upon hearing those words. It twitched and turned, panic mixed with sadness creeping down her lungs. And she realised—she wasn't mistaken earlier.

And however sweet his confession came out, Hermione couldn't really feel anything she was supposed to and it scared her to death.

In a desperate need to ease the tension, she lunged for one of his own tricks.

"You're getting soft." She let out, smiling with the left corner of her mouth, feigning composure again. This made Draco widen his eyes and get even more crimson in his face.

"Couldn't help it," she added quickly, "it has side effects too. Being your friend, I mean." She emphasised the word firmly. "Your cynicism's just too contagious."

It took them three seconds before they both burst out laughing, the tension evaporating in the blink of an eye.

"Okay, you've got me here," the boy let out, slowly killing the laughter, "but Granger," okay, back to the surname again, Hermione thought. "Let's compromise. Stay until the end of the week and then go. It's just four more days, it won't kill you."

"Well, that's a little controversial, don't you think?" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Maybe, but the O.W.L's results are coming this week and you surely—" he started but the girl cut him off, yelping.

"WHAT?! Oh no! I've completely forgotten they're coming! Why didn't you tell me sooner?!" She panicked, her eyes as wide as plates.

"I thought—" he began, only to be hushed again.

"Doesn't matter now!" Hermione put her palm over her mouth and quickly started sprinting back
towards the Manor, leaving Draco behind.

"Where are you going?" he shouted after her, trying to catch up.

"Where do you think?! The O.W.L's are coming and he's asking me—" she yelled back erratically as she kept jumping over rocks and roots.

Under constant grumbling coming from behind her back, Hermione finally arrived back to the Manor, flying through the magical barrier, running straight into the house.

"Miss Granger?" She heard a cold surprised gasp somewhere on the left. Stopping abruptly, she glanced over, trying to locate the owner of the voice, but her vision became blurry when somebody crashed into her, almost sending her flat on her stomach.

"For Merlin's sake! What is this?!" Narcissa Malfoy came into the view as Hermione and Draco tried to steady themselves. "What are you two doing?"

"Excuse us, Madame!" The girl apologised quickly, her face warm and red—whether it was from running or embarrassment she couldn't tell. "Uhm... It's just that I've realised, the O.W.L.s are coming this week and," Hermione continued, her breath heavy, "I wanted to know whether..."

"No owls today," Narcissa interrupted, annoyed, her eyes immediately jumping to her son. "We need to talk, Draco...privately," she added firmly.

Hermione, catching the meaning, only smiled awkwardly and excused herself. She took mere three steps when the boy stopped her. "Wait, Granger! What is going on, mother?" he asked in a clear voice, folding his arms.

"Draco...?!" Narcissa could taste disbelief in her mouth. "I think I said very clearly I wanted to talk privately!"

"We'll see each other later," Hermione emphasised, feeling desperate. They were back at it again. She was aware Draco's mother wanted her here probably as much as her husband, but she was the last person Draco should be mean to. He wasn't being fair.

"No, stay!" he said firmly, thinking he was acting all heroic, "she can hear it now or ten minutes later upstairs, it's your choice."

Hermione closed her eyes and buried her face into her palms. This couldn't be happening.

"How dare you talk to me in such a manner, I'm your mother!" she hissed quietly but still managed to maintain her posh tone.

Draco didn't apologise, nor did he avert his gaze. He was done being a coward.

When Narcissa realised there was nothing coming out of him, she took an erratic breath. "Look, young man, I don't think you quite realise what I've sacrificed accepting the girl here," she let out, not really caring anymore about Hermione's presence." I've been supportive all along just because of you and what is it I get in return?! Nothing but defiance and insolence." Narcissa stepped closer to her son, making his firm expression falter. "So think very carefully about your choice of words. It's the least you can do." She finished, lifting her chin.

This was the first time Hermione had seen the woman crossed, let alone with her son.

She took another few steps, trying to get away from the scene, but this time it was the blond witch
stopping her. "No, don't leave! He wants you to hear it, so let's do it his way," Narcissa exhorted, turning to the girl. "Miss Granger, are you by any chance familiar with any pureblood tradition?" She raised her eyebrows as she gestured towards the door leading to the library.

"Yes, I've read a lot of books regarding the topic! The Pure Blood Directory and—" Hermione began, but then caught Draco's gaze clearly advising her to shut up.

"Impressive," Narcissa called over her shoulder as she led the way into the spacious room full of books. When they reached the dark sofa, she prompted both Draco and Hermione to sit down while she remained standing.

"Have you read anything regarding the pureblood marriage?" she asked again while turning her back to them.

"Mother!" the boy hissed suddenly, not really keen on analysing this kind of topic.

"Silence, Draco! You were the one who insisted on letting her stay." She briefly looked at her son but then turned again towards the table with the photographs.

"Have you, Ms Granger?" Narcissa repeated the question when Hermione kept quiet.

"I—" She glanced at Draco who only shook his head. "No, ma'am, I haven't."

"Well, the tradition's always been about parents arranging the marriage for their children, but I suppose you already knew all that—the Hogwarts library is just huge, am I right?" She took the same photo of baby Draco Hermione had seen the very first day she arrived. "Lots of books to be read," Narcissa added, glancing at the memory of the tiny boy, "about so many things."

"Ah... there you are, Cissy! We've been looking for you." The voice of Draco's aunt suddenly pierced their ears. All three of them turned their heads, spotting Bellatrix and Lucius walking towards them side by side like best friends.

"Have you told him already?" Lucius asked impatiently.

"Told me what?" Draco was looking from one parent to another, confusion written all over his face.

Hermione, on the other hand, kept her head bowed, purposefully avoiding any eye contact.

"It's your first ball this Sunday!" Bellatrix's voice sang cheerfully.

Hermione couldn't help but shot Draco a quick look. If it wouldn't be for the nerves eating her up alive, she'd actually laugh at the sight in front of her.

"What ball?!" Draco gulped audibly, his eyes full of unfounded fright.

"You're seventeen in less than a year. You're going to choose your future wife." Lucius informed him in a harsh tone.

"What?!" Draco suddenly leapt to his feet, making Hermione jump slightly.

"All pureblood families are invited. Your friend is no longer needed here," the man added, addressing Hermione for the first time since her arrival. He stood next to his sister-in-law, avoiding anyone's eyes.

Draco, on the other hand, kept the firm gaze pointed at his father. To everyone's surprise, he sat
down, his lips curling into a sly smirk. "If you want me to go, Granger's got to be there as well," he announced calmly.

When the words found their way into Hermione's mind, she'd rather see herself in hell then here and now. This couldn't be happening.

Everyone but the boy looked like they have been slapped by a giant palm. Narcissa was the first to recover. "Draco, absolutely not! This isn't something we will negotiate on!"

"Fine, then I'm not going." He folded his arms behind his neck as if nothing had happened.

"Listen to me, you little...!" Bellatrix suddenly barked, taking a few steps closer, but was stopped by Narcissa crossing her way.

"Bellatrix, don't! Let me deal with it!" she let out firmly.

"You should have dealt with it much sooner! I've told you this would end up a disaster, haven't I?" she snapped but backed away nevertheless, shooting Hermione a look full of hatred, which pierced through the poor girl like a knife. "Draco, I swear, if you don't stop with this nonsense right this instant, I'm going to teach you how to respect your family and believe me, you don't want to go through it!" she added angrily but kept her distance.

"How can I respect a family who doesn't even know the meaning of the word," he murmured.

There was a silence and Hermione could feel a rush of goosebumps forming on her arms. This wasn't good and she knew it. Why couldn't he just keep quiet sometimes? Why?

"What did you just say?" Bellatrix asked, feigning calmness, but a twitching muscle in her jaw gave her away.

"Bella..." Narcissa seized her elbow.

"You know what—deal with your brat! Because I can't guarantee what I'll do to him if I hear one more word coming out of his traitorous mouth!"

Neither Lucius nor Narcissa said anything in the boy's defence.

Hermione, having had enough, had no desire to listen to this any longer. "Uhm... I should... I should probably go," she announced quietly, standing up.

"No, if you go home, Granger, I swear I won't come to the bloody ball at all!" he blurted, his eyes akin to lightning.

"Draco, stop!" Hermione objected desperately. "It's insane!"

"Speak up, girl, we can't hear you," Bellatrix addressed her, coming a few steps closer.

"I just said... it's a terrible idea," Hermione repeated, averting her gaze. It was still hard to maintain such an intense look.

"See, Draco?! Even the Muddy understands!" she approved and despite her resignation on talking to him still seemed to find the strength to continue.

"Please, aunt Bella, don't call her that, she has a name." Draco frowned, no longer tolerating this rude behaviour.
"All right, you wanna play the 'if you don't allow me this, then I won't do that' games, don't you? Fine! You don't want me calling her names? Then grow up, finally send the girl home, and we can all forget about this whole situation." She lifted her chin, nodding towards Hermione.

"Draco, your aunt is right." Hermione looked at him. It was insane. The whole fighting just because he wanted her somewhere she didn't even wish to be.

"See?" Bella tilted her head, clearly pleased. "You tell him, deary!"

"Granger, don't be stupid! You don't have to leave!" Draco turned to her with a frowning look.

"No, I'll go, but please don't fight anymore." Hermione ignored him. She looked at Bellatrix's smug face, doing everything in her willpower not to look away too soon. "Madame, please, don't be cro..."

"Look, muddy, I think you've mistaken me for someone who cares about your opinion—though I highly doubt there are such individuals... Just go already." She rolled her eyes.

"If she leaves now, you can all forget about me attending!" The boy gritted through his teeth.

"I'll kill him! I swear I'm—" The dark witch threw her hands up, turning her back to them, completely frustrated.

"Draco, you cannot blackmail us like that!" Hermione turned on her heel. "It's not just your family! Did you even think about whether I want to be there or not? There are other people besides you!" she snapped, surprising everyone in the room.

It had been bubbling under the surface for far too long and she was just done. Done with everything. She turned her back to them, ready to walk away.

"Fine," Narcissa said in a clear voice, raising her eyebrows even more.

"What?" Bellatrix, Lucius, and Draco spoke at the same time.

"Miss Granger may attend the ball," she announced, stopping Hermione in the middle of the way.

"Are you bloody insane?!" Bellatrix barked only to be joined by Lucius. "Oh, please!"

"I mean it," the blond witch spoke again.

"Such a scandal!" Lucius ran a hand through his hair. "Doesn't this family mean anything to you, Narcissa?"

"It does... more than anything in the world—that's the thing," she let out quietly, looking at Draco with such love in her eyes the boy couldn't help but quickly walked over to her, pulling her into his embrace.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. She watched the scene with such warmth forming inside her chest that she couldn't help but smiled.

"Right... Granger." The boy's lips curled upwards when he let go of his mother and looked at the bushy-haired girl.

She kept smiling back at him, the unspoken hanging in the air. After seconds of silence, she mouthed him a pair of three simple words. Good-bye, Draco.
His expression faltered, changing into confusion. He opened his mouth to say something but she already turned back, walking out of the library.

She had to say Good-Bye. This was as good as it could get and she knew it was the time to leave.

There was a knock on the door that made Hermione turn away from the books she was just putting into her bag.

"I'm not changing my mind, Draco." She called and smiled to herself.

"It's not Draco."

The girl froze. She stood up and slowly came to the door. She pushed it open only to be greeted by Narcissa Malfoy herself.

"May I come in?" She asked in her usual posh tone, but this time there was something different about it.

"Of course." Hermione backed away, letting the elegant woman in.

"So you've decided to leave." Narcissa nodded towards the opened wardrobe and the bags laid next to it.

"Yes, I have. I don't think it's right for me to stay, let alone go to the ball," Hermione replied bitterly, still standing at the door.

"Maybe not," the woman agreed, hesitant as she walked over to the wardrobe, turning to face Hermione, "but who decides what is right or wrong?"

"Feelings?" Hermione replied simply.

"Or circumstances?" the woman suggested and her eyes suddenly weren't as cold. There was wisdom in them and something Hermione couldn't quite identify.

"Or more like perception," she added, making Narcissa smile slightly.

"Well, let it be whatever it is. In the end, there's only one truth. It's not permanent." Glancing over at the last book laid on the bed, she continued. "All our life, we've lived under the impression we're better than the rest. It's something we were born into and you can't just expect us to change our views. However... it doesn't necessarily mean we are right about everything... or everyone."

Hermione hung on her every word.

"Should I take it as an apology?" she asked, hesitant.

"No," the witch replied simply, "had it not been for the mistakes, people would never learn anything." She raised her eyebrows. "If I apologise, I regret gaining the knowledge."

"Aren't you ever sorry about hurting people along the process?" the girl inquired curiously.

"I can't control the way they perceive things, can I? Either they understand I needed to learn, or they don't—and I hope, Granger, that you do," she let out after a while with the self-control that must have cost her all her pride.

"So it is an apology," Hermione said, too surprised to stop herself from talking.
Narcissa only glanced at her with those arctic eyes without any blinking.

"It's just four more days. Stay for the ball and then go if you like... but don't hurt him like that. My son's fought his whole family and if that's not good enough for you, I can't imagine what is..." She let the words sink in and slowly left the confused Hermione alone to her thoughts.
As soon as the blond witch stepped out of Hermione's room, she hurried away in the naïve hope to catch her sister before it was too late. She rushed through the dark manor, passing the whispering portraits until she reached Bella's door.

Luckily enough, her sister still possessed a strong backbone to wait and let Narcissa speak before she'd slam the door close and leave this bloody place for good.

She was facing a huge window, gazing at saturnine clouds when a familiar presence washed over her. "Wondering why I'm still here?" she started sharply. "I just wanted to take one last look at your treacherous—"

"You can't leave," Narcissa cut her off, glancing over at Bellatrix's packed belongings.

The older witch turned around, utter animosity radiating from every inch of her face. "Oh really?" she whispered darkly. "Do you seriously dwell on the idea I'd stay here after everything you've done?" with her voice picking up the volume, she went on. "To watch you destroy our status just because your brat is infatuated with some filthy half-blood and you can't say a BLOODY no to him?" Bellatrix paused for a while, letting her words sink in, but Narcissa only stood there, driving her mad with a lack of any signs of remorse.

"I thought you'd put an end to it. I really thought you'd come to your senses but, oh no, silly Bella..." Shaking her head, the woman took a few steps closer to her unmoving sister. "I see, I was mistaken. You're just like her!" she spat out with venom, her eyes full of resentment.

She waited for Narcissa to open her mouth, to get some sort of a response from her, but the marble face stayed unreadable, even though Bella desperately needed her to apologise. Or fight back—anything, really.

"FUCKING SAY SOMETHING!" she yelled, losing her patience, but got the same answer as before—silence accompanied solely by the dying echo of her own voice.

Knowing this wouldn't go anywhere, Bella only shook her head. "Fine, you know what? Have a nice life, Narcissa—or don't—I don't care anymore." She glanced at her but quickly looked away, trying to hide the pain that was creeping up her throat like acid, making it almost impossible to breathe.

"I want you to teach them Occlumency," the blonde said finally as Bella reached for her coat, laid on a nearby chair.

The dark witch slowly straightened her back and turned to face her sister. Another cold silence ensued, but then her lips moved, forming an almost unnoticeable smile. She raised an eyebrow, her smirk getting wider with each passing second until she suddenly burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Narcissa only folded her arms, patiently waiting for this dramatic act to be over. "Are you done?" she asked calmly when the other let out a long exhale.

This only added fuel to the fire, because her tranquillity was nagging Bellatrix's nerves to unbearable heights. "Yes, I am!" the dark witch yelled abruptly, disbelief and fury written all over her face. "I am done with YOU and your SON!"
Again, this outburst of emotions didn't have any effect on Narcissa. Her eyes stayed calm and focused, gazing firmly at her sister. "You can't leave. If you don't teach them, anyone can know," she reasoned. "We need you!"

Bellatrix ran her hands through the thick locks of her hair in complete frustration. "Don't you get it?! I don't care!"

"Yeah, you never do." Narcissa finally stepped inside, closing the door behind her. She came over to the chair, lifting Bella's coat, and sat down.

"If you have a desire to lecture someone, go to your son!" Bellatrix barked angrily. "I'm not a child!"

"Then stop acting like one," the blond one responded casually, smoothing down her robe.

Bellatrix almost jumped out of her skin. She had had enough of her sister's calmness while her own blood boiled with anger. "How dare you talk to me like that?!" she yelled, absolutely furious.

"How dare you think about leaving?" Narcissa replied, looking up.

"How dare I think..." Bellatrix repeated, stunned, backing away. "I'm out. OUT of here!"

Narcissa stood up, still holding the long coat in her hands. "Bella, surely you don't want to part ways like that. We're family!"

"Should have thought about that before you accepted the half-blood into your so-called family—the one I no longer have." Her eyes flared like a fire. She snatched her coat out of Narcissa's hands and took out her wand.

A heavy breath left the blond witch's lungs upon hearing those words. She was trying her best to stay in control and ignore them but the last statement had managed to break through her barriers. "Just hear me out. I'm not asking for anything else."

"My time is expensive, Narcissa, you know that very well." Bellatrix lifted her chin, locking her eyes with the blue oceans.

And the whole moment suddenly became too much. It was simply heartbreaking because they both felt the ghost of the past grasping at their skin like death. They were seventeen again, but this time it was Narcissa standing in Andromeda's shoes, tears threatening to fall down her marble cheeks.

"I've never thought this day would come." A sad smile fell upon her lips as she breathed the words out.

"Me neither," Bellatrix responded, gazing at the floor. "If that's all you had on your mind..." She waved at her suitcase, making it disappear in the midair.

Looking up, Narcissa tried to lure the tears back. She gulped, closing her eyes. "Now I understand what she meant."

Bella froze. She too remembered Andromeda's last words. One day, you'll understand. Her eyes found Narcissa's ones again. "Good. Now you can run after her and forget about me as well," she let out harshly, moving towards the door.

"Bella, stop!" Narcissa called after her, her voice trembling, breaking her sister's heart into million pieces.
"If you don't want to stay for me, stay for the girl!"

This made Bellatrix spun around abruptly, a horrible laugh drawing out of her throat. "Oh my! Why didn't you suggest that earlier!" she let out sarcastically as she clasped her hands together.

"She could help you." The blond witch ignored the mocking tone and took a few steps closer to her sister.

Bella buried her face in her palms before she glanced back at Narcissa, too stunned to say anything.

"Remember when," the blond one wasted no time, "remember when I told you I'd read her mind? I saw something peculiar, Bella," she went on urgently. "I think there's a possibility she could be—she could be a venor floccus."

Snorting, Bella licked her lips, shaking her head. "Goodness, Narcissa, that's really... something. Do you even know what a venor floccus is?" she asked sardonically, tilting her head.

"Of course I know!" Narcissa's tone was suddenly cold. "Can we just talk like normal adults for a change?"

"Exactly, adults!" the dark witch nodded. "And here you are with a goddamn fairytale for me to eat."

Narcissa's hand shot to her forehead. "Look, I know it may sound like an unlikely story, but I have a good reason to believe it!"

"Regale me, then." The dark witch threw her coat aside and folded her arms.

"All right." Narcissa came over to the window, facing Bella with her back. "As you probably know, a person's mind consists of five substances. Hopes, fears, feelings, opinions, and memories." She reached out, touching the cold glass, tracking the outline of the clouds. "Each of them gives off a different vibration, a sound..." She glanced at Bella, who was watching her with a frowning look.

"Today," Narcissa went on, using her hands expressively, "when she had lost control and started yelling at Draco, she was bursting with emotions—and you know how easy it is to slip into someone's mind in such a state... I wanted to know what she really felt and while I went through her mind, I slightly touched the memory area where I sensed something odd."

Bella nodded, the lines around her eyes slowly smoothing out.

"While her memories got around 17400 Hz, this particular area I sensed was spiralling much higher. I'd have missed it completely if it wasn't for a soft but very present vibration."

"What kind of vibration?" Bella asked as she slowly stepped away from the door, walking further into the room and sinking into the chair Narcissa had previously occupied.

"I am not sure because I had never encountered anything like that before and... I can't help thinking... it could be the sixth area," Narcissa finished, excitement bubbling in her blood.

Bella took a moment before opening her mouth.

"That's insane," she let out, finally shaking her head, "she's too young... not to mention a half-blood!"

"I can see your point because it's shocking, really," Narcissa nodded. "I couldn't believe it myself."

Bellatrix exhaled loudly, sinking deeper into the velvet chair, thinking.

"No, I refuse to believe it!" she let out after a while, standing up abruptly. "You have to start training from a very young age and maybe after thirty years of practice, you might catch a glimpse of something! This is just not possible!" Aggravated, she gestured with her hands, pacing back and forth.

"Yes, I'm perfectly aware of that," Narcissa agreed patiently, "but that's what makes it even more interesting... Bella, I don't think she knows what's happening."

"Oh, please!" The dark witch threw her hands in the air, frustrated. "She doesn't know? There's never been a single case of being a natural. Not one!"

"Then give me a better explanation!" Narcissa challenged her with a raised eyebrow. "As long as you don't have any, we must take this possibility into consideration."

"Fine, let's call the bloody girl a venor floccus," Bella theorised, steepling her hands. "Do you honestly think she'd be of any help when she doesn't have a clue? Even trained wizards cannot choose to see what they want."

"I know, but it's worth a try, don't you think?" Narcissa asked with a drop of hope in her eyes.

Bellatrix slowly approached her sister. "No, I don't think so. There's no way I'm asking for help from anyone of her kind."

Narcissa closed her eyes in frustration. She tried to reach for Bella's hands but the witch backed away.

"This burden you got, Bella, it's too much! I can see you getting more tired after every sleepless night. Maybe, if you found a way to..."

"Absolutely not," she let out stubbornly, thrusting her chin out like a defiant child.

"All right... if you don't have any desire to ask for her help, then don't," Narcissa started, her voice darkening. "She doesn't have to know, am I right? You'll teach her Occlumency in exchange for her thoughts. It would be a... simple transaction. Where's debt in that, tell me?" she finished manipulatively.

Bella raised her eyebrow, thinking.

"I know exactly what you're trying to do, my dear..." She shook her head but hesitated.

Narcissa didn't say anything, only let her face bloom with a smile.

After seconds of silence, the dark witch let out a deep breath. "Fine. I'll do an Occlumency act," she agreed finally despite the distaste lingering all over her face, "but I can't promise to behave myself."

"Of course," Narcissa rolled her eyes.

"And I'm still mad at you."

"So am I."

"You?! What for, may I ask?" Bellatrix asked, perplexion and anger mixing as one feeling.
"For staying because of your business rather than your family," the blond witch issued with a long searing look before she made her way out, quietly closing the door behind her.

A bushy-haired girl was sitting on the floor, her eyes unfocused, lost in a freshly made history.

She couldn't believe how easily Narcissa had manipulated her into staying. Even though it wasn't that long ago that she was crying her drained heart out for being treated miserably, for being done putting everyone else's needs before her own, there she was, with her suitcase still opened, ready to be unpacked again.

Knock. Knock.

Hermione came to herself upon hearing the dull sound. She glanced towards the noise, trying to decide whether to answer or fake her death. She longed for the second option but went with the first.

She stood up and reluctantly dragged herself to the door, expecting to see Draco's face to appear in front of her—and really, it was the blond boy standing there with an unusually serious expression, chewing on his lip.

"May I come in?"

Hermione put on a small smile as she let him past her. She closed the door, turning around to face her best friend.

Draco strolled to the middle of the room, nervously rubbing his hands together. "Granger... I don't know how to put this..."

"I do. You're sorry," she said simply, folding her arms.

He smiled softly, nodding. "That too, but there is something more important."

"An apology first!"

His smile grew wider and somehow warmer, making the girl blush because suddenly she remembered the possibility of him liking her—the possibility which squeezed her stomach in a very unpleasant way.

"I'm sorry!" he confessed sincerely. "I wasn't being fair and I really want to apologise for that. I was bloody selfish, not once asking whether this is what you want. I promise I'll get better!" he paused for a while but then went on spilling the beans in a hurry. "After the ball!"

Hermione let out a sigh of frustration, the colour leaving her face.

"You have to promise me you'll go!" Draco added urgently.

"Have to?" Raising an eyebrow, Hermione tilted her head.

"Oh, Merlin, I'm doing it again!" The boy covered his face with his palms. "But I promise you, this is the last, last time I want something from you." He emphasised the word, clasping his hands together as if praying.

"Yeah, the last time until the next time," Hermione shook her head. "I know you too well!" She took a few steps closer, reluctant to pursue this topic, but she didn't really see any other options. This could only go terribly wrong or—nowhere, actually, but she couldn't postpone it any longer.
"Fine," she started, "I'll go under one condition. You'll tell me why you want me there." A soft pink painted her cheeks again as she said that.

Draco's face froze for a moment, blushing even more than the girl in front of him—and that was the reaction Hermione feared the most, but if there really was something going on, she needed to stop it before it was too late.

"Oh," he breathed out, appearing all perturbed, "I.. you know… If I really need to choose my future wife," he started slowly, making Hermione's breath hitch in panic, "I need an approval from my best friend, don't I?" he let out, smiling, quite proud of the statement he had managed to produce.

Hermione exhaled audibly, relief travelling through her body like a wind during an unbearably hot summer. She smiled, nodding.

"I'll take that," very cowardly, she decided to believe him despite the obvious, "but we need to take a trip to Diagon Alley because I don't have a fancy dress at hand."

"Sure, me too, actually. Didn't really expect it would come so early," he said, worry painting his eyes dark.

Hermione couldn't help but felt really sorry. She couldn't imagine being forced to marry so early... with so limited options.

"What about my apology?" Draco interrupted her train of thoughts, an innocent expression planted on his face.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Accepted."

"Yes!" His fist shot in the air. "And now to the important stuff!" he chirped, quickly jumping aside when Hermione grabbed a quill from her nightstand and hurled it in his direction.

"What have I done?" he asked, perplexed.

"Excuse me? The apology wasn't important?! Goodness, do I have to teach you everything?"

"Speaking about teaching," Draco grabbed the opportunity, quite relieved he was spared from making up an intro, "there's something I need to tell you."

"What's going on?" Hermione asked, a strange feeling growing inside her stomach.

"Well," he chuckled anxiously, "remember my aunt?"

"Oh, no, not really," she replied sardonically, "oh wait, isn't she the one who keeps insulting me anytime she's given a chance? Dark shining hair, big eyes?"

Wait, what? Hermione's brain was a little confused by the description.

"Exactly!" Draco's arms shot in the air, index fingers pointing at Hermione. "Guess what?! She's going to teach us Occlumency!" The boy smiled, his excitement a little too forced.

"What?!" Hermione yelped, her eyes growing wide. "Why?"

"I'm not sure, but... Merlin, it doesn't matter! It's Occlumency!" He looked at her as if she'd gone crazy.

"It does to me! Hello?! She hates me immensely! Why...?" Hermione objected, running a hand
through her hair.

"Don't worry! She's past that stage!" Draco tried for a wider smile but Hermione's look stopped him immediately.

"It's been probably an hour since she told me to get out!" The girl pointed out with risen eyebrows.

"Well, that's a lot of time to make up your mind," Draco said, pursing his lips as he shrugged.

Hermione shot him a funny look. "Yeah, she seems like the type."

"I know she can be... eh, too much sometimes," Draco confessed, "but I can assure you, she's insanely good with a wand!"

"That's exactly why I'm afraid. She'll kill me at the first opportunity!" Hermione responded, throwing a hand into the air.

"No, she won't! Granger, what happened to your desire to learn anything, anytime?" Draco asked, trying to attack her soft spot.

"I don't know, maybe I value my life too much?" she answered, rolling her shoulders, cynicism lacing her words. She was pacing back and forth when she stopped abruptly, her eyes growing even wider.

"Draco!"

"What?" He flinched at the urgency.

"Tell me this didn't spring up in your head! Tell me you didn't ask her for this!" She asked with terror in her eyes.

"I'd hardly dare," he confessed, shaking his head, "actually, it was her idea to... let's say, make up for her behaviour."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "What? She wants to apologise?"

"I wouldn't say apologise... she never..."

"Yeah, either you understand or you don't," Hermione repeated Narcissa's words from their previous conversation. "Like sister, like sister."

"Sorry?" Draco frowned, not really following.

"Nothing. I just... I'm wondering what's changed their mind. I mean, your aunt's and your mother's... isn't it odd?"

"Maybe, but come on, Granger! It's Occlumency! What could possibly go wrong?"

"Come on, Draco! I don't want to be late!" Hermione urged her friend to move.

She was standing on the doorstep of his room, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. It was the very next day after that ridiculous fiasco—and just as Narcissa had persuaded the girl to stay, so had Draco agreed on lessons of Occlumency to be taught by his beloved aunt. Hermione still didn't understand what it was about this family that even the slightest of emotions coming from them would get her to do exactly what they wanted her to.
Damn Draco for making her sign her death warrant! Literally.

"Calm down! Aunt Bella told us to be there at seven." He rolled his eyes, still lying across his bed, playing with a golden snitch.

"So?"

"Hello?! It's six thirty! The exact amount of time it's going to take us to get there is three and a half minutes," Draco responded patiently, studying the left wing of the ball.

Hermione let out a shaky breath, keeping her mouth closed—only for a second.

"Are you—?" She started, leaning against the door when Draco interrupted her.

"Yes, I'm absolutely positive she said you are welcomed to join in."

"No, no! She couldn't possibly have said 'welcomed'! Tell me what her exact words were!" Hermione urged, nervously rubbing her hands together whilst Draco didn't move an inch. She couldn't understand how he managed to stay so calm.

"Merlin! I can't even remember what I was doing five minutes ago." He looked at her, seeing her all upside down because his head was hanging from the bed.

"You were trying to open that box and then—" Hermione started, pointing at the wooden container resting on his bed, but he waved her musing off.

"I wasn't really asking, you know." He finally rolled over, standing up. "Stop worrying so much!"

The poor girl ran her hand through her hair. "I just don't want to show up there if she doesn't—"

"Enough of this! All right, I'll try to remember..." He put his finger to the left corner of his mouth, frowning as if thinking hard. "She said something like... 'Please, Draco! I really want Miss Granger to come! If she doesn't, don't bother showing up yourself'."

"That's not funny!" Hermione lunged for him, trying to hit his shoulder, but only stumbled upon the crumpled carpet, falling straight into Draco's arms.

Before any of them had a chance to say something, there was rich laughter coming from the open door. "You two idiots are perfect for each other!" Blaise was leaning against the door, observing the scene in front of his eyes.

Draco quickly helped Hermione to regain her lost balance, his pale cheeks blooming with a soft pink colour. "What are you doing here, wanker?!" he snapped at the dark boy.

"Oh, pardon me!" Blaise let out mockingly. "I didn't want to interrupt this little bonding time!"

"You're not interrupting anything!" Hermione quickly cleared things up, feeling a rush of blood coming to her face. She smoothed her shirt, gulping audibly.

"Don't be so flushed, Granger! I won't tell anyone." He winked, laughing.

"Stop talking rubbish, Zabini! I think I asked you what you were doing in my room."

"First of all, I'm not in your room, I'm in the corridor," he pointed casually, picking a piece of lint off of his robe, "and secondly, I'm joining you for Occlumency."
"Oh, bloody hell!" Draco rolled his eyes in annoyance. "And here I was thinking I won't see your ugliness face any more than necessary."

"I'd be careful with the word ugly." Blaise bared his white teeth. "Unlike you, I got a girlfriend." He shot Hermione a quick look, going on. "Granger, tell me, is it true they had to organise a dance because he's not able to find himself a girl? That not even a mudblood like you would want him?"

"Draco, no!" Hermione threw herself at the boy to stop him from punching an openly laughing Blaise.

"Get out, you bloody prick! Or I swear I'll—!" Draco, completely red, tried to fight Hermione, but she was holding onto him with all her might.

"I'm shaking," Zabini put on an act of shivering. "I'll leave you two alone, to finish... well, whatever you were doing." He winked again as he disappeared, taking his taunting smile with him.

"Let go of me, Granger! I'm gonna pull his bloody oedipal soul out of him!" Draco thundered resentfully.

Hermione unhooked her arms from him and stepped aside.

The boy turned his back to her, throwing the golden snitch away.

"Draco..." Hermione tried carefully, but he held out his hand.

"Let it be..." He shook his head, breathing hard. She wanted to say something to calm him down but the words got stuck inside her throat for an obvious reason.

"Come on, we better get going," he said suddenly, still trying to get his anger under control, "or else Aunt Bella kills me before I have a chance to kill the tosser."

Hermione's eyes widened, her stomach twisting slightly. For a second she'd completely forgotten about the whole Occlumency thing and under different circumstances, she'd freak out about the time, but recent events had slightly affected her verbal ability.

"Right... Let's go." She agreed nervously, walking out of the room, trying to stop herself from asking whether they were late.

They walked in silence, one floor up, passing shiny ebony pillars. Hermione was looking down, the dark green carpet one big blur before her gaze. She was too worried about the lesson to be able to perceive the unnecessarily expensive... well, everything around her.

Her brain was busy trying to recall every book she'd read regarding Occlumency. Every definition, every single detail, because she didn't want to appear unprepared even though, surely, the woman couldn't expect them to know everything from the very beginning...

Merlin, she'd never even dreamt about having an opportunity to acquire the skill and suddenly, despite all the anxiety, there was a spark of excitement rising inside her stomach, slowly outgrowing her fear. That was until Draco's steps fell silent.

"We're here," he announced, looking at Hermione, traces of anger still visible on his frowned forehead.

"Oh.." Hermione let out, snapping out of her trance, her stomach making a tiny backflip. They were standing in front of a simple but elegant door, both a little hesitant to enter.
"It's going to be all right, don't worry, okay?" Draco tried to calm Hermione down, smiling reassuringly.

The girl returned the smile, nodding, feeling more nervous than before any test at Hogwarts.

"Okay..." Draco let out, pushing the door open, prompting Hermione to enter first.

"I must say I'm a little disappointed," Blaise's voice echoed through the air when Draco too stepped in, closing the door behind him. A room bigger than the training one at Hogwarts greeted their stiff faces, consisting of nothing but a couple of windows, lit torches, and Zabini. Bellatrix was nowhere to be seen.

"So must've been your mother when you were born." Draco, not the one to miss a good opportunity, struck back immediately.

Before Blaise could retort with something pungent, Hermione cut in, shooting both of them an indignant look. "Would you two just stop? Merlin, you're almost adults and here you are acting like kindergarteners!"

Both boys looked at her with a surprised expression, having not really expected her to mix in. Blaise opened his mouth, ready to say something, but a creaking sound of the door opening distracted him.

Hermione's breath hitched because the dark figure of Bellatrix Lestrange had just stepped in, walking with her head held high, paying them as much attention as the dead fly on the window sill.

The girl couldn't understand how it was possible for one woman to radiate so much authority just by her mere presence. It was probably the confidence which she wore boldly without any drop of uncertainty or the aura of danger threatening to let the hell loose anytime she moved. And maybe it was both of it combined.

Hermione watched her stride to the middle of the room, where she finally decided to grant them some attention. She took a moment to quickly look at each of them up and down, her gaze lingering a little longer on Hermione.

The dark witch lifted her chin, conceit fanning out from every inch of her face. She parted her lips, pausing as if deciding whether to throw the girl out or not—at least that's how Hermione felt inside her twisting stomach.

"All right," a cold haunting voice resonated through space as she averted her gaze, letting Hermione mentally sigh in relief, "I suppose you know why we're here. The Ministry of Magic granted you a permission to use the spells until midnight so let's not waste the time. You'll misuse too much of it on your poor attempts anyway, so no more talking. You'll learn in the process. Draco," she addressed her nephew in the same icy tone, "I taught you the spell. Let's show your friends how it's done. You can choose whoever you want."

Bellatrix, sensing the energy in the room, knew exactly whom he'd pick, leaving her with an innocent excuse to get the partner she wanted.

"Zabini, my friend, let's have a look at your thoughts!" Draco smirked, giving him a single up-down eyebrow flash. For a split second, Blaise's face illustrated something very close to fear but it quickly disappeared behind a mask of determination.

"Fine, that leaves us two together." Bellatrix stepped closer, locking her dark coal eyes with Hermione's cinnamon ones. The girl gulped, quickly shooting Draco a look signalising nothing else
but a pure cry for help, but the blond boy was too preoccupied with the vision of humiliating Zabini.

"What is it?" the dark witch asked innocently, watching Hermione back away and taking immense pleasure in seeing her so scared.

"Nothing," the girl replied quickly, trying to regain her composure.

"Good." Bellatrix narrowed her eyes, drawing out her wand. "On the count of three!"

"Wait!" Hermione panicked, holding her hands out. "I'm sorry, but you didn't tell me what to do."

Bellatrix smirked. Of course, she didn't, that was the whole purpose of this little show.

"Never heard of improvisation? I just want to know what you're capable of."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest but was stopped by silver light hitting the wall behind her back. She flinched, quickly stepping aside. It was Draco and Blaise fighting after not even mere seconds of being left alone.

"You take that back!" Blaise yelled, completely red, in his face. Draco, on the other hand, was laughing openly, easily blocking another one of Zabini's spells.

Hermione's widened eyes shot in Bellatrix's direction and her mouth fell open. The dark witch was just standing there, watching the pair with amusement, not really keen on stepping in.

The girl, on the contrary, was filled with worry, wanting to stop them before they'd break each other's bones.

"Don't be such a spoilsport!" Bellatrix snorted upon seeing her expression.

Hermione, ignoring the remark, was ready to mix in when Zabini's spell went flying straight at Bellatrix, who blocked it with the speed of lightning, her smile no longer there.

There was a moment of silence. Draco and Blaise both looked terrified.

"Out! Both of you!" she barked, not really as mad as she pretended to be. This just came in handy and she'd be a fool not to take the opportunity.

"I'm so sorry, Ma'am!" Blaise stuttered, looking as sincere as never before. Bellatrix almost lost it. She found the whole effect she had on the kids too amusing.

"I never ask twice!" She warned in a whisper, her head nodding towards the exit, and neither Draco nor Blaise was in need of negotiating any further. They slowly moved towards the door, closely followed by Hermione.

"No, not you, deary." The girl turned around, only to see Bellatrix was looking directly at her. "You stay right here."
A Habit To Break

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Draco stopped, trying to comprehend the whole meaning of the words echoing across the room. He surely must have misheard because there was no way aunt Bella would suggest anything of such sort.

He shot an awkward look towards Blaise, who was sporting a matching expression, wordlessly trying to get a confirmation that Draco, too, had heard the same thing.

Crap!

"Aunt Bella?" the blond boy blurted, turning around. His eyes darted towards Granger, who was standing just a few feet away, completely frozen in time.

Double crap!

The situation did not look good and it wasn't just because of his aunt's enigmatic smirk. It was the desperate thumping in Granger's chest, resonating through his very own being like a giant drum. He moved to her side, focusing all his attention on the dark witch.

"What?" The woman lifted her eyebrow. "I don't see a reason why she shouldn't stay. It's not her fault you two prats cannot control your temper," Bellatrix nodded towards him and Blaise, who observed the scene with such a stupid expression she'd give him an award, had it been a competition. Snorting, her gaze fell back on the blond boy, who was clearly attempting to bail the half-blood out.

He gulped, resisting the urge to glance over at Hermione. 'If I don't come up with something...

Taking a deep breath, he decided to roll with the first plan that sprung up in his head. "That seems fair," he started strategically, "but you see, Granger here, she... how to put it... she needs emotional support," Draco expounded, shrugging innocently, "I wouldn't mind staying here and just being supportive. You won't even know I'm..."

"Oh, I'm sure she's old enough to handle a private lesson on her own," Bellatrix cut in, making her point very clear, "but I understand, darling, why you're—how to put it—so protective and..."

The statement alone would paint Draco's face strawberry red, but the tone of his aunt's voice took it to the whole another level. He quickly averted his gaze, the blood in his cheeks burning imaginary holes inside his mouth.

Ignoring his embarrassment, Bellatrix took a few steps closer, placidly carrying on "...I can promise you to be very... considerate."

Hermione, who up until now seemed too hypnotised to even move, suddenly flinched because a ghost of a touch, almost like a wind, brushed against her hair. She quickly looked up, her eyes colliding with the sweetest smile forming on the woman's lips, making her spine erupt in goosebumps.

'What kind of fear is this?!'

A voice, coming to her like an echo from a distant land, finally broke her two-staged trance,
forcing her to focus. "I don't know," it was Draco, sounding completely unsure, "if I could—"

Shifting her attention, Bellatrix let the strand of hair bounce back against its owner's shoulder. "No, deary, you're not going to negotiate with me."

The expression forming on Draco's face was becoming desperate. He had no clue how to save the situation. Turning to Hermione, he shot her an urgent look. "Granger, is that all right with you?"

The dark pupils dilated. 'No, no, no! Don't leave me alone with her!' Her brain screamed silent words the boy had no chance to hear.

"L," she started, not really knowing how to carry on, "I mean, I wouldn't mind Draco staying," she added after a while, keeping her eyes focused on her best friend.

"Oh, please! You're what? Fifteen? A bit too old to be in need of emotional support." Bellatrix rolled her eyes, backing away a little.

"Please...?" Draco pierced his aunt with those arctic blue eyes, hoping to melt her firm decision.

The older witch only exhaled, pursing her lips together. "All right."

"Really?!!"

"No," Bellatrix snorted arrogantly, "I don't blow hot and cold, you know that very well. " She raised her eyebrow, nodding towards Blaise. "Now get out and don't forget to take that boy with you, he doesn't look good." That was true. Zabini really did look odd. Ill-like almost.

"Look," Draco tried again, but the persuasive firmness planted on Bellatrix's face silenced him quite efficiently. He gave Hermione one long apologetic look before he turned his back to her, walking out and pushing Zabini along with him.

When the door closed behind them, nothing but a thick silence travelled through the air, choking all the hope out of the girl's chest.

That's it. I'm done. Hermione thought, the nerves eating her up alive. She was afraid to even look up and meet those dark eyes, let alone interrupt the quiet.

Bellatrix, however, didn't wait for the girl to speak first. "Why so shy, dear? I don't bite," she let out, aiming for a casual, friendly tone. It cost her so much effort to lower herself like that, but if what Narcissa said was true, she'd have to bite at least her own tongue. Forcing the most genuine smile she could form, the witch moved closer to Hermione.

Hearing the clicking of the heels, the surprised girl glanced up, locking her eyes with Bellatrix's. She opened her mouth but no sound came rolling off.

"I think we started off on the wrong foot," the dark witch began with an innocent expression, making Hermione's eyes widen even more.

'I must be dreaming.'

"Clearly, we both misunderstood each other's intentions which led to the issue we had to face these past few days," Bellatrix pointed, making the young witch frown despite all the anxiety bubbling under the surface.

'What an arrogant way to put it!' Hermione's mind objected, folding its imaginary arms.
Bellatrix, correctly guessing the reason behind the sudden scowl planted on the half-blood's face, had to restrain herself from not yelling the very daring soul out of this little creature.

Instead, she licked her lips, forming another charming smile. "You see, I've always been very protective when it comes to my family," she confessed, her gaze getting more and more intense, "and once I notice someone threatening them," the witch whispered, making Hermione's breath hitch in her lungs, "I can guarantee to rip the throat out of that someone with my bare teeth."

If what Hermione had felt till this moment was fear, what possessed her after hearing those words was complete terror. She stood there like a frozen statue, unable to move, goosebumps travelling down her arms.

"And you, my dear, were a perfect example of such someone—but," Bellatrix suddenly exchanged the haunting tone of her voice for a much more tolerant one, completely diversifying the overall mood of her monologue, "you didn't have the intentions I had expected and," pausing, she took a breath, the left corner of her mouth twitching, "I'm actually quite disenchanted I didn't notice that earlier," she finished while silently cursing every second of this conversation.

It was even more excruciating than the one with Sirius' house elf back in the day. She could still remember very clearly how she and Narcissa had decided to persuade Kreacher to tell them where their cousin kept his muggle trash so she could have a go and kindly return the 'favour' she had promised weeks ago. Being the good actress she was, she had stuffed the poor thing with so much empathy it revealed everything, and once Sirius found out his idiotic house elf had betrayed him, he almost jumped out of his skin. Mainly because his motor-something had been burned down to the last atom, leaving him with nothing but ashes shaped into a heart to remind him of Bellatrix's good intentions.

Using the memory of his furious face as a driving force to carry on with her act, her lips curled upwards. "So how about we forget about our little differences and start over?"

Hermione was in too much of a shock to be able to respond right away. Her senses had gone completely mad because this woman surely hadn't just apologised for her terrible behaviour. In her own special way, but still.

"Come on, say something." Bellatrix tilted her head playfully, knocking the breath out of the girl for the thousandth time today.

"I don't know what to say," Hermione choked out of her. "It's... I mean... I really didn't see this coming," blurting, she put her arms around herself, eyes travelling to the darkening sky outside.

She couldn't possibly forgive this woman for all the sleepless nights and stomachaches. She had put her through hell, for Merlin's sake, but,

Hey, she was doing it all to protect Draco, a calm voice inside her head pointed out, she cannot be so evil when she managed to...

But what about all the insults? a new voice objected. That surely wasn't a part of all the care.

However, she's here, apologising.

That's not an apology!

Still, the calm voice silenced the angry one, appealing to Hermione's kindness. You've always believed in the best of people, being always the one for second chances... don't be a hypocrite now.
She glanced at the witch again, inhaling.

"But sure, I... we can...ehm...start over." A blush crept into her cheeks because of her incoherent talk. That was unlike her at all, for her conversing skills have always been well put together, so why the stuttering?

"Splendid." Bellatrix's eyes gleamed with deeply hidden mischief. "So how about a little compensation?" she asked, clasping her hands together. "What do you say about learning the ancient charms of Occlumency?"

Hermione's heart suddenly leapt with excitement, burying all her doubts for good. If there was something that could make her go all soft, it was the desire to know. "Yes!" She nodded eagerly. "I mean, I'd love to, ma'am, if it's not a problem," she added quietly, gulping.

Bellatrix bared her teeth, completely satisfied she got the girl exactly where she wanted. "Of course, it's not a problem! It's the least I could do."

Hermione smiled shyly, still feeling like having been put into a strange dream. It was just a day ago that this woman hated absolutely everything about her, and look at her now. "So what should I do?" She reached into her pocket, her fingers closing around her vine wood wand.

"Tsk, tsk, tsks, no, deary, you won't need that." Bellatrix shook her head, narrowing her eyes. Paranoid, Hermione suddenly felt like the whole conversation was just a trick to calm her down before the woman would strike and do only Merlin knew what.

It took Bellatrix a lot not to roll her eyes. "Don't be so scared." She tried for a calming tone. "Nothing bad is going to happen, all right?"

Hermione only nodded, pursing her lips together. "All right, but please, I need to know what to do."

"Goodness, you hate being clueless, don't you?" Bellatrix tilted her head, making Hermione fold her arms protectively. "You see, that's the first habit we need to break," she went on. "You have to detach yourself from the matter and travel through the unknown, otherwise, you'll never experience the power of true, real magic," Bellatrix whispered in a silky voice, "it is as simple as that. Vulnerability."

Hermione glanced towards the floor, embarrassed.

"Now, let's try, shall we?"

Hermione, however, couldn't help it. She looked back at the witch. "So.. I... I'm just going to stand here and do nothing?"

Of course, Bellatrix was supposed to tell the girl to empty her mind, to try and fight her, but why bother when it was so much easier this way. "Exactly. We need to build trust," Bellatrix fabled, taking out her wand, "or everything goes in vain."

This is rich. She wants to build trust after everything that has happened...

"I'm going to enter your mind and what I want you to do is to stay still, nothing else," the woman instructed briskly.

"Wait! Are you going to see my thoughts? My memories? Everything? I don't know if I—"
Hermione backed away.
"Don't be so timid," Bellatrix interrupted her, trying her best to remain patient, "this is the only way to do it. Now, do you want to learn or not?" she asked in a detached tone, raising her eyebrow, "because I don't think you'll have another opportunity."

"I do! I'm sorry, it's just— I," Hermione blurted quickly, contradictions fighting inside of her. She looked at Bellatrix, who was waiting for her to stop mumbling. "Nevermind," she let out finally, "it's okay, we can try."

"Good. Now, take a deep breath, I'm sure I won't see anything you should be ashamed of—it is all just about perception, my dear." Bellatrix lifted the left corner of her mouth.

Gulping, Hermione inhaled as if for the last time and braced herself for the worst.

Bellatrix's smile widened. She backed away a little, stopping about eight feet away from the girl. "On the count of three... One."

Hermione watched as the witch pointed her wand at her.

'Oh. Merlin. Help. Me.'

"Two..."

Gulp.

"Three—Legimens!" Her vision became blurry the second the spell hit her face. It was like being sucked in by a vacuum cleaner into her own mind. She lost the sight of the witch as the images started flowing in front of her eyes like a movie—or dreams—except there was a slight pressure of someone else's presence there, which didn't feel entirely unpleasant but it surely wasn't the best experience either. One's mind wasn't designed as a sharing tool, after all.

Hermione's focus shifted towards the images taking shape in front of her eyes. She saw her mom baking a cake for her dad's birthday but the memory disappeared quicker than it came, leaving space for another one.

There she saw Mina, her childhood friend, but just as before, it faded before she could catch anything but her face.

The images kept flying with such a speed she couldn't even keep track until one particular appeared, slowing everything down.

She was looking into Ginny Weasley's widened eyes.

"I don't know what happened, Hermione! I swear! I wanted to throw the diary away, I really did, but it has always found its way back to me and... I'm afraid that when I wake up tomorrow, it would be there, laid on my table, waiting for me... and I'll be doing those things again!"

"Ginny, no! There's nothing to be afraid of! Harry destroyed the diary with a basilisk's fang, it's not going to get back. Ever!"

And there was a pull, trying to push further, but Hermione's will suddenly awoke, closing around the dream like a shield. The same odd feeling as before pushed her out of the strange place, making her snap out of the trance. She found herself kneeling on the stone floor, clutching her head.

Opening her eyes, she searched for the older witch and found her standing a good few feet away, looking completely astounded.
"What was that last memory?" Bellatrix asked in a quavering voice, doing a really bad job at hiding her excitement.

"I don't really know... It was just a dream I had a long time ago." Hermione stood up, explaining, feeling a little exposed.

Now, this was unbelievable. Narcissa was right—the girl really had a sixth area planted inside her mind while having no clue about it. Bellatrix composed herself, trying to keep her feelings under control. Pointing her eyes at her, she exhaled loudly.

"Have I done anything wrong?" Hermione asked slowly, completely misinterpreting Bellatrix's expression.

The woman furrowed her brows. "Well, yes and no. You skipped the trust thing and pushed me out without any instructions."

Widening her eyes, Hermione quickly apologised. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do it!"

"That's all right. It was quite impressive, actually," Bellatrix gave the girl a searing look, and the latter blushed at the sudden compliment. "But that's not what we're aiming for, is it? Now, let's try again."

Hermione, seeing it wasn't so bad, straightened her shirt, locking her eyes with the woman once more.

"Right... one... two... " Bellatrix entered her mind. Just as before, she kept flicking between the thoughts and memories like a hurricane, trying to find a particular one. It wasn't even two seconds when she found herself being pushed out for the second time in a row.

"Again," Bellatrix ordered before the girl had a chance to compose herself, but it was of no use anyway. Hermione kept pushing her out without even meaning to.

This wasn't good. What if...?

Bellatrix turned to Hermione.

"This is going nowhere. You're not listening to anything I say." She let out, feigning disappointment. "Where's trust?"

The poor girl, dreading nothing but failure, opened her mouth in penitence. "I'm so sorry! I swear, I'm not doing it on purpose!"

"That's even more deplorable!" Bellatrix lamented, enjoying her acting.

Hermione blushed furiously because the worst nightmare of hers was just coming to life. "Sorry..."

Bellatrix shook her head. "You have to focus! I can see you shielding yourself and even though it's the whole purpose of Occlumency, you can't just not know how you do it because once you need it the most, it will stab you right in the back," she let out coldly.

Biting her inner cheek, Hermione was doing her best not to cry. She had never been criticised for lack of discipline by anyone before. Not even professor Snape.

"I think you remember I told you to detach yourself, but what you're doing is nothing else but plain resistance to give up the control. We'll try again!" Bellatrix ordered in the same icy tone.
Hermione looked up, trying to push the tears back. On the other hand, Bellatrix couldn't be more satisfied with the results of her scolding. The girl was getting distracted, making it much easier to access her mind.

"All right..." The older witch exhaled loudly. "Close your eyes."

Perplexion flew across Hermione's face but seeing Bellatrix's risen eyebrow, she quickly did as she was told. Her stomach wrung upon hearing the sound of clicking heels approaching. Closer, very close.

Her eyes snapped open, seeing the pale face of the woman right in front of her.

"What did I say?" she whispered in a dangerous tone, making Hermione shut her eyes tight. Her heart rate increased rapidly—and Bellatrix, oh, so knew that. She was aware from the very beginning the little one was afraid of her beyond understanding and it would be such a shame not to make some use out of it.

"You're too... tense." Hermione heard the woman inch even closer.

Suddenly her nostrils filled with an unusually appealing perfume. A mixture she couldn't quite place. A scent slightly sweet and earthy, with a hint of something... something dark, reminding Hermione of the dangerous nature of the woman.

She heard the older witch clear her throat, trying to get her back to reality. Hermione swallowed, her whole body numb from the proximity.

"Now... open your eyes and just... let me in," Bellatrix whispered, making the girl shake with fear. Because this must have been fear.

Hermione opened her eyes, losing herself in those dark depths gazing back at her with such intensity she couldn't even blink.

"One..." Bellatrix counted slowly. "Two... Three... Legilimens!" Just as she anticipated, images, much more vivid, started forming inside her own mind. She roamed through thousands of thoughts, purposely trying to find the fume with a similar vibration she'd felt before. Coincidentally, there it was, the very same one as before.

"What difference does it make?"

"Ginny, basilisk venom is one of the most powerful substances! You saw what it did to Harry! Hadn't it been for Felix, he'd..."

"Oh, Merlin! I cannot believe I was that stupid!"

"No, stop! You couldn't have possibly known it was dangerous. It's not your fault, all right?! Look, it's all over—just like You-Know-Who, so don't worry, Dumbledore's got the diary now—and if there's someone worth our trust, it's him."

That was all Bellatrix needed to see. She easily pulled out of the girl's mind, quickly stepping away. She really had a little venor floccus in front of her, however unbelievable it might seem.

"Well, that was certainly a progress," the older witch commented, intrigued, "finally, we're getting somewhere."

Hermione looked at her, rubbing her temples. Her lips formed a small but sincere smile, showing
her modest joy about the fact that she finally did something right and pleased the woman.

Bellatrix flashed a much wider smile, making the girl glance to the floor. ‘Oh, now this is sweet, the little half-blood is starting to admire me.’

"Well, I think this is enough for today. I'm sure you must be exhausted." She pitied her with a puppy-like expression. "We can continue tomorrow. The Ministry won't be against the idea, I'm sure."

"I'd like that," Hermione replied timidly.

"Same place, same hour." The dark witch moved towards the door. "And bring those two along." She smirked, leaving a puzzled Hermione behind.

"I still refuse to believe you're alive, Granger. Are you sure you're not just a ghost?" Draco poked her arm, testing whether she's still skin and bones or just a smokey substance.

They were walking back to the, as they had started to call it, training room, the very next day, Zabini dragging himself behind them. Since yesterday, the boy wasn't the same, they could tell. He barely reacted to Draco's moderate teasing, settling with a namby-pamby scowl at the most.

"You and me both," Hermione confessed, opening the door to the room to see that just like yesterday, they arrived before Draco's aunt did.

"Zabini, my friend, cat got your tongue?" Draco turned to the boy once they were all inside, waiting for the woman to come. "Or are you starting to choke on your own bullshit?"

"Draco, just leave him be!" Hermione snapped, annoyed. She hated when he acted this way.

"But Granger, clearly he's not even going to respond, so why not hit the punching bag when it doesn't hit back?" he asked, smirking.

"Because it's pathetic and immature. That's why," she retorted, wiping the smugness off Draco's face. Frowning, he folded his arms, not saying another word.

The girl didn't really mind, though. He needed to start acting according to his age and stop bullying people just for fun. Even though it was Zabini she defended, who was just as much of a bully as Draco, she saw he wasn't really there and probably didn't need any more teasing. Something must have happened, she'd never seen him like that.

"I hope you'll last more than five seconds today." A deep voice interrupted Hermione's thoughts when the heavy door opened and Draco's aunt entered, carrying herself like a goddess of wit.

"Merlin, what's the matter with you, boy?" she paused upon looking at Blaise, who was obviously not himself.

"I don't feel very good," Zabini responded after a moment of silence. His dark skin was much paler, looking oddly unhealthy.

"Why bother to come then?" Bellatrix asked coldly, clearly annoyed he was wasting her time.

Blaise opened his mouth, not really knowing how to respond.

The dark witch only rolled her eyes. "Just go see Narcissa, she'll give you a potion or something." She waved him off and shifted her attention towards Draco and Hermione, who, on the other hand,
watched the boy drag himself out of the room, not quite sure if it was a good idea to let him go on
his own.

"I'm here if you haven't noticed." Bellatrix suddenly clasped her hands together, making both of
them flinch. She clearly didn't share the same sentiments as they did.

"Right, hope you didn't forget anything you learnt yesterday." She nodded towards Hermione,
making her stomach jump.

'It's probably going to take some time not to get scared anytime she speaks to you,' the girl thought,
trying to justify the strange feeling inside her belly.

"Most certainly not," she responded with a small smile, rubbing her hands together.

"Great, come along, then," Bellatrix ordered, beckoning the girl to come closer with a quick
motion of her hand.

"What about me?" Draco queried ambivalently. He didn't like being pushed aside.

"You'll wait." Bellatrix barely looked at him, too preoccupied with her nails.

"Damn." The boy murmured, folding his arms.

An almost unnoticeable wave of the wand sent a simple spell in Draco's direction, flicking his
nose. He yelped, rubbing the place with such a scowl that it made Hermione giggle unconsciously.
The dark witch looked at her with a risen eyebrow but hesitantly moved her lips as well.

"What was that for?" Draco asked with widened eyes.

"You're not going to swear in my presence! Haven't my sister taught you anything, damn it?!
" Bellatrix lectured with amusement lacing her words.

"But you've just sworn yourself!" Draco objected, throwing his hands into the air in frustration.

"I can do whatever I want, I'm an adult, you know," she pointed smirking, shrugging her shoulder.
"Now, sit over there and try not to be such a baby. I'll be with you sooner than you think," she
promised, turning her back to him.

"Take out your wand," Bellatrix ordered as she glanced over at Hermione. It was about the time to
repay her for the valuable information she had given her the day before. "Since you were doing so
well yesterday," she went on, "I thought I should probably let you really fight me this time—so
once I try to break in, you do whatever you can to get me out, understand?"

"You mean... like attacking you?" Hermione gasped shyly.

"Sure," Bellatrix confirmed in a matter-of-fact tone. "Try to empty your mind. Let go of all the
emotions—fear especially, in your case," she pointed in a silvery tone.

Hermione's cheeks turned red immediately. 'How does she know? Was it so obvious?'

"Ready?" Bellatrix's voice brought her back to reality.

"Wait! What kind of spell should I use, I've never—" The girl panicked, clutching her wand.

"Improvise." The witch replied simply, taking her position, but this time much farther from her
than the last time. "Empty your mind."
Taking a deep breath, Hermione was trying her best to push everything out. Her eyes opened, locking with the dark witch's.

"Legilimens!"

Draco calling her names. Professor Snape making fun of Ronald. Her, crying over Ronald's kiss with Lavender Brown.

'Ooh, Merlin!'

Hermione was suddenly back, blooming red with embarrassment. She didn't have any feelings for that boy. It was just another memory of her bizarre dreams.

"Oh deary, let it be, you can do better." She heard Bellatrix's voice. Looking at the witch, she saw her smirking, which made the poor girl turn an even darker shade of crimson.

"It's not like..." she started but the woman interrupted her, raising an eyebrow.

"Tell me, do you know how you managed to push me out?"

Hermione swallowed audibly. She kept quiet because she had no clue.

"It's your unconsciousness," Bellatrix explained simply. "You're almost there... The only thing you need to do is become aware," she whispered, having Hermione hanging on her every word.

"Again, one—two—three..."

Hermione focused all her attention on the blankness but the images appeared anyway—however, not so clear or particular. She was doing her best not to attach herself, just perceive them with no interest or emotion, as if looking at something tedious. Instead, she put all her strength into finding the force standing behind this state. She felt an alien presence but couldn't quite place it. All she could do was detach herself from seeing the thoughts but not grasp the very essence of Bellatrix's mind. After a few moments of unsuccessful roaming, she felt herself being pulled out without her own endeavour.

"Are you trying to get lost inside your own head?" Bellatrix's voice echoed somewhere above her. Hermione opened her eyes, finding herself lying on the floor with Bellatrix leaning over her.

She quickly moved backwards, leaping to her feet, rubbing her forehead. "I couldn't leave," she admitted, a little dazed, a sharp pain pulsing through her skull.

"Of course, because you were trying to get to me through your own mind, which is not really a wise move. You can't reach something that's not actually there." Bellatrix explained again, licking her lips. She glanced at the girl, noticing her face faltered. "But that's all right! You can learn so much more through failure than success." Bellatrix couldn't believe what'd just left her mouth. She had become so wrapped into teaching her that she'd completely forgotten about her distaste towards the girl.

On the other hand, Hermione put on a sincere smile, clearly grateful for the words of support. Bellatrix could almost feel the increasing admiration radiating from the young witch's eyes.

"Fine, let's try for the last time," she let out, her voice suddenly a few degrees colder, "just focus on getting yourself out. Once you're not there, I can't be either."

"All right." Hermione nodded determinedly.
"Legilimens!"

It was blankness, complete blankness graced only by Bellatrix's presence, but Hermione wasn't looking for its source this time, she simply tried to ignore everything and focus on waking up from this trance. Trying to become aware of her body, the temperature in the room, anything, really, and... it worked.

Suddenly her vision became sharp again, taking in quite a satisfied-looking witch.

"Congratulations, darling!" She forced a smirk up her lips.

Hermione smiled herself, but more genuinely, with excitement bubbling under the surface. "Did I manage to get it right?"

"You did," Bellatrix responded, playing with a curl of her long dark hair.

"Can we try again?" Hermione blurted before she could stop herself.

"Another time. I'm afraid I cannot stay any longer." The woman tilted her head, making Hermione's smile slack. There was an odd emptiness taking place inside the young girl's chest.

"But hey, here's Draco, he knows the spell, you can practise together," Bellatrix suggested, looking over at the quite annoyed boy, seated on the floor with his back leaning against the cold wall.

"Oh, suddenly you remember me," he called from across the room, making the witch laugh.

"Oh, sweety, how could I forget about my favourite nephew!" she said with a charming smile.

"I am your only nephew." Draco raised his eyebrow as he strolled towards them.

"Exactly my point." She met him half-way, softly touching his cheek. "Now, don't make me disappointed I don't have any more of them," Bellatrix advised, leaving the two kids alone.
Deeds Over Words

CARPE NOCTEM / DEEDS OVER WORDS / CH. 9

It's been half an hour since Bellatrix left the two teenagers alone, not caring a single bit about the potential consequences of their unsupervised practice, which they, naturally, had made one hell of a use of—id est, irresponsibly hazarding with a Legilimency spell without any adult to administer the situation.

They had been talking theory, analysing the spell Draco had already got all figured out, thanks to aunt Bella's endeavour. Surely, they were supposed to keep working on Occlumency, but since Hermione understood everything it took to shield herself, it had become impossible to get through her barriers. And given they still had some hours to kill, the girl suggested to switch the roles.

Fully recovered from her disappointment earlier, she was shifting on her feet, restless like a little puppy. "Okay, I get it, but please, can I finally try now?"

"Fine," Draco grunted, his tone slowly changing into a warning, "but may Merlin be with you if —!"

"Don't worry! I promise I won't say a word about anything I'll see! Besides, who would I tell?"

Draco nodded hesitantly. Granger was right, it wasn't like she had a sleeve full of friends waiting on hand for the latest gossips about his life. "Fine... but remember to stay focused! I don't want to be stuck with you in my head for the rest of my life!"

"That's not even possible! The Great Book of Ch—" Hermione started but stopped upon noticing the expression forming on his face. "Okay, sorry."

Draco gave her one last sour look, secretly hoping she'd change her mind, but her eyes stayed determined and he knew that the battle was lost. Taking a deep breath, he wiggled his legs to release the anxiety. "I cannot believe I'm letting you do this..."

"Trust me, everything's going to be all right!" Hermione smiled, keeping her excitement at the minimum. "So... are you ready or do you want me to...?"

"Just do it, or I'll change my mind," the boy gulped, visibly uncomfortable.

"Okay, okay." Hermione locked her eyes with his, focusing all her attention on performing the spell properly. "Right... One... two... three... Legilimens!"

A whirlpool of smoke pulled her into the depths of a continuum, but this time it wasn't her territory she could wander around. Even though equally peculiar, it wasn't like her experience at all. Draco's thoughts were moving much more languidly, similarly to a slow-motioned movie. Hermione thought it must have been due to the fact she wasn't experienced enough to send them passing the way Bellatrix did.

She tried to be polite, not really focusing on any particular bubbles of moments, just objectively perceiving the mixture of sounds, feelings, and colours presenting itself to her. She was doing an excellent job not prying into the private thoughts of Draco Malfoy until... until her focus shifted on its own accord, forcing her to dive into a fume of bright orange colour, filling her mind with an alien memory.
A little toddler-Draco appeared, sitting on his aunt's lap, beaming with joy. He was reaching his tiny hands up towards her hair, giggling as it tickled his snowy pristine skin. Bellatrix leaned in, planting quick playful kisses on his cheeks, making him laugh even harder.

"Yooou, little widdle-waddle, what's so funny?!" she let out in a baby voice, tickling his little belly until he gave in completely, leaning back, his head hanging down her knees.

"Noooo!" Draco squeaked in between the laughs. "Pweaaase!"

Bellatrix giggled as well, taking his clenched fists into her palms, dragging him back up.

The little guy steadied himself, his laughter quenching, turning into a wide smile. "You awe the best in the whowe woowowd!" Toddler-Draco announced, putting his arms around her neck, losing them in a mane of shining curls, gazing into her eyes with pure child's love. "I'm going to mawy you when I gwow up!"

Bellatrix let out a hearty laugh, throwing her head back.

"Don't waugh, auntie, I weally wove you!"

"Too bad, little buddy, she's already taken." A man with a blurred face walked into the room, making Draco gaze grumpily at him.

"No! She's mine!"

That's when the memory stopped and Hermione found herself being pushed out of Draco's mind with a raging force.

"Damn it!" the boy cursed, his face madder red. He was looking anywhere but at Hermione, who, on the other hand, couldn't distinguish between her own mixed up feelings.

The whole memory had almost knocked the very breath out of her because it was simply impossible to imagine the woman being so... sweet and loving—and yet, there she was: face blooming with a genuine smile, sending a strange kind of warmth travelling through Hermione's chest.

A small blush crept into the girl's cheeks. "Ehm," she cleared her throat, aiming for her voice to sound as casual as possible, "I think it worked."

Draco gave her a quick look. "I don't wanna hear anything from you!"

"Oh, come on! I'm not going to laugh at you. It's just a memory! You were tiny and... so adorable, may I add," she said, unable to keep herself from smiling.

"You really are a trained professional at making people awkwardly mad." Draco frowned, the colour still lingering in his cheeks.

"I'll always have your back, you know that."

"Unbelievable..." Raising an eyebrow, he smirked against his will, letting the girl know his uncomfortable feelings were slowly easing into the oblivion. There was nothing to be ashamed of, after all. He had been just a child and he loved his aunt dearly, that much he could remember. She was always the one for the crazy stuff, responsible for all of his childhood adventures.

"So," Hermione cut through his inner monologue, the itching question on the tip of her tongue,
"who was that man at the end? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

Sitting down on the floor, Draco's upper lip curled in distaste. "Not at all. That was just auntie's husband."

Oh.

For reasons unknown, Hermione's stomach sank, reflecting all the traces of her friend's expression.

"Where is he now?" she asked, her voice strangely distant.

Draco shrugged, gazing down at his black brogans. "No idea, home probably, Lestrange Manor."

"You don't really get along, do you?" Hermione asked carefully, sitting down opposite to her friend.

"Guess you could say that."

The taste of a slowly approaching melancholia brushed against the girl's skin. "Yeah, I could see why." She smirked, trying to disperse the gloomy feeling.

Draco's eyes widened, his cheeks immediately turning pink again. "Hey, stop it! I don't feel that way anymore!"

"I wasn't suggesting..."

"Whatever." The boy leapt to his feet. "I just don't like the man, all right? He's not my cup of tea."

"Surely he's not. I'd never guess you to be that type, anyway." Hermione went on, succeeding in winding the boy up.

"Ha, ha! Hilarious, Granger!" Draco let out sarcastically. "If you're so eager on the topic, though, how come I haven't seen anyone near you ever since Krum? Not counting Weasley, of course." He struck back with an equal force.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She smoothed her shirt nonchalantly. "I think we should either carry on with the practice or go back to our rooms, it's getting late."

"Oh, no! We're not dropping the subject!"

"Yes, we are!"

"So it's true!" Draco sneered awkwardly, looking her up and down.

"What is true?" Hermione frowned, already regretting her teasing game.

"You and Weasley."

"But sure, I've been secretly dating him for months, glad you finally figured it out."

"Are you seriously not telling me?" Draco asked, a shade of curiosity gracing his face. "Isn't there anyone you like?"

"Ehm... Draco..." she blushed, gulping. They've never talked about this subject before. Ever. "I... don't know what to say."
"The name would be enough."

She let out a deep breath, thinking hard how to get out of the situation. There really wasn't anyone on her mind, but admitting that to someone who might potentially like her was just too cruel. However, giving away a false hope would be equally heartless, too.

Okay, let's try this.

"I have to focus on studying now," she dropped diplomatically, "I don't really have time for boys."

"Girls, then?"

"I beg your pardon?" She raised her eyebrows, making Draco laugh.

"What? I'm just checking."

"Should check with yourself first," Hermione retorted, her eyes smirking.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I don't know... Zabini, maybe," she let out, bursting into laughter, running towards the door, having a red-faced Draco closely behind her.

"You'll pay for this, Granger!"

Another morning slowly approached, waking Hermione a good deal earlier than she was accustomed to. She was lying in her bed, eyes travelling across the carved ceiling, wondering why there was an anxiety biting her stomach sore like an annoyed bird...

No! The O.W.L.s!

In a second, the girl jumped out of the bed, throwing the covers aside, hissing as her feet collided with the cold wooden floor. She was making her way towards the wardrobe, ignoring any fashion statements as she grabbed the first thing she could touch and pulled it on over her pyjamas.

She hurried to the door, stumbling upon a "Common Magical Ailments And Afflictions" that had fallen from her bed. "Damn it!" she cursed, picking the book up.

She practically flew out of her room, tripping again, but this time it was her own foot making her fight for balance."Unbelievable," she muttered under her breath, astonished by her own clumsiness.

The corridor was still dark, illuminated by the dim light of the torches that were casting shadows on the sleeping occupants of the portraits. Hermione didn't waste time observing the surroundings though. She went sprinting, heading straight down the marble stairs, skipping them three at a time. Jumping from the last one, she turned left, flying through the wooden door and stumbling upon the spiral staircase hidden behind them.

Hermione rushed up, completely oblivious to the fact it was still too early for any mail.

A cold morning breeze hit her coral cheeks as she braked at the entrance. Bending over, she touched her knees, taking the air in for all she was worth. Her heart was going mad inside her chest, dreading the results, which surely couldn't have been that bad, but still... what if? Hermione was almost sure Anthony Goldstein had done a better job with a Riddikulus spell than her. Much better.
A sudden rustling of feathers made her flinch, tearing her inner debate apart. She straightened her back, completely freezing as her eyes landed on a dark figure standing still with her arms folded across her chest.

"Merlin!" Hermione choked out of her. "I'm so sorry, I didn't...!"

"What are you doing here?" A tired voice laced with a hint of surprise escaped Bellatrix Lestrange's lips.

Hermione cleared her throat, blaming the running for her heart's unceasing thumping. "The O.W.L.s results are supposed to get delivered today, ma'am."

Bellatrix came out of the shadows, the weariness that was radiating from her words reflected on her face in the same manner. Having a slightly distorted view, Hermione couldn't swear to it, but the dark circles blooming under the heavy eyes were anything but a play of light, suggesting the woman probably hadn't gotten much sleep.

"So?" A raspy voice interrupted Hermione's thoughts.

The girl gripped her upper arm, gazing at the witch. "I just thought I'd go check."

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes but then turned around walking towards a Eurasian eagle-owl waiting patiently in the open window. "Sweetheart, it's five fifteen. Important letters such as O.W.L. results are always delivered around eight o'clock at the earliest."

Hermione pursed her lips together, eyes darting towards the hands trying to loosen the small scroll of parchment attached to the bird's talon. "I thought, just in case. Well, I—I better be going then."

"Actually, since I have you here," Bellatrix had finally untied the letter, turning back to Hermione, "I planned on seeing you today, anyway."

"You did?" Hermione gulped, unable to tear her eyes from the smile forming on the woman's lips.

"I wanted to ask how the practice went yesterday," she explained, putting the parchment into her pockets, waving the owl off with a quick motion of her hand.

Hermione flinched as the majestic bird spread its wings and took off towards the aurora sky, leaving without any reply.

Hearing a soft cough, her eyes snapped back to the witch, who was clearly displeased the girl wasn't paying her any attention. "I'm sorry," she murmured, "I— it went really well. Draco was trying to break into my mind but wasn't really successful. Not once, actually." Hermione shrugged, trying to sound modest despite her own pride.

Seating herself down on the stone windowsill, Bellatrix crossed her legs, a smirk playing on her lips. "My, my... aren't you a bright little one." She locked her eyes with Hermione's, the intensity almost tangible. The young witch, sensing the intention, quickly put up invisible walls around her thoughts, not that keen to fail right now.

Bellatrix's smile widened. "Bright indeed... but tell me," she tilted her head, adding conspiratorially, "is that all you did yesterday?"

Feeling a sudden rush of blood coming to her cheeks, Hermione averted her gaze, biting her inner cheek.
"Oh, but I didn't mean it like that, what do you think of me, for Merlin's sake, girl?!"

"But," Hermione quickly looked back up, locking her eyes with the smirking woman. "I wasn't... I just.." she kept stammering, unable to form a proper sentence. What was it about this witch, making her so... not herself.

"Come now, I was just joking." Bellatrix chuckled, shaking her head, the thick curls bouncing against her shoulders as the crispy breeze coming from behind her blew right through them.

Suppressing a shudder, Hermione's arms erupted in goosebumps when the wind advanced towards her, bringing a soft perfumed scent along the way.

The woman raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "So, no forbidden spells? Not one?"

"I," the girl started hesitantly, not sure what would happen if she came out with the truth. There was still a trust issue they needed to work on.

"I won't be mad, I wasn't any different back in the day, after all." Bellatrix winked, leaning in.

"Well," Hermione began, clearly not persuaded, "We..."

"Yes?"

"We practised a Legilimency spell. I mean, Draco taught me how to do it and I... I used it on him," the girl finished, embarrassed as if she'd done some horrible crime. Biting her lip, she was awaiting... well, anything really. Looking up, she froze, her eyes widening. The dark witch really wasn't mad. Actually, she was... was that disappointment?

"Is that it? I thought you'd at least duel a little. What a shame you wasted such an opportunity, miss Goody-Goody!" Bellatrix curled her lips downwards.

Hermione didn't know how to react because this attitude was surely the least of her anticipations.

"Well, too bad," Bellatrix carried on, exhaling loudly, "so you killed the time, literally, trying out the spell and when you couldn't do it, you..."

"But I did! I managed to do it!" Hermione cut her off eagerly, blushing as the woman raised her eyebrow. "Sorry... I didn't mean to interrupt you."

The dark witch kept looking at her for a while. "You performed the Legilimency spell?"

Hermione nodded, putting her arms around herself. Standing there without any movement wasn't doing her any good.

"What did you see?" Bellatrix asked, genuinely interested.

"Ehm..." The rosy cheeks of Hermione's turned a few shades darker. She was starting to get really mad at her groundless body reactions. If she had to count the times she had spent blushing during her entire life, she'd bet ten galleons the majority of it would lock around this summer.

She gave the woman a quick look. "You," she murmured, immediately averting her gaze.

"Me?" Hermione heard after a while, an amused voice painting the atmosphere with clear disbelief. Her eyes snapped back to the witch leaning against the frame of the window. "And what exactly was I doing in my nephew's memories, may I ask?"
Gulping, Hermione bit her lip. "You were playing with him."

"What details! I'm sure I've never heard such a complex description before!" Bellatrix clasped her hands together.

Cursing mentally, the girl tried again, "Draco was around four or five years old. He was sitting on your lap, playing with your hair, announcing he was going to marry you once he's old enough, but then your husband came in, saying you—you were already taken." She spilt out in one breath, turning even more crimson, but this time refused to look away.

Bellatrix's smile faltered. "Oddly enough, that really does sound familiar," she let out after a while, her face painted with a pensive look, "how many tries did it take you?"

"One."

The woman slowly stood up, folding her arms. "Are you telling me the truth?"

Hermione only nodded, rubbing her arms. The chill was already starting to bite her bones.

"Surprising," Bellatrix whispered, her eyes unreadable like everything else about her, "most of the people would fail to perform the spell until their fourth or fifth try."

"Oh..." The girl's cheeks let out another wave of warmth, making Bellatrix chuckle.

"You're so timid, so easily distracted," the witch pointed in a silky voice, her eyes travelling over Hermione, who'd rather see herself in hell because the redness in her face was anything but leaving.

"That won't get you far in life. Believe me."

Hermione frowned, wishing to tell her she was anything but timid or easily distracted. She was brave, focused! She wanted to tell her, to defend herself, to prove that she was strong—and just like that, frustrated with herself for her lack of muchness, she let her emotions spill.

"I'm not any of those things," she declared, wishing her voice, at least for once in her life, wouldn't sound so sugary sweet.

Bellatrix took a moment but then stepped out towards Hermione, having her back away immediately. The woman laughed. "Deeds over words, deary," she let out, shaking her head.

Fine.

An anger bit Hermione's nerves, making her stroll back into the room and suddenly there was a wand in her hand. Her feet moved further, stopping just mere steps away from the witch. Her eyes found the black depths and for a single moment, she could enjoy the surprised look imprinted on the arrogant but pretty face. Very pretty, actually. Not even that undeniable tiredness could take away from the fact.

Wait...

This moment of confusion cost Hermione everything. Maybe she really was easily distracted after all.

Taking advantage, Bellatrix's sharp intuition knew exactly what to do as she inched closer towards the girl, licking her lips. "Not trying to bite off more than we can chew, are we?" she whispered, moving even closer, getting a perfect view of every little freckle planted on the girl's face.
Exactly as she thought, Muddy was dumbstruck with fear, unable to form any reaction. "Not so brave, now." Bellatrix lifted her chin, a smile spreading across her face, not really helping Hermione to break away from her trance.

Oh, how easy it would be to curse the little one—just for fun. Unfortunately, given the recent events, the girl's mind was too precious to play games with like that.

The paradox, though, made her want it even more, tempting her to take out her wand and... No! The gathered excitement quickly turned into a huge bulk of annoyance, wanting to break free.

"I'll give you a piece of advice. Girl to girl," the dark witch let out sweetly after a while. "Benevolence is not in my nature, so if you're not willing to fight or do anything at all, don't test my limits. It might not end up pretty." She raised an eyebrow, slowly backing away.

Hermione stayed glued to the spot, ready to spill the tears of humiliation.

Bellatrix, composing herself, softened her tone. "Look, I understand it's not easy to get criticised, but doing stupid things without logical thought won't make people change their mind. Remember that next time you get frustrated trying to impress someone with your bravado."

"I am so sorry... I don't know what I was thinking." Hermione whispered, feeling as low as never.

"Fine." Bellatrix pursed her lips together, swallowing the urge to throw up. Surely the girl wouldn't expect any pity from her—that'd go far beyond her acting skills.

"I got so annoyed, because I know I..." A single tear escaped from underneath Hermione's eyelashes but quickly vanished under the quick motion of her hand.

"You don't need to explain yourself." Bellatrix averted her gaze, folding her arms.

"I do! I was disrespectful! I don't even know what I was trying to prove!" Hermione blurted, throwing her hand in the air.

"Look, girl. No, look at me!" Bellatrix suddenly raised her voice. "You are young. Of course, there's a lot you'd want to prove. You may not even know all the reasons behind it—and surprise, there's actually more to come, ready to frustrate the hell out of you, giving you anxiety, headaches, but that's what makes these years beautiful! What makes the life worth living.

You should be angry, you should rage and be disrespectful—not to me, of course, but there are others willing to take that," Bellatrix paused, planting a hesitant smile on Hermione's face but cancer on her own brain. It clenched once she understood what was she actually doing. And it surely wasn't a part of the plan.

'I was supposed to be tolerant, not kind.'

Hermione, seeing struggle painting the woman's face, frowned. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course it is, why shouldn't it be?" Bellatrix barked schizophrenically, freezing the warmth spreading through Hermione's stomach. "I just didn't realise how much time I've wasted," she muttered, moving towards the exit.

She paused at the door, giving Hermione a look full of distaste. "I'm not an expert, but I don't think you're wearing that the right way." She nodded at the girl's shirt before disappearing into the darkness.
Confused Hermione looked down, realising she was sporting her top upside down, having all the messy seams on display.

Burying her face in her palms, she wondered whether this day could get any worse.
"Granger!"

"Uhm?" Hermione's head moved towards the voice but her eyes stayed motionless, lost in the land of ifs and whys. A gentle nudge to her arm made her snap out of the trance and meet the puzzled expression illustrating Draco's whole face.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, her voice unusually raspy. She'd been quiet since she came down for breakfast, too preoccupied with her own inner monologue to be able to initiate any sort of conversation. The plain good morning was her only compromise as she settled on a chair, which hardly provided any comfort she so desperately needed.

"Are you serious?" Draco raised his eyebrows, completely stunned.

"Why?"

"Why...well, let's see..." He curled his mouth downwards, nodding somewhere towards Hermione's empty plate.

Following his gaze, the young witch's heart skipped a beat.

"MERLIN!" she squeaked as her eyes landed on a brown barred owl impatiently fluttering its feathers, clearly frustrated from the lack of Hermione's interest.

"Miss Granger, could you be so kind and restrain yourself from—" Lucius Malfoy gritted his teeth but let the rest of his sentence die upon feeling his wife's palm over his.

"Of course, I'm sorry!" The young witch dismissed rather than apologised, having her eyes only for the yellow envelope trapped inside the owl's beak.

The bird, sensing her full attention, released the letter onto the white shining plate right in front of her. She was about to grasp it when the ball of irritation suddenly snapped its beak, making her withdraw her palm.

"Oh, come on!" The young witch pressed her lips together and carefully tautened her hand once more. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting!" she pled, making the bird hoot, but this time it allowed her to snatch the letter.

Having been offered a piece of toast, the owl moved its head aside, preparing to leave with her companion, which Hermione noticed only when it hit her forehead with its wing.

"I don't understand why bother having an owlery when the birds do whatever they want," Lucius grunted with distaste, brushing a single feather off of the table with a spare knife.

"What are you waiting for?" Draco asked as he caught his friend staring at the envelope in her shaking hands. Hermione searched for his, noticing it was already opened, passing in between his parents.

"Come on, you of all people really don't need to worry!"
"Right." She bit her lip, putting a finger under the crease, carefully breaking the seal. Pulling out a long letter, her eyes blurred for a moment.

Dark green ink imprinted into the high-quality parchment read:

**ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS**

**PASS GRADES**

- Outstanding (O)
- Exceeds Expectations (E))
- Acceptable (A)

**FAIL GRADES**

- Poor (P)
- Dreadful (D)
- Troll (T)

**HERMIONE JEAN GRANGER ACHIEVED:**

- ANCIENT RUNES: O
- ARITHMANCY: O
- ASTRONOMY: O
- CARE OF MAGICAL CREATURES: O
- CHARMS: O
- DEFENCE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS: O
- HERBOLOGY: O
- HISTORY OF MAGIC: O
- POTIONS: O
- TRANSFIGURATION: O

**PROFESSOR GRISELDA MARCHBANKS**
  Governor, Wizarding Examination Authority

**HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT & WIZARDRY**
  Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore, D. Wiz., X.J.(sorc), Mag. Q.

Hermione held her breath while swallowing every single word. She skimmed the letter again and again—and would do for the third time, hadn't it been for Draco snatching the parchment out of her hands.

She turned to him with the widest smile, taking in his stunned expression.

"Nerd! I knew it!" He returned the parchment to her with a matching grin.

"What about you?" she asked, trying to keep her excitement at the minimum.

Draco shrugged. "Seven E's, one A, and one O."

"That is brilliant!" Hermione lit up sincerely. "What did you get the 'outstanding' for?"

"My good looks." He winked, making her chuckle.

"We are so proud of you, Draco!" Narcissa glared at her son with pure motherly love, melting
everything around her.

"That's nothing." The boy took a bite of his marmalade toast. "You should see Granger's, she's got Outstanding for every single subject."

Hermione quickly looked down, her cheeks flaming red. There really was no need for attention.

"Oh," surprised gasps came out of both adults at the table. "That is quite... interesting." Lucius commented in a cold voice.

"Well done, Ms Granger." Narcissa addressed the girl, making her meet her eyes, which hardened as soon as they left Draco's face.

"Thank you." She smiled politely. "Ehm... Could I ask for a small favour?"

Narcissa let go of her cup of coffee. "Sure."

"May I borrow one of your owls to send a letter to my parents? They asked me to let them know as soon as I can..."

"Of course. I suppose you know where the owlery is."

A small wrinkle formed on Hermione's forehead as she remembered what had happened there just a few hours ago. "Yes, I do. Thank you, ma'am." She stood up, trying her best not to show her abashment.

"A moment, please." Narcissa shifted on her chair, folding her napkin.

"Yes?"

"As you probably know, the ball is approaching," the woman began as she let her hand rest next to her plate, "surely, you realise it is quite an important event, requiring a proper attire."

"Of course," Hermione nodded. "I was planning on visiting Madame Malkin's today! I can actually go right after..."

Narcissa's lips formed an arrogant smirk. "No, I don't suppose any of Madam Malkin's robes would suffice."

Hermione opened her mouth but subsequently closed it again. She kept looking at the smiling woman, who watched her struggle with pure satisfaction. "Ehm... all right, well, then I can visit Twilfitt and T..."

"No, I'm afraid not even Twilfitt and Tatting would do us any favour."

'Then what should I do?' Hermione thought to herself.

Standing up from her chair, the older woman smoothed her silver robe and folded her arms. "Are you familiar with the name Vittorio D'Avalos?"

Hermione recalled the picture of a skinny man with sharp cheekbones she'd seen in one of the books in the Hogwarts library. She nodded her head eagerly. "He's an Italian fashion designer, the only one to improvise on the spot and get dresses done in less than fifteen minutes. He won the most outstanding outfit award twelve times in a row, the international artist of the year, the best..." She paused to take a breath.
"Impressive." Narcissa took the chance of the silence. "Yes, that is all accurate, not to mention he is a family friend as well." She smirked upon noticing Hermione's chin bob.

"He is coming over this afternoon. I've already informed him there is one more woman in need of a dress so you don't have to worry about anything else than being on the third floor at four p.m."

Hermione's head spun. "No... I mean, I would be perfectly fine with Diagon Alley's shops. I'm sure I'll find a proper..."

"It is not an option. The robe needs to be perfect and that can't offer anyone but D'Avalos."

"But..." Hermione tried desperately. There was no way she'd be able to afford a tailored dress from the wizarding equivalent of Zuhair Murad. No wonder he was beyond expensive.

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "You don't have to worry about the money. It's all taken care of."

Hermione furrowed her brows. "No! I'll pay for my dress!"

"Look, Granger," Draco suddenly decided to join in. "You don't even wanna be there. You are doing me a favour, so... let's just take the dress as some form of a thank you."

"No, it doesn't work like that!" She shook her head stubbornly. "I couldn't possibly accept anything so expensive! Ma'am," Hermione turned to the woman, "what if I just went to Diagon Alley and if I don't find a suitable..."

"I've already said it is not negotiable. Draco, if you really want your friend to be there, make sure she's in the guest room at the given time," she ordered, already turning on her heel, not giving the girl another chance to object.

"One advice, Ms Granger—" A cold but somehow tired voice of Lucius Malfoy made both Draco and Hermione turn around. "Don't try to argue with my wife... you stand no chance." Rising from the chair, he gave her a half-smile, half scowl, ambling his way out of the dining room.

"How am I ever going to pay you back?!" Hermione grunted as she marched along with Draco, heading nowhere else but towards the third floor. "I'm serious, so stop laughing at me!" she snapped, seeing the boy grinning with corner of her eye.

Amused, Draco only shrugged. "I've already asked you. Why can't you just accept it as a simple thank you?"

"And I've already told you," Hermione emphasised the last word angrily, "if you want to thank me, a plain verbal statement would do just fine! Your parents don't have to go and buy me a dress worth more than my whole wardrobe combined," she objected, folding her arms, "this is insane!"

"Please, it's nothing." Draco waved his hand dismissively.

The young witch let out a short, forced laugh. "No, it's not! Draco, there are actually people who have to work their fingers to the bone to be able to buy a bloody toast for breakfast, people who know the true value of money. For them, things just don't fall from heaven like that." Snapping her fingers, she stopped and turned to face her friend. "So don't tell me it's nothing!"

Draco paused as well, looking at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Okay. That's really... unfortunate, I guess, but what does it have to do with you and that dress?"
Closing her eyes, Hermione took a deep breath. "Forget about it. I just don't want to be contributing to this nightmare of materialism. If you do, it's your choice, but I think it's a waste of money. Money that could be invested in a much better cause."

"Right." Draco took the chance. "What would you do with so much money then, how'd you use it?"

Shrugging, Hermione began, "Thousands and thousands of organisations are in need of financial support. Have you ever heard of the Equity Fund?" She watched him shake his head. "Well, there is a small group of people here in London, trying to enforce equal pay for all the working house elves. I think it would..."

"Are you serious right now?!" Draco couldn't help but laughed. "You're here telling me about wasting money and you'd invest them in such a nonsense?"

Hermione opened her mouth, super indignant. "It's not nonsense! It's something that needs to be brought to attention! Oh, I cannot believe I..." She turned on her heel, ready to march right back to her room.

"Okay, wait, wait, wait!" The young wizard ran after her.

"Not interested in anything you have to say!" She held her head high as she approached the staircase.

"Just a second!" Draco jumped in front of her, preventing her from going any further. Hermione folded her arms, looking anywhere but at him.

"Okay, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said that! Look, here's an idea. How about you sell the dress after the ball and use the money for that Equity fund? How does that sound?"

"What? It's not even my money, Draco, I couldn't possibly..."

"Then I'll do it! I'll invest the money."

"Don't be ridiculous! You don't have to do things just because of me!" Hermione shook her head but deep down melted a little from this kind gesture.

"I don't want to do it because of you, gnashgab!" He grinned as his friend's eyes narrowed. "I've just had a laugh on the account of someone who works 24 hours a day and still doesn't get paid. I don't want karma getting me for that later in life."

However much she didn't want to, Hermione couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"Now, that's a good sign." Draco's grin widened. "Come on, you've got a dress to try on—and remember to take the priciest! We want as much money as we can get!"

Satisfied with a slight punch to the boy's shoulder, Hermione didn't say another complaint as she followed him to the end of the corridor.

"Time to say goodbye," he informed her nonchalantly, "if you excuse me, I'm going to leave you to a dragon—I've already had a pleasure and don't intend to get any more of it," giving her a quick grimace, he turned around and started walking away.

"It's not that hard, all you need to do is knock," he called over his shoulder as he walked down the stairs, leaving just the sound of his footsteps behind.
"Okay, Hermione... deep breath," she whispered, finding herself stepping from one foot to the other in front of the dark ebony door. Inhaling sharply, she reached out and knocked three times. The door opened almost immediately, making her take a few steps back.

"Miss Granger, I'm glad you came to your senses," Narcissa Malfoy whispered as she came into the view, giving her a barely visible smile, "come in."

Hermione entered hesitantly, taking in the whole room. Like the rest of the house, it was designed with a great taste. Dark pieces of furniture contrasted deeply with unusual light coming from the stationary windows, making space look much wider than it actually was.

"Vittorio, may I introduce Miss Granger?" Narcissa spoke and Hermione's eyes were forced towards a tall man dressed in a mauve coloured suit. She recognised him immediately by his sharp features and a blithe expression.

Coming close enough to shake hands, the girl gulped as his dark eyes narrowed upon looking at her striped t-shirt and denim pants.

"Ms Granger, this is Vittorio D'Avalos."

Offering her hand, the girl smiled softly. "Hermione Granger. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," he replied in a strong Italian accent, squeezing her palm, "let's have a look at you," the designer murmured as he started circling the girl without further ado.

Hermione, feeling like a piece of meat, tried to turn around and face him, but the man wouldn't let her. "Just a second, amore!" he added, sensing her impatience.

"A great shape, good posture, skin slightly tanned, chocolate eyes and..." Vittorio reached out to her jaw but barely touched it when he quickly pulled his fingers away with a dramatic gasp. "Dio mio! Jaw so sharp it cut me to the bone!" He smiled widely, making the girl giggle. "That's all in our favour! But, my... those hideous clothes!" His smile immediately changed into a mask of horror. "Why hide your beauty under such garbage!" he went on without any remorse.

A small wrinkle formed on Hermione's forehead. "It's quite comfortable, thank you."

"So, I would suggest," he voiced as he tilted his head, not really paying attention to her hurt feelings or anything she had to say in particular, "pink—or better white with a soft cerulean mist transition. What do you think, Narcissa?"

Hermione gave the woman a quick look, realising the whole focus was on her. "I would agree on the white and blue combination," she drawled indifferently.

"Yes. Loose from the waist, tight all the way up," Vittorio sang, looking like Mad Hatter, "okay, amore, here!" He took out his wand and with quite a complicated flick of it, a black patterned folding screen appeared in front of them. "Hop in, undress, and we can start working!"

"But..."

"Don't be shy. We're professionals here!" He rolled his eyes, turning to Narcissa.

Hermione didn't have any other choice but do as she was told. With a soft sigh, she crawled behind the folder and began reluctantly removing her clothes.

"I think I'm done," she squeaked shyly after a while, praying for this nightmarish summer holiday
to be finally over.

"Splendido!" Vittorio nodded approvingly as he approached her.

Feeling heat rising up to her ears, Hermione put her arms over her chest, trying to cover everything her simple beige underwear wouldn't.

"I'm going to perform a basic spell, just to get exact measurements, okay?"

Nodding, the young witch slowly let her arms fall to her sides. It was a mere second before she felt her breath hitch. There was a tightness all around her torso, hitting her lungs, making her feel like a piece of lemon being squeezed out of its juice.

As quickly as it came, it disappeared, letting her cough with much-needed oxygen.

"Quite the numbers!" he whistled, impressed. "Okay, bella, I need you to close your eyes, and no peeking—I want a full reaction after I'm done!"

Hermione opened her mouth to argue but his demanding look made her change her mind. Snorting, she closed her eyes, preparing for the magic.

"Promise you won't look?"

"I promise," she assured him, stressing every syllable.

"Okay, let's get started then!"

Hermione had no idea what was going to happen. She stood there embarrassed and clueless, trying to detect any sound that would suggest what the man was up to.

She flinched as a wave of warmth washed over her. Feeling a sensational softness, almost like a spring breeze flowing all around her legs, hitting her open palms, she felt like being in the middle of a golden field, just enjoying the last sunset.

"Careful, now!" She heard Vittorio murmur somewhere below her waistline. She was tempted to open at least one of her eyes, to see where was this whirlpool of wind coming from, but kept her promise.

"You may feel slightly uncomfortable, but don't worry, nothing bad is happening." With those words the feeling of freedom changed, advancing up towards her waist. It felt like something liquid had spilt and decided to travel the other way around, up to her chest. Upon reaching her armpits, it stopped and slowly started to dry out, making it quite difficult to move.

"Don't stir, bella, you'll ruin everything I've done so far," he cried out, irritated.

"Sorry!" Hermione apologised quickly and decided to even breathe much more shallowly to prevent anything bad from happening.

"Okay, just a little bit of fluff here and here," he kept on murmuring to himself, "the blue... the blue now...! and more white... no, blue, it needs more blue... oh Dio!"

"What is it?" Narcissa's voice called from behind them. The girl had almost forgotten she was still there.

"All is fine, my muse! I'm almost finished!" he called back a little too loudly for Hermione's liking.
It took the designer ten more minutes before he clasped his hands together, calling for Narcissa to come and look at his masterpiece.

"May I look?" the young witch asked, trying to sound casual. She wanted to see herself before anyone else would.

"Not yet!" he snapped a little too hysterically.

Hearing a sound of footsteps approaching, Hermione frowned because she knew she was on display. "What do you say?"

Silence.

"It is magnificent!" the voice whispered after a while, quite taken aback, making the young witch's breath catch in her throat.

"Now, my bella, you may look," Vittorio allowed sweetly.

Hermione couldn't wait for this moment. Opening her eyes, she wanted to glance down, but the young woman standing in front of her caught her attention first.

Her lips parted, unable to get a word out because what her eyes saw swept her whole being off the feet like a hurricane.

A soft fabric, softer than the most expensive vucana silk, was covering half of her body, flowing around her legs like a morning mist, complimented by almost invisible apple blossoms dancing elegantly over the dreamlike material, disappearing in the midair anytime the dress moved. The snow white substance went up, meeting a few neat cerulean blurs here and there, stopping right at Hermione's waistline, where it hugged her curves tightly like an Oxyuranus. It advanced toward her breasts, stopping at her armpits, circling its way around her upper arms, changing into flowing translucent sleeves ending at her elbows.

"Wow..." It was all the girl got out of herself.

"Look at you! I knew there was a princess under all those trashy clothes!"

Hermione sobered up immediately, frowning at his note.

"I think you've done a spectacular job, Vittorio," Narcissa pointed as her eyes travelled over the dress.

"My pleasure." Vittorio bowed his head, turning to Hermione. "Don't fail to mention who's the mastermind behind this art... it's me—not your parents, even though they've helped."

The day Hermione dreaded the most was there and she could swear she'd rather spend it in the company of professor Snape trying out expired potions than actually attend this ball.

It was almost time to get ready. She had the dress prepared and hanging outside her wardrobe, sending tiny blossoms all around it evaporating in a stealthy dust of silver before it completely vanished.

Vittorio had told her he had used a real mist of the Tasmanian Styx Valley but refused to give out any more secrets. However, as he was leaving, he had leaned in to give her a fake kiss on her cheek, secretly pushing a tiny something into her hand, whispering: "It's all art of the mind, to
Squeezing the stopper glass bottle in her hand, Hermione didn't have to think twice to realise what was that cinnabar coloured liquid trapped inside the sample. Interestingly enough, evening gowns weren't the only field Vittorio specialised in. It wasn't a well-known fact to the public but the designer was also a passionate alchemist, drilling into a rather shady kind of magic. However, because of his fame and money, the man could practically get away with anything.

Putting the potion inside the tiny pocket of her travelling bag, Hermione knew there was no point in postponing the preparations any longer. With a heavy sigh, she walked over to her vanity and sat down, ready to make a noble young lady out of herself.

She reached out for the palette Draco's mother had sent her and went for the white shadow, applying it to the corners of her eyes. She couldn't help but smirked when she remembered Narcissa stressing the importance of the hair and make-up, how it all had to harmonise. The girl had had to explain every single step she was planning to do to assure her she was capable of styling herself on her own.

It took her two hours to complete everything from her hair to the dressing part and with a bag of moths loosely flying through her ribs, she finally stood in front of the looking glass, taking in the sight in front of her.

She looked nothing like the bookworm Hermione Granger people knew her as. Instead, there stood a young woman in a dress stolen out of a fairytale of princesses and golden apples. Her long hair was braided into an elegant updo, graced by a thin silver chain glistening in the dim light. And her face, although still young with immature traits, was without a doubt showing a promising bone structure, enhanced by the soft make-up.

Knock. Knock.

'Madam Malfoy... of course.' Hermione thought to herself. The woman had informed her she'd come to make sure everything was perfect. That she looked perfect.

Touching the silky fabric, which felt like a pure mist under her fingertips, she floated to the door, opening it.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Was the first thing that fell from Narcissa's lips upon seeing Hermione. "We're running late!"

Hermione parted her lips, slightly taken aback by her appearance. Even with that anxious expression, she looked like a Greek goddess that appeared with the first sunrise among the mortals. Her face was flawless, almost like porcelain, without any disturbance caused by the make-up. The sharp cheekbones stood out even more thanks to her blonde locks being tied into a twisted updo, decorated with an ornamented clip on each side.

But what contributed most to her ethereal look was the dress of a nude colour, studded by hundreds of golden crystals, creating an illusion of flowers.

"Take your stuff, we better get going. Draco's already in the hallway." She turned on her heel, hurrying away, giving Hermione a perfect view on her bare back, occasionally getting covered by loose transparent sleeves coming all the way down to her waist.

Hermione's head spun when she imagined how much money that robe must have cost.
Partly relieved she did just fine, she returned to her room, grabbed the white purse Vittorio had conjured up for her and hurried into the hallway to meet Draco and wait for the others.

She wasn't prepared, though, for the shocked expression his face created upon seeing her walking down the stairs.

"Close your mouth." She smiled as she stopped right in front of him.

Draco pressed his lips together but didn't reply. He seemed to be too stunned to get even the simplest word out of him.

"You look nice." Hermione tried to initiate a dialogue, admiring his black robe with complicated golden lining. "Like gentlemen from the old movies!"

"Ha-ha!" His tongue finally decided to cooperate, but those blue eyes stayed still as wide as plates. The young witch smiled. "I meant it as a compliment! Where's everyone else?"

"My parents are already on their way, but I'm not sure about aunt Bella." "I see." Hermione was glad to be covered with makeup so Draco wouldn't see her pink cheeks. She hadn't spoken with the witch since that little fiasco in the owlery.

"So," keen on changing the subject, she clasped her hands together. "How are you feeling?"

"Sick."

"Don't worry! I've got your back!"

"Draco!" An unfamiliar voice called from behind their backs. Turning around, they spotted a man approaching in a swift walk, wearing quite an expensive-looking robe.

"Rodolphus..." The boy acknowledged him with badly hidden distaste, making Hermione's stomach tighten uncomfortably.

The wizard paused in front of Draco, looking at him from above.

Taking the chance to examine his features, Hermione pointed her curious look at him. His eyes were green with a supercilious emphasis to them, not that different from his wife. Skin, quite dark, was glowing with health, but his lips were chapped as if weathered by wind, which was almost impossible during this time of year.

"Rodolphus!" Narcissa's voice interrupted Hermione's observation as she walked down the stairs, supported by her husband.

"Narcissa, Lucius." He bowed his head. "Where is my wife?"

"Right here, my dearest." They heard forced, sugary sweet enthusiasm as Bellatrix appeared out of nowhere, right next to him.

Hermione automatically turned her head towards the woman and, to her embarrassment, gasped audibly
According to the ancient tale, there once was a creature of ethereal beauty, so divine that mortals could not bear a single glance cast upon her crystalline skin. She used to dance through the angel oak trees in nearby forests and sang so purely the heart of a man fell inexorably into a trap of infatuation. Following the voice, males wandered across the meadows lit by the dawning sun, mad with a desire to see the celestial being. Alas! Once they approached and set their eyes upon the glow of her amber hair, they fell to their knees, cursed to the darkness for the rest of their days.

Night by night, each sunrise brought more and more blind men back to their wives, until there wasn't any left to succumb to the charms of Lillith.

The dawns became quiet again.

But as yesterdays teach us, peace is a tricky fellow, short like the time between the first and the last breath of a mayfly.

The velvet voice re-appeared again, wiring through the air like the sweetest melody, but there were no more men to respond and no one worried anymore.

Sadly, they'd all forgotten about the youngest son of the judge. The boy was coming out of age, just about to turn fifteen. Upon one summer morning, he crept out of his bed, following the angelic sound to the woods behind the house. As soon as the boy caught a glimpse of naked, radiant skin, he covered his face, for the pain was excruciating.

Hearing agonising cries of her only son as he blindly ran home, the mother's heart burst into flames of loathing. Delirious with rage, she gathered every man, leading them into the forest to track the vile creature. She kept her eyes on the ground, following the stardust soon replaced by the crimson blood falling from the nymph's bare feet as she ran through the mountain rocks, trying to escape the humans.

Eventually, the creature slipped through a crack, finding a shelter in a tiny cave.

Wanting nothing else but to destroy her, the people went on, trying to get inside, but got stopped by a flood of tears falling through the loop. The flow became stronger and stronger as the creature wailed for her wounded skin. The villagers retreated, desperate to run back home, but the salt from the tears had loosened the rocks, making the avalanche devour the poor men and bury the nymph alive, casting her, too, to stay in the darkness until the end of times.

Never ever did she show herself to the world again. Because of living in a constant gloom, her skin had become paler and her hair darker. No man had ever seen her face but if she had any, Hermione was positive it would be the one of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Quickly as if blinded, the girl turned from the woman, trying to occupy those betraying eyes of hers with something else, but they kept darting back, leaving her no other choice but to capitulate.

Hermione parted her lips for the second time.
There she stood, like a demon of the night, dressed in a dark, see-through lace, brightened by a plethora of tiny little crystals exalting the ivory skin underneath. The upper part of the robe pressed tightly against the collarbones, dragging thin paths of merlinite stones all over the breast area, creating an illusion of a Breckland thyme.

The tightness went on, sneaking down the slender arms, stopping just above the wrists, trapped in the dark fingers of the man standing next to the witch. He pulled one of them up, letting it slip to get a hold of the palm, and pressed his mouth to the marble skin. "Bellatrix."

The woman released her hand, curling those blood red lips into a bored, arrogant smile. Rodolphus Lestrange, however, did not reciprocate the sentiments. His face stayed still, eyes glued to hers without any blinking. "It's been a while."

"Yes," the dark witch nodded indifferently, "yes, it was." Granting him no more attention, she blatantly stepped away, walking past the dumbstruck Hermione towards the blond pair still standing on the stairs. "Cissy, we should be going if we don't want to be late."

"I know," the blond witch replied nervously, holding the delicate fabric of her dress as she took the last few steps down the staircase. "Draco, Miss Granger, our conveyance is outside, so please—"

Narcissa motioned towards the door as she made her way past them, followed closely by her husband.

Coming face to face with the incomer, she paused, nodding faintly. "It's good to see you."

Lucius, too, acknowledged the visitor, reaching out his hand, and even though Lestrange did take it, none of the men showed any sympathy for the other.

Freshly brought out of her hypnosis, Hermione shook her head and gave Draco a quick questioning look before moving and, unfortunately, tripping over her dress. She heard a soft chuckle behind her back, painting her ears bright pink.

Embarrassed, she bent over to get a hold of the long skirt but before she could straighten up, her eyes fell on a dark, loose fabric, which appeared in front of her ex nusquam.

"We need to have a quick talk, you and I."

Hermione's brain sent an electric shock to her stomach upon catching the low whisper somewhere near. Forgetting all about the dress, she quickly regained her posture. Bellatrix was standing right in front of her, gleaming with pulchritude. Her skin looked flawless, like glass without a single blemish, enhanced by those infamous cheekbones of hers. The dark shadows underneath her eyes had disappeared—instead, a smooth alabaster colour was on display, radiating nothing but pure health. Hermione couldn't tell whether she was wearing any make-up except a matte, blood-like rouge, but the change was impressive.

"Granger, are you coming?" Draco's voice came like an echo from a very far distance. She was too mesmerised to even try answering, but it did not become any issue, for the dark witch took it into her own hands.

"No, she'll go with me." Bellatrix turned to the boy, whose face got the look of a freshly slapped one.

"What?" He blanched, freezing on a spot.

"What do you mean, with you?" Narcissa came back into the picture, her mouth opened agape. "Bella, this is not the time—!"
"Calm down," she replied, rolling her eyes, "I just need a second, then I'll take her there," she added, giving Draco a reassuring look. "I'm not going to tie her up somewhere and—"

Hermione choked on her own saliva and started coughing.

"For Merlin's sake, I wasn't even thinking about that! Thank you for the idea. Now I'm definitely —!" The boy's eyes went wide, completely ignoring Hermione's discomfort.

Inhaling deeply as if not to lose patience, Bellatrix licked her lips. "Your little princess will be there on time. Now hurry up, your parents are waiting for you."

The boy took a few unsure steps forwards. "Aunt Bella, you know I am very fond of you, but if Granger doesn't show up there—!"

Bellatrix provocatively lifted her chin. "Then what?"

"Can we please not do this now?!" Narcissa almost stomped her foot. "This—this is a very important evening and you two are not ruining it! Merlin forbid there's a one day without arguing over Hermione Granger!" she barked, surprising everyone in the room. It wasn't a common thing to have Narcissa lose her temper.

"You!" She pierced Draco with her gaze. "Outside!" She nodded towards the door. "And you, Bellatrix, I expect the girl to be there!"

She turned on her heel, marching out with Lucius and Draco jogging swiftly in front of her without anymore grumbling.

There was a loud sound of the door closing, making the girl realise they were alone. Well, technically, there was still Rodolphus, standing aside, obviously displeased with the ignorance his wife was lavishing upon him, but it did not make the feeling of anxiety any better. Quite the opposite.

Gulping, Hermione waited in anticipation.

"Give us a moment," Bellatrix called out, addressing her husband, but did not spare him a single look.

"No," he spat venomously, "I'm afraid I can't do that. We need to talk, Bellatrix, now!" Hermione's gaze jumped to the man, who looked like being so damn done dealing with her attitude.

"We can talk later. I don't suppose it's something of great importance, is it?" the dark witch retorted with a mocking smirk as she stepped closer to the girl, whose glance automatically shifted back.

Rodolphus threw a hand into the air in undeniable frustration. He waited for a few more seconds before turning his back to them and storming out, completely vexed.

'Somebody's henpecked tonight.' Hermione thought to herself, but subsequently regretted her very own place on this Earth.

Stupid Hermione!

In a second, she built up imaginary walls around her mind, but it was already too late.

Bellatrix parted her lips, visibly taken aback. "Careful with such words, deary, could cause you any sort of trouble... or injuries," she added, making the hair on Hermione's arms stand up.
"I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that! I-I mean—" the girl stammered, absolutely petrified. This wasn't the first time she got into trouble for her lack of caution.

"I may let it slide today," Bellatrix raised her voice, "but next time, do keep your mind closed—or else I may see more than just an eerie fairytale of The Temptress of a Nyriad Valley, even though it came out like a very flattering compliment."

There would never be enough make-up in the world to cover the bright shade of sangria which took place on Hermione's cheeks after that statement. She fought with all her might to stop herself from running upstairs with her face buried in her palms.

"What's the matter? There's nothing wrong with thinking there are far better-looking women than you, right?" Bellatrix smirked with just one side of her mouth, sending an unexpected punch into Hermione's gut.

The witch rolled her eyes "Oh my, I was just joking! You can't take everything so seriously!"

Being splashed by such cold water, Hermione found her voice once again. She shook her head, carefully adjusting her dress. "I didn't."

"Good. Otherwise, you might find the next subject a little too offensive." Bellatrix tossed her long hair over her shoulder. "It's really nothing personal, I wouldn't do it if it wasn't for the sake of our name, but—"

"You don't want me to go," Hermione interrupted, not understanding why her stomach dropped since she didn't even want to go to the ball in the first place.

Bellatrix only tilted her head. "—but I have to protect the status of our family."

"That's just a metaphor." Hermione exhaled, getting a hold of her dress, ready to leave.

"Turn your pretty little face back to me, I'm not done talking," Bellatrix ordered with such authority Hermione wouldn't dare not to collaborate. She angled back, gazing over the woman's shoulder. There we go. More humiliation—and here she thought they were past this point.

"And..." The woman stepped a little closer, bending her knees to catch Hermione's eyes. "Would you mind looking at me?"

Hermione did as she was told, feeling a slight tingle inside her stomach.

"Here." The woman took out a tiny container of a bright, violet potion out of nowhere. She threw it Hermione's direction, who, even though caught off guard, still managed to catch it.

"What is it?" she asked, perplexed.

"A potion. You take it and no one, except us, will know it's you."

Hermione frowned, suspicion lingering in a back of her mind. "But this is not a polyjuice potion. The colour, the consistency..." she pointed out, unsure.

"Of course, it's not the polyjuice potion. It's something else."

"What exactly?"

The dark witch paused, trapping her lower lip in between those dazzling teeth. "You need to trust me."
Hermione's eyebrows moved up on their own accord. You need to trust me? Seriously?!

"Deary, I wouldn't hurt you." Bellatrix' face melted into a soft smile. "You're like a protected flower in this family."

Gulping, Hermione looked at the small ampoule in her hands. She couldn't imagine anything in this world that would bring her to drink an unknown potion.

"Are you afraid you'll die?" Bellatrix spoke again, watching the inner battle.

"I... This was getting scarier and scarier. 'Now I am.'

"Look, I'm an adult woman. What would I get out of killing a fifteen—or whatever your age is—year-old child, tell me?"

'A feeling of satisfaction?' Hermione thought, keeping her mind tightly closed.

"I've already told you I reconsidered my views, haven't I?" Bellatrix tried slowly. "It's purely for Draco's own good, trust me."

The girl's face radiated pure despair. She wasn't a fan of the idea in any way, but there was just something in those dark eyes, a glimpse of sincerity piercing through her very own soul and... Merlin, if she was to survive this...

"All right." She sighed heavily. "How do I take it? Does the glass need to be broken or—?"

"No, you swallow it whole." Bellatrix left her lips parted, visibly unnerved the girl would change her mind.

Hermione slowly moved her left arm up and put the petite phial inside her mouth. It was cold but other than that, there was no taste to it. Closing her eyes before swallowing, she prepared for the worst.

Nothing.

Not a thing.

She blinked, letting out a sigh full of relief. She was alive. But wait... Ouch!... Hermione's hands shot up. It was as if somebody pressed a hot pancake against her face and refused to let it slide down.

But the feeling, as quickly as it came, disappeared in the same fashion. Hermione focused on the woman in front of her, who was tilting her head like a curious puppy.

She wondered about a sudden somersault happening inside her stomach. It must have been the nerves.

"Feeling as alive as ever?" The dark witch smirked, clearly satisfied with the results.

"How do I look?" Hermione asked, her hands roaming over the features of the new face. As far as she could tell, it did not feel any different.

"Tweaked." Bellatrix moved closer. "Wait... come here!" She reached out to Hermione's face but the girl quickly took a step back, her heart skipping a beat. It was beyond her human understanding why she always acted like a scared little bunny around this woman.
Bellatrix raised her eyebrow and chuckled. "Goodness, it's just your mascara." She let her arm fall back to her side and slowly inched closer again. This time Hermione did not move. Beside the strangest feeling of trepidation bouncing inside her form, she stayed completely still.

"Eyes closed."

Nodding, Hermione slipped into the gloom. She waited with her heart beating faster and faster. There was almost a taste to the raw proximity she felt when a perfume found its way inside her lungs.

Her breath became shallow and it seemed as if the world around her also forgot to exist.

A second, two, three…

She gasped erratically when a cool flow of breeze hit the skin near her left eye. Slowly, almost like tiny raindrops, a rush of precisely aimed goosebumps covered her entire spine. Hermione would swear she could feel them slipping underneath her skin, into the bones of her ribcage, swallowing all the oxygen out of her lungs.

She heard a soft exhale of a smile, somewhere very very close, but she didn't dare to open her eyes.

"There," Bellatrix said softly.

It took Hermione a second or two to peer through her eyes. The dark witch was already halfway to the door when she turned around, confused why she didn't hear any footsteps behind her back.

"What is it?" she asked.

'Exactly. What. is. it?!' Hermione thought, utterly distressed. She tried to attribute this weird agitation to the constant state of fear she had to live in before she and the woman made their peace, but this interpretation did not feel quite right.

No, it has to be just post-stress. There's no other way to explain it.

"Well?" Bellatrix interrupted her inner monologue.

"I think I'd like to see myself before we leave." She aimed for a cover-up. "Just to make sure—eh." Hermione didn't finish. She hurried to the glass doors of the cabinet positioned on the left side of the hall, trying to catch a glimpse of the face.

The improvised mirror did not provide much information, however, Hermione could see that the eyes staring back at her weren't her own. They had grown bigger and heavier. The mouth, too, seemed much plumper and the tip of her nose unusually pointy.

"Satisfied? Now come along," the older witch commanded, tearing the girl from her observations.

"Sorry... I'm coming," Hermione blurted, rushing after her.

As soon as she caught up, her attention automatically slid to the shoulder blades stretching the sheer fabric. She tried focusing on the door in front of her, but it proved to be a fight of quite a tough nature.

A plain move of a hand, and the door opened on its own, revealing a dark starry night and a furious looking Rodolphus Lestrange.

"That is not a happy face," Bellatrix pointed, clearly amused, making a vessel on his neck pump a
little faster.

"Are you done with your little conversation?" he asked, ignoring the statement.

"Uhm." Bellatrix nodded cheerfully, driving him even angrier. "We're running late. Could you be so kind and take the little missie there? I still have some business to finish."

"Bellatrix, I think I've explained very clearly that I need to talk to you!"

"Sorry," she sneered, apparently not sorry at all. She turned to the girl.

"Bella, I am not ..." Rodolphus started but thought better of it. His eyes jumped to Hermione, who quickly averted her gaze.

"Find my sister, all right?" The woman raised her eyebrows to emphasise her point. "Tell her I gave you the potion."

"But... "

"Oh, please." She shook her head, seeing the girl's reserved body language upon looking at Rodolphus. "He is a very reliable man, you don't have to be worried about your first time."

Hermione's pupils grew twice their size. "E-excuse me?"

A pause, a tilt of a head and a wave of laughter followed. "Oh." Bellatrix put her palm over her wide smile. "I was talking about the apparition, not that."

The feeling of boiling water inside her own head was back and Hermione couldn't be more grateful to be standing outside, where the lights couldn't enhance the growing redness in her cheeks.

"Teenagers these days." Bella shook her head, the signs of laughter still visible on her face. Angling back to Rodolphus, she put a hand on his cheek. "You better get going, darling. You wouldn't want to miss the first dance, would you?" Giving him no chance to respond, she spun around and disappeared in a swirl of thick, black smoke.

Hermione was looking at the slowly evaporating mist in disbelief. Did the woman just leave her here?

They could sing whatever glittery canticles they wanted about the nobleness of the name Black, but the term decency couldn't fit in the scriptures in any way.

Rodolphus coughed, trying to catch Hermione's attention. "You need to hold on to my arm," he drawled in a snobby voice "and try not to let go. You could split."

This was the last thing the young witch needed to hear. Not that long ago, she'd read an article about Roger Matthews, a sixteen-year-old wizard, trying to apparate without a proper training. He split in five, leaving the most intimate part of his body in Denmark.

"I don't have the whole night, you know." The man extended his left arm, waiting for Hermione to grasp it.

A little hesitant, she stepped closer, reaching out her hand. She touched the soft, silky robe, covering the man's brachium. "Ready?"

Hermione nodded, too fearful to say anything.
She almost screamed as the invisible force pulled her into a space so tight she was afraid it was going to crush her bones into plain dust. It pushed all the breath out of her body, leaving her with nothing but a desire to have this feeling behind her as soon as possible.

It was as if a golden Carassius somewhere heard her and fulfilled her wish. Her feet touched the ground without a warning, attacking her balance.

What a great thing it was to refuse the slice of cake Ailey had left in her room that evening, Hermione thought. The apparition alone almost made her sick—she couldn't imagine doing it with a stomach full of food.

Trying her best to regain the composure, she smoothed the dress on her sides and looked around the space.

The capacious anteroom they appeared in was full of laggards, still lingering behind, talking to their families and friends. Hermione was wondering whether she'd bump into anyone of her classmates but personally hoped for zero encounters.

Funnily enough, of all the people around, her eyes immediately fell upon Pansy Parkinson, dressed in a dark green robe, who was too, shamelessly staring back at her. Expecting the worst, Hermione could only pray the girl would behave and not make a huge scene out of it. But to her surprise, Pansy not only controlled herself—the Slytherin student smiled, nodding—a sign of respect she only had for her equals.

'What?'

Hermione smiled hesitantly, averting her gaze to the large mirror plastered across the entire wall. She recognised the ethereal dress, even the frame looked just like before, but the face covering her own, was absolutely unrecognisable.

'Ooh, That's where the dog lies buried.'

She took a step closer, gazing into the face she had to present tonight and noticed her features had changed completely. Instead of her own, cinnamon eyes, a cold grey colour gleamed from underneath the dark eyelashes. Her lips had become fuller, with the bottom one standing out a little more, glistening under the light of the crystal chandelier hanging above her head.

"You better go find Narcissa." Rodolphus approached her, gesturing towards the entry on the other side of the hall. "The ball has already started, so don't hang about," he added, looking all around him, probably searching for any signs of his wife.

"Yes, of course! Thank you for the..." Hermione began but the man was already gone, swallowed by the crowd of attires.

The girl stayed completely alone, slowly processing what it really meant to attend a pureblood event like this. Of course, she'd read all about it in Soirées of Wizarding World, but being here in person, experiencing the atmosphere first handed it was a completely different story.

The air was heavy with a green floral scent, mixed with something classy and crisp Hermione couldn't quite place—almost as if the aristocracy itself carried a fragrance on its own. Everywhere she looked, she saw witches and wizards with the same characteristic scowl rooted to their faces, giving off an iron aura of confidence.

Deep down, Hermione had to admit that the potion plan wasn't such a bad idea, however, she still felt a slight sting of disappointment that they were ashamed... that Bellatrix was ashamed.
It was beyond her why she valued the woman's opinion so much. Yes, she was a very powerful witch, clever, but she could also be ruthless and obnoxious.

A perfect example was her own husband. Hermione felt truly sorry for him, even though he was a complete stranger.

A marriage like this would be just too forlorn for any human being.

One evening, when she and Draco were sitting in the garden, the boy had told her Bellatrix used to travel a lot, leaving Rodolphus at home to take care of everything while she was on some kind of a mission, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it.

"Auntie is more mysterious year by year. She doesn't talk much about the business. I remember I used to go to Lestrange manor for holidays, but since she took the job, I hardly see her and I think the same applies to Rodolphus. He's all alone there."

"So they don't have any children?" Hermione asked, a little tingly with expectations.

"No. Once I overheard her talking about it with my mother. Aunt Bella said that if she wanted a child, she wouldn't risk it with Rodolphus. She'd rather kill herself than have a dumb offspring if he was to take after him."

Worming her way through the crowd, Hermione accidentally bumped into someone. She murmured an apology but continued with her inner monologue.

That right there was the proof that arranged marriages were the most senseless and cold unions, chaining two people together for the rest of their lives, no matter how miserable it turned out to be—all for the sake of the bloodline. It was true, she'd never given it much thought, but Hermione was positive if she was ever to be married, she'd choose a sweet, caring man and they'd spend their lives in peace and harmony. She wouldn't definitely end up like Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange…

A few more seconds died and Hermione finally passed the entrance hall and appeared in a spacious hall, full of chandeliers and expensive-looking sofas and tables. The decoration was aligned in golden and white, a very clear and eye-pleasing combination emphasised by classical music, similar to André Rieu compositions. The aesthetics of the synchronised dancing, the whirlpool of colour and that beautiful surrounding all combined created a place the dreams are made of.

Impressed, Hermione took a moment to memorise everything from the mist dragging across the floor to the starry ceiling, almost identical with the Hogwarts’ one.

"Do you need any help? You seem lost." A girly voice called from behind her.

She turned around, seeing a very friendly looking Pansy Parkinson smiling at her. "Oh, hello," Hermione choked out of her, a little distressed the girl would recognise her voice. "I... no, thank you. I'm sure I'll manage."

"Are you looking for someone? I can help. By the way, I'm Parkinson. Pansy Parkinson. My father works in the Ministry of Magic with Cornelius Fudge himself." She stuck out her chin, expecting a lava of praises to fall from Hermione's lips, who had a lot to do to stop herself from bursting out.

Of course, Pansy would brag about her father the first thing.

Hermione bit her tongue so she wouldn't say anything acrid. When she thought about it, it was actually quite sad the girl needed to bring up her parent to gain a friend or whatever these
relationships were called among the purebloods.

A little confused that Hermione's reaction was just a plain smile, Pansy furrowed her brows. "What's your name? You're definitely not a Hogwarts student and I've never seen you here before, either."

Hermione's curled lips froze. "I believe you haven't because—well, this is my first time," she peeped. "I-I'm homeschooled."

"Why?"

"Because—oh, excuse me, I think I've just seen a friend of mine," Hermione quickly blurted, glad to see a glimpse of Narcissa's beige dress actually not that far from her, "it was nice talking to you, Pansy." She gave her a quick smile and rushed after the woman before she'd disappear.

After a set of excuse me-s, the girl caught up with the blonde witch. "Madame Malfoy?"

Narcissa turned around with perplexion lingering around her features, but it took her just a single glance at Hermione's robe to realise what was happening. Her smooth hand grabbed Hermione's wrist and led her to the first empty table nearest to them.

"Miss Granger?!" She stopped in front of the girl, completely ignoring the rule of personal space. "What is this?" Her arctic eyes roam over Hermione's face in uneasiness. "Where's my sister?"

Backing away a little, Hermione tried to release her wrist. Narcissa glanced down, quickly letting go, probably not even aware she was gripping the thin hand in her own.

"Well, Madame Lestrange came to me with a potion. She didn't tell me what it was and..."

"You took some potion without knowing what it is? You stupid girl, what if something bad happened to you?" Narcissa whispered almost hysterically.

"I'm sorry?" Hermione parted her lips, glaring into Narcissa's pretty face. "Do you think she would...?"

The blonde witch didn't answer, only kept looking at the changed features with an intense look, making Hermione swallow painfully. A sudden feeling of warmth washed over her as the woman cast a silent spell to reveal any sort of poisoning or whatever harm the potion could cause.

"You seem fine." She breathed out and relaxed her tensed posture. "I..."

"Mother? Have you seen Granger?" Draco came to those two with a frowning look plastered upon his face.

"Yes, actually, I have. She's right here," the woman answered, crossing her arms.

Hermione peered from behind her, meeting the boy's eyes, which did not look happy at all. The widened pupils scanned through her face, confusion leaving his mouth open.

"What's this? Why are you—why aren't you...? You?" he blurted, gesturing ambidextrously.

The girl sighed, shrugging. "Doesn't matter, but I think it was a really good idea. I've just seen Parkinson and believe me, I was glad she had no idea it was me."

"This is aunt Bella's doing, isn't it?!" he fumed. "I told her..!"
Shaking her head, Hermione soothed the explosion before it was too late. "Stop it, Draco. I think it's for the best. I wouldn't feel comfortable with anyone staring and pointing at me, anyway." She took a step forwards. "It's all right, please, don't be mad at her."

"Where is she?" Narcissa joined in, dragging her son aside from a few curious looks. "You came here with her, where's she gone?"

"Actually, I haven't. Mr Lestrange brought me here," the girl explained, not really knowing how would the woman react to the news, "she had something important to do, that's why she asked her husband to accompany me." Hermione could see the muscles in the woman's jaw tensing.

"Fine," Narcissa said after a while, covering all the signs of aggravation. Her lips curled into a dazzling smile when the pair of wizards passed their little gathering, bowing their heads.

"Madame," they muted, moving ahead.

"Listen." She inched closer to Hermione, her voice low and urgent. "Try not to talk to anyone, dodge all the questions, but if the situation forces you, say your name's Delphini Ingram, a distant family of Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange. You came for the summer holiday from... " Narcissa tilted her head, considering Hermione's appearance. "Norway."

"What?" Draco frowned. "I don't want her to pretend she's someone else... It's disrespectful!"

"Well, we don't have a choice now, do we?" the woman snapped back, eyeing the crowd of people.

"Eh... with all due respect, ma'am, I don't think Madame Lestrange would be pleased with me saying we're related," Hermione objected, dreading the expression the dark witch's face would create upon hearing this.

"Don't let that concern you." Narcissa's eyes gleamed with a vengeance. "That's the price she has to pay for not telling me first handed."

Hermione exchanged a look with the blonde boy, unsure of what to say. She didn't like lying.

"Narcissa, what a surprise!"

They all turned around, spotting a tall, handsome man around twenty-eight-thirty years old. His golden face emitted a youthful glow of summer, underlined by electric blue eyes wrinkled under the weight of his wide grin.

"Bartemius Crouch Junior himself." The woman curled her lips in a short-lived smile, letting him approach and kiss the back of her hand.

"How do you do? This must be little Draco, am I right? Well, not that little anymore as I see." He winked at the boy, who only raised his left brow, making Hermione bite her tongue so that she wouldn't laugh. "And this lovely creature?" His eyes jumped to Hermione, whose cheeks reddened at the sudden compliment.

"This—this is Delphini, she's here with Bellatrix," Narcissa explained without hesitation, making the girl's heart jump to her throat. If the dark witch hadn't killed her with the potion, she'd definitely take care of it after learning about this.

"Bellatrix?" The man's face seemed to brighten even more, although his smile faltered.

"Yes." The blond witch frowned, piercing him with an intense look. "She and Rodolphus are both
here."

"How lovely." Barty smiled again, but this time it did not come naturally. "Would you mind me introducing my little niece to you?" He turned to Hermione and Draco. "She's from Ireland and would be really pleased to meet you both."

It was obvious Narcissa wanted to object but did not want to sound rude. "Not at all! Draco, go ahead! Delphini will join you as soon as I help her with the hair." Narcissa smiled sweetly, hooking her arm through Hermione's who shuddered under the sudden warmth. The woman did not wait for the answer as she started pulling the young witch towards the anteroom.

"Not a problem. All right boy, come along. You know I've always... " They heard the man say but the rest of his sentence faded in music and loud conversations of the wizards around them.

"That was close..." Narcissa exhaled. "Now, I don't need to emphasise how important it is to avoid situations like this. No one can know—it would be even more scandalous than an actual mudblood showing here."

Hermione bit her inner cheek, lifting her chin higher.

"It wasn't meant as an insult," Narcissa added, understanding too late what'd just come out of her mouth.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I don't see how it'd be any more shocking than that," the girl said slowly, not willing to kept her mouth shut anymore.

Narcissa nodded at the fat-looking lady sitting across the room, sending her a warm smile. The woman reciprocated, waving back at them.

"There is a lot you don't know about the world we live in. Treachery is not something we do forgive. If you're a traitor, then be one—but acting like a coward, hiding behind something that stands far lower than anything else." Narcissa stopped abruptly, unhooking her arm. "Talking about cowards... wait here," Narcissa ordered, walking away from Hermione, making her way through the crowd.

The girl was stretching her neck to see where she'd gone, but didn't have to try for a long time. In a second, the blonde witch was back, her whole being in contrast with another woman walking beside her.

Bellatrix's face radiated absolute carelessness, while Narcissa's gleamed with a forced smile. Seeing the woman, Hermione's stomach purred with a sparkle of warmth.

"Calm down, Cissy. You should thank me instead of this ludicrous chiding." She heard when they got closer. "I was the only one who tried to save the situation. You're all too scared of your little baby boy. Guess what, you are the parent, not the other way around, so you better set your standards!"

Narcissa was about to retort something when she noticed an older wizard glaring at them. She closed her mouth, turning her back to him. "You know what? You're right," she said finally, stopping in front of the girl, "absolutely right, Bella." She glanced at Hermione, giving her a mischievous smile. "I believe you've already met Delphini, here, you know, a distant relative of yours and Rodolphus' from Norway. You better stay with her the whole night because I can't guarantee what would people say if she's seen all alone... a lot of your friends are already aware of your little niece." Narcissa stroked the curl of her sister's hair. "You may try being a parent yourself
when you think it's that easy." With those words, she turned on her heel, leaving both women frozen to the spot.
Hermione's widened eyes stared after Narcissa strutting her way back to the main hall, amply satisfied with the fashion she had handled the argument with. That infamous patience of hers was balancing during the entire evening and Bellatrix, the veteran of hitting a raw nerve, should have known better than treading on thin ice like that.

The young witch wondered whether these sore feelings between the sisters truly grew from her own hands or it was just the perception itself, planting guilt to her excessively emotional self as usual. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd taken the blame for someone else's disordered values and even though her presence caused nothing but conflicts, she had to remind herself it was actually the hostility and a lack of tolerance which had brought the whole family to the current state.

Yes, this theory seemed pretty accurate and would apply quite efficiently, had it been not for the absolutely furious Bellatrix standing behind her, shaking with suppressed anger. Hermione's eyes strayed aside, sensing the intensity of the witch's gaze on her shoulders. She took a shaky breath, not even daring to look at the woman.

Stupid ball! And stupid Hermione! She should've never listened to the blond boy. Her intuition had it clear from the very beginning this fiasco wouldn't end with sappy feelings.

A faint cracking sound interrupted the moment of anxiety, making the girl turn towards the mirror on the left side of the anteroom.

Oh Merlin!

The perfectly smooth looking glass she had seen upon her arrival suddenly lost all of its previous glamour. The entire surface scintillated with criss-cross splits, threatening to fall out of the frame at any moment.

There was another crack, much louder, that caught the attention of the nearby standing wizards, making them swiftly jump aside and thus attract the majority of the looks. The whole room erupted with surprised gasps and whispers, trying to detect what was happening.

Hermione, however, didn't need to guess twice whose work of art that was. She gave the witch a furtive look, catching her glaring right back at her and clenching her jaw quite virulently.

The girl gulped.

"Excuse me!" A plummy voice resonated through the air when an elderly wizard tried to worm his way through the crowd of people, unwilling to cooperate. "Excuse me, sir!" He squeezed through the tiny space between the pair of wizards. "Please, carry on, everything is under control!"

Bellatrix's eyes followed the man for a short span of time before they returned to Hermione's face, blazing with nothing but pure anguish. There was a tiny shard of a moment which left the girl trembling that those blood-red lips would part and spit the most painful curses at her, but none of that happened.

The mouth quivered, fighting the urge to make a scene, to yell, destroy, but however angry, the woman didn't say a single word. Instead, she spun around, pushing past the young wizard standing
in her way, hitting his shoulder with hers. Taken aback, the boy frowned, looking after her, but did not make any comment, just rubbed the pained spot.

Hermione stood like a stone, forlorn, not knowing what to do. Was she supposed to run after the witch or stand here until the ball was over? She found it rather unappealing having to chase her like a little puppy when clearly the woman had no desire to keep her company.

Hermione would give up the world to have the same sentiments but unfortunately, couldn't help feeling upset. It was hard to admit but she'd really grown into admiring the woman despite her unparalleled personality and wayward behaviour.

There was no denying she was insanely talented. The power of magic Bellatrix manipulated with made the girl uncharacteristically tongue-tied. She'd never seen anyone use spells of such power without even touching their wand—and damn it, if not for her persona, Hermione looked up to her simply because of this little fact.

"Excuse me." A young brunette pulled the girl out of her thoughts.

Hermione turned around, realising she was blocking the way. "Sorry," she murmured, stepping aside, letting the girl walk past her and vanish in the mass of robes.

Savvying there was no other choice but to move along, Hermione anxiously gripped her upper arm. She peered through the crowd, trying to spot a familiar face, secretly hoping for Draco's or his mother's, but didn't have much luck. Thinking it would be for the best to get back to the tables, she ambled forward, keeping her head down, aiming to limit the unnecessary attention.

"Would you like a glass of wine, miss?" Hermione looked up, locking her eyes with a young waiter, clearly intrigued by her appearance.

"No, she wouldn't." Bellatrix's cold voice came from behind the startled girl, whose head moved too abruptly, a burning sensation overpowering her neck.

'When did she come back?!

"Clearly, the person responsible for hiring you emphasised enough that offering alcohol to minors is illegal."

The boy widened his irises, genuinely trying to apologise. "I'm sorry, madame! I didn't realise—"

"What makes you think you can talk to me?" The witch raised her eyebrows, her voice clear and haughty. "I don't remember asking for an explanation."

Hermione's forehead formed a tiny wrinkle. How on Earth can someone talk to a fellow human being with such venom? How?!

"It's easy to forget your place, isn't it?" Bellatrix went on, scanning his frame with a look full of disgust. "If you need any help remembering, I—"

'I'm not letting her insult him like this!'

Anger slipped into Hermione's veins. She'd hardly ever fight for herself but witnessing someone being bullied pumped up her blood. She knew she'd regret this stupid act of bravery in a very short span of time but couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

"Oh please, auntie," her voice trembled as she spoke over the woman, "not this again, you sound
just like great-grandmother Cressida. Her views too got stuck in the Stone age." The girl rolled her
eyes and with her heart threatening to explode, marched away from the scene, already feeling the
death herself breathing on her neck.

'And the Darwin Award for the stupidest death goes to, the imaginary person inside her head
announced dramatically, doing a drum roll, yes, Hermione, it's you! Bravo! Being choked by
Bellatrix Lestrange at the ball, representing a new chapter of life, for the lack of common sense
and restrictedness is really something! Once again, unique idea! Also, congratulations to Madame
Lestrange…'

Hermione shook her head to stop the voice from rambling. She'd really done it this time, registering
too late she was no Narcissa Malfoy to get away with insulting the woman like this.

'Run, Muddy, because I cannot guarantee what I do once I get my hands on you!' Hermione
jumped upon hearing an alien voice inside her own head. She turned around, meeting Bellatrix's
dark eyes just mere steps away from her.

She stumbled but managed to keep her balance. The woman was approaching and the girl had no
chance to escape.

"For God's sake. Get a grip," she hissed quietly, once close enough, "you've got yourself into a fine
mess, but you've already realised that, haven't you?"

"I'm sor—"

"Shut it, muddy! Not interested!"

"I...

"You know what I think?" The woman's face slowly lit up with a menacing smile, scaring the hell
out of Hermione. "We should take a walk. Just you and I. There is a beautiful backyard out there." She
spoke with the charm of a skilled theatrical actress. "Let me tell you, if I ever had to make a
death wish, it would be seeing that magnificent garden no one really knows about, at least one
more time," she finished, giving the girl a quick eyebrow flash.

Desperate Hermione tore her eyes from the witch, searching for any help, but people passing by
were too wrapped up in their own little realms to notice anything unusual happening.

"Please, ma'am, let me explain," the girl whispered, clutching at her snowy dress, "I didn't mean
to...

"After you," Bellatrix smirked, nodding towards the end of the hall, where a double-winged door
led to the resting place of Hermione's soon-to-be-dead body.

The young witch took an erratic breath. "N-No, I don't want to..."

"Oh." Bellatrix tilted her head, curling the corners of her lips down. "You don't?"

Hermione shook her head, swallowing painfully.

"Well, I'm not asking," Bellatrix hissed, leaning in.

To Hermione's horror, the noble room swirled, her whole body experiencing the same
uncomfortable sensation it did half an hour ago. She was apparating.
Her feet touched the ground much sooner and softer than before, but this time she wasn't so well-composed. Tumbling, she hit her knee, the palms of her hands gripping the dirt from the wet lawn.

"Get up!" Hermione heard above her. She angled her head to get a better view, seeing Bellatrix's hand leaving the white fabric of her dress.

With her heart trying to dig its way out of her chest, she scarcely got to her feet, looking around. They appeared in the middle of a garden full of purple fluorescent plants that swayed in a warm summer breeze and emitted tiny particles of light, which slowly evaporated in the air. Hermione would normally gasp upon seeing such splendour but the recent events had somehow taken away from her perception of aesthetics. The only thing she could think about was the soggy skirt sticking to her legs and those ominous eyes gleaming in the dark.

"I told you once," Bellatrix started quietly, "don't test my limits unless you're willing to face the consequences." She took a step forward. "So I am wondering when you got the nerve to talk to me the way you did, is the day here already?"

"Ma'am." Hermione gulped, backing away. "I'm sorry I..."

BANG!

The girl yipped when a sudden explosive sound echoed through the air, a few feet away from her. Bellatrix was holding a wand.

"What are you sorry for?!" She raised her voice, shutting Hermione up quite efficiently. "Where should I start? Are you sorry for calling me your auntie?" BOOM! "Or comparing me to your dear great-grandmother?" The third blast detonated, much closer than the previous one.

At this point, the poor girl was so frightened her eyes started to pour tears shamelessly, without any suppression.

"You've just humiliated me in front of a goddamn mudblood!" Bellatrix barked, her wand sending a red flash of light hitting the wall right over Hermione's left shoulder. The young witch screamed, jumping aside, protecting her head. "I didn't mean to humiliate you!" she cried in horror.

"I don't give a damn what you did or didn't mean!" Bellatrix was blasting one spell after another, each getting closer and closer to Hermione.

"Please, STOP!" The girl yelled in between the sobs. "I... I... let me explain!" she tried but the woman had no intention to listen.

She had no other choice. Trembling, the girl shoved her hand through the layers of her skirt, gripping the wand hidden in a sunken pocket. She clumsily took out the wooden stick, pointing it at Bellatrix and deflecting her spell.

The woman hesitated. Her lips parted, letting out a surprised snicker. "My, my, aren't we getting our claws out?"

Hermione was shifting on her feet, awaiting another attack. There was no way she would initiate another wave of fighting on her own. She was perfectly aware she'd just broken the rule of using spells outside the school but judging by the circumstances, the loop about using magic when in danger suited this situation quite accurately.

Bellatrix was prowling closer and closer, her deathly aura almost tangible. A moment of silence passed too quickly because the woman struck again, sending a blue flash straight towards
Hermione's face.

Bending her knees, she almost tripped, silently cursing the beautiful dress, for it did not make the duelling any easier. Her breath became shallow as she blocked another spell.

The witch, on the other hand, looked more alive than ever. Her attacks became swifter and no longer intentionally aimed off its target. She was sending spell after spell, making Hermione sob harder.

"What's up with you, little muddy? Are we getting scared? I've always known you were just a little..." She mocked, firing one more flash, but finally managed to hit the nerve.

Bellatrix knew without a doubt the girl was too Goody-Goody to fight back but the next action made her anticipations crumble like a house of cards. Hermione lurched forwards, firing the first curse out of her wand.

The noises stopped and Bellatrix gasped.

She was holding a hand to her face, gazing at the young girl with eyes full of shock. "You've split my lip!" She pulled her palm away from her face, revealing drops of blood emerging from the swollen mouth.

Hermione widened her eyes, too stunned to even talk.

"You did, you little animal!" The woman let out and suddenly burst out laughing maniacally. The girl thought she was either dreaming or the entire world had gone mad—or maybe just one woman in particular. She was standing stupidly in front of the laughing witch, breathing hard, tears still falling down her cheeks, her appearance a mess. She had absolutely no idea what was going on.

If anything, firing a spell at the woman left Hermione thinking it would be the last thing she'd do before the witch would beat her senseless, but instead, she found herself in this ridiculous scenario.

"I am sorry," she let out, still trembling. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Bellatrix made a gagging sound, leaning back. "Just when I was starting to think there is something in you, after all," she curled her lips down, "you ruin it with your pathetic apology!"

The breath in Hermione's lungs got knocked out. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse me?" The woman mocked, wiping the blood off with her wrist. "Clean yourself up, we need to get back there," Bellatrix added, completely off topic.

Taken aback, the young girl couldn't believe her ears. Was the woman schizophrenic?

"What?" The dark witch tilted her head as if having no clue why was Hermione hugging her torso, sobbing.

"You attacked me!"

"And you attacked me." Bellatrix brushed her index finger across her lip, smirking.

"But." Hermione tried to stop the new flood of tears. "I was just defending myself! I thought you were going to kill me!" She gasped, wiping her cheeks.

The witch rolled her eyes. "Oh please, don't be dramatic, I've hardly even touched you."
"Dramatic?! You physically attacked me because I dared to stick up for someone who is as much of a human as any pureblood! Who's done nothing but offered a drink to me. Isn't that classified as overreacting more than me thinking you were about to put me to death?!" Hermione was spitting the words like hot lava.

"You don't force your morals upon me, girl!" Bellatrix barked. "Save it for the Ministry, I'm sure there's already an envelope coming your way."

Hermione, feeling slightly braver after speaking her mind, only shook her head. "I don't think so. There are far too many underaged witches and wizards to track the right person."

Parting her lips, the witch raised her eyebrow. "My, aren't you a clever little one."

"I want to go home." Hermione wiped the last traces of her tears off. "I can't go back in there." Not looking like this.

"Fine, if you know how, I'm not against the idea," Bellatrix shrugged. "But since you're still just a fifteen-year-old brat, I don't suppose you'd be able to apparate on your own, wouldn't you?" She finished, smirking triumphantly.

"I see," Hermione gritted, catching the drift. "So, I am to walk back, all smiles, pretending this never happened, right?"

"I'm glad we're speaking the same language."

"But I can't! I am no actress," Hermione frowned, maintaining eye contact. Long gone were the times she was worried about looking at the witch.

Bellatrix coughed out a laugh. "Well, my advice is to quickly become one then," she moved towards the girl, who swiftly tried to lurch back, but the witch stepped on the white dress, keeping her in place. "Because you have no other choice... Look at you, we need to fix that mess."

Before Hermione could react, the dark witch raised her wand, casting a spell, making the girl yelp. She was awaiting a curse coming her way but it never arrived. Bellatrix stepped off of her skirts, letting magic do its work.

Hating herself for her betraying feelings, Hermione couldn't help but felt a wave of awe upon seeing the dress all fixed. "How did you do it?" she gasped. "Mr D'Avalos said it's impossible to mend once it's ruined."

"Oh, the poor Italian doesn't know a thing," Bellatrix shook her head as she waved her wand one more time, making Hermione's hair neat again. "Now, suck those tears in, we cannot afford any unnecessary attention," she ordered and before Hermione could drop any objections, grabbed the white fabric once again, apparating back inside.

Hermione coughed, trying to steady herself as they appeared in the main hall, right next to the tables abundant with privacy. Bellatrix was standing beside, her lips all fixed. She was adjusting her dress's fabric, revealing much more than appropriate. The young witch averted her gaze, her cheeks reddening.

"You stay right here, I'll—" Bellatrix began but the rest of her sentence got swallowed in Draco's fuming voice.

"Where the hell have you been, Granger?! I was looking for you all this time. Been here twice and when I ask the first person if he hasn't seen a girl of your fresh new appearance—by the way,
thanks a lot, Auntie Bella—he looks at me as if I am an idiot and points right in...

Glad to see the boy, someone who truly cares, Hermione ignored all of his words, throwing her arms around him, making him stumble backwards.

"I don't consider this a proper apology, but it's close enough," he murmured. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she let go of him, aware of Bellatrix's eyes on her back.

"You hugged me for no reason, then?" Draco questioned with suspicion.

"I don't know, maybe."

"Hm..." A mischievous smile slowly spread across his face. "Don't tell me you are starting to realise you're losing me," he whispered only for her to hear.

Feeling the tension falling off, Hermione only smiled, softly hitting his arm.

"Draco, there you are!" The trio turned at the voice. A young witch with cerulean eyes and dark blonde hair hurried towards them with a happy smile plastered upon her face. "I was looking for you! Is this your cousin, Delphini?" She stopped in front of Hermione, holding out her hand. The girl hesitated but took it, returning the smile.

"I am Astoria Greengrass, nice to meet you!"

"You too," Hermione replied, flinging a glance behind her.

"Greengrass? You must belong to the Crouch family then, am I right?" Bellatrix approached the girl, stopping beside Draco.

"Yes, Madame Lestrange." The girl nodded her head enthusiastically, making Bellatrix tilt her head in confusion.

"Pardon me," Astoria took a deep breath. "But I simply must tell! I was dying to see you! My uncle talks about you all the time! I," she closed her eyes for a second before opening them, smiling even wider, "I cannot express how honoured I am to finally meet you!"

"How charming!" Bellatrix smiled warmly, surprising Hermione to the moon. The woman had never looked at her that way. But sure, if it's a pureblood, she's suddenly a sweetheart, the social butterfly.

"I'm sure that whatever he said, he was just exaggerating." Bellatrix winked, hooking her arm into Astoria's. "Deary, why don't you tell me how's dear Barty doing?" She stepped forward, trying to get the Crouch's heiress away as far as she could.

Hermione knew what she was up to; however, it did not stop her from frowning upon seeing how differently the woman acted towards Astoria compared to her.

"It would be my pleasure, ma'am!"

"Oh please, call me Bellatrix!"

Hermione's jaw tensed as she turned to Draco, shaking her head. Oh yeah, saint Bellatrix. She was the absolute devil in disguise.

"Thank Merlin! She was so annoying," the boy whispered, looking after Astoria and Bellatrix. "I
shall never forgive you for leaving me with her all alone!"

"Like I had a choice, right?! At least you were talking. I had to witness the argument between your mother and your sweet auntie. It wasn't pretty," Hermione confessed, intentionally leaving the garden moment out of the conversation. No matter how evil the witch was, Hermione would never come in between her and the boy.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "You know, I could tell mother looked somehow off, but that clinger kept me occupied so I didn't really have a chance to ask her what was going on."

Hermione explained briefly the whole point of the quarrel, completely avoiding the fight, saying that she was with Bellatrix the entire time in the anteroom, discussing the details of her disguise.

"My mother is a badass! Who would have known?!" Draco was looking into the distance with widened eyes. "I mean, I cannot blame aunt Bella for flipping out either. Delphini was the name chosen for her daughter. That is, if she had any."

Hermione gasped and despite her anger towards the woman, felt a slight sting of guilt hit her guts. It was the amount of empathy she possessed, which made her realise how mad the woman must have really felt when Narcissa had abused the name. It wasn't that long ago the dark which was a mudblood hater, par excellence—well, still was, as Hermione had had a chance to experience, but...

She needed time. Draco, too, hadn't changed overnight.

'Why are you always justifying even the most horrible behaviours of hers, Hermione?' The inner voice began innocently. 'Is it because...?'

The girl placed her palms over her face. She couldn't possibly be thinking about such stuff. The ridiculous suspicion hiding in the back of her mind was slowly trying to creep out into awareness itself, but she was doing whatever was in her power to push it back down like complete nonsense.

"Crap! Granger, wake up, I say!" Draco was gripping her wrist. "Crouch's coming."

Hermione let her hands down, trying to come up with a plan. She wasn't supposed to talk to anyone and Draco—well, he just didn't want to talk, but it was already too late.

"Delphini, hello, we meet again!" He bowed his head, flashing his white smile, making Hermione return the gesture. "Draco." He turned to the blond boy. "Have you seen, by any chance, my lovely niece, Astoria? I was looking for her, it is the first waltz of the season, she cannot miss that."

"I'm afraid I ha..."

"Uncle Barty!" Astoria's voice called from a good few tables away from them. Hermione looked behind, seeing the girl take Bellatrix's hand into her own and pull her towards their table.

What a ray of sunshine, that one, Hermione said to herself venomously, averting her gaze from the handholding to the curly-haired man instead.

'Oho."

The whole room suddenly seemed to be on fire from the expression on Barty Crouch's face when his eyes fell upon Bellatrix. Hermione exchanged looks with Draco, demanding a silent explanation, but he only rolled his eyes.

"Bellatrix," he choked out of him, absolutely mesmerised.
"Long time no see, hm?" the woman replied, smirking, visibly aware of the effect she had on him.

"Uncle! She's as charming as you described! Maybe even more!" Astoria shined, smiling at both of them.

'Maybe even more...blah blah blah.' The inner voice in Hermione's head was starting to get a little too annoying, not letting her think objectively.

"Bellatrix!"

Well, this is getting ridiculous. Hermione thought. Whenever there was a conversation about to start, there was always someone coming, ready to interrupt.

Everyone turned towards Rodolphus, who finally caught up with his wife, his face as angry as Barty's surprised. Recovered pretty quickly, he reached out his hand. "Rodolphus, my friend! How do you do? I was just about to ask your dear wife to dance with me!"

Bellatrix's husband flashed a smile for the first time. "Maybe later, Barty. She has to dance with me first."

"Love to, but I have to keep.. eh... Delphini a company," Bellatrix explained, tensing. Hermione saw the struggle behind the name, feeling her anger drop a level lower.

"Who?" Rodolphus asked stupidly, earning a nasty look from his wife. "Oh, the girl!" He tried to save the situation but only added more fuel to the fire.

"The girl? Your niece, you meant to say." Barty frowned, forcing out a laugh. "And not to worry, I'll gladly dance with her if Draco here dances with my Astoria. He promised, after all."

Hermione would laugh so hard but had to do everything she could not to. The look on Draco's face was just too priceless.

"That's settled then. It's about to get started. My dear—" Rodolphus offered an arm to Bellatrix who didn't have any other choice but to collaborate. She gave Hermione a stealthy look and as she walked past her, pressed a finger to her lips, emphasising Hermione was to keep quiet.

"May I?" Barty's playful eyes glistened, making Hermione feel soft tingles inside her belly.

"Of course," she agreed shyly, putting her hand into his warm one. She looked behind, seeing Draco scowl when offering his palm to Astoria. She had to quickly look back to save herself from embarrassment, id est lying down and rolling with laughter.

Barty led her to the dance floor, occasionally sending a smile here and there. Stopping, he turned towards Hermione, putting a hand on her shoulder blade.

The music started off abruptly, leaving Hermione speechless, for the sound was absolutely magnificent. The young wizard was moving elegantly, smiling too sweetly to not make the whole room swirl even when dancing slowly.

Hermione was so hypnotised she'd almost forgotten about Bellatrix and Rodolphus. Almost. Her eyes left Barty's, looking for the couple. She didn't have to search for long. There was a very uncomfortable-looking Draco on the left and right next to him was the goddess herself, the most elegantly moving of them all.

Hermione gasped when Barty swirled her so quickly she lost the sight of the witch. It was his turn
to look. The swirls repeated a few more times until they were standing next to the Lestrange couple.

Letting go of Hermione's hand, the man smiled, making her turn again. The young witch giggled, unable to hold onto her vexation any longer.

Paying good attention to the movements, Barty waited for the right moment. "Exchange!" He announced, moving even closer to the couple, and freed Hermione's palm to take Bellatrix's instead. Stunned Rodolphus was in too much of a shock to react quickly enough, for the man was already dancing his way away from them.

Not to make it more awkward, Rodolphus quickly grabbed Hermione's hand, who couldn't feel any worse. The man's dancing skills weren't bad at all, but he lacked the charm of the young man who seemed to live for attention.

After a few embarrassing minutes, it was all over and Rodolphus immediately let go.

"Come on!" It was Draco grabbing her wrist, trying to get away from Astoria, who however jogged after them.

"You are a great dancer!" She braked at the punch bowl next to the annoyed boy and the amused Hermione. "And look at my uncle with your aunt. Aren't they just beautiful?" she proclaimed romantically, making the boy secretly roll his eyes.

Hermione, however, did look, seeing the pair still dancing with such glamour they outshined everyone on the dance floor, even Narcissa, who looked almost as stunning dancing with Lucius on the other side of the hall.

"Well, hello, Malfoy!"

"Parkinson... having good fun?" The boy sneered at Hermione's nemesis who appeared out of nowhere. Since they had become friends, Pansy hated the girl with a passion.

"You have no idea. Won't you introduce me to your friends?"

"Why? Don't you have any?" Draco laughed, earning a nudge to his ribs. Pansy furrowed her brows. She'd seen this somewhere.

"I am Astoria Greengrass." The blonde stuck out her hand.

"Pansy Parkinson."

"Hello." The girl smiled charmingly.

"What about you? We've met briefly, but you've never said what your name was. You kinda look familiar."

"Oh, that's just my friend. Her name's Pansy Dontaskstupidquestions," Draco pointed casually, making Pansy clench her fists.

"I wasn't asking you, muggle-lover! Apropos, where's your girlfriend Granger?" Pansy turned to Astoria. "He loves mudbloods, you know. So much that he started dating one."

"Shut up! Granger's not my girlfriend!"

"Yeah, just because she doesn't want to, haha!"
"What's wrong with having a non-pureblood friend?" Astoria joined the conversation. "I'd like to make friends among them, too!"

"Shut it, do you want anyone to hear you?" Pansy hissed.

"I think I should go somewhere else then, where no one can hear me." Astoria suddenly stuck out her chin, giving Pansy a defiant look.

"Idiots," the Slytherin girl barked, turning on her heel and marching away.

Suddenly, Astoria seemed quite all right to Hermione. Amazing, actually.

"Hey, do you wanna see something?" She turned to them, not even waiting for an answer and grabbing Hermione's hand. She was pulling her towards the door the girl hadn't even noticed.

"Where are we going?!" Draco called, jogging after them.

Astoria stopped, facing the duo. "Do you know what this place actually is?"

Both Draco and Hermione shook their heads, Hermione a little too reluctantly. She hated not knowing.

"It's a small muggle club—and I... well, I've read all about it on the intranet—"

"Internet." Hermione corrected. "But how...?"

"I may have one muggle friend after all." Astoria smiled with hesitation but the other girl's look assured her she wasn't about to get scolded.

"Unbelievable. Does your family know?" Draco asked with a risen eyebrow.

"My parents do, they raised me with love and compassion. Muggle-borns, half-bloods, I don't think there is a difference."

"Your parents seem lovely." Hermione smiled sincerely.

"They are."

"Okay, okay." Draco's got enough of the sentiments. "Now tell us about that intramet."

"Internet!" Hermione corrected for the second time, giggling.

"That's what I said!"

"Well, there is a simple way to get down there, if anyone's interested?"

Hermione hesitated, thinking about the consequences first. "I don't know."

"Oh, come on, Granger!" The blond boy threw a hand into the air, realising his mistake too late.

"Granger?" Astoria asked, confused, her eyes jumping from one kid to the other.

"I meant, Delphini."

"No, you didn't."

"All right Astoria, get us to the club, I'll explain!" Hermione decided, exhaling loudly.
The Argument

CARPE NOCTEM / THE ARGUMENT / CH. 13

„Right, but I still cannot understand why you would agree to that,” Astoria furrowed her brows, clearly confused. „I mean, are you ashamed?” She was glaring at Hermione from the dusty floor, completely ignorant of her mauve dress slowly getting thick with grime.

It'd been a while since they left the ball and found a refuge in a room guarded by an old, half-damaged staircase, a supposed getaway to the Muggle club. The space was rather small, consisting of nothing but a rectangular mirror hanging on the scrappy wallpaper.

Hermione wouldn't normally participate in such an escapade but found it necessary to get Astoria away from everyone until she was aware of all the reasons why—at least the main ones. She was halfway through her monologue when the mutual understanding went swirling in a completely wrong direction.

„Of course, I'm not ashamed!” She stuck out her chin, frustrated the girl wasn't getting her point. „I was just trying to protect Draco's family from the—” What, exactly? The humiliation? The shame of introducing a mudblood into the royal society?

‘You're a hypocrite, Hermione, do you know that?’

„—Oh, nevermind, it's complicated!” she finished evasively, having no clue herself about the rest of her sentence. She glanced over at Draco, searching for some support, but to her surprise, the blond boy didn't really feel like helping.

„What is so complicated?” he asked bitterly. „Honestly, I don't get it either; me, mother, even my father—we've all agreed to take you here under your own name because we respect you enough to come forward. The only one with any objections was aunt Bella." His eyes were clear and determined, shifting between Hermione and her clenched fists. "Let me ask you then, who exactly did you want to protect? Her? I can assure you she is more than capable of taking care of herself on her own."

„Oh, please!” Hermione let out a forced laugh, purposefully ignoring the last statement. „Do you really think your parents took me here because they would respect me?! Snap out of it! They did it because of you—because," she was gesturing crazily, trying to make her point, "they love you so much they were willing to face all the humiliation so that their spoiled little kid could be all shiny and happy."

As soon as those words left her mouth, she regretted every single one of them. Senseless panic stemming from not understanding her own train of thoughts was taking her emotions by storm, making her overreact and say things she didn't even mean. At least not like that.

„Wow,” Draco whistled, clearly taken aback by her sudden outburst, „you know what? I cannot keep up anymore… at first, you are offended because I can't admit I befriended a half-blood and when I do, and proudly so, you freak out and hide behind gold tinsel. What is it with you?! That Granger I know would never do anything like that—she'd consider it degrading."

Hermione's jaw was tensing from anger. The anger that Draco, giving her a piece of his mind, was absolutely right. He'd come a long way and seeing how he ignored her chilly remarks about him being infantile showed quite the opposite, but she wasn't about to admit it that easily.
"What makes you think I don't?" Hermione ignored Astoria's hand tugging at her wrist. "I'm just trying to be a little bit more understanding. Do you have any idea how disastrous this could have ended up? Your parents would get so dragged for this. They would lose the status, lose everything they've spent their whole lives building! Think about that for a second." She shook Astoria's hand, leering into Draco's face.

"Losing and building what?!" He raised his voice. "The fake friends, the artificial respect earned for their name and not for their actions? What's that good for? You've told me once none of this matter. The real life is about something else. Love and—and being true to oneself! So let me ask you, did you forget all about that?"

Hermione opened her mouth in surprise, not at all prepared for such an eye-opening lecture. Draco was absolutely right making her drop those valid arguments she still had up her sleeve.

Like a drowning man clutching at his straw, she shook her head, striking one last time. "You still don't get it, do you? It's not about you or me. It's something bigger! I'm still against the supremacy, but this is a huge step and if I remember correctly, you too didn't come forward just like that." Hermione snapped her fingers. "You can't force people into doing things you want and then say they are fine with it! It doesn't work like that!"

"Okay, that's enough!" Astoria finally decided to cut in, standing from the floor. "I think your friend is right. Look, Draco." She turned to him, using her voice with a lot of care. "You know what we're like—the whole society of purebloods—we are not the tolerant type. The gossips that would spread? They could have fatal consequences."

"That's quite a big word, don't you think?" He raised his eyebrows, not really interested in anything she had to say.

"Not at all. I'm not really consecrated, but I don't think your father or your mother have any friends outside the circles." Astoria shrugged. "Just think about it—he'd go through hell at work for this, might even lose his position, and you could forget about attending events like this ever again."

"Oh my, that would really be an atrocious tragedy!" Draco widened his eyes, covering his mouth with his left hand. "I think I'll die if I won't dance a melting waltz ever again!" He rolled his eyes, snorting.

"You're not funny," Hermione noted, sending him a nasty look. Finally, his nature was back, making her feel comforted she was such an arse to him before.

"And Hermione," Astoria faced the girl. "I'm sure it wasn't easy to agree to do something like that, but I have to second Draco's opinion. You really shouldn't go against yourself like that. There's nothing wrong with being a half-blood and if—"

"Which side are you taking again? You've just negated your entire statement, so what should I take out of it?" Hermione snapped at the girl, folding her arms. Who does she think she is? She's not even involved enough to be able to review the whole situation objectively.

"There's no need to lecture me. I told you I did it only because I didn't want to ruin his family's name." She nodded towards Draco, who was sporting a matching scowl. "That's all! I can assure you I'm in no way ashamed and I'm perfectly aware there's nothing wrong with being a half-blood, so thank you, but you better back off!" Hermione finished but gasped, taken aback by a sudden hug she had just got dragged into. "What...?"

Astoria grabbed her elbows and pulled her close enough to wrap her into her arms, resting her chin
against her shoulder.

„What are you doing?” The brunette choked out, trying to release her body from this ridiculous situation.

„Just let it out, I'm here for you!” Astoria said soothingly, gently patting her back and making Hermione's eyebrows shoot so high they almost disappeared in her loosened hair floating around her forehead. She tightened the hug, pressing herself even more against Hermione and radiating so much heat it got through the thick skin and eased the brunette's anger away.

Draco, who was watching this whole scene with the same surprised look, couldn't help but burst out laughing the minute he caught Hermione's eyes.

„See? That's the attitude!” Hermione more felt than heard Astoria's voice, as the rosy cheeks wrinkled under the weight of the smile against her ear. She took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh scent of jasmine when the girl finally decided to let go of her unresponsive form.

„What the hell was that?” Draco asked, still laughing, his eyes shifting from the smiling Astoria to the frowning Hermione.

„A comforting hug," the blonde explained, shrugging as she widened her smile. „I thought she'd use one, it helps with those unbearable gallu demons mumbling inside her stomach."

„What did you say your name was again?” Draco inquired, pretending to hunt in his memory. „Luna Lovegood?” he snorted, ready to exchange looks with Hermione who, however ludicrous she found the situation, wasn't really in a mood to support his jokes.

Draco's smile froze and melted into an innocent expression—and that was all it took to relax Hermione's tensing jaw as well. She didn't even understand why she had gotten mad in the first place. She should have been proud of Draco and the things he had said and not be flipping out like a mad woman. These emotional unbalances were getting out of hands.

„Friends again?” Astoria put on a wide smile, shifting her eyes between Draco and Hermione, who only sighed, snorting. „Aww, how lovely!” The girl clapped her hands, making Draco turn his back to her, surreptitiously tapping his temple only for Hermione to see.

She suppressed a chuckle, biting her lips. The girl really was an astral twin of Loony Lovegood.

„Now, when we have this sorted out, what about our adventure?” Astoria asked with expectation.

„Eh,” Hermione cleared her throat, trying to buy some time by brushing non-existent dust off of her dress. She really had no need to creep into some club full of only Merlin knew what people. She'd never gone out partying—it just wasn't among the things she'd consider entertaining—and the girls she knew had never asked her out with them anyway, so there wasn't even an opportunity to change her mind, but still, who would want that?

„I don't think it's a good idea," she started carefully. „Look, we're not supposed to go anywhere. If we disappear, your parents will freak out and I can't even imagine the consequences if they find us having fun with jolly old muggles down there." 

„Oh, I'm sure they'll just think we've only gone out or something.” Astoria's eyes went into the puppy mode, „We won't be there for long—just want to see how different it is from the balls I'm used to attending."

„Oh, very different, believe me! It's not at all formal—there is heavy drinking and smoking
We'll just take a look." Draco took Astoria's side, inching closer. "And then we're gone! Now when you described it, it seems like a hell of a blast—I cannot miss seeing that!"

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh. „The robes, Draco!“ She pointed at her white floating dress, aggravated.

„That can be easily arranged!“ Astoria joined in. „Look." She took a few steps until she stopped directly in front of the old patina mirror. Hermione was watching her with caution, already knowing what she was about to do.

The blonde girl outstretched her right arm, pausing just a few inches from the dusty surface. „I'm left-handed so if anything happens, I can still do stuff." She giggled and then slowly put her hand right through the surface. The glass rippled like water disrupted by a rock falling through. Small circles started to form, dancing around the wrist of Astoria's arm.

„I told you my father wouldn't lie about this!“ She bit her lips and squeaked excitedly. „See you in a bit!“ She said before jumping with full force into the mirror, leaving only the wild circles floating across the surface.

„Merlin...“ Draco whispered, peering into the looking glass, trying to find any signs of the girl. „Do you think she's dead? I didn't want to stop her, you know, just in case. She was annoying anyw... OUCH!“ He rubbed his arm, the place Hermione had just punched.

„A-Astoria?“ The brunette called hesitantly, leaning in.

„Boo!“ Astoria's face suddenly appeared in the middle of the mirror, scaring the hell out of both of them. „Ah, you should have seen yourselves!“ The girl cracked up laughing. „Come on, I've found the box!“ She retreated, leaving the glass rippling once again.

Hermione exchanged looks with Draco.

„Pity...“ He sighed as he closed his eyes, inching towards the mirror.

„Draco, no! We really should get back!“ Hermione tried to stop him, seizing his arm. „This is going to end badly!"

„Nuh-uh. You owe me for calling me a spoiled brat, remember?“ Draco shook his head, pausing.

„But that's not fair!“

„Granger, don't be a spoilsport, and live a little!“ He rolled his eyes. „We'll be back before you say 'Draco is the hottest man alive'.“

„I cannot imagine the situation that would force me to say anything like that," Hermione pointed sardonically.

Draco only smiled, moonwalking into the mirror. „Well then, prepare for a bloody lifetime of a party!“ He winked before disappearing as well.

'Why am I always the only responsible person in the room? Why?' Hermione thought desperately, hypnotising the fading circles left by Draco's form.
Thinking before doing! Even though when I think about that, it's never gotten me anywhere, so...

A sudden scenario formed inside her head. Narcissa and Lucius, catching their only son armwrestling a huge motorcycle driver. She snorted against her own will. More and more hilarious pictures started to appear in the imaginative part of her brain.

It's gonna be just a second.

She approached the mirror with a beating heart and put her hand through the surface. A funny sound escaped her mouth as the mirror closed over her wrist, making her feel like having her hand stuck inside the cold raspberry jello her neighbour, Mrs Quincey, used to serve when babysitting her on occasion.

Hermione squeaked, feeling a palm grasp her own and pull her through. She shuddered when the unpleasant feeling washed over her whole body.

Stepping into a dark, stone corridor, almost identical to the one leading into the Hogwarts dungeons, Hermione had to blink a few times to adjust to the small amount of light coming from a poor number of torches hanging from the walls. She averted her gaze, feeling a gentle tugging somewhere below her waist. It was Astoria's slender hand, pulling her by the dress towards Draco and an irregular wooden box glued to the stones.

„Nice.” The boy smirked upon seeing her. „Ready to break some rules?”

Hermione ignored him, folding her arms.

„My dad told me they used to go here all the time!” Astoria chimed, putting her hand inside the box through the single hole positioned on top of the wood. „Once he...”

„Wait, your father told you about this place? I thought you found it on the internet,” Hermione frowned.

„Well, technically. He told me about it, but I searched it up to learn about the muggle perspective on the place,” Astoria explained, digging deeper. „Did you know they had a laser show going on?” She paused her mining activity, opening her mouth as if someone had just told her a huge secret. „All without magic!” She shook her head, giggling, continuing to browse through the insides of the box.

Draco drew closer to Hermione, whispering. „What's a laser show?”

„Oh, those are the colourful lights you should be extremely cautious about! No matter what, you cannot let it hit you or else...” She gave him a significant look, dragging her index finger across her throat. He gulped, quickly averting his wide eyes to Astoria. Hermione smirked to herself, feeling her mood scoop a little higher.

"Finally!” The blonde witch called out, pulling a butterscotch-coloured skirt out of the box. „For you, I think,” she said dead serious, handing it to Draco who, even though looking hesitant, took the items out of Astoria's hands. Hermione was tempted to let him wear it, however, the kindness hiding inside her heart was just too strong.

„No, that's for you.” She handed the skirt back to the girl, who meanwhile found another gem.

„What's this?” She asked, observing a nude leotard Hermione snatched from her hands before the girl would set her mind on wearing it. Goodness, one would think purebloods would have some sense of fashion in them.
"May I?" Hermione approached the box, swapping with Astoria who looked rather disappointed to leave her job. The brunette went searching through the box, pulling out the worst pieces of clothing she had ever seen. After a few unsuccessful tries, she was finally able to put together three decent-looking outfits.

„You know, we don't have to get changed completely," Astoria informed them as she tried to detect the front of the dark blouse Hermione had chosen for her to match the yellow skirt. „We're just supposed to put them over our dresses. It's going to adjust—we won't be even able to tell we are wearing something under this muggle garment."

"Here." Hermione helped the girl to turn the blouse over and went back to her own white shirt and navy jeans.

„Damn, I don't even see myself entirely, but I still can tell I'll be the best-looking man in the house, my friends," Draco stated, curling his lips downwards, observing his leather trousers and making both girls laugh.

The trio quickly put their clothes on, Astoria and Draco stealing a glance here and there, making sure they were doing the right thing. After their robes completely disappeared under the layers of shirts and pants, they looked at each other, nervous smiles playing on everyone's lips.

„Dear old Merlin, my heart is beating so fast I can't even stay still!" Astoria beamed with excitement, shifting on her feet, infecting those two as well.

Hermione rubbed her hands together, feeling the butterflies tickling her ribs. „Ready?"

Astoria gritted her teeth, smiling so hard it was impossible not to reciprocate. She took Hermione's hand, intertwining their fingers, and pulled her forward deeper into the corridor. She turned around to snatch Draco's hand as well and dragged a very reluctant smile out of him.

They were scurrying in silence, hand in hand, their hearts beating like crazy. It wasn't every day that underaged wizards went partying with muggles.

Barely two minutes of their walk had passed when they ran into the dead end, spotting a simple, seedy door in front of them. Looking at one another, they wordlessly decided it was Astoria who would have the privilege to open it.

"Three, two, one..." She took a deep breath, her big shiny eyes meeting Draco's. "Let's go," she whispered, pulling at the handle.

A sudden sound of old cheerful music hit their ears, filling their stomachs with even more butterflies—there were noise, laughter, and screams of joy.

Astoria squeaked, setting a foot in as the first one. Hermione and Draco looked at each other. They followed the girl, inhaling the scent of vanilla powder wafting from the artificial mist dragging across the floor. Walking further in, they appeared right next to a bar full of youngsters and a few older-looking people dancing hilariously in groups on the dance floor.

„What is this?!" An amused chuckle escaped Draco's lips, which suddenly turned into a gasp as he quickly kneeled down upon spotting a blue flash coming from the lights attached to the ceiling.

Hermione laughed, pulling him up. „I was just joking! It's harmless," she shouted through the music and in between her own laughs „it's just for fun!"

Draco opened his mouth, trying to appear offended, but couldn't help himself and laughed as well.
„You're the worst!"

„Well, maybe I am the worst, but you're certainly not the 'best-looking guy in the house', as you put it!"

„You know what that means? We're staying the whole bloody night!" Draco raised his eyebrows, smirking, not even a little bit offended.

„Okay, what do we do now?!" Astoria turned her gleaming face towards Hermione, expecting her to lead the way.

„Well, we saw what's the club like, so we may go back," she suggested hesitantly.

„You're joking, right?" Draco opened his mouth agape. „This is the best day of my life, we're not going anywhere!"

„Blimey! Look at this young fellow!" Someone patted Draco's back, making him widen his eyes into the size of plates. They all focused behind the boy, seeing a young man with his arm placed over Draco’s shoulder.

Maybe I wasn’t that wrong about that arm-wrestling thing, Hermione thought, a little unnerved.

„Drinks on me, Mads," the man shouted over at the barmaid. He brought his face closer to Draco's, smiling with nothing but pure friendliness radiating from his pretty, even though drunk eyes. „Lucky man... lucky man." He laughed, unhooking his arm, walking back to the bar. „Give those kids a little taste of Malibu!" he ordered, looking over at them. „Come along, friends!"

The trio looked at each other, not knowing what to do. „I don't know about this," Hermione hesitated.

„Hermione, look me in the eyes and tell me. When you're old, sitting in your chair, telling stories to your teenage grandchildren—what will you tell them?!"

Hermione tilted her head, confused.

„Exactly! You need to make some memories, girl! Come on, don't be so cautious!"

„I am not," Hermione shouted, glad to have the music to back up her screaming. A memory of Bellatrix appeared inside her mind.

*Don't be so timid all the time.*

Timid? She would show her who's timid!

„All right, the hell with the rules," Hermione announced, walking towards the bar as the first one.

„That's it! There you go, young lady!" The man welcomed her with outstretched arms and a smile plastered on his face. He pointed at a shot of a transparent colour.

„My friend!" He smiled even wider when Draco joined in. „And your pretty lass, there, this is on me! Have a good night, guys!" He smiled at them warmly but suddenly frowned. „Oh, I almost forgot I was heading to the restroom." He danced away, singing to the tune of the music.

„Bloody hell," Draco announced, snorting, „I've just talked to a muggle! This is brilliant!" he laughed. „To us?" He pulled the shot up, raising an eyebrow.
„We are underaged!“ Hermione shook her head, forgetting all about her decision to have fun.

„So what?!“ It was the barmaid, Mads. „I'm not going to tell anyone!“ She shouted, dancing behind her counter. Draco smiled, earning a wink from her.

„I've already said that, but this is the best bloody day ever! Come on, Granger, do not disappoint me!“

„It's just one drink and we're leaving!“ The girl warned, taking the tiny glass into her hand.

„To us,“ Astoria shouted.

"And muggles!" Draco joined in, making Hermione close her eyes and chuckle under her breath.

„To us and muggles,“ she repeated, clinking her glass against Astoria's and Draco's. She brought the liquid to her lips, feeling a strong scent of coconut. As soon as the liquor touched her tongue, she could taste the white rum she had only had a drop of when added to the cakes Mrs Quincey loved to bake. She swallowed, feeling a pleasant burning sensation as the drink travelled down her throat.

„Oh my, this is so good,“ Astoria shouted, expressing both Hermione's and Draco's sentiments out loud.

„I think we should dance,“ she suggested, not even waiting for an answer, „I like this song!“ She grabbed their hands, dragging them to the dance floor, giving them a zero chance to protest.

Hermione recognised the tune immediately. 'Come on Eileen' was her grandfather's favourite song. They used to do silly dances together in the living room, making her grandma laugh so hard she broke the chair once.

Had it been any other song, Hermione would hardly agree to dance like this in a crowd full of total strangers, but the memory mixing with a warming feeling inside her stomach made her act otherwise.

She smiled at Astoria, gladly taking her hand, swirling around. Draco's palm got also trapped when she made him do the same pirouette, cheering at the elegant demonstration. Looking quite surprised, he chuckled, seizing Astoria's hand. They soon joined the omnipresent noise of shouting, almost crying from laughter. They were having so much fun people even made a circle, having them dancing in the middle and applauding and cheering at them.

Astoria almost fell as the swirls became too much, but Draco caught her right in time and they hugged randomly, laughing on each other's shoulder.

Hermione was smiling widely, glad to see them getting along.

All too soon, the song was over.

„Look, I know we're having fun, but we really should get going," she noted apologetically, earning puppy eyes from both of them. „We cannot allow ourselves to stay here for so long. Remember? Your aunt is supposed to look after me. I don't want to know what she'd do if I...“

„Oh, Bellatrix? She is so charming!“ Astoria smiled dreamily, earning a risen eyebrow from Hermione.

'Maybe to you.'
“Yeah, so charming,” she parroted, trying to hold onto the sweetness still lingering on her tongue to bite the bitterness away. “Please, guys,” Hermione tilted her head, using the same puppy eyes at them.

“Look how cute she is!” Astoria pinched the brunette's cheeks and pursed her lips, making Hermione's stomach even warmer.

“Hey, lovely!” She heard a man's voice behind her back. “Care to share your number with a lonely lad?”

“I'm sorry, we're leaving,” Hermione replied, trying to avoid his eyes and move towards the door leading back into the corridor.

“Why so soon? You've just arrived!” She heard him follow them. “Hey, I'm talking to you!”

“Is there a problem? The lady said she's leaving, you back off!” Draco turned around, not able to keep his mouth shut anymore.

“What?” The young man laughed. “Is the blonde John Travolta here your boyfriend? That's why you're so cold, sweetie? Let him go, I'm sure I'd make a better—”

What exactly would be better Hermione never learnt, because the rest of his sentence faded in a chaos of noises. She turned around just in time to see Draco punch the guy and immediately turn his back to him, grabbing both Hermione's and Astoria's hands and dragging them to the door they had entered through.

He quickly pulled the handle, letting them run in first, and then joined, slamming the door with an unusual force.

“What was that?!” Hermione asked as they all collapsed on the floor, breathing hard.

“I punched the guy,” the boy explained as if she hadn't seen it herself.

“But why?! There was no need for such an action!” she scolded him, still shocked.

“Hermione!” Astoria suddenly raised her voice. “This guy right here,” she patted Draco's bicep, “he saved your arse! Literally: the man was about to grab your butt and this brave young man did what a true gentleman—well, wouldn't—but it was cool regardless!”

Hermione was gazing at the pair with widened eyes.

“Don't look at him like that, just say thank you!” Astoria nudged her, a smile creeping up her lips.

“Thank you,” Draco let out, making Hermione snort.

“Not you,” the brunette shook her head, now smiling herself. “Thank you, Draco! There...” She bowed to giggling Astoria.

“Come on now, we need to get back!” she reached out her hands, pulling both of them to their feet. They made their way back to the mirror, taking off their clothes, the girls trying to fix each other's hair.

“Right,” Hermione exhaled, quite satisfied with her recreation of a french braid on Astoria's head.

“Thank y...oh no, Hermione, your dress!” The blonde put a palm over her mouth. The young witch followed Astoria's gaze, spotting torn fabric across the entire length of her right leg.
„Bloody hell," she cursed, running her hand through the fragile fabric, „not this again! Nevermind, you two, run along, I'll join you after I fix the dress. Just cover up for me and say I needed to be alone for a moment."

„Can I help you somehow?" Astoria asked with concern.

„No, but it's very sweet of you! Now go on! I'll be there before you say 'Hermione was the best-looking guy in the house'," she winked at Draco, who chuckled.

„Right. We'll be at the tables."

They squeezed themselves through the glass, leaving Hermione alone, gazing after them. This side of the glass was completely transparent, allowing her to see anything that was happening inside the tiny room.

„What on Earth am I going to do with this," she said out loud, burying her face into her palms. She was no Bellatrix to swirl her wand and fix the dress which was completely beyond repair.

She took out her wand, thinking that if Ministry didn't care about the Protego charm, they wouldn't be alarmed about a simple mending spell. She tried Reparo, Lignum, The Sewing Spell, but none of that seemed to work.

Desperate, Hermione came to realise she didn't have any other choice but go and try to find Draco's mom to help her out. Her heart sank like a stone when she imagined the horror written all over Narcissa's face, but it was already too late to cry.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up, reaching out to touch the mirror.

Her hand paused, lingering.

She took a few quick steps away from the glass, tripped over her dress, and fell backwards. The door to the room swung open, revealing Bartemius Crouch Junior offering a breathtakingly beautiful woman to walk in before him.

Hermione's palm closed over her mouth, hoping they hadn't heard the noise she had caused upon her falling. She was pressed against the floor, breathing so shallow her heart was the loudest in the room.

If only she could roll over. Her spine was hurting like hell, forcing her to cry, but she suppressed even the tiniest of the sobs, watching the pair from her spot with her eyes full of tears.

Hermione had no clue why on Earth from all the places they ended up right here, but prayed for dear life it wasn't because of the Muggle club.

Dear Merlin, Bellatrix in a Muggle club.

She slowly lifted her arm, trying to wipe her tears off. The pain was slowly easing away, letting her breathe normally. She moved her leg carefully, silently rolled to the side of the cold walls, and pressed her back to the stone.

Fine. No one heard me.

She rubbed her back but stopped upon hearing Barty's laughter. She froze—up until now there wasn't a single sound coming from the other side of the mirror.
"...I mean it, Bellatrix," he let out, "what's stopping you?"

The girl closed her eyes, not really desiring to be a witness of a private conversation. She wanted to move away but her sweaty palm slipped, cutting her skin open. A warm stream of blood made its way to the surface, running down the soft skin. Hermione pressed her lips to the wound, trying to block the bleeding.

"Stopping me? Don't be ridiculous," Bellatrix replied, laughing arrogantly.

'No, no! I shouldn't be listening to any of this!' Hermione thought, covering her ears with her palms to only hear a faint ghost of Bellatrix's voice.

'That's it, I'll wait like this until they're gone.'

Unfortunately, there was an uninvited movement under Hermione's dress that made her jump to her feet, hitting the wooden box with her arm. "OUCH!"

Blimey!

Hermione's head snapped towards the mirror, but neither Bellatrix nor Barty seemed to have noticed anything unusual happening. Her gaze fell back to the ground, spotting a tiny mouse standing on its hind feet, holding a piece of a flax seed.

"You scared me," she whispered when she realised the noise wasn't coming out of the mirror. Coming closer to the rodent, she kneeled down, not even caring about the dress anymore. It was already all dirty from her fall anyway.

"I'm trapped, how about you," she asked, tilting her head to see the little creature better. Snorting, she shot a fleeting look towards the mirror, freezing on the spot.

The young man was prowling closer to Bellatrix, his mouth moving. Hermione couldn't make out any words, but the way he carried himself suggested this wasn't a simple friends' meeting.

Her eyes shifted to Bellatrix's amused smile and she suddenly felt her stomach catch on fire. It hurt and twisted, making her put a palm over it to ease the senseless pain away.

Private—not private, she'd forgotten all about her inner battle, hurrying towards the glassy surface.

"I don't care, you know that very well," Barty said softly, reaching out, resting his hand on Bellatrix's forearm, "damn, the things I'd do to you!" He inched even closer, his hand creeping around her waist to tug her in, pressing against her front, leaving just a tiny space between their faces.

Hermione gritted her teeth, her ears ringing, shutting all the outside sounds out.

'How dare he! I mean she!'

This was unacceptable! It wasn't even an hour since both talked to Rodolphus Lestrange and now they were all over each other like this! Poor man!

Surely, you're feeling like this because of that fellow you don't even know?

'Of course, I am!'

Then why the jealous feeling?
Hermione shook her head, trying to stop the annoying voice inside her mind from talking nonsense. It was simply the injustice, not jealousy! Why would she be jealous—she didn't even like this man or had any desire to have a secret relationship behind her husband's back.

*You don't have a husband, Hermione.*

„Just shut up,” she hissed out loud, clenching her fists.

She was watching the pair without even wanting to but found herself so drawn to the situation she couldn't just look away.

Her breath hitched, the stomach jerked even more as her eyes followed Crouch, who was leaning forward and trying to kiss the woman in front of him.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Bellatrix pull away just in time, leaving his face frustrated and hungry. He tried one more time, but she leant back, travelling her hand over his, reaching behind, seizing his wrist. She pressed the right place, twisted the limb, and made the man fall to his knees, bringing a soothing feeling into Hermione's hurting stomach.

He hissed from the pain as she stopped behind him, leaning forward, twisting the hand even more. „Well, and these are the things I'd do to you, love." She smirked, leaning even closer, drawing more hisses from him. She smiled, brushing her cheek against his before releasing his hand.

Barty stood up immediately, turned around, and stepped back to the witch, pushing her against the wall.

The calmness washing over Hermione's stomach was gone again, replaced by the same, maybe even stronger ache as before.

*Boom!*

The man jumped backwards, waving his hands as if burned.

„Little boys, they never learn," Bellatrix chuckled, pursing her lips into a kiss before turning on her heel.

„You can't just leave, Bella!"

„Oh really," she called, walking away with such elegance Hermione couldn't stare anywhere else.

The girl waited, seeing the man leaning against the wall where Bellatrix stood just mere seconds ago, punching it, causing a few pieces of plaster fall on his head. The smart guy, however, quickly composed himself, realising that punching everything around him wouldn't bring the enchantress back. He ran a hand through his hair and stormed off after the witch.

Hermione let a few moments pass before she climbed out of the mirror, inhaling the alluring perfume that was still lingering in the air, making her head spin. She forced her feet towards the exit, lost in her mess of a mind, when the door opened, making her face a very surprised Bellatrix.

„What are you doing here," she hissed, quickly stepping forward, forcing the young witch to move back into the room.

„I..." Hermione's heart jumped into her throat, making it difficult to talk.

„Not a good time for your stuttering. What did you see?" Bellatrix raised her eyebrows, smirking
when getting no answer out of Hermione. "Nevermind." She tilted her head. "I'll find a way to make you talk."
The lock guarding the crummy door clicked, awakening a deep feeling of hopelessness inside Hermione's already dismayed body. She was stone frozen, her irises affixed to the marble face in front of her, incapable of taking in anything else.

The plan A, to disappear and casually join Draco and Astoria in the main salon, was, as anticipated, bound to succeed so she hadn't really bothered mastering an alternative strategy, which unfortunately came with quite a big price to pay.

It was barely an hour since the woman had dragged her outside, senselessly blasting spells at her, nearly making her faint from dread, and there they were again, locked inside this small room in the exact same situation.

Bellatrix's face gleamed with nothing short of pure hatred, paradoxically underlined by a disturbing smirk, a certain sign of a hell of a storm approaching.

"Tell me now," she began, "is it a mudblood custom to spy on private conversations which are absolutely no bloody business of yours?" she asked rhetorically, her eyes travelling over the ruined dress hanging on the girl's body.

Hermione adjusted the torn skirt, clearing her throat. Surely, she had had no right to be listening to anything the witch and her boy-toy, Crouch, were discussing, but having been stuck on the other side of the mirror, it wasn't like she'd had a choice anyway. Admitting to that, however, was a whole other story and she didn't really feel like selling herself out without a bit of fighting.

"I don't know what you mean," she ventured, trying to sound all calm and confident.

Wrong move.

Bellatrix's smirk disappeared, leaving her lips parted. "You have the audacity to lie to me?!!" she hissed, prowling closer, making the girl automatically back away as if they were the same poles of the magnets, one forcing the other to repel.

The young witch held out her hands, trying to stop her from coming any closer. "I am not lying—I swear, I didn't hear anything!"

"Then what the hell were you doing here?!" Bellatrix barked, making her flinch. "Well?! I asked you something so you better answer me before I lose my patience!"

Barely breathing, Hermione remained silent, desperately trying to buy more time to think, but soon realised it was the worst idea she could act on because Bellatrix's forbearance was suddenly gone.

The woman's teeth clenched as she lunged forward, reaching inside her sleeve, clearly hunting for the wand. Gasping, the girl strived to distance herself from the witch, but that bloody dress of hers betrayed her for the third time in a row tonight. Her feet slipped, making her hit the floor painfully, the torn fabric of her skirt exposing her left leg.

Oblivious to any possible injuries, she tried to prop herself up on her elbows to crawl away from the danger but suddenly froze solid.
Her stomach twisted violently upon feeling a cold hand grasp her bare thigh, the sharp nails digging deeply into her skin and preventing her from moving. Hermione's throat let out a high-pitched sound, her eyes widening. This was the first time the witch had ever touched her and she certainly wasn't prepared for such an intimate encounter.

Bellatrix, though, wasn't shy to move even closer, positioning herself over the girl's body. She pressed her knee against Hermione's stomach, letting her shin rest in between her legs, drawing absolutely preposterous feelings from the brunette.

In sheer panic, Hermione's hands shot down towards her core but Bellatrix easily seized both of her wrists, pinning them above her head and bringing her face closer.

A sweet scent of vanilla whiskey hit the young witch's senses as the woman exhaled heavily, making her feel nauseous and shaky. She shut her eyes so tightly they started to hurt, but it was nothing compared to the nonsensical excitement burning deep inside her stomach, chasing the fear away without any effort.

"You're not going anywhere until you explain yourself!" Bellatrix's low voice wasn't helping, drawing a sob of frustration from the girl. "Oh, no crying, little muddy." She leant even closer, her breath hot against Hermione's cheek.

The young witch quickly moved her head aside, staunchly pressing her back into the floor, trying to create some distance between them.

"Pl-Please, let me go, I-I..." she cried, painfully aware of every little touch there was: the silky but ice-cold hands, one grasping her wrists, the other sewn into her thigh, and the leg—the leg pressing hard against her stomach.

She dug her heels into the dusty floor, lifting her bum to try and move a little higher, away from the agonising touch, but her shoe slipped, making her loins hit Bellatrix's leg hard, drawing another embarrassing whimper out of her throat.

"Nuh-uh, you had your chance, now we'll do it my way," Bellatrix whispered, removing her hand from Hermione's thigh, her nails fleetingly brushing the relieved skin, leaving only a trail of goosebumps behind. The knee, however, pressed deeper, making the young witch avert her attention and hiss from the pain. Her head jerked back, the eyes snapped open, locking with Bellatrix's, which were much closer than she ever remembered them to be.

She knew immediately what was going to happen. There was no time to close her mind, but she doubted her current state would allow her to compose herself enough to do so anyway. Her vision blurred, filling her mind with familiar déjà vu pictures.

She found herself back in Crouch's arms, dancing the waltz, before the memory changed into the one of her, Astoria, and Draco drinking the Malibu shots and laughing in the corridor. It was the following memory, though, that awakened resistance and her sleeping willpower—the sight of Crouch pressed against Bellatrix, making Hermione's heart crack with jealousy.

'NNOO!'

The girl let out an erratic breath and snapped her eyes open to find Bellatrix's widened ones glaring back at her from above, her body no longer touching hers.

Hermione's cheeks acquired an insane carmine colour upon realising what had just happened.

She finally understood. It wasn't Crouch she fancied, it wasn't Bellatrix trapped under his body she
was jealous of...

She felt like being sick.

'No no no no no! This cannot be! It's not that! Just no! Oh, Merlin! And she's seen it all. She knows before I could even...'

Immediately, she built up walls around her mind, but Bellatrix had already seen what she needed. "Well, muddy," was all that came from her lips before she burst out laughing, "you..."

Hermione quickly pulled the dress over her exposed legs, leaping to her feet, her cheeks burning. Tears of humiliation were streaming down her face but her trembling fingers were too slow to wipe them all away. Her ears were filled with the sound of her own blood, rushing like a wild river, perceiving the hysterical laughter as if coming from a far distance. She could still feel the ghost of the touch on her thigh, making her hands move on their own, angrily rubbing the memory away, but without any success.

"I want to leave," she gritted mechanically, not even recognising her own voice. It was weirdly blank, sotto-voce, coming from her dry throat, choked by all the pressure of feelings she had no time to inspect.

"Oh, don't you now, sweetie, when I know we've got something in common," Bellatrix implied, taming down her amusement.

The girl turned towards the witch, opening her mouth. She was kneeling on the floor with the tears of laughter still visible in her eyes. Her head was tilted and her lower lip, though smiling, trapped in between her teeth.

"There's no need to be ashamed of anything," Bellatrix went on, standing up, waving her hand to charm the dust away from her dress.

Hermione's body broke out in a sudden sweat, her world spinning. She did not know whether she was prepared to hear this. She wasn't even sure whether she was ready to fully acknowledge her own... her own what?

"I used to fancy that Crouch candy myself but don't worry, if you like him so much, I won't stay in the way," the dark witch chuckled, catching the girl off guard.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play stupid," Bellatrix let out gruffly, "he is a handsome man, I can't really blame you," she added, eyeing the unnerved girl, who was trying to wordlessly figure out whether the woman was just messing with her or genuinely having no clue. She was finding it rather difficult to believe the witch wouldn't have noticed the obvious.

Oh! But what if...?

A sudden thought slipped into her mind.

In the Malfoys' library, there was a book, The Divine Occlumency, that explained how to deceive the opponent slyly when letting them inside your head. The trick was to make oneself believe something was true—and in Hermione's memory, she had been solid the feelings she had were aimed at the man. She had been in such a denial the real deal had been blocked somewhere deep inside her subconscious, so it was possible not even Bellatrix could see through the lie, let alone if she wasn't interested in this particular field.
Hermione swallowed painfully, now fully recognising the weird feeling of relief, mixed with disappointment and shame at the same time. It forced another wave of tears into her eyes.

"Please, I just want to go home," she whispered, wanting nothing else but to leave. To calm down, to reason out every single feeling in a normal, healthy way; but unfortunately, she couldn't, for Bellatrix had only begun to play.

"Don't be such a wimp!" The woman rolled her eyes but then lowered her voice conspiratorially. "We're both girls here, we can talk."

Oh, but Hermione didn't feel like talking. What she wanted was to get the hell out of here as soon as possible. Her entire body was too panic-stricken to feign composure, whereas her emotions were getting a claustrophobia on their own, threatening to burst out any moment.

"I can teach you what to do, at least he'd get some distraction and would stop running after me," the dark witch added, setting all the organs functioning inside Hermione's body on fire.

"I have no feelings for that man!" she lashed out, driven by her panic. "Besides, you've already seen I didn't witness anything unusual and even if I did, it's, as you said, none of my business and I do intend to keep things that way. There's no point in talking—" The words were coming out so fast she wasn't even sure whether they made sense at all. Her head was lowered, her eyes running all over the place. She was too ashamed to look at the woman, afraid the truth would scream out for itself.

Too caught up in the moment, she stood no chance of noticing a sudden movement that stopped her outburst immediately as Bellatrix's glacial hand grasped her elbow, making her meet the neverending blackness, deep as the universe itself.

The bag of butterflies inside her belly exploded with such a force her spine erupted in goosebumps under the sore tingling. Bellatrix's face was so close, so beautiful, almost glowing from triumph as she pushed the younger witch further into the door and leant in, bringing the sweet scent of vanilla back and making Hermione's knees weak again.

"Are you sure you want to use that tone with me?" she whispered, having the girl hypnotised by the way her blood-red lips touched and parted, slightly sticking together. "Because if I were you, I'd slightly reconsider," she tightened the grip on her arm, bringing the girl back to reality. "Or you too cannot learn your lesson?"

Hermione, all hazy, finally focused her attention on the words coming from those alluring lips and swallowed, incapable of getting a single word out of her mouth.

Tired of waiting for an answer, Bellatrix let go of her elbow, shaking her head. She backed away, looking the girl up and down with an expression that could be explained either as disgust or disbelief—or most probably, both of it combined.

"I don't understand," she started slowly, narrowing her eyes. "Why you from all the people had to —?" she hesitated, her chest heaving.

Hermione waited in anticipation, breathing so shallowly her body wasn't far from passing out. The dark witch, however, didn't say another word, leaving her trembling with the desire to know. She could practically feel the itching sensation running up and down her tongue, nudging her to ask, to prompt the woman to continue.

"Had to what?" she let out in a small voice, praying Bellatrix wouldn't flare up. They'd just
achieved quite a neutral state—none of them were shouting, firing spells, or bruising each other's skin, and Hermione didn't want to mess that up with her stupid curiosity.

Her eyes, finally rid of all the tears, were watching the woman, anxiously awaiting her reaction. A small wrinkle formed on her forehead before relaxing, tremendously relieved at the sight of a smile taking place on Bellatrix's face.

The witch didn't look crossed and that was all Hermione cared for. She wasn't sure whether she'd be able to survive another attack if Bellatrix had found her question too intruding. Fortunately, the delightful expression didn't suggest a pre-fighting mode and Hermione would even smile back herself, hadn't it been for her stomach still upset from the violent pressure.

Bellatrix let her smile play before curling her lips downwards, disappointing the girl with a shallow answer, consisting of seven empty letters.

"It's not nothing!" Hermione blurted before she could stop herself. "Sorry..." She shook her head, closing her eyes.

There was a moment of embarrassing silence.

"Do you really want to know?" The young witch heard after a while, making her quickly glance back at the woman. Her head was tilted, the dark curls cascading over her shoulder.

Faintly nodding, Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from her. She was like a pendulum, making her hypnotised even without moving.

"I'll tell you a riddle and if you solve it, you'll know," Bellatrix spoke suddenly, giving her a quick eyebrow flash, pressing her plump lips together.

Excitement that had nothing to do with the woman in front of her spread through Hermione's whole being. An odd thought echoed through her mind. Wasn't she, herself, a little bit like Bellatrix, Jekyll-Hyding-like crazy? She could still feel the dried tears on her cheeks and here she stood, almost jumping at the opportunity to show off how smart she was.

It was weird how bipolar she became around the witch, how easily forgiving and ignorant she was about the things that had happened just moments ago. She was starting to fear Draco had been right about her before.

"Well? Do you want to hear it?" Bellatrix asked again, interrupting Hermione's thoughts, drawing another nod from her. Smiling, she licked her lips.

"The skin and bones, how essential for ye, mortals,
shall perish in dust of stones, bleeding from the portals.

Skin and bones, but not thy breath,
taken nor by wind, nor by earthly death.

Is the precious life all too empty
if I tell you there's not one but plenty?

Tempting thy to travel far,
beyond the ocean, beyond the space and time."
Bellatrix finished, watching the girl, whose determination radiated from every inch of her face. "I'd say it's about the human soul and reincarnation." Hermione guessed, her voice a little raspy.

"My, my..." Bellatrix smirked, tilting her head.

"But what does it have to do with me?" Hermione asked, still pressed against the door without any movement.

"Nothing, because it's not about reincarnation," the woman drawled, playing with a loose curl of her hair.

Frowning, Hermione pushed out all the memories of the previous events, focusing only on getting the answer right. "Fine, if it's not the reincarnation, then it's probably about astral projection, but again, what...?" Hermione paused, the pieces slowly clicking into the right places.

She gave the woman a questioning look. Was this about those strange dreams her mind kept producing almost each and every night? The witch had seen them herself, so it would kind of make sense.

"Is," Hermione started carefully, thinking every word over, "is the answer somehow connected to my—to my dreams?" she asked after a while, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

The witch nodded, sending a wave of shock through Hermione's body.

"Do you know anything about them?"

"I do, actually," Bellatrix's lips curled into a devilish smile.

"Can you tell me?"
Hermione was holding her breath, watching the triumph written all over Bellatrix's smug face. She
could almost swear the witch was taking some sort of a sadistic pleasure in keeping her on pins and
needles, judging by her delighted smile and the prolonged silence. So intentional, so ruthless.

"Please," Hermione whispered so quietly she wasn't even sure whether the faint sound made it past
her lips.

She remembered she was thirteen when a strange sequence of dreams had started haunting almost
each and every night of her sleep. She'd often wake up covered in sweat aching all over her body,
completely absorbed in unfamiliar relations which made no sense whatsoever.

At first, she didn't think much of it. It was just a couple of odd, rather disturbing images, she'd say,
nothing to worry about. But then the continuance, the connections, the clues the dreams would
come with made it impossible to ignore anymore.

She'd ordered numerous books regarding anything from psychoanalysis to fortune-telling, but none
of it dropped any hints about what could be actually happening to her. She would search the
Hogwarts library up and down, even asked Professor McGonagall for a permission to borrow some
literature from the restricted area, but unfortunately, never found anything relevant.

Merlin, and here she stood, after two torturous years of countless speculations, a little bundle of
nerves, waiting for the moment Bellatrix would finally stop playing around and answer her
question. The unbearable silence was slowly taking its toll and if she was to wait any longer—

"I could, actually," the dark witch opened her mouth at last, dumbstriking the girl. "Yes," She
nodded, smirking even wider upon noticing Hermione's breath hitch. "But you see, the information
I've got is very expensive," she went on, almost whispering, "and I am not entirely sure whether
you've got anything as equally valuable to offer in exchange." Her face saddened under false pity,
making the girl gasp from determination.

"Oh, I'm positive I can think of something," Hermione objected quickly, eyeing the mischievous
grin. She would not let go of this golden opportunity for the world. "Whatever it is, I'll do anything
I can!"

"Anything?" Bellatrix raised her eyebrows, her gaze intensifying. There was something very
disturbing about the way she demanded affirmation and Hermione could feel it in her bones that
she was dicing with death making deals with this witch. She knew it was dangerous, she knew she
should back off while she still could, but despite all the warnings ringing inside her brain, her head
moved, as if on its own accord, nodding.

The timid gesture made the dark witch smirk. "Very well." She bit her lip, pretending to be
thinking really hard. "Hmm, let's see, what is it that I could actually ask you for— Oh!" She gasped
dramatically. "What about Draco?" She raised her eyebrows, knocking the breath out of the girl.

"Excuse me?"

"If you want to know everything about your itty-bitty nightmares," Bellatrix framed, her voice low
and imperative, "you have to promise me to break up this whole relationship you two have," she
paused, letting her words sink in. "You're never to speak to him or even look at him. That's what I want from you, everything else is out of the question."

The colour left Hermione's cheeks, making them look ghostly white, without any traces of youth. She was gazing at the witch with pleading eyes, faintly shaking her head. How could she possibly stab Draco in the back like that?

"Think about it very carefully," Bellatrix tempted. "It's just a simple transaction."

Hermione shook her head more vigorously. "I'm afraid I can't do that. He's not a— he is— he's my only—" she didn't finish, looking aside, silently cursing herself for letting her tongue slip.

"He is what?" Bellatrix asked, her voice sickeningly sweet. "Your only friend? Oh, my poor baby!" She mocked, speaking the same way a parent did to his child.

The young witch tensed her jaw, feeling humiliated. She had had enough of the taunting, enough of the way this woman was treating her. Not because she was incapable of handling a bully, but because she— she freaking—

Hermione's eyes almost bloomed with tears. She took a deep breath, trying to swallow the lump growing inside her throat.

"Oh, don't start crying, it doesn't suit that face you're presenting right now, it gets all red and... rather unattractive," Bellatrix wrinkled her nose, observing the features created by the violet potion Hermione had taken earlier that day.

Ashamed, the girl glanced down, her hands immediately shooting towards her cheeks and trying to brush away the redness, but it only managed to make it shine brighter. She didn't understand what she had done to deserve this. It had been barely a week since the witch told her she wished to erase everything about how they had started and how she treated her, and there she was, back to her old ways, confusing the girl with her constant changes of persona. It was either the despisal or sheer camaraderie coming out of her. Nothing in between.

"Look, I'm sure it wouldn't even matter to him after a few days," Bellatrix went on without a bit of tact. "It would be like friends growing apart over the years," she shrugged one shoulder, laughing subsequently. "But much swifter. I think we can both agree it's just a temporary flare. He'll get bored of you eventually."

A wave of anger washed over Hermione. "I'm afraid we have very different perspectives of friendship." She lifted her chin, gazing straight into Bellatrix's surprised eyes. "For me, it is not a thing of convenience. It won't end just because one gets bored of it." She took a deep breath, trying to get some composure. "Draco is a human being, my best friend, not a toy I could trade for something better."

"Are you sure about that?" Bellatrix narrowed her eyes, completely ignoring the brunette's lecture. "Because this is your only chance to know what it is happening inside that little brain of yours. You may read all the books in the entire universe but you won't even come close to knowing what really is wrong with you, girl." She inched forward, raising her eyebrow, whispering. "This is an equally beneficial deal."

"No, it's not," Hermione murmured.

"What did you say?"

"I said it is not," she repeated, but this time a little louder, "that friendship—that is, between Draco
and me—is far more expensive than any piece of information, so forgive me for not taking you up on your offer." Hermione swallowed painfully, incredibly torn she had answers on the tips of her fingers and yet she was the one to cut her hand off.

"Oh my, what a romantic confession," Bellatrix pressed her hands to her heart, making her breasts look even plumper under the sheer fabric, and Hermione hated herself immensely for noticing. "Well, don't go crying after me later when you realise what a terrible, terrible mistake you've made," she nodded, her eyes never leaving Hermione's. "Because I can guarantee this was your last chance."

The girl looked away, unable to hold the gaze any longer. She wanted to cry out of sheer frustration for not being able to get the answers she needed despite being so close to them.

"I'll keep that in mind," she proclaimed against her own will, despondent yet surprised by her temerity. She was expecting another spirit of anger to possess the dark witch but her sole response was an arrogant smirk.

There was a clicking sound behind Hermione's back, announcing the unlocking of the door. Her feet, however, stayed rooted to the ground, afraid of making the wrong move.

"What are you waiting for then?" Bellatrix folded her arms as if it was the brunette keeping her locked up against her own will, wasting her precious time. "Run after your little friend." She nodded towards the door behind Hermione's back.

"I can't," the young witch said slowly.

"You what?" Bellatrix tilted her head as if she didn't understand. "I can't," the girl repeated, loathing her current position. "I— the dress and—and my hair."

"Oh, you poor thing, the dress is all ruined, isn't it?" Bellatrix looked seriously so concerned and sorry for her misfortune that the brunette had almost eaten up the whole act. "What are you going to do about it?"

Of course...

Taking a deep breath, the girl gritted her teeth. She could practically see Bellatrix's false pity changing into pure smugness. It was clear the witch knew Hermione needed her help but wouldn't spare her from further humiliation. She was just watching her struggle, enjoying every second of it.

"I cannot fix it myself," Hermione admitted, swallowing her pride, "could-you help me, with a—if, uhm."

"Aww, you want a little favour from dear old me?" Bellatrix flashed a fake, flattered smile. "But I have already helped you. Look!" She gestured at Hermione's dirty skirt. "Suits you better now. It matches your... well," she finished like that, grinning.

That was a punch to the stomach. Hermione's eyes flooded with tears, betraying her, streaming down her cheeks, giving her no chance to stop them.

"Deary, why the tears? You know me, I was just joking," Bellatrix waved her hand dismissively, doing a very bad job at hiding her amusement.

"Why," Hermione choked out, her voice breaking, "why do you have to be so mean to me? Ever since we met you've been acting like I'm nothing but some dirty item, not worth the—" She
inhaled, trying to ignore the pain rising inside her chest. "I've never done anything to you and yet you're doing everything you can to make my life a living hell! I am a human being, I've got feelings! And it hurts to be treated like that, especially since you've asked me to trust you and then you failed me! I thought that—"

"You thought what?" Bellatrix asked, her voice taunting and cruel. "You thought that we could be friends? That you would be calling me antie Bella by the end of the summer, that I'd be—"

"Stop!" Hermione cried, not wanting to hear anything else anymore.

"No, you will listen, stupid girl! Get this through your head! I am no friend of yours and I'll never be!"

"Then why did you pretend you wanted us to get along?!" Hermione yelled, an embarrassing sob drawing out of her throat.

"I don't need to explain myself to you!" Bellatrix barked, her eyes flaring. "What I do and why is none of your concern!"

"It is when I am involved!"

"You shut your face," Bellatrix fumed, making the girl flinch, "how dare you talk to me like that!"

"I just wanted..."

"I don't care what you wanted! This was the last time you spoke to me in such a manner! Am I making myself clear?"

Hermione was shaking all over her body. She was frustrated for having no say in this when she wanted nothing else but to yell back at the witch that it wasn't clear, that the conversation was everything but fair.

She wanted to be entitled to as many things as Bellatrix; be able to express her opinion and not choke on it just because the woman couldn't stand being talked back to. Surely, Hermione was much younger and it was expected from her to be reverent, but Bellatrix was the first to act without any traces of humanity, provoking the girl to stand up for herself and subsequently scolding her for the lack of respect. It was like a cat playing with a silly little mouse: Bellatrix too comforted her and then struck even stronger than before.

However much Hermione wanted to shout that into her face, the terror she felt inside her body just wouldn't let her speak.

"I asked you something! Was I clear enough for you to comprehend it?"

She felt like a coward, nodding faintly, looking away, swiftly wiping her tears.

"You are so so pathetic!" Bellatrix burst out laughing, finishing with a dramatic draw. "I'll fix that stupid dress, but only because we can't allow attracting any more attention," she confessed, taking out her wand. At this point, Hermione didn't even flinch. As unpredictable as the woman was, it wouldn't be surprising if instead of mending the fabric, she'd just curse her.

A mild breeze brushed against the skin on her legs. She glanced down, seeing a silver light pulling the torn skirt together, sucking the dust into its depth, making it look pristine again.

"Turn around," the dark witch ordered but Hermione didn't move. She knew better than showing
her back to Edward Hyde. One could never know when he'd feel like taking over the witch's body.

"How am I supposed to fix your hair?" Bellatrix asked, irritated, making her, though reluctantly, do as she was told. Her hair was tight again.

"Thank you," the girl murmured, turning back, looking at the floor.

"Obviously," Bellatrix smirked, "oh, and one more thing." She took a few steps forward, her aura of dread forcing the girl to scooch further into the unlocked door, the pressure flying them open."Give me your hand," she demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"'Excuse me?'" the witch imitated. "Just do as I say."

Hermione slowly reached out her right hand, her jaw tensing. She had no idea what this was about. Was she about to turn her fingers into wooden sticks or...?

"The other one."

Hermione let her arm fall back to her side, extending the left one with her palm open. She thought of Astoria laughing and saying if something was to happen to her right hand, it was all right, for she could still use the left one. Being in such a situation as she was, Hermione couldn't help but felt the same way.

Her eyes slid across her forearm to her palm, spotting the wound she'd received upon slipping in the corridor behind the mirror. Bellatrix must have noticed when she'd had her pinned down on the floor. The memory painted her cheeks red, planting a sudden feeling of self-hatred into her stomach.

The older witch, ignorant to any emotions the girl was showing, pointed her wand at the faint injury but hesitated when putting the wooden stick back into her sleeve. She inched closer and bent her knees, slowly blowing on the wound, smirking upon making Hermione shudder.

"Make sure to dry those tears before anyone sees you," she advised, pushing past Hermione without sparing her a single look. "I don't suppose you need my help with that," she called over her shoulder before disappearing, leaving only the clicking of her heels behind.

Hermione needed a moment to pull out of her trance. Slowly, she stepped back into the room, hobbling towards the mirror, her eyes focused on the glassy surface. She hopped through, plopping onto the ground and letting the tears flow naturally, without any effort at stopping them.

The incredible relief she felt once left alone fell down on her with a striking force, making her drop all the barriers. She didn't even remember when was the last time she cried like this, sobbing so hard she couldn't breathe properly.

It all suddenly became too much on her. Once the brick was loose, the entire wall came crashing down, bringing in all the iniquities she had to endure during her stay at Malfoy Manor.

She cried and cried, remembering the betrayal of her own body. How ridiculously good it had felt under the touch of Bellatrix's hands. She felt so sick, so dirty, exactly the way the witch was treating her.

Maybe she deserved it after all. The feeling she was experiencing wasn't normal in the slightest—it was perverse and she'd give up anything in the world not to feel like that ever again. She was sure
this was exactly what she was supposed to feel the day Victor had leant in, trying to kiss her under the mistletoe in her fourth year at Hogwarts. But she hadn't—she had pulled away just in time, only to murmur some pathetic apology. Back then she didn't understand why she rejected him. Why it was so hard to let him press his lips against hers.

She understood now.

Did it mean that she was...? No! She was just confused. Her body was confused, nothing else. Nothing else!

Hermione sat down, hugging her knees, realising she had stained the dress all over again. But at this point, it didn't even matter anymore. She wasn't going back.

"Uhm, uhm," somebody cleared his throat, startling the girl and making her leap to her feet.

"Who is it?" she called, wiping her cheeks clean.

"Right here, my lady," a fruity, adenoidal voice called from the corner by the mirror. Hermione looked in the direction, spotting a small frame resting in the shadows. Slowly, she stood up and walked forward, her hands reaching down to pick it up. It was a painting of a jovially looking man with small, mischievous eyes, and thin lips.

"Well hello," he greeted, grotesquely bowing his head, "it is not wise to talk to strangers but a simple pair of words might fix the issue. My name is Godwin Gideon, how do you do?"

Perplexed, Hermione even forgot to cry. She was staring at the painted man with her cheeks all wet and her mouth agape.

"You ought to tell me your name, pretty one," he winked.

"Uh, it's Hermione, Hermione Granger," she choked out in a raspy voice, too stunned to even think about Delphini.

"Well Hermione, now that we're no strangers anymore, tell me why you were crying your pretty eyes out. It's not been that long since you were smiling with those two friends of yours," he asked, scratching his painted head.

"I... were you spying on us?"

"If I could choose not to, I would, alas, I'm imprisoned in this hell for the eternity," he gestured vehemently, pointing at the dark green wallpaper behind him. "I cannot run when the situation requires it."

Hermione sat back down, wiping her cheeks again. She put the portrait on the ground, letting it rest against the cold wall. She felt sorry for the little guy: most certainly, his portrait didn't make the cut for the gallery down there.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" she asked, sincerely curious.

"I wanted to when you stayed alone, but you got distracted."

"Oh," Hermione's face reddened upon remembering the circumstances.

"Tell me, what happened?"

"Oh, it was nothing," she tried to smile, feeling a little bit ridiculous talking to the portrait as some
sort of a therapist.

"You're lying."

"I am," she snorted, making him laugh heartily.

"Listen, whatever happened, it was most certainly not worth those tears!"

"What if it was?"

"Oh please, you are alive, you can walk, you are pretty and kind. Kind enough to talk to an old portrait and the little mousy-mouse earlier if I remember correctly. What's there to cry about?" He smiled, making her sob as she reciprocated the gesture. "You have it all."

"I'm telling you," Godwin went on, "don't waste those precious tears for anybody. Wipe them away and run after your friends!"

"I cannot do that!"

"Sure you can! You shall stand up," he went on, moving the chair Hermione hadn't even noticed before farther from the frame and stepping on it, putting his arm up into the air like a soldier, "hold your head up like the warrior that you are, a lovely Joan of Arc, if you will and show those maggots you are strong enough to face them no matter how hard they try to put you down!"

Hermione couldn't help but laughed. He jumped down from the chair, grinning. "Tell me you'll do that! It would be delightful to know I influenced a revolution, even if it clearly wasn't meant for me to be a true leader," he said sadly, looking at her with expectation.

"Talking about putting oneself down," Hermione started, a small smile still playing on her lips, "no colours, no frames would make you more of a leader than your recent actions have, chivalrous sir," she finished, seeing his face beam with joy and gratitude.

"Do you really mean that?"

"I do! Actually," Hermione stood up, dusting off the dress. She took the portrait into her hands, climbing through the mirror.

"What is happening?" Godwin called out, stumbling.

"A revolution." Hermione smiled, walking with her head held high.

"What on Earth are you doing, girl?!" a portrait of an elderly wizard barked upon seeing Hermione use a sealing spell on the painting of Godwin. She glued him to the corridor wall, leading back to the main salon, luckily enough emptied from all the guests.

"I'm excited beyond measures," Godwin's eyes were flooded with tears of happiness. Hermione only chuckled, flicking her wand once more. A little note saying 'Godwin Gideon, the great leader of the mirror hall' appeared under the portrait.

"I'll be forever grateful, lovely Joan," the guy pressed his palms together, bowing his head. "But run along now, there's one more revolution you need to spice up!"

Smiling, Hermione blew him a kiss, waving her hand as she moved, leaving him to meet his new and rather unnerved neighbours.
She was on her way back to the dancing hall when she remembered there was something else she needed to do. She made a detour to the bathroom to fix her makeup, long since worn off. She was clearing the last traces of mascara when she got interrupted by a pair of Slytherin girls, whispering to each other with great excitement.

Trying to ignore them as much as she could, she observed the unfamiliar face, looking for any flaws. She looked all right.

It was about the time to go. However, the closer she got the hall, the more unsure her steps became. She tried to think of Godwin's speech, that she really should be walking with her head held up high, but his words suddenly seemed too ridiculous and meaningless.

At least I revolutionised his little world, she thought, smiling to herself.

"There you are! I was worried sick, you nutter!" Draco's voice came from behind her. She turned to him, a slight sting of sorrow pinching her stomach. How could she ever trade this precious boy for some silly dream interpretation? For all she knew, Bellatrix might have been lying. Even though...

"Where have you been? Mother almost bit my head off! You say we cannot stay for too long and then you don't bother showing up at all. Don't tell me you went back in there! And without me!"

"I love you, Draco!" She laughed, startling him.

"What?"

"I—you know." She immediately tried to clear things up. "You're the best friend I could ever ask for."

"Oh... good." He ran his hand through his hair. "I was afraid you were proposing."

They both burst out laughing.

"Come on, need to show my mother you are safe and sound," he said eventually, pulling her by the wrist. She remembered Bellatrix's grasp and was oddly glad to have the ghost of the memory replaced by Draco's warm palm.

He was pulling her through the mass of people, turning once left, then right, then again left, and finally stopped in front of both of his parents.

Narcissa formed a stiff, rather unconvincing smile. "There you are, Delphini, dear!" She tugged her close, an intoxicating smell of geranium clouding Hermione's brain.

"I thought you got lost." She laughed, looking all around her.

Oh oh.

What happened to the inconspicuousness?

Hermione found herself standing in the circle of people, trapped by Narcissa's arm hooked into hers. The heart beating inside her chest jumped as she realised Bellatrix was standing straight across from her, with slight surprise lingering on her face. Right next to her was her husband, Rodolphus, and—her heart jumped again—Bartemius Crouch Junior. It was Lucius Malfoy, then Narcissa herself, some old, quite a pudgy-looking lady sitting on an armchair and gazing at her with great interest, and finally Draco, standing by Bellatrix's right arm.
"So this is that precious niece of yours," the elder woman issued, her voice guttural but still overly joyous.

"In a way," Rodolphus clarified, earning a pinch to his forearm—a very faint gesture, which, however, didn't escape Hermione's eyes.

"Well, niece or not, it's still family, right?"

"This is Madame Selwyn," Narcissa introduced her, seeing no one else was feeling kind enough to do so.

"How do you do?" Hermione bowed her head, putting her palm into the wrinkled one.

"Oh, what a charming, little lady," the elder witch praised, clutching the small palm in both of her hands now. "How do you like Britain? I must say I'd have never guessed your origins had it been not for dear Narcissa telling me. Your accent is just impeccable!"

"Thank you, madame! I found it incredibly charming," Hermione tried to imagine being Astoria, praising everything and everyone within a mile. "I like it even better than Norway. It's just always snowing there—no time for strolling whatsoever, and I do enjoy a good..."

"Ehm..." Narcissa cleared her throat, looking quite taken aback by Hermione's sudden ability to talk like that. "Delphini, why don't you..."

"What a coincidence! I hate to disrupt a good conversation, but I would never forgive myself if I just passed by without greeting my precious nieces!" A bone-chilling voice interrupted Hermione as much as Narcissa had. They all glanced towards Lucius because by his side suddenly stood a tall wizard of sharp features and cold, cruel eyes. He smiled, but the orbs stayed ruthless, without any trace of kindness in them.

"Narcissa." He stepped towards her and for a tiny bit of a moment, Hermione had a feeling the woman's fingers tightened around her upper arm as if looking for support.

"Uncle Perseus," she acknowledged him, her voice clear and neutral, assuring the young witch that she was most certainly just imagining things. She let go of Hermione to touch his shoulder and kiss his cheeks.

He took a moment to glare into her pretty face, stroking it with his fingers, making the girl's stomach twist uneasily. But then he turned around, his gaze landing on Bellatrix, and Hermione couldn't believe her own eyes.

The witch was frightened.

She could clearly see the dread and the slight movement of her neck bobbing as she swallowed.

"And my dearest Bellatrix." His voice suddenly became sleazy and fond. The witch composed herself, hiding the emotions behind an unreadable expression. He came rather close to her and touched her arms, slowly leaning in to kiss her cheeks.

Not a sound came out of her and despite being mad, Hermione couldn't help feeling concerned. The man stepped away from her, giving the girl a clear view of Rodolphus reaching out for his wife's hand, but she tugged it away. He quickly put his into the pocket of the long robe, masking the sudden movement.

There was an odd atmosphere surrounding the whole group. No one uttered a single word and the
man, sensing it himself, wouldn't even try for a further conversation. His fingers brushed a loose curl of Bellatrix's hair out of her face. The woman's eyes were wide, her teeth gritted, but she wouldn't even flinch.

"Well, the business won't wait, it was good to see you." He bowed his head, sparing both witches another searing look before leaving as suddenly as he had come.

An uncomfortable silence fell onto the group, for no one really knew what to say. It was rather surprising then when Rodolphus, who barely spoke, interrupted the eerie muteness.

"Talking about business," he started casually, "I'm afraid you have to excuse us. My wife and I shall leave earlier too; I'd completely forget about it, hadn't it been for the gentleman reminding me." He turned to Bellatrix, speaking directly to her now. "Bella, the Albanian business had to be taken care of much sooner than expected. We have to leave tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Madam Selwyn." He bowed, smiling faintly at the woman.

"What a shame!" The old lady lamented, holding a hand for him to kiss. He gently touched her fingers, almost pressing his lips to the wrinkled skin. "Bellatrix, my lovely, it was very good to see you," she went on, prompting Bellatrix to come closer. Hermione shuddered as the witch stopped by her, leaning in to give a fake kiss to the elder lady.

"It was my pleasure, as always." Bellatrix gifted her with a charming smile, all the signs of her fear long gone. She was back to her usual self.

"Narcissa," the two witches came face to face, both battling their stubborn pride, the unspoken hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles. It was Bellatrix who eventually pressed a hand to her sister's cheek, kissing it gently. She was about to pull away when the blonde wrapped her arm around her, tugging her close. The dark witch relaxed, letting out a faint breath, stroking the slender back of her younger sister.

"Take care, promise me that," Narcissa whispered only for Bellatrix to hear, but the words caught Hermione's ears as well. She turned around, thinking it wasn't appropriate for her to witness such an intimate moment.

"Lucius." Bellatrix's voice cracked, suggesting a smile.

"Just as I was starting to get used to you, dear sister-in-law."

"Oh, stop being so sentimental," Hermione heard, but this time the words coming out of the witch's mouth were kind, not at all harsh as she had experienced them first-hand. She heard footsteps and spotted the witch brushing past her as if she was just a ghost. Bellatrix paused in front of her nephew, who was just glancing over his shoulder, clearly observing some girl dancing.

"Draco." She touched his shoulder, already leaning in, aiming for his left cheek. The boy, realising it was his turn to say goodbye, moved his head back, a little too forward, accidentally kissing her fully on the lips.

He pulled away with a soft smacking sound painting his face unbelievably crimson, his eyes growing twice their size. He opened his mouth, probably trying to say something, but his tongue didn't seem to collaborate.

"Sorry, love." Bellatrix patted his arm, not giving it a second thought. She glanced over at Barty and gave him a slight smile, ruining his hope for a goodbye kiss.
Hermione felt an incredible amount of pain hitting the walls of her abdomen, but this time she knew exactly the whole reason behind it. She pressed her palms over her face, trying to mask the monstrous shame.

"But dear, aren't you forgetting about someone?" Madame Selwyn announced suddenly. "What about Delphini? I do hope you arranged an alternative programme for the girl." Hermione glanced up, figuring Bellatrix and Rodolphus were just about to leave.

It took the dark witch only a second to recover. "Oh, of course, we did! She'll be staying with Narcissa at Malfoy Manor. Poor thing, she was getting bored with us anyway, weren't you, darling." She smiled fondly at Hermione, making her stomach flip.

"All right, then. I apologise for being so inquisitive, but—" the lady paused, frowning at Hermione. "Aren't you going to say goodbye to your uncle and aunt?"

"Well," Hermione hesitated, not really knowing what to say. "I'll be seeing them soon, it's not really..."

"Nonsense! Go ahead and give them a kiss, you never know when shall be the last time to see them. Merlin knows what I'm talking about. My son, may he rest in peace, promised me to come home, but he never did, poor thing," she stopped, her lips wobbling.

Appalled, Hermione was looking for a helping hand, looking over at Narcissa, but the witch only nodded towards the Lestrange couple, giving her no other option. She took a few unsure steps toward the tall man of a very hostile expression, pausing right in front of him. She stood on tips of her toes, planting a quick kiss on his warm, dark skin, smelling of aftershave balm.

But then, oh Merlin, it was her turn to move ahead. She almost stumbled, feeling her lips getting numb with each passing second. She didn't even know how she stepped to the side, moved to the dark witch, who was waiting for her with a stiff expression, quickly melting into a mask of tenderness, as if Hermione really was someone she loved, a little niece visiting from Norway.

Not a bad feeling for a change. Not bad at all.

She gulped, trying not to look into her eyes. Leaning in, her lips sloppily brushed against the cheek she didn't even feel under the numbness travelling all over her body.

She leaned back, realising her hand was placed on the soft fabric covering the woman's shoulder, touching a few silky curls. She quickly retrieved it, stepping aside.

"Enjoy the rest of your night," Rodolphus flashed a faint smile, reaching out for Bellatrix arm, who this time allowed him to touch her. Hermione was looking after them, getting swallowed by the crowd of people, not understanding how all of a sudden everything felt so very shallow.

"Malfoy, you lucky bastard!" She heard an amused whisper from behind her back. Both she and Draco turned around, only to find themselves circled by a group of four or five boys from Hogwarts. "I'd give anything to be in your place." It was Avery, chuckling, nodding towards the place where the Lestranges had disappeared. "Well," he paused, glancing at Hermione, "me ... or her!" He grinned even wider, making the group of his friends laugh as well. "Wouldn't mind some girl on girl action."

"Shut up, you idiot! That's my aunt... and my cousin you're talking about," Draco hissed, absolutely furious, giving Hermione a fleeting look, catching her all red and flustered. She tried her very best to erase the words she'd just heard. It never even occurred to her to...
"I was just joking!" Avery laughed, trying to pat Draco's shoulder, but the boy shrugged his hand off.

"Hate to break it to you, but you're not at all funny. Just stupid."

"What's gotten into you?" The boy scowled.

"What's gotten into me? You're talking rubbish about my family," Draco hissed as quietly as he could not to attract any attention.

"All right, all right," Avery put his hands up, his suite getting quiet as well.

Draco only shook his head. He turned on his heel to walk away, tugging Hermione along with him and stopping at the first table and a pair of empty chairs. They sat down, avoiding each other's eyes. They were both crimson in the face, both for different reasons. Or maybe not so much.

"Don't mind the idiot with his perverted ideas," the boy let out, thinking Hermione was embarrassed because of them, while the truth lay somewhere else. "Where have you been this whole time?" he asked all of a sudden. "We had—"

"Draco, I'd like to go home," Hermione stated, interrupting his investigation.

"Right, we can go, it was boring anyway, Astoria was just—"

"No," she cut him off again, "I mean home. My home."
It had been hours since she and the Malfoy family returned from the ball thanks to Draco's endless grumbling about how unbelievably bored he felt. Hermione had to hide her amusement behind a cup of punch anytime he whinged 'motheeeer', which was driving Narcissa absolutely nuts. She'd turn to him with a nasty look, most probably meaning something close to 'I cannot believe you sprang from my loins', hissing at him to quit. He, however, had ignored all of the remarks and proceeded to irk the woman until she finally capitulated.

"You owe me a big time, Granger, a big time!" He leaned in as they both settled on the backseat of a highly avantgarde-looking sedan driving them back home. "I had to promise to keep in touch with Astoria. They actually think she could be suitable—" He shivered, making a gagging sound.

"I think she's lovely," Hermione whispered back, "but don't you worry, I'll never forget this great gesture of yours. In fact," she shifted, slightly turning to him, "I'll make sure to disrupt the wedding and kidnap you if it really comes to the point," she promised, lightly tugging at his sleeve. She imagined being dressed as a healer, wearing a droopy moustache, running into some fancy parlour, shouting 'Stop the wedding, the groom has a spattergroit!'

As if hearing her thoughts, Draco gave her a long, searing look. "That calls for an Unbreakable Vow."

"Sure! Well, I've got a minute right now, just take out your wand."

Snorting, he only shook his head. It was their modus operandi offering to bail each other out of the silliest little situations—even as a joke. She would help him, then he'd do the same for her. It could be actually a pretty fair trade, hadn't it been for the fact that most of these ordeals were the results of Draco's doing—if not all of them.

Hermione chuckled under her breath: Draco really was a master troublemaker. Her eyes fleetingly slid down towards her hands and the smile on her lips froze.

A wave of cold sweat washed over her as she spotted a faint lavender colour blooming across the skin of her wrists. She gulped, shifting slightly to expose her hands to the lamp above her head, hoping to see that it was all just the play of light, but unfortunately, her sight wasn't mistaken.

"Do you really want to leave tonight?" Draco asked, making her eyes snap towards him. Her arms automatically folded across her chest, hiding the discolouration under the fleeting sleeves of her dress. "I don't want to dictate you what you should or shouldn't do," he went on, failing to notice her sudden tension, "but wouldn't it look a little too suspicious if—?" he paused, gazing to his left to see his mother leave her seat and sit down right next to him.

"Since we're in a chatty mood, I'd like to have a conversation with your friend, too. Could you give us a moment?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Scenarios, each worse than the previous one, started springing inside her brain like a fountain. There could've been a million reasons why the woman wanted to talk to her and she did not like the concept of any of them. No matter the course, she was positive
every single one would mean she had to lie.

"What for?" Draco stepped in suspiciously, acting like a lawyer who had to have every little thing run by him first in order to protect his client from saying the wrong thing. Hermione couldn't help herself from nudging his arm. It must have been his curse to always pick the wrong person to be rude to.

"I'm sorry?! I believe it is a business between me and Miss Granger only," Narcissa raised her eyebrow in disbelief. "And mind your tone, young man, it is not appropriate to—"

"Hey! I didn't—"

"Draco!" Lucius cut in, his voice as cold as ice. "I think you're forgetting who you are talking to!"

Hermione glanced at the boy sinking in his seat.

"I won't tolerate rudeness, you should be already aware of that," the older wizard let out, making even Hermione feel ashamed, "now do as you were told!"

Sighing, Draco stood up, moving without any more objections to sit next to his father on the other side of the car, looking like he'd just swallowed something particularly sour. "We will have a proper conversation tomorrow. I'm not putting up with..."

Hermione felt a movement beside her, making her avert her attention from Lucius giving Draco a piece of his mind to the blonde woman gazing directly at her. "Is there any reason for such a rush?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh please! I'm not a fool. I know it was your idea to leave the ball— No, I don't blame you," Narcissa clarified, noticing the girl was about to open her mouth to argue, "it was actually very convenient. I am simply asking why?"

The young witch adjusted in her seat.

"You were gone for quite a long time and so was my sister," the woman went on brusquely, "is she the reason? If anything happened there, I better know."

Clenching her teeth, Hermione turned to the window. What was she supposed to tell?

'Yes, it was your sister, attacking me multiple times in the span of one hour and making me think she was trying to kill me'?

"Nothing happened. I was in the bathroom, fixing my hair," Hermione said after a while, looking at her hands, hiding the lilac universe etched on her skin in the white fabric.

"If I remember correctly, this excuse was meant for Barty Crouch junior—you have to do better than that."

Hermione shot her a quick look before her eyes returned back to her lap.

"You know, I had to do a lot to keep this family together over the course of the past few weeks," Narcissa changed the strategy, considering every word, "don't you think I deserve the truth?" She paused before adding, "Tell me, Granger, what did she tell you?"

"Nothing you yourself wouldn't think of me," Hermione blurted suddenly. "Sorry," she added, realising her voice, though quiet, was far from polite. The curse of Draco was clearly infectious.
"That's it?"

Ouch.

The young witch resisted the urge to give a bitter snort. She knew the woman didn't like her very much but hoped for at least a little bit of compassion or maybe a kind gesture of pretence. Well, wrong again.

"Yes, that's it," she whispered, glancing at her, "and I think it's a good enough reason. I'm fed up with having to stand up for myself every single second I—" she paused, shaking her head. "I just want to go home."

Narcissa inhaled, lifting her chin a little higher. "Do as you like, after all, that was the agreement as I heard it from Draco," she spoke, showing no emotion whatsoever, "but at least wait until the morning. It wouldn't do your parents any good seeing you appear in the middle of the night looking like this. Surely, you don't mean to upset them." She raised her eyebrow, hitting the right nerve.

It was crystal clear to Hermione the woman was not saying it because she felt sudden empathy toward her parents, but she still had a point. The girl knew her mom would freak out and feel no shame in paying Narcissa a visit and explain a thing or two regarding the treatment of her daughter, even though the whole thing had to do a lot more with Bellatrix than her, actually. No matter the circumstances, the argument wouldn't be pretty and Hermione wanted this whole experience to be damn over so much she didn't want any more drama.

She had to stay. It was only for a few more hours, after all. She'd get some time to gain a composure and figure out what exactly and how much to say. The relationship she had with her mother was tight, but there was no way she'd tell her about the hell she'd been through. Well, at least not on her own accord.

"All right," Hermione agreed finally, making Narcissa nod.

"Smart choice. You'll get some rest, sleep is the best medication."

The girl parted her lips, a sudden thought knocking on her brain.

Sleep.

What if...?

If Bellatrix knew about her dreams, there was a small possibility, that maybe—maybe—her sister knew something as well. They seemed incredibly close after all and if they were anything like best friends, they surely must have shared information with one another.

It was worth a try. However, there was this difficult part about figuring out how to phrase the question. She didn't want to sound like a complete lunatic but couldn't think of a way of asking without impersonating one.

Think, Hermione, think!

"May I ask you something?" she started carefully, startling the woman.

"What is it?"

Licking her lips, the young witch shifted slightly towards her. "Your sister— she's— she has mentioned something peculiar."
"Yes?"

"It was a riddle regarding— astral projection," Hermione got out of her, seeing the woman raise her eyebrow and suddenly, she felt so incredibly stupid. If Narcissa had no clue and she would go on rumbling about time-travelling and similar kind of stuff, she was sure a healer from St Mungo's would be summoned immediately to take care of her.

"Astral projection," the blonde witch repeated, a small smirk forming on her lips.

"I— never mind. It's probably stupid."

"Probably." Narcissa shrugged her shoulder, her gaze intensifying. "But if, in any case, it wasn't, L-47 could get you some decent answers."

Hermione's eyes snapped toward her.

"Elefteriou, I believe," the witch added, standing up. On the opposite side of the car, Lucius pushed Draco out of his seat, making space for his wife.

Hermione's eyes unfocused.

Elefteriou, Elefteriou. Oh.

She did remember the name Magnus Elefteriou mentioned in the book of Astrology in her third year. He was attached to the research on abiogenesis through meditations but had dropped out and left for Key Gompa, a monastery in India, where, it was believed, he stayed until his death.

Except for the so-called research, there was not a single piece of his work known to the public, hence Hermione was dead curious to see what exactly it was in the L-47 section of the Malfoys' library. She let out a deep breath, turning to Draco, who was taking a seat next to her, but the boy refused to make any eye contact and stayed silent for the rest of the journey.

When they arrived, Lucius wouldn't even give him a chance to say goodnight as he grabbed him by the back of his robe, pushing him upstairs in front of him. Narcissa too followed the two men, not saying a single word about the way her husband was handling their son. Her chin was high, trying to hide the humiliation behind the most arrogant expression she could manage. Long gone was the veil of a happy, well-composed family, and she was clearly aware of that.

A small wrinkle formed on Hermione's forehead as she stared after them. She couldn't help but felt genuinely sorry. Draco, for trying to do good but only causing harm, and Narcissa—she could hardly imagine the embarrassment the woman must have really felt inside.

It wasn't a big deal according to the young girl. She was never the one to point fingers, but she understood that the woman didn't know any better. It was her world, the surface glory and golden praises she probably spent her whole life maintaining—the image of a perfect family, the rich, powerful Malfoys. They were considered a royalty, far better than everyone else—and here they were, exposed to the likes of Granger, a person of a low status who might start looking down on them as if they were just like her, the dirt.

Hermione shook her head, realising her empathy went too far. Those thoughts resonating through her brain didn't even feel like her own, as if it was someone else talking and she was just listening...

What was going on with her?

She glanced at the library door. Maybe there was a way to find out.
Her feet moved on their own, leading her straight to the opulent room. She dashed through the door, passing the tall pillars and looking for that particular sector, unusually ignoring the shining books that were flying out of the shelves, offering themselves to her.

She braked upon seeing the letter L puff in the air in the corner of her eye. Her breath hitched and she turned to the left, stepping forward. Her hands reached out, tracing the spines of the books as she went on, reading every single label so she wouldn't miss anything.

"Eanor, Edias, Efarov, E... come on—Elias, Emeron. No—that cannot be right," Hermione murmured, frowning at the letters. There was no one with a name Magnus Elefteriou.

After minutes of unsuccessful searching, she gave up the slouching and grabbed as many books as she could carry, wobbling to the small circular space behind the shelf.

Hermione settled on the floor with the heavy items surrounding her like a tower. She reached out for the nearest book, written by Ivan Eapolous and entitled 'The Accretion Disk'. Briefly skimming the chapters and names imprinted on the last page, she realised this probably wasn't the right material.

She grabbed the next book, and then another and another one, until she lost track of time, focusing solely on her feverish reading. She was so wrapped up in texts regarding the positron, nuclear fusion, and other things which had no connection to her issue whatsoever that she didn't even notice the French clocks strike four in the morning.

There wasn't a word about the scientist in any literature she had picked. Hermione was chewing on her cuticle, flipping through the pages, drifting from one book to another and opening the third one, searching for further explanation in the fourth, getting back to the first one and repeating everything all over again.

Her eyes were swelling from the poor source of lighting she used. She blinked, stretching her back, trying to resist the urge to flake out when she wasn't even halfway through with the books.

Yawning, her hand touched another one, the title of which she didn't even bother to read. She lowered her back, resting her chin in her palms. She was exhausted.

... the particles have the possibility to blend in... creating heavier elements by magic ... lucid dreaming made him... Lucid dreaming!

Hermione's eyes focused again. She shifted, bringing the book closer to her eyes, hypnotising the sentence. "I believe Salomon lost his mind. He was no longer capable of living in realms..."

Knock, knock.

Hermione's head jerked up.

"Hello!"

Standing in the shadows of the slowly easing night was none other than Bellatrix Lestrange in that sheer dress of hers, smiling devilishly. The young girl's mouth opened agape, her stomach twisting.

"Madame Lestrange!"

"May I join in?" the woman asked but didn't wait for an answer as she stepped further into the space. "My, my, quite a research is going on here." She outstretched her hand, making the nearest book fly up straight into her open palm. Her slender fingers elegantly flipped it over, exposing the
She looked at the girl with a risen eyebrow and laughed. "Traveling through time?" She skimmed through the first few pages. "Deary, if only you weren't so stubborn, I could have spared you the trouble." She snapped the book close, throwing it back to the floor, making Hermione frown indignantly.

"I can manage perfectly well on my own, thank you," she retorted, crossing her arms over her chest, "is there anything you'd need, ma'am?"

Bellatrix smiled again. "Yes, actually, there is. I think I wasn't being very nice before," she started, having Hermione snorting in disbelief. The witch was doing her little theatrical act all over again, pretending to be sorry only to stab her in the back at the first opportunity.

"No, you were not and I hardly think you'll ever be," the girl blurted hotly, not even caring she was probably way out of line.

"Quite the opposite! I came to apologise, to tell you about those dreams, and here you are, treating me like damn garbage."

Hermione's breath hitched halfway through her lungs because she surely must have misheard. "Are you really trying to distort this situation and make yourself a victim?"

"Darling, there are no victims in this world. Everybody gets what they deserve."

Hermione clenched her teeth. "Then you probably shouldn't be surprised yourself."

Bellatrix let out a rich laugh. "You've got a sharp tongue for such a sugar face," she paused, blooming with another charming smile, "but I'll give you a piece of advice. You really shouldn't aspire to wind up the only person who knows all about your secret world of fluffy dreams," she added, rewarding Hermione's remark with an intense look. "Tell me, don't you wanna know?"

Hermione frowned, torn between her own diverse feelings. Yes! She would so like to know, but she wasn't that stupid to admit it and anticipate any help. She had stepped into the same river far too many times to do the same mistake again. "No, I do not." She stood up. "I've got nothing to trade, remember?"

"Oh please," Bellatrix waved her hand dismissively. "I'll tell you everything," she whispered, "I am your auntie Bella, after all."

Hermione's breath hitched. She didn't like that tone. The woman was so sly, so manipulative, knowing exactly how to deceive her with a pretty choice of words and that angelic smile.

"I won't stop being Draco's friend," Hermione informed her before the witch had a chance to bring it on.

"I didn't—"

"Just stop!" She shook her head, raising her voice. "I've already said I—"

"If your sassy mouth would let me finish, you'd know I wasn't going there," Bellatrix spoke over her dangerously, prowling closer.

Hermione took a step back, the familiar fear running through her veins. "If not Draco," she started softly but coughed, trying to eliminate the fragility out of her voice. "If it's not about Draco, what
"Let's say I am feeling generous and I will do it for free."

It was Hermione's turn to laugh, although it lacked the effect and the charm of the dark witch. "Yeah, right! And I am supposed to believe that?"

"Well, if you want to give me something so badly," Bellatrix tilted her head, "let's settle on a little kiss, right here." She tapped her left cheek. "You barely did say goodbye, it would be only fair since your dear auntie has to leave in the morning," she said in a fake, gloomy voice.

"What?" Hermione blurted, her cheeks immediately burning. "I—what?"

"Is it that hard for you? I thought it might come easier than letting go of a friend." The witch inched closer, pausing just three feet away from the young girl.

Hermione's heart started racing painfully. "You are joking."

"I would never." Bellatrix stepped even closer, making Hermione's brain freeze her perception of all her bodily functions. "You seem nervous," the dark witch pointed, "are you afraid of me?" she whispered as she swept past her, pausing behind her back, "Or are you afraid of yourself?"

At this point, Hermione thought this must have been exactly what sleep paralysis felt like. The inability to move but the insanely dreadful sense of panic travelling through every vessel in the poor one's body.

"You know." She felt hot breath against her neck, which made her lungs shrink. "I had this funny feeling while being inside your head," Bellatrix said silkily and Hermione didn't even know which was worse: the dangerous words or the shivers running down her spine as the woman reached out to her hair, running her fingers through them in a languid, unbearably slow manner.

"I wasn't entirely sure what it was, but I think I've come to realise—" Her hand became even gentler, pulling at her hair with such faint pressure Hermione had to do a lot not to let her knees buckle.

"I don't know what you mean," she denied, finally finding her, although shaky, voice. This was the most sensual feeling she'd ever experienced, and although it felt so damn good, she knew she needed to get away from the woman. If not careful, she could spill the beans about her preposterous feelings and that would mean the end of her. She tried to force herself to move but it was the same kind of impossible as trying to detach her head from her body.

"Don't you really?" Bellatrix's hands were still running through her hair, twisting it, pushing it aside to rest on the girl's right shoulder.

"No."

There was no more touching—the only thing that existed was Hermione's spinning head and the feeling of anticipation beating in her lower belly.

A second. Two—

Her skin erupted in goosebumps travelling all the way from her nape down to her sacral area.

Nails. She could feel them tracing the skin of her exposed neck down towards her collarbone with such tenderness she couldn't help herself any longer. She leaned back, pressing against Bellatrix's
form, letting out a barely noticeable gasp, which however didn't miss the woman.

Bellatrix pulled away immediately, making Hermione stumble, and quickly stepped forward to face her.

"I knew it!" she let out a surprised laugh, her eyes widening in disbelief, "you do fancy me! Hell, I thought so from the beginning! Oh, how disgusting!"

Hermione was standing there with an opened mouth, panicking. "No! That—that's absurd! I would never...!"

"Don't try to deny it!" The dark witch was looking at her with her mouth slightly curled down in revulsion. "How jealous you were... Tell me," she winked, stepping closer again, "were you imagining it was you instead of him?" she asked, enjoying herself like the sadist she was. Her freezing hands reached to Hermione's warm ones, grasping them and pulling them toward her hips.

"Touching me like this...?"

Hermione felt a wave of very unpleasant heat washing over her. She was struggling to free her hands from resting where they shouldn't, but Bellatrix's grip was too strong, bruising her skin even harder.

"...having me so close..." the witch purred, leaning forward a bit and even though Hermione was stubbornly looking aside, she couldn't miss her exhale, still sweet from that vanilla-spiced alcohol.

Bellatrix's hands moved higher, grasping her chin, forcing her to look at her.

"Were you imagining," she went on mercilessly, her head moving slightly forward and immediately drawing back, "it was you kissing me?"

Hermione's brain shut down. She wasn't able to focus on anything but those alluring lips, parting and saying things. The woman's knees were moving, pushing the young witch with her until her back pressed against the wall.

"I think you were, you little animal," Bellatrix breathed. "Who would have thought so—such a good girl..." Hermione's eyes were fluttering, her knees shaking. Her hands were curled in fists, still resting on Bellatrix's hips.

"...and such a pretty one. I guess it wouldn't hurt to—" The woman brought her lips impossibly close. Hermione's heart was physically hurting, threatening to tear her skin—

Her eyes snapped open upon hearing a strange moan coming out of her own mouth. It was a perfectly plain day and she was lying on the floor, her cheek stuck to the 'Astrology & Its Origins' and her stomach hurt like hell.

She tried to sit up but hissed, feeling a sharp pain in her neck. Rubbing the place, she swallowed harshly. Her chest was heaving and her heart still beating as if racing a marathon. She could feel a flutter of crazy butterflies flying through her ribs, lungs, and the lower belly, tickling everything their wings touched. She placed a palm over her opened mouth, breathing hard into it.

"No, no no no no!" She stood up, her feet tangling in the dress she was still wearing. Quickly, she peeked from behind the bookshelf, her eyes travelling all over the space of the library where they could reach.

The room seemed quiet so Hermione retreated to her small corner, scratching at her palms. A hot stream of tears began falling down her cheeks but she roughly wiped them off.
She let out a desperate sigh, feeling so indescribably disgusted. What in Merlin's name was wrong with her for dreaming about such things! For having such feelings! Bellatrix was a woman, Draco's aunt, damn it, and here she was fantasising about—oh, she was so sick, so sick! It was just wrong for so many reasons.

Oh how she hoped the witch was truly gone, because she was sure she wouldn't be able to face her. Not in such a state.

She wondered what time it was. Bellatrix was never the one for breakfast—maybe she could avoid her, manage to sneak up into her room and get a cold—not cold, freezing—shower to teach her crazy hormones a lesson, pack her stuff and get the hell out of here before she would go completely mental.

Yes, that sounded like a good plan.

She frowned at the books scattered all over the floor, taking a moment before kneeling down and trying to pick them up, but they magically hopped on each other, flying up and out of Hermione's sight.

She blinked, disposing of the last traces of tears. Taking a few deep breaths, she forced her thoughts to shift completely. Maybe it was just an absurd dream. She'd had tons of them already. Tons! It was probably nothing to worry about, just an odd thing which surely had an explanation! Just like Draco's mother giving her a piece of advice that was worth nothing and had made her bury herself in books, only to drift off and dream about—

Hermione's palms pressed against her crimson face.

'I need to get away.'

She was lucky she had dozed off only for a couple of minutes. The main hall she had to pass through seemed empty: Everybody was probably still asleep, enjoying much more ordinary fantasies than she did.

She rushed up the stairs, jogging as quietly as she could to her room, stopping only to lock the bathroom door behind her.

Whatever. It was just a dream. The first dream of such a kind—and it happened to be with a—

Hermione hissed as the first splash of icy shower hit her body. She could almost feel all the pores on her skin shrinking, trying to protect her organs from the crispy cold water.

She was shivering like an autumn leaf threatening to fall from the tree at any moment; it was a torture, but quite an effective one. Bellatrix's face was gone at least for a while. It was fascinating what self-preservation could do, but it was equally sad that the body adjusted so quickly, returning the brain the ability to think of whatever it wanted in mere seconds.

Sensing the effect wearing off, she stopped the water, enjoying the warmth spreading all over her skin. She reached for the towel, trying to ignore the new peony-shaped bruises on her thighs and arms.

Once fully dressed in her usual striped shirt and beige trousers, she began packing her things, starting of course with the books. She just couldn't forget any. While sorting them by title, she had some time to think about what to tell and not to tell.

Her parents. Until now, she had the privilege of talking about her experiences from Malfoy manor
solely through letters, meaning she could keep to herself as much as she wished. It was always just 'we went for a walk, spent some time in the library' and the similar talk. She hated lying, but it wouldn't do any good crying to her mom over Bellatrix being awful to her.

Frowning, Hermione suddenly paused with the History of Magic halfway to her trunk.

Merlin, did everything have to be about that woman?! She'd had a great time too, it hadn't been all sour! She and Draco had shared quite a few laughs together. She could tell about how the blond boy had pranked Zabini by saying they had a magical room in the manor, which, if one stood naked in front of its door precisely at midnight, would turn into a portal to another dimension.

Being as mean as he was, Draco hadn't told him directly but talked loudly when he knew he was close enough to hear him. Hermione had only shaken her head, thinking Zabini wasn't an idiot to fall for such nonsense, and so she hadn't said a word. Well, wasn't she mistaken?

She hadn't seen it herself but heard about it from Draco the morning after, in between his laughs, how Blaise went standing in front of the door, only to come face to face with Lucius Malfoy, and started pretending to be sleepwalking to get out of trouble.

Or she could tell how she and Draco had made a new friend and they all ended up drinking with muggles—well, maybe she should leave out that drinking part. The point was if she focused on the good things, her parents wouldn't notice how unhappy she really felt and how glad she was to be back home. It was a poor plan but she didn't come up with a better one that wouldn't require direct lying.

Hermione sighed, zipping up her trunk. She was done with packing and the only thing she had to do was to go downstairs and wait.

Narcissa was the first to show up. Her face didn't give away any surprise at the sight of the girl sitting on the sofa. "Draco's not up, yet," she informed her without any greeting or offering her to have some breakfast before leaving. She was probably done pretending to be polite once it was all over.

"It's okay, I'll wait for him," Hermione said, standing up. She wanted to say something, to ask whether the woman found it amusing giving away the false hope—she wanted to ask many many things, but frankly, it wasn't worth the drama anymore.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay, you know how to use the floo powder," Narcissa said mechanically before she disappeared, leaving Hermione all alone without saying anything else.

The girl wasn't surprised, nor disappointed at this point. What else was there to expect? She sat back down on the sofa, trying to ignore her unnerved stomach fearing Bellatrix would be the next to appear.

Fortunately, she wasn't. It was Draco.

"I must say, I did hope you would change your mind." He pursed his lips together, shrugging his shoulder.

Hermione let out a sad smile, shaking her head.

"Well then, the next year," the boy started but she stopped him immediately.

"Don't even think about it! The next summer it's your turn!"
Draco let out a surprised laugh. "What?"

"What do you mean by 'what'? I'm inviting you over—you and ... Astoria, your future wife."

"Keep going, I think I'm feeling better about your leaving."

"Jerk!" Hermione smirked, tugging his shirt so she could give him a hug. He wrapped his arms around her, staying like that for a moment.

"See you at Hogwarts. Try to stay out of trouble!"

"I think I'll manage just fine without you around," she retorted, smirking, earning a fake scowl from him.

"Go away, Granger."

"Bye, Draco." She waved as she took a handful of the floo powder.

"Bye, Brain," the boy smirked, watching her disappear in a smoke of a green colour.

Hermione's plans didn't work out. It took Jean Granger one single look to realise her daughter wasn't at all fine. It didn't matter what she said, the mother always knew.

"Here." She came to sit by her in the living room, handing her a cup of chamomile tea. It was a rare rainy day of the summer, which depicted the girl's mood quite accurately.

"Whenever you're ready, I'm here for you, all right?" she started, stroking Hermione's arm. "I won't ask about anything, I just want you to know that.. that I'm after their arses!" Jean nodded seriously, making Hermione crack a smile.

"Probably it's just the lack of sleep. We went to the ball and returned pretty late."

Jean gave her a knowing look, not buying a single thing she was saying. "Come on, off to bed then!"

"But it's 10:30!"

"You're tired, end of story. When you wake up, I've got quite a surprise for you!"

"What is it?"

"Good things come to those who wait!"
Salty Mouth

SALTY MOUTH / EP. 1 of 2 / CH. XVII

she had salt running in her veins

but I loved her far too much

not to let her bleed

over my open wounds

It is the essence of the entire world to be diverse. To be both the beauty and the beast, bound together as one—just like nature. Though fierce and livid, she still hides a tremendous amount of love within—unseen by eyes but found in silence, in those rare moments of lucidity when the mind stills and sees for the first time.

It grows with the first morning dew before each dawn and rests in every sleepy flower closed by smoky dusk. So present, and yet overlooked.

The forgotten magic of love—all kinds, waiting in the loveliest corners of a human soul. No matter how odd, how different, or unusual. It is still love—plain as that; the real reason kids understand it so seamlessly. They don't analyse, they just feel—and that right there was the whole issue with Hermione Granger.

She had to understand before letting herself accept any sort of emotions. It was her way of surviving, her safe zone which ran as smoothly as a Swiss watch and had been lasting for about sixteen years before the massive revolution took over: Her feelings, blatantly refusing to follow the rules she had once set, and leaving her with nothing but chaos in her head.

The chaos by the name of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Up until meeting that woman, Hermione had no trouble managing her reactions whatsoever. She knew how to hold back tears, knew how to handle her frustration or anger, but that once strong composure was long since gone.

She became a whining little child anytime the witch was around, crying on every occasion she sent her a nasty look or spat some venom; and it was all just because of those irrational feelings she held toward her. Feelings so irrational Hermione refused to believe in the natural occurrence of them.

She hadn't thought of Bellatrix that way before the Occlumency lessons, had she? Of course, she hadn't! That wicked woman must have got inside her head and messed with her thoughts, planted those feelings inside her just for the sake of her own sadistic idea of fun and then silently laughed behind her back as she watched her struggle.

The woman was so twisted it would be no surprise if that was exactly what was going on—and it must have been, because if Hermione did fancy the fairer sex, she'd have known about it by then,
right? There'd never been a single case she could say her eyes rested on a girl just because she'd find her beautiful—at least not in a romantic way.

She admired women, yes. She had platonic crushes but that didn't mean anything. It was pure appreciation of their wit and intelligence. Hell, she was allowed to feel that!

It was the exact same scenario with Bellatrix at first as well. The young girl thought she was smart and talented, hence the affection, and the witch, probably sensing her growing interest, had taken the chance and made something vile and twisted out of it, just to make Hermione more miserable.

The young girl couldn't believe how stupid she was for not thinking about this option earlier. She could have been spared from so much self-hatred and instead pour her energy into something a lot more productive, like those damned dreams of hers.

It was slowly becoming unbearable and not only because of Ronald Weasley's affectionate glances. It was also his best friend, Harry Potter, fighting this dark wizard, someone called Lord Voldemort, who was apparently planning on taking over the world.

She remembered it was precisely three years ago when his name popped in her dreams for the first time and had been a part of ever since. It began with Ronald's little sister Ginny crying over the magical diary she confined in, and went on the very next night with Harry and a replicated dialogue he led with the headmaster. He claimed that the old man had told him the diary was an item of a very dark nature and a possession of Voldemort's, but unfortunately refused to say any more about the subject.

Hermione had been tempted numerous times to approach the real-life Albus Dumbledore to ask for his help, because she knew he was a man of an immense intelligence and skill, but she never had done so just out of pure fear he'd think she'd gone completely mental.

Recalling the conversation she had with Professor McGonagall in her third year over the time-turner, she could still clearly hear her voice stressing the importance of being careful—not to get seen, let alone interfere in the past events, for people would think she'd gone mad.

The young witch saw both situations in a similar light, so she had dismissed the option involving Dumbledore and rather focused on her own abilities. Maybe it wasn't the quickest way but it sure as hell was safer.

She would spend hours in the Hogwarts library, many times ditching Draco, just for the sake of trying to figure something out, but to no avail. She had been clueless ever since that whole madness started, knowing as much about it now, at sixteen, as she had in her third year, but still tried to hold to the hope, no matter how small, that maybe one day it would all start making sense.

Surely, Bellatrix did drop her some bread crumbs, but Hermione was no longer that naive to believe everything the witch and her sister would say to be true. Particularly when it could be of any help—yet, she still couldn't stop herself from planning on ordering plenty of books centred around esotericism once back home, and she certainly would have if only she had the time...

The Sleeping Draught had always been Jean's speciality. As soon as the spring approached, bringing the sweet scent of blossoms to her windows, the witch would spend her evenings out in the fields, harvesting essential plants for the formula. Her modern kitchen would turn into a proper Wiccan shed, consisting of nothing but a strong scent of lavender sprigs lying everywhere around the room. She would pour all her heart into brewing the potion, even take a few days off from work to get some extra hours for crushing the remarkable amount of herbs that devoured her kitchen.
According to her, there could never be enough of the sleeping potion, and she would wave off anyone saying that the supply, which was breaking the shelves in the pantry, would be too much even for a hundred ghouls.

"What if something bad happens and we run out of it," she'd retort, sweating over the steamy surface, "it's a cure for everything!"

Got a headache? Sleep it off. Stomachache? Sleep it off. Any issue? Just sleep it off!

Hermione had given up bringing up the point about overdosing years ago. She had consumed so much of the liquid she should have been ten years deep in a coma by now, and yet there she was, finally back home and luckily awake after another dose of the concoction.

She was sitting on her old bed, feet tucked under her knees, pulling a puzzled face at her mother. The surprise she had been promised before being sent to sleep everything off was finally out, but it didn't spark any sort of excitement she'd initially hoped for.

"Greece?" Hermione managed to repeat while yawning, trying to steal some time to think, "just the two of us?"

"Yes—well," Jean shrugged her shoulder. "I was supposed to go with your dad but he was denied even a day off, so—it was just me," she stated bitterly.

"What?! But he's working overtime! We barely see him anymore and they won't even let him spend some time with us?! That's so unfair!"

"Yes, it is, yet he won't say a word about it to the management," Jean let out, startling the girl. "I've told him countless times to stand up for himself; I've told him the job's too challenging, too harsh on the whole family, but he's so very stubborn! I cannot understand why he'd still insist on—!" she paused, probably realising this unexpected outburst might have been a bit over the top.

She let out a deep breath and closed her eyes for a few seconds. "I mean." She glanced at her perplexed daughter, smiling faintly. "I know he— I get that he's just— I always—" Hermione waited but no explanation made it to her ears.

"Look, Mione." Jean stopped trying and went back to the previous subject. "There are two plane tickets and since you're back from Draco's, it would really mean a lot if you went with me."

"Mama," the young girl put her blanket aside, crawling closer to her. She wasn't fooled by her sudden perky tone, lacking any kind of sincerity. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course, silly, why shouldn't it be?" Jean forced out a laugh. "I just had a rough day and I'm taking it out on your dad." She winked, putting her arm over Hermione and tugging her close. "I guess I just miss having him around... and I miss having you around!" She squeezed her shoulder.

The girl slightly pulled away, her eyes still lingering over her mother's. She wasn't satisfied with the explanation she'd received and couldn't help thinking something was going on.

The woman was rarely crossed, let alone with her husband, and if so, she had never dragged her daughter into it.

Hermione opened her mouth, going for another question, but Jean, clearly having no desire to explore her feelings any further, quickly attacked her first.

"Tell me you're coming!" She squeezed her hand, determined to maintain the subject. It was
Hermione's turn to get cornered.

Had it been any other time, she wouldn't be so reluctant to accept the offer. She loved to travel. She loved learning about different cultures, reading under the trees, accompanied by a salty breeze and mild splashing waves, but not this time. After her experience in Malfoy Manor, she would much rather stay home and just be happy about it.

"Uhm, I probably shouldn't. I need to get back on track. The school starts in a month and I haven't had a chance to—"

"Hermione, dear," Jean pursed her lips together. "If there's any kid prepared enough for school, even without preparation, it's you, so don't give me this nonsense. You are one of the brightest girls—the brightest if you ask me, and I'm not saying that just because I'm a little biased." She nodded, raising her eyebrows, making Hermione chuckle. "I've got proof and it's right here!" She pulled a yellow parchment out of her pockets, handing it to Hermione.

"That's my O.W.L. results," the girl pointed, taken aback as she unfolded the letter, "don't tell me you've been carrying it everywhere with you ever since I sent it to you!"

"You want me to say no, don't you?"

Hermione let out a laugh, shaking her head. Why was she even surprised?

"Okay, let's leave the O.W.L.'s out of it." Jean quickly grabbed the letter out of Hermione's hands, folded it, and put back into her pocket. "My point is, you work too hard and you deserve a little break. Besides, I'd like to spend as much time with you as I can before I'm forced to let you go for another year." Jean's eyes suddenly reminisced a wounded puppy and Hermione didn't have the heart to say no anymore.

Wasn't this emotional blackmailing supposed to work solely the other way around, the young girl thought desperately as she voiced her reluctant consent.

Jean gave her a huge smile. "Brilliant! I'm sure you'll love it there! Those beautiful beaches, the monuments...!" She gestured vehemently as she stood up from Hermione's bed, making a few springs cry. "Oh, and guess what! We'll be staying at Blair's—you do remember Blair, don't you? She owns the villa near the.."

Hell, of course, she remembered.

It was impossible to forget about someone like Blair Alderidge, the very definition of ne plus ultra. Not because she'd be this gorgeous creature of them all, the kindest, most humble person to ever walk this Earth. No—she was the perfection itself in the most unusual sense.

She was intelligent, straightforward, and audacious, sometimes a little too audacious, but still unbelievably charming with that dry sense of humour that would leave everyone laughing for days.

Hermione could still remember the way she used to look at the woman—as if her every move was turning the air into a plethora of silver stars, raining down on her like a hailstorm. The way she carried herself, talked, even laughed—it all seemed like an art to Hermione. She'd admired her with every inch of her soul, wishing to grow into at least half the woman she was: the rare combination of glamour and sass, the true wonder of the girl's, back then, tiny little world.

Goodness, it had been years—years since she saw her—and reflecting on the whole thing now from her teen's perspective was, quite frankly, bitterly amusing: how smitten she had been, how small and silly, always following her like a little puppy.
She wondered how different her view was now, how different she was—whether she'd changed or managed to stay the same. She wondered many many things but didn't ask: she wanted to see for herself.

And she did.

It had been a couple of days since arriving on one of the gorgeous Greek islands and finally seeing Blair after all those years.

Hermione had been on pins and needles the whole flight, earning a few chuckles from her mother. The reunion wasn't as exciting for her as it was for the girl. Jean and Blair were best friends ever since their university years and even though one lived in Britain and the other in the US, they still managed to see each other from time to time.

Jean used to say it was a friendship meant to be. 'How else could you explain a meeting of a witch and an American gal at the British university?!

She would always laugh about the first time she saw Blair, though she'd refuse to tell Hermione anything about it. It was only a matter of time till she found out the reason why.

The girl had overheard them talking over drinks one evening when Blair came for a visit. The woman and her parents were sitting outside, while she peered from behind the door, curious what they were laughing about.

"I still cannot forget what you did back then! What was it again, the thing he said to you?" Her mom was in tears.

"Well," Blair elegantly flipped her dark blonde hair and started in her old hollywood accent. "The idiot came to me, put his hand on my ass and went—Baby," she changed her voice to make it sound a bit deeper, "how about some action, you and me. See that right there? That's my room—or we can stay and do it right here, I don't mind."

Jean turned to her husband, laughing even harder. "And you know what she did?! She just said 'okay', pulled down his pants and mind you, there was everybody to witness this, she pulled down his pants, took a good look and turned to us, saying 'Oh wow, judging by that size, I can tell you all, this will be my first time with a girl'."

"You did not!" John choked, joining his wife, laughing her arse off.

"She did." Jean managed to say through the tears. "The boy was mortified! He's never come near her ever since."

"Unreal."

Hermione had been too small to find the situation funny—she couldn't believe her Blair would do such a thing to somebody. Though it was true the man didn't have any right to harass her like that, her action still seemed too vicious in her young eyes.

She learnt very soon that Blair was quite an unpredictable woman who always managed to surprise no matter how well one knew her—but she had grown to love this quality of hers and as she got older and less of a prude, she'd find the adventures—which her mom would write about in the letters they shared—she and Blair had together amusing. Hell, sometimes she wished to be able to join them, but being at Hogwarts didn't give her the possibility, and when it finally came to a holiday, Blair would always be too busy acting in theatre.
There were quite a few attempts at getting together, and despite her mom's magical abilities and Blair's money, the two most potent tools in the world, it had unfortunately never happened. Therefore one couldn't blame Hermione when she started jumping from ground to ceiling upon hearing who it was waiting for them in Greece.

Long time or not, she almost knocked the woman over as she squeezed her in a bone-crushing embrace the second she approached them with that familiar wide grin, showing a lot of perfectly white straight teeth.

"I cannot believe it! God, you've grown into a beautiful young woman! " She opened her mouth in disbelief, holding Hermione in front of her as soon as she pulled away.

"And you haven't changed a bit! You're as stunning as I remember!" Hermione replied, smiling so hard her cheeks were burning.

"Please, can I keep her?" The woman turned to Jean, giving her a fake kiss on the left cheek. "Hey, darling."

Hermione was delighted to see Blair seemed every bit of herself as she remembered her to be and she specifically got assured of that one particular afternoon. She was just coming back from the town's bookshop with a bag full of psychotropic literature when she overheard the two women talking.

"... well, I found the maid cleaning in my own bed, under my own husband."

"Oh God! What did that bastard, Bill, do?"

"Before or after I made sure his lousy dick wouldn't produce any more children?" Blair asked in that posh, amused voice before taking a sip from her glass.

Hermione couldn't help but felt the same old feeling of awe washing over her, marvelling at the fact that Blair could be talking about worms and germs and still manage to sound and look that classy.

Hell, even without magical abilities, she had the charm worth hundreds of wizards.

Hermione had always considered it ironic how every good thing in her life vanished or turned into something vile and disturbing sooner or later.

Quite like this lovely vacation.

She wanted to believe, she really did, that someplace away would do her good, that she'd be finally able to get a fresh new perspective, but unfortunately none of that happened; instead, she got even more confused and anxious over her chaos of feelings, forcing her to reconsider her accusations toward Draco's aunt.

Because suddenly it wasn't just the dark witch causing her stomach to flip anytime she looked her way. There was someone else, and that person right there was the final nudge Hermione needed to finally stop lying to herself and look at things with a pair of sober eyes.

Those eyes that somehow thought Blair looked more beautiful with every passing day; the same eyes that made a habit of resting on her smiling lips and her exposed skin more than they should.

It scared the hell out of her when she realised she'd been staring at her unbelievably long legs, quite
intrigued, thinking how amazing they looked in that mini dress she was wearing—and this time she could say with certainty it wasn't a simple feeling of admiration.

Her eyes went wide as soon as she realised what'd been travelling through that sick head of hers. She quickly sat up, almost falling from her beach lounger chair, right next to Blair's, accidentally dropping her book to the sand. She recklessly picked it up, burying her nose in its depths.

"Out with it." Blair's voice found Hermione.

"What?"

"Who'd you kill?"

"What?"

"I'd like to ask more, but I'm afraid I'm running out of questions you could answer with what."

Hermione smiled against her will.

"You seem distracted."

"Not at all."

"You're reading that book upside down."

"Well, I wondered why the letters didn't make any sense." The girl let out a very forced chuckle, closing the debate.

Later that evening, when Hermione ran to the beach to distance herself from the woman and think about everything in the tranquility of the white sand, she realised it was impossible to ignore the obvious any longer.

Maybe it had been in her all along and she was just too young, too immature and blind to understand it fully. She had forced herself to believe her feelings were just a matter of appreciation and respect, but paying closer attention to her body and the way it reacted while looking upon Bellatrix or Blair, she could say it was clearly not at all that innocent.

She wondered, though, how come she had figured that out just now? Why hadn't she had this sort of feelings in Hogwarts toward her female classmates as well?

Both, Bellatrix and Blair were significantly older than her, probably in their mid-thirties. Did she have a thing for just more mature women? And if so, what caused it? She couldn't have mommy issues, her mother had always been very loving! Was it some defect during her pregnancy then? Had she been anxious a lot? Hermione had read about a study stating that the prenatal stress increases the chances of homosexuality or bisexuality substantially.

The young girl buried her face in her palms as a flood of questions started popping in her head. "This is absurd," she muttered.

What about Victor then? That famous quidditch seeker, who was quite smitten with her, according to Padma Patil. She liked him too, right? Oh, she didn't know anymore.

Yes, Hermione thought he was sweet and funny, but when it came down to physical stuff, she had backed off like a scared cat.

So she didn't like men at all?
Her eyes focused on a group of shirtless boys—particularly one of them—running after the ball, which had fallen way out of his reach. She could honestly say he was handsome, but that was about it. Her stomach didn't flip when he made eye contact and sent her a blinding smile. She didn't feel anything—but still, that was no proof.

Maybe he just wasn't the right one.

Hermione suppressed a laugh. 'Yeah, right, keep bullshitting yourself, Mione.'

She was aimlessly roaming across the beach, wondering what she had done to deserve such punishment, because it certainly wasn't any gift from above. Maybe she had been a killer in her previous life or another kind of a horrible person, and the universe was just trying to even it out; or maybe and more likely it was just some teenage phase she had to go through. Surely, she wouldn't be the first one.

Oh, how she wished she had a girl friend—someone to share this burden with. She'd ask her if she, too, had ever felt attracted to someone of the same gender, if she too had sometimes inappropriate thoughts and if it was okay to feel that way.

But she didn't have a friend like that and she certainly wasn't going to ask Draco, that one was clear. What would she tell him anyway?

'Hey, I think I might have a crush on your aunt, do you think it's normal?'

She stopped dead in her track.

Wow.

That was the first time Hermione addressed her feelings in their true nature, without playing around with words. She did acknowledge she had a crush on Bellatrix and there was no going back from that. Bellatrix and now Blair, too.

She let out another laugh, full of desperation, attracting a few curious looks.

"Sorry," she apologised to the family who'd raised eyebrows at her unexpected outburst. She moved, slowly making her way back to Blair's.

What seemed funny to her was the fact that she finally might have feelings for someone but they happened to be the two people who would never look at her the same way she looked at them. Ever.

But that was okay! Because even if she felt about them a certain way, she'd never act on it. Period.

"Where have you been, Mione?! I was so worried!" Jean leapt from her chair as soon as her daughter appeared at the patio of the luxurious villa, unfashionably late.

"Let the girl live! She was probably downtown, charming the local fellows with that innocent look." Blair smirked, flipping a page of some magazine lying in front of her. "Are you hungry, darling?"

"No, thank you." Hermione forced a smile, avoiding Blair's eyes at all cost. "I was just walking around and forgot about the time, I'm sorry, mom," she apologised lowly, using the same puppy eyes Jean had when she asked her to come with her to Greece.
"Okay," she sighed, softening, "but don't do that again, please... anything could happen."

"Jean! Stop scaring the poor girl, she's not twelve anymore! Besides, the worst thing that ever happened on this island was most certainly Maaria's new haircut."

Hermione chuckled. Maaria was Blair's housemaid, a Greek woman almost in her seventies, quite plump and tiny, always smiling from ear to ear. The two women shared a very special kind of bond, sealed from the very first day by a totally drunk Blair who had had the woman swear she would never try to seduce any of her potential husbands.

Maaria told Hermione so when she invited her to the kitchen for a slice of a karythopita.

"She was a mess, my poor baby! It was a few days after she left 'the bastarde'. She was crying all night— well, crying and singing, the chorus of that song—what's it called? 'I can't help myself', but changed the lyrics from 'Sugar pie honey bunch, you know that I love you' to 'Bill you twat, lousy slag, you know that I loathe you'."

"Hey, come over here, I want to show you something," Blair addressed the girl, whose stomach immediately made a soft somersault. The very first one.

'Oh great! Now what?! I'm gonna feel nervous about Blair too? That Blair I've known my entire life?!

She folded her arms as some form of an invisible protection and reluctantly went to the woman, stopping a good few feet away, leaving quite a distance between them. Blair turned her head to her and smiled, slightly leaning from her chair to take Hermione's wrist and pull her closer.

Her hand was so soft and warm and the young witch suddenly felt like melting, standing so close behind her, all hazy from that intoxicating perfume clouding her brain. She could almost feel the heat radiating from her body and as much as she tried to fight the urge, she couldn't help but bend down even closer, casually resting her chin against Blair's shoulder and leaning her head against hers to see better.

'Merlin, help me!'

"Mione?" The voice came to her as if from behind a closed door, making her jump, because in those few magical seconds she had managed to forget all about her mom standing just a few feet away.

"Uhm?" She straightened her back and moved away from Blair as quickly as she could, feeling redness spreading all over her guilty face.

"Listen, honey, I've got an owl from work half an hour ago," Jean started, drawing invisible patterns over the top rail of her chair. "Something unexpected has happened and I'm supposed to be there tomorrow morning. They've sent me the portkey."

Hermione's face faltered. "We're leaving?"

"I am—you don't have to go with me. I've already talked to aunty Blair." She smiled at her friend, who clucked her tongue and winked. "She doesn't mind. I'll be back in four days, anyway."

"Oh," Hermione's stomach jumped upon the realisation what that possibility really meant. She would be alone with the woman for four days straight. Was that a good idea? Probably not, but it would be really rude to say she wanted to go home—even though she didn't, just should.
She bit her inner cheek, looking at Blair.

"Come on, can't you see my presence has only done you good? I haven't seen you touch a book for ten minutes straight!" She smiled, earning a playful scowl from the girl. It was as if she heard Draco, who was nudging her about her passion anytime he was given a chance.

"What do you say?" Jean nodded in her direction.

"Well," Hermione started, trying to suppress the waves of butterflies forming in her belly, "I guess I'll stay then and wait for you."

---

If only she didn't.

Because her feelings grew stronger and stronger anytime Blair's warm skin brushed against hers, giving her a fever which had nothing to do with the burning sun high above them; anytime she made one of her jokes, leaving Hermione laughing until her stomach hurt.

The girl couldn't remember the last time she was so happy-confused.

She would often find herself looking at the woman from behind her book, not even paying attention to the content because there was finally something much more interesting than 'The History of Magic'.

"What would you say if we went out tonight? You've reached sixteen recently—that's a good reason to get drunk," Blair called from her white beach lounger chair.

Hermione cleared her throat, tearing her eyes from Blair's flat stomach and flipped the page she didn't even start reading. "Drunk?" She hoped the woman was joking.

"Yeah, you'll be an adult in a year, won't you? I mean, according to that magical law of yours. It's about time to start living—sixteen's the best." She lifted her head, giving Hermione one of her charming smiles.

"I don't think I should."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you don't attach yourself to anyone's leg, begging them to sing with you Frank and Nancy Sinatra's 'Something Stupid'."

Hermione raised her eyebrows but Blair only waved her hand. "Don't even ask, it's been a long time ago and I don't remember any details."

And however much Hermione wanted to protest, she couldn't say anything when Blair knocked on her door at eight p.m., wearing the tightest dress she probably could.

"You won't need this," she took The Astral Dictionary out of Hermione's hand as she approached her, holding the book in front of her eyes. "Oh my, what is this deep spiritual crap?"

"Nothing," Hermione said, leaning for her book, but Blair jumped aside, putting it way out of her reach, onto the vanity on the other side of the room.

"Where are your dresses?"

"I didn't bring any. I don't really like dresses." Hermione shrugged, trying her best to avoid looking at Blair's legs.
"If this was California, I'd have you arrested for that statement."

"I mean, I don't like wearing them, you—you look gorgeous," she said smiling, so bloody proud of herself for complimenting her without blushing.

"Too late for flattery, darling, the only apology I'm willing to accept is you going with me and letting me choose something fabulous for you to wear."

Hell, did she have a choice?

It was thirty minutes later and she stood in Blair's room, garbed in one of her expensive dresses. Hermione felt so uncomfortable undressing in front of the woman. She wasn't as slender as her, not as tall—what if she'd think her body was weird-looking? That her breasts were too small or her thighs too thick?

As quickly as she could, she pulled the dress over her head.

Great. It got stuck.

"Wait, let me help you." Blair chuckled and Hermione felt a pair of hands pulling at the fabric. "There." Her wide grin appeared in front of the girl and despite the embarrassment, she simply had to smile herself.

"Thanks."

"Sure, now turn around, I got to tie the dress."

So she turned around and simply stood there feeling vulnerable, letting Blair be a torture with such a proximity. She had to suppress a gasp tearing up her throat upon feeling long nails brush against her back. Unfortunately, what she couldn't control was shudder which washed over her like electricity—and there was no way Blair would miss that.

The girl quickly jumped away from her. "You've scratched me," she let out the first lie that popped into her mind.

"Sorry... My, my, look at you!" the woman announced, looking her up and down with her eyes frowned and an oh so very attractive smirk.

Hermione felt a wave of heat rush into her cheeks.

"Now, sit over there, I'm gonna do your make-up."

"Is it really that necessary?" The girl wasn't sure whether she was prepared to survive the woman being so close again. She wouldn't be doing anything else but keeping swallowing the excess saliva of her watering mouth.

"Not that you'd need it, but a little enhancement here and there won't do you any harm." Blair smiled, nodding to the chair in front of the huge mirror. "Don't worry, it won't be anything drastic. We'll go soft and..." it was suddenly so very hard to sit still, "sleek."

Hermione tugged her hair behind her ears, and then sat on her hands, swaying a little.

"Quite nervous, aren't you?" The woman came to the view, looking at her with an amused expression. "All right, we can do just a bit of lipstick, okay?" she said, misinterpreting Hermione's fidgeting.
"Oka-okay." She cleared her throat and gave her a very nervous smile.

"Here." The woman put a red lip gloss into her hand. Hermione looked at it and gulped. She was trying very hard not to think about the fact how many times this little thing had touched Blair's lips.

She softly smeared the colour across her mouth, pressing her lips together, inhaling the mild, but very pleasant scent.

"All right, let's hit the streets!"

It was Hermione's fourth glass of wine and the warmth spreading through her entire body was just the most pleasant thing ever. She was smiling from ear to ear, unable to tear her eyes from Blair, who was sitting across her and asking questions, but Hermione didn't mind answering any of them.

She was so smitten and she didn't even care. Why has she been repressing these feelings for so long when it felt so damn good to just let them flow freely—even if they hurt.

Who would have known pain could be so beautiful?

Certainly not her.

"To Bellatrix bloody Lestrange," she announced, pressing the glass to her swollen lips, giggling. "You know, Blairie, Blair— she might be a little bit— oh, who am I fooling, she seriously is a huuuuge grade A bitch, but she's taught me a lot— oh, you've got such a pretty smile, do you know that?—well, she really has, you know!"

"All right, you've probably had enough," Blair stated, trying not to laugh, "what if we went back home and got some rest?"

"Whatever you say— Oh, God!"

"Is everything all right?"

Of course, it wasn't, because Blair's right arm had just embraced her and even though she could walk perfectly fine on her own, she still leaned into her, resting her head against her shoulder, feeling a burning sensation inside her whole body.

"It hurts. It really hurts."

"What hurts?"

Hermione closed her eyes for a while, letting out a deep breath.

"You."

She didn't say anything anymore, only kept thinking that if Bellatrix was the knife cutting her skin, Blair was the salt falling upon her open wounds.
it must have been no less delicate than a butterfly
touching my lips with his florid wings
softly and barely—almost as if i was only imagining it
even then it felt like a faded memory,
but it was as real as a heartache
i felt during those summer days
and dear,
so many years have passed since then,
but anytime i think back to our moment
i like to remember it was the first time
i understood the pain of starving lips

Hermione would swear she fell asleep the second her eyes landed on the stack of pillows resting on her bed. She had no after-memory, therefore no job of getting herself changed and put under the blankets. It was most certainly Blair who had done all that for her and the poor girl couldn't feel worse once she woke up and put one and one together—she was so embarrassed she refused to acknowledge even a tiny piece of her, wishing she would have stayed at least a bit conscious to savour the feeling of Blair's hands on her skin…

'Oh Merlin!'

She sat up, hesitantly pulling at her nightgown—the nude underwear was still on.

'What did you expect, pathetic girl?'

Maybe not remembering was for the best. The level of hormones in her body went wild even at the concept and if she were to go through the whole experience half-awake, half-naked, on top of it drunk, she might have not handled the situation in the quiet, most mature of ways.

The girl imagined herself confessing everything to Blair: how she wanted to sit next to her on warm sand and talk about Chekhov; eat blueberry pancakes in the middle of the night and subsequently choke on a piece, thanks to her overly dramatic singing; how she wished to see her acting up on stage and be that special one Blair would anxiously look for in the ocean of people.

She'd say how she wanted to be there any time she'd break apart to comfort her; to hold her hand; to
—no, no, no! She was not going down that road ever again! Yesterday was the first and the last time she allowed herself the luxury of fantasising about such a thing—and only because she was so out of control!

*How on Earth could I ever look into Blair's eyes after thinking of kissing her like that?!!*

Sighing, the girl slowly put the covers aside. Would it be really that rude of her if she just stayed in this room with an excuse of being sick? The dire aftermath of the red wine was more than real, though it was nothing a simple potion wouldn't cure. Hermione was positive her mom had thought of everything while packing for Greece and surely brought at least a few bottles of Sobrius Sursum with her.

Yawning, she was just about to stand up and look for a sobering potion when a soft knocking sound interrupted her musings, making her stomach flip in a way that had her doing a lot to keep its contents where they belonged.

*Blimey!*

It must have been Blair.

She was in no state to face the woman right now—still hadn't had the time to reflect on the last night properly, hadn't prepared any answers—hadn't prepared for questions either! Should she pretend she was still asleep? Or—

*Hermione Granger, you little coward! You were brave enough to drink, now you'll face the consequences, however fatal!*

Sooner or later she'd have to see her and she might as well do it now. Postponing things just because of feeling uncomfortable was Draco's way of dealing with issues, not hers.

Screwing up her courage, Hermione took a deep, controlled breath.

"Yes," she called in a raspy voice, clutching at her blanket. She'd swear her heart was trying to leave an outline on her skin by racing so frantically but there was just no backing down.

"It's time to eat, asteri mou!" The maid, Maaria, opened the door and peered inside, making the young witch sigh with tremendous relief. The woman smiled, stepping further into the room and carrying a full tray in her plump hands.

Hermione stood up, but the world swirled and she sank back to her bed. "I'm sorry, I haven't realised it's already breakfast time," she said, casually crossing her legs as if falling backwards was a planned move.

"No, dear, it's almost one p.m." Maaria made her way to the bed and placed the platter on the white sheets. "Blair told me to check on you and bring you some water."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "One p.m.?! Merlin! I need to—"

"Relax! You don't need to do anything. Here, have this!" She forced a bowl of warm soup into her hands. "I've made you delicious chicken broth. You'll feel much better!" The girl didn't miss the amused undertone and lowered her head.

*Great! Now everyone knows I am a wasted mess.*

"Oh, come now," Maaria tsked upon noticing her discomfort, "you're young! Getting a little
"overboard is nothing to be ashamed of," she chuckled, sitting down next to her. "Everyone went through that—God knows I wasn't any different in my days."

"Yes, but," Hermione squeaked, feeling even more upset despite Maaria's well-meant solace, "I'd never done anything like this before! I've surely made a fool of myself! Blair must be very upset..."

Hell, she had every right to be: the woman had had to carry her home and then look after her as if she were just a baby and not at all a well-mannered young woman.

The grinning maid shook her head. "On the contrary, she said you were just yummy!" The room got suddenly so very hot. "Should I go and tell her you're up?"

"No," Hermione blurted, quickly placing the untouched bowl of soup back on the tray. "No, eh, I mean, thank you, Maaria, but I'll probably take a shower first and then—then I'll go see her."

"All right, but eat the soup while it's still hot, it will do you good! At least a spoonful while I'm still here!"

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Fresh from the shower but not at all washed of her guilt, Hermione reluctantly made her way to the patio, finding Blair lying on a lounger chair in one of her fine dresses, reading *Human, All Too Human* by Nietzsche. Gulping, she tried her very best to keep her jaw from dropping—the woman had never looked more gorgeous than right in that moment.

*She*, on the other hand, looked like a naked hell. Her mane of curls was twice its usual size, completely untamable, and her eyes so puffy that not even a cold shower could be of any help.

If only she'd thought of braiding her hair to look a bit more presentable. Maybe that way she'd feel one step ahead of the deviant she had become last night.

'Yeah, that would definitely help. Next time you do something stupid, just dress nicely and everything will be forgiven—and while you're on it, do blame your inability to take care of yourself on something as equally absurd.'

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut under the weight of the irony.

She knew very well that trying to put a patch on her loose behaviour would be unbelievably unprincipled. She needed to take full responsibility for her actions and be prepared for the sour fruit of her wrongdoing. It wouldn't be easy but it was the right thing to do, so she took a brave step forward, silently swearing to herself this was the last time she had to apologise for being an unmitigated nuisance.

Clearing her throat, she opened her mouth, ready to recite the eminently prepared speech, but was spared the trouble when Blair shifted her attention from the book to her nervous form. "So how's your endolymph doing today?" she smirked, taking off her sunglasses.

Hermione frowned, her hammering heart skipping a beat. "I'm sorry?"

"Well, you kept talking about endolymph and semicircular canals." Blair dropped her long legs from the chair, sitting down. "How the alcohol in your blood confuses them and makes your head spin." She closed the book and placed it down next to her.

"Oh no... Blair, listen!" Hermione buried her face in her palms. "I'd like to apologise for yesterday." Her hands slid down, fidgeting nervously. "I am so so embarrassed about everything I—!"
"Come on!" Blair rolled her eyes, smiling. "You have nothing to apologise for! You were just having fun—I know I was!"

"But," the girl objected, firm to get everything off her chest, "I don't remember how I got in bed! Merlin, I was so sloshed and—and it's just not right! You had to change—" Her cheeks went hot. "Oh, I can't even look at you!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Blair stood up and walked over to the blubbering mess of the girl, taking her wrist into her hand. She pulled her towards the nearest chair and softly pressed on her shoulder to get her seated. "Darling, it's fine!" She let go of her and grabbed a chair for herself. "If I had a quarter for every time I got drunk like that, I'd be a millionaire—well, actually—" She looked around the luxurious place.

The girl put on a very hesitant smile. She loved her sense of humour and she loved the tingling sensation travelling over the skin she'd touched.

"Don't worry about it, okay? There are far worse things in life ahead of you." Blair nodded seriously, brushing Hermione's hair out of her face. "Like marriage."

Openly giggling now, the young witch couldn't help herself. The sweet gesture brought so much warmth into her abdomen it was as if she'd just swallowed the entire sun and suddenly, she wanted nothing else but to curl her arms around the woman. She wanted it so much it hurt, yet her body didn't move an inch. She felt like she had lost the privilege to touch her the moment she'd realised what a corrupted mind she had. It would be like taking advantage of her—just as if she'd violate her in some way. Blair had no idea what was going through her head and if she did, she'd most certainly hate her and never wish to see her ever again.

Hermione's heart broke at the thought.

She decided right there that Blair must never know. She needed to tone down her sympathies, no matter the bloody cost. It'd be unbelievably stupid to lose a friend over such an anomaly as her sick feelings. After all, letting go couldn't be that hard.

People are forced to forget about the loved ones all the time, she tried to convince herself, it takes a while but in the end, they always manage to cope, one way or another.

Hermione'd always believed everything was possible with a good amount of will and she was determined to prove the theory once again. All she had to do was shift her thoughts, limit the amount of time they spent together, but most of all avoid any form of physical contact.

Fortunately, Blair'd never been a touchy-feely kind of woman. It was more of her mother's thing, spooning the very soul out of her whenever she felt like it. She'd always said it was a compensation for all the months she couldn't be there for her.

Her sweet, sweet mom.

Hermione didn't even dare to imagine what she would say if she knew about her malady. The woman certainly wasn't any bluenose, yet the idea of her daughter panting after her best friend might seem slightly alarming to her.

Goodness, if only she could get this overwhelming feeling by instinct right now. She'd get the first portkey and take Hermione away from her suffering in a matter of seconds. What a rotten luck though: Jean sent an owl the very next day, explaining she'd be unable to come for the girl until the following week at the earliest, for the circumstances at work had only gotten worse.
"What has that plumed creature brought you besides histoplasmosis?" Blair asked, leaning over and flooding the girl with her signature gardenia scent.

Merlin help her not to move her head those few tempting inches—the woman knew what histoplasmosis was and Hermione would be lying if she said she hadn't realised she was falling, hard and heavy, right at that moment.

Since the day of her lucidity, her stay had swiftly become nothing but a struggle full of suppressed feelings and impels. She tried to fight it with iron effort, avoiding as many promised trips to the city as she could, shutting herself in her room in early evenings with an excuse of being tired from all the walking she'd done just to avoid Blair. But despite all the strict following of her rules, the need for the woman's presence had become painfully unbearable.

Hermione had already given up the hope she'd be able to fall asleep without the disturbance of a burning abdominal ache. She was doing all the breathing exercises she could think of, but relief was only ephemeral. Desperate, she even tried Adflicto, a painkiller paste her mom had left for her together with a bunch of potions, but she would be a fool to actually believe it would work. How could it, if the pain's source wasn't located in any of her organs.

It was the grief itself, making her grab onto her stomach at twelve p.m., pointing out very clearly she would have to do something eventually, but as stubborn as the girl was, she would even refuse to cry about her breaking heart, for she thought it would be nothing but vain self-pity.

She'd often lie awake until dawn, wondering whether she was a bad person for feeling this deformed sort of emotions, but the clear answer could never make it for a plethora of valid arguments from both points of view.

If only she could go back in time to stop herself from going to Malfoy Manor and meeting Bellatrix. She tried so hard to blame her for being the trigger but deep down she knew that however vile the witch was, the fault wasn't hers.

Maybe a little… for being so bloody alluring.

'Very well, Hermione, as if you haven't had too much trouble sleeping already.'

The girl pushed the thoughts of both women out, focusing on the third, the most important one. Her mom. Only two more days of this misery of speculations and she'd come for her.

Hermione knew she should be happy—ecstatic—but she wasn't. For some reason, it had brought even more sadness upon her and she was forced to leave the house in the middle of the night and go running along the empty beach to shake the sore feelings out; exercising was the only thing to help her weeping soul to take at least a little break from the struggle.

Sweaty and out of breath, she was making her way back half an hour later, ready to take another cold shower and maybe try to get some sleep again, but Blair crossed her plans and despite Hermione's promise to herself to spend no more alone time with the woman after eight p.m., she didn't have the strength to object anymore.

She sat down on the sofa in the vast living room while Blair stayed standing by the partition window, unusually serious. There was something cold about her voice when she asked her to stay to talk. Something the girl neither liked nor could place. She didn't want her to be mad or worse, to know, but that would be beyond impossible, wouldn't it? She'd never breathed a word about it to anyone, so what exactly was this about?
A small wrinkle formed in between her brows when considering the possibilities. She didn't have any other choice but to play stupid for the sake of her own good—and damn did she!

"What happened?" she asked, tilting her head, sounding so beautifully clueless she had to mentally congratulate herself.

"I'll tell you what happened." Blair's tone had gone a few degrees colder and the girl could practically feel a fine amount of icicles growing inside her lungs. "You're avoiding me and I'd like to know why," she finished, her voice suddenly mellow, making the winter inside the girl's body disappear in a second.

'Oh, so this is the deal!'

"I am not avoiding you, Blair, what are you saying?" Hermione gave out a weak, surprised chuckle, pretending to scrub non-existent dirt off of her shorts, following the rule number one—'Just don't look at her and you'll be fine.'

"This is the first time I am talking to you in five—sorry," the woman paused and Hermione caught a glimpse of her silver watch lifting up, "six days. What's going on?"

"I had to study."

"Really?" She heard the clicking of the heels and the sofa she was sitting on sank a little. Blair was now beside her and Hermione had a strong urge to run.

"Uhm." She nodded instead, folding her arms across her chest. It wasn't a complete lie; she had studied her feelings, that counted, right?

"Look," she went on, inconspicuously presenting her exit speech, "I really need to take a shower, don't even come near me." She let out a forced laugh, moving further from the woman. "I'm soaking wet."

'Stop-talking-immediately!'

The young witch turned her head aside, closing her eyes, grimacing at her own words and their double meaning. Her chin brushed against her shoulder to mask the movement.

"But hey, we can talk later." She leaned forward and stood up, rather satisfied with the way she had closed the debate. She barely took a step though when Blair's mild hand seized her forearm and she suddenly wasn't able to move an inch. She felt she could stand there for the whole eternity if it meant the woman's hand would also remain placed over her skin—warm, soft, and so assuaging. She'd gone unbelievably skin-hungry over those past few weeks and even a tiny contact was a spark of Eden in her pit of hell.

"Oh please, I can't see a drop of sweat on you."

"I smell."

"Very pleasantly, darling."

'She did not just say that! She-did-not!'

Hermione's lips curled against her own will and her cheeks felt like she had a tiny flame burning in each one of them. Why did Blair have to be so sweet? It would be a lot easier with Bellatrix who acted like a prick most of the time.
She sat back down, reaching for a few cinnamon-coated almonds resting in a crystal bowl on the table in front of them. Despite her not feeling a bit hungry, she put a chunk into her mouth, only to be ahead and have an alibi for her late response if Blair decided to ask her a question requiring her to think hard.

"Tell me something," There we go. The woman didn't disappoint as she started conspiratorially. She uncrossed her legs, moving closer to Hermione, who'd rather she didn't. "Are you seeing someone?"

'What?!

The girl's eyebrows shot so high she was surprised they didn't fall off her face. "Wh-No!" she blurted, accidentally spitting the tiny bits of the half-chewed nut out. "I'm sorry!" She immediately placed a palm over her mouth, cursing her former idea. She quickly swallowed the remaining pieces and cleared her throat. "I am not seeing anyone! How on Earth did you come to such a conclusion?" Hermione finally looked at her, blinking a few times. Even at one a.m., the woman managed to look like she'd just stepped out of a salon and meanwhile she sat there like the sweaty, almond-spitting mess she was.

A smile spread across Blair's glowing face as their eyes met and Hermione melted like sugar into warm caramel.

"How did I know?" She raised her eyebrow, grinning even wider. "Easy. You look lovesick."

"I do not!"

"Are we in denial?"

"I don't know, are we?" she spat, blushing furiously, making Blair tilt her head in confusion.

'What did you just say, Hermione Blubbermouth Granger? What what what?!

The words had left her mouth without a logical thought and she had to quickly come up with something to fix this; otherwise, she'd be so damn screwed.

"I mean, don't tell me you're not dating anyone!" Hermione quickly attacked her, turning the tables. She'd wanted to ask her anyway but had never found the right opportunity until now—still not a perfect occasion but as the saying goes, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.'

She dug her nails into the hem of her shirt and went for a, hopefully, curious smile, as if the idea of the woman dating someone made her happy.

Blair frowned her eyes in jest. "Now you're just trying to avoid my question."

"So are you!"

"If I answer yours, will you answer mine?"

Hermione nodded before she could stop herself.

"Fine." Blair's tongue slid across her upper lip as she chuckled. "I—" Hermione held her breath, knowing that whatever would come out of the woman's mouth, she'd have to act insincerely. Either she'd have to be happy Blair'd found love or 'sad' she still hadn't.

"Well?" She encouraged her, casually pulling her legs up, resting her chin against her knees.
"Well," Blair repeated, amused, "I am seeing someone." She widened her eyes for dramatic effect but Hermione had her act already put together.

"Oh!" Her lips curled into an unnecessarily wide smile. "Wow, that's—that's just great!" She kept grinning, unable to tone it even a level down, channelling the huge amount of disappointment into fake happiness. "Do I know him?" she asked, aiming for a jubilant tone.

"Oh, you certainly do."

"Who is it?"

"Uh uh, it's your turn now! Who are you seeing?"

"Nobody," Hermione answered truthfully but still earned a playful nudge into her thigh. "I mean it! I'm not seeing anyone, I swear!"

"But you like someone, am I right?" Blair winked and Hermione lowered her head.

"Yes," she sighed after a few seconds of painful silence, "yes, I do. I like someone a lot." Her eyes helplessly landed on the woman.

'You— I like you!' She ached to say but knew better than that. She'd rather confess an undying love for Ronald Weasley than tell the truth and lose the woman's friendship.

"Aww, sweetheart!" Blair parted her lips and pressed her right hand against her chest. She was looking at the girl in the exact same way one looks at a cute bunny snacking on raspberries and Hermione had to blink a few times to stop the first signs of stubborn tears from forming. She let out a shaky breath, practically feeling her heart breaking. She didn't want Blair to be happy about the idea of her liking someone else. She wanted— she needed her to be as equally crushed as she was when hearing about some random man Blair was dating.

"Who is it?" the woman asked in a velvet voice, her entire face shining from generous, selfless happiness, and Hermione had to do a lot not to break down right there as a brand new perspective knocked on her brain.

Was it even possible to be a bigger self-centred ass than she was?! Blair was sitting there, unbelievably happy for her, and what was she doing? She felt disappointed the woman was in love. Why? Just because she didn't want her to be with anybody. How childish of her!

Blair was such a good human being and she deserved to be loved— she really did and as long as she was, it just didn't matter by whom. It shouldn't have...

But it bloody did and the girl couldn't stand how much she cared. She was a horrible, horrible person. If she could, she'd rip her heart out of her chest and rather live an emotionless life than carry the knowledge of her cruel nature.

"So? Will you tell me on your own or do I have to persuade you?" Blair raised her eyebrow, trying to bring the girl back from her reverie. "Because I'll do it, you know I will!"

Hermione blinked, trying to focus, a sudden plan slipping into her head. "No, it's your turn to answer my question!" She shifted towards the woman, lowering her left leg to the ground. "Who is it you're seeing?"

Blair pursed her lips, clearly dissatisfied. She gave the girl a long, serious look and took a deep breath. "All right," she started quietly, closing her eyes, "it's Maaria."
Hermione parted her lips, speechless, not sure whether she'd heard her right—but soon got the answer. The woman opened her eyes and burst out laughing.

"God! You're just terrible!" the young witch cried, grabbing the first pillow she could reach, and smacked Blair's leg with it.

"I couldn't help it, you should have seen yourself." Blair leaned into the sofa, slapping her thigh.

"Ha-ha, very funny! Now the truth!" Hermione folded her arms, demanding the answer—she had to know.

Still laughing, Blair took a few almonds into her palm and threw one at the frustrated girl, who crossed her arms in front of her face, trying to avoid the flying nut. "Hey!"

"Why do you want to know it so much?"

Hermione gulped, unbelievably grateful the lights weren't so bright so the redness on her cheeks wouldn't be visible. "Because," she started, trying to radiate cool tranquillity and not at all the distress spreading through her entire body, "I just do."

'Very mature, Hermione.'

Blair laughed. "Oh, okay, I have no arguments against that—now I really must tell you."

"So?"

"I'm not seeing anyone right now," she announced, nodding slightly.

A spark of hope gleamed through the darkness. "Really," Hermione asked, practically feeling her eyes widening, "why?"

'You just couldn't help it, could you?'

Blair's face flashed with surprise. "Why, maybe because I don't want to," she laughed, throwing more almonds at the girl, "and before you ask me again why," she raised her eyebrow, "let me tell you fourteen years of marriage have taught me enough not to want to step on the same rake twice."

"Doesn't have to be the same," Hermione suggested, occupying herself with the search for the lost almonds all around her, "might be a completely different rake this time."

"But still a rake."

"Can I ask you something?" The girl put a handful of nuts on the table and moved the bowl out of Blair's reach.

"Go ahead."

"Do you still love him?"

Blair parted her lips, completely taken aback.

"What?" she let out a contemptuous chuckle. "I couldn't give fewer damns about Bill!" His name came out with such venom Hermione'd almost believed the statement. Almost. "Why would you even think that?"

"Because," the girl gulped nervously. "You've got a lovesick expression, too."
Blair turned her head away, clearly uncomfortable, and Hermione had a feeling she'd crossed the line. "I'm sorry," she apologised quickly, "I probably shouldn't have brought it up."

"He's a damnass, Hermione," Blair said after a while, "such a damnass that if there ever was a contest for the biggest damnass, he'd be such a damnass he'd be a runner-up."

The girl buried her face into her palms, smirking. God, this woman.

"But—" her voice got all of a sudden sad, "I just can't help it. No matter what I do or where I go... I —" Blair almost whispered, looking into the distance, her hands loosely resting in her lap, trembling.

Hermione clenched her teeth. She wasn't disappointed or jealous anymore, no—she'd suspected something wasn't right for quite a while now. No matter how hard the woman tried for a careless image, in her silent moment when she aimlessly stared at the ocean, Hermione just knew—and she couldn't stand seeing her in such a state because it was even more painful than all the agony she'd been through during those sleepless nights.

She acted without much thinking. Her own shaky hand reached out and coyly touched the warm, olive skin. She was trying her best to ignore her beating heart. This wasn't about her.

A short smile flashed across Blair's face as she opened her palm so Hermione's hand could fit better.

"I don't want you to be sad," Hermione whispered, tightening her grip, pressing her fingers into the back of her hand, "you'll meet someone wonderful, I know you will!" Merlin, she wouldn't even mind if it meant Blair would be happy again—truly happy.

The woman snorted, "I don't think so. Bill was and always will be—"

"No," Hermione objected firmly, "Bill was and always will be a prick! You just need to give someone a chance, you'll see!"

"I simply don't want to get hurt again," Blair admitted, lowering her head, making Hermione sigh in despair.

"You won't, I promise!" She moved closer, completely forgetting about her rules. She needed to comfort her.

"It would be the same scenario all over again," the woman went on, completely ignoring the soothing words, "he'd leave me for someone younger, prettier—"

"Blair, no! Listen!" Hermione's other hand reached to her jaw, brushing against the tips of her hair. "You don't even understand!" She smiled, her fingers softly touching her skin. "You have no idea how magnificent you are. You're smart and funny! Far more beautiful than any other twenty-something! You—" Hermione lowered her sight, afraid that those blue eyes, now gazing directly into hers, would see right through her.

"Darling, you're sweet, but you don't understand men."

"And what if I do?" Her shaky voice broke and her eyes, for the first time absolutely sincere, locked with Blair's and started filling with tears.

Hermione was sure that had it been any other situation, Blair'd definitely laugh and say something ironic, but the woman was far too intelligent not to notice the full meaning behind that statement.
"Hermione...?"

"I—" There wasn't an atom in her body with the strength to fight it anymore. Hastily, she leaned forward but froze the last second mere inches from the woman's face, touching her cheek with the tip of her nose. Her eyes fluttered shut, her breathing became unsteady and her heart—her heart was long since mad with the longing.

It was as if time had stopped; none of them dared to move. Blair was still like a porcelain doll, and only a fragile ghost of breath coming from her parted lips, so warm against her cheek, suggested she was a living being.

Hermione shuddered upon feeling a pair of hands slipping to either side of her face. Her heart was beating so fast she was sure it was trying to break her ribcage.

She let out a shaky moan as the softest touch made it to her forehead and she couldn't help moving her chin forward. Her breath hitched because she was close to the warmness of Blair's breath. So close—

"No, sweety, no..."

Blair pulled away and Hermione's whole body screamed in protest. Her still closed eyes let out the first tear.

The smooth hand slid from her cheek to her shoulder and pulled her forward.

She blindly grabbed onto the slender form, fully moving into the embrace. The woman was so maddeningly soft and warm Hermione doubted she would ever be able to let go. She was pressed against her so tightly as if her entire life depended on it; in that excruciating moment, she would swear it certainly did.

"I'm so sorry." Hermione muffled into her shoulder, her voice cracking with a sob, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." she kept repeating, unbelievably crushed, her tears blending into Blair's top.

"No, stop it!" Blair said firmly. "Nothing happened." She unhooked her arms from her back but Hermione wouldn't let go.

"Hermione," she said soothingly, stroking her long hair. The girl slowly pulled away but still reached for Blair's hand.

Nobody said anything for a while.

"So, Maaria's got quite a rival, I see," the woman let out finally, probably trying to lighten up the mood, but Hermione didn't feel like joking.

"Look—" Blair started but the girl interrupted her.

"I think I love you," she confessed, wiping her tears, "and I am so so sorry," she sobbed, "I tried to fight it, I really did! That's why I was avoiding you, that's why I—" She took a deep breath. "I just can't help it!"

"You sweet English muffin," Blair whispered and Hermione quickly looked up, locking their eyes, "don't you dare to apologise for something so beautiful," she emphasised, squeezing Hermione's hand and making her stomach flip. "Do close that mouth, because I'm not finished," she ordered when she saw Hermione was trying to object. "Are you hurting me in any way with your feelings? No! If anything, I should be the one apologising, because clearly—"
Hermione suppressed another sob. "This is not right!"

"Who said so?"

"Me."

Blair only raised her eyebrow. "Hermione, you are such a smart girl and yet so incredibly foolish. Imagine if it was someone else in your shoes, would you also be so narrow-minded?"

"No."

"See?"

"I don't know what to do, I..."

"Nothing," the woman said simply. "time will do everything instead of you, darling."

Needless to say, the goodbye wasn't the most pleasant thing Hermione'd ever experienced. She cried together with Blair, who'd managed to give her a huge piece of her mind the day after her confession to make sure no self-hatred was left in the girl's heart.

"I'm sorry for hurting you," she whispered into her ear while Jean tried to set up the ministry approved portkey, "but you're a strong girl, you'll get over it, I promise!" She pressed her lips to her cheek, making all the sleeping butterflies inside Hermione's body come to life at once.

'I hope so, but right now you're making it very difficult.'

A few more words fell between them and it was over. All was over.
"So what if the person you like happens to be a woman? So what if it's a bit out of the ordinary? If you liked a damn unicorn, you shouldn't care! It's not something to be ashamed of, Hermione. This feeling—it is the most precious of gifts and if anyone's too dumb to understand it, it's their fucking problem, all right?

Don't go thinking for A SECOND I would hate you over something so beautiful; I am genuinely flattered that such an intelligent young woman finds me interesting—of course, I'm not implying you should pursue it: honey, I've known you since you were basking your little bum in the incubator, not to mention your mommy would sever both of my hands if—"

"I swear, Granger, you are one box of a weirdo." Draco's voice interrupted the memory.

"Sorry?"

"I just asked you if you'd consider naming your and Weasel's children after my parents and you said okay."

"Well, it's not that bad of an idea, is it?" Hermione focused her eyes on the boy, quickly catching up. "Your mother is a saint and I cannot imagine anyone who wouldn't want to be named Narcissus."

"So you want a boy?"

"A unicorn, Draco, a damn unicorn would be enough."

The two of them were sitting in a cosy compartment of the Hogwarts express, sharing a small talk anytime the boy managed to catch Hermione's slipping attention. She tried so hard to concentrate and stop her mind from wandering back to those summer evenings, filled with salty waves and uncontrollable laughter, but it proved to be a job of quite a difficult nature.

Ever since she came back from Greece, she hadn't been able to get Blair out of her head and she was dubious the feelings would pass anytime soon. Her heartache was still very much present and there was nothing she could do except to stay strong and wait for some sort of a miracle to happen.

"So, how was the rest of the summer?" Draco asked, hoisting his legs up on the unoccupied seats right next to him. "Much better than mine, I suppose," he added, making the girl glance towards her knees.

"Was it that awful?"

"You'd be surprised."

Hermione parted her lips but subsequently closed them again. She couldn't help feeling ashamed. While she was crying in the corner over the unrequited love, the boy had had to face real issues and she hadn't even thought about sending him a letter asking how he was doing.

"Well, well, well!" The door to their compartment flew open and their eyes turned towards the tall frame of Blaise Zabini. "If this isn't our new couple!"
Frowning, Hermione shook her head, averting her gaze to the lake behind the window. She wasn't in a mood for his teasing.

"I told you once," Draco started patiently as if trying to explain something particularly difficult to someone particularly dumb. "I value my life too much to waste even a second of it on looking at your ugly face, so do me a favour and get the hell out!"

"Don't be rude, Malfoy!" Zabini tsked, his voice full of fake offence. "Mommy wouldn't be proud."

"Let me break it to you."

"Let me break it to you." The blond boy sounded amused. "I don't do things in life to impress my mother, Blaise, okay? I know it's hard to comprehend, but some of us just don't have mommy issues."

The girl almost choked on her own saliva.

"Yeah, some of us just have mudblood issues, right, Granger?"

"What did you say?" Draco barked and it was clear Blaise finally hit the nerve.

"Let it be," Hermione said, sensing it was about the time to get involved, "getting detention the first day just because somebody,"

"doesn't know what to do with their spare time is not worth it."

Blaise laughed. "Listen to this, guys, she's already ordering him around!" He turned his head to the group of boys slouching behind him.

Draco jumped to his feet, searching his pockets, but before he could do anything, Hermione swiftly stood up as well, walking over to Zabini, and locked her flaring eyes with his. "If I were you, I'd back off before I tell everyone how you promenaded naked through Malfoy Manor in the middle of the night," she whispered, making his smile falter.

"Strike."

He was looking at her without blinking for a good five seconds before turning on his heel and pushing the grinning Goyle peeking from behind him out of his way.

Hermione let out a sigh, closed the door, and got back to her seat.

"I am very impressed!" Draco complimented her as he, too, sat down, glaring at her in awe.

"You've handled that with such a grace of blackmailing that even I have to tip my hat to you."

"Oh shut up! I'd much rather know why Goyle was laughing at you. You're his everything, for Merlin's sake, I can't imagine why he would hang on Zabini?"

"Well, there is a lot you don't know yet," Draco said placidly, checking his nails. "You've missed all the fuss by running so late."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean by fuss?" she asked, bringing her hand up to shield her eyes from the blinding sun rays hitting their window as the train took an unexpected turn.

"I'd very much like to spare you the details but I'm afraid that's all the important stuff, so I apologise in advance."

Hermione adjusted in her seat, straightening her back. What was he talking about?

"You remember how the prick, Zabini, was ill back then? I'm not sure what happened, but I think
he had drunk some old-ass potion he'd found, thinking it was alcohol. Mother gave him the antidote but he was still not getting better so she had to send him home," Draco started explaining, finally having Hermione's full attention. "Of course, she asked him to be discreet about your stay, but you know him—the first thing he did when he got back was ratting everything out to his precious mommy and—well, things sort of took a nasty turn." Draco took a deep breath, preparing to continue, but paused as the trolley lady opened their door.

"Anything from the—?"

"No." He waved her off impatiently, making the woman frown.

"We're good, thank you." Hermione gave her a quick smile and turned back to Draco, already fearing what was coming next. It was getting close enough to the scenario she had outlined at the ball when they argued about being careless with their friendship. Surely, Hermione was proud of the boy, but it was clear coming forward like that could cause quite a stir among their circles.

Draco waited until the old lady moved to another compartment and continued.

"So, rumours started spreading and mother had to deal with a lot of letters coming from her fake friends. Long story short, people are avoiding her, my father too, and now this bunch of idiots started making fun of me as well," Draco finished as if he couldn't give fewer damns. "Should have seen them whispering when we got to the station. My parents couldn't bear the attention and left earlier. Merlin, they were so embarrassed, you cannot imagine! Might as well be burning my name off from the family tree right now."

Hermione was watching the boy silently with widened eyes. "But how come people took notice just now?! I thought they kind of knew—your friends," she made air quotes with her fingers, "must have told their parents long time ago."

"Apparently," Draco smirked, slightly flipping his hair, "they thought I was just pretending to be your friend so I could pull some brilliant prank on you and was just refusing to admit it for dramatic effect."

"They've been thinking that for two years?" Hermione raised her eyebrows, kind of losing faith in human intelligence.

Draco shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say, you know about the tradition. If there are no more purebloods left outside the family, marry your cousins—no wonder they're thick."

Hermione opened her mouth, taken aback. Did he just say something offensive about purebloods? She locked her eyes with his, not knowing how to react, but he spared her the trouble.

"It's true," he went on. "I cannot believe how blind I was. Thank Merlin this whole thing is over and I'm rid of those morons. I don't even care if they wanna make fun of me. I'd much rather have them pointing at me for having a half-blood as a friend than a half-brain as one. No offence."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "None taken. I am kind of proud, you know. My granny always used to say half-bloods and muggle-borns must be actually really special because their magic appeared out of nowhere."

"As pathetic as I may sound, it's a beautiful thought and—" Draco coughed and his cheeks went slightly pink.

"And what?" Hermione asked, trying to get the rest of the sentence out of him.
"Nothing, forget about it." He shook his head. "Let's talk about your summer for a change. You're kind of dark, where have you been? Africa?" He chuckled nervously.

It was clear he was trying his best to change the subject by this weird random observation but the girl decided to let it be. She pursed her lips together, shaking her head. "No, I went to Greece with my mom to— to visit our friend." She gulped, feeling a great deal of discomfort settling in her stomach.

"You got friends in Greece?" Draco raised his eyebrow, casually showing Nott his middle finger as the boy knocked on their compartment door.

"Well, not really." Hermione frowned, crossing her legs. "She's American, actually, only owns a place down there."

Draco nodded thoughtfully, ignoring the laughing onlookers from the corridor. "Sounds fun. Next time you might consider taking me with you so I wouldn't have to wonder what might have possibly happened to make you look so... odd."

Hermione's breath hitched. "I'm sorry?"

"I don't know." The boy shrugged his shoulder, putting a searching look on his friend. "You look different—and not in a good way."

"Thanks."

"I didn't mean it like that, it's more of— for Merlin's sake, give me some motivation not to hex them!" Draco closed his eyes as if praying when a roar of laughter from outside made it all the way to their ears.

"Well, you may get a detention and be forced to feed some creature in the Forbidden Forest," Hermione smirked, pointing to that night when she had kind of saved his arse for the first time.

"Laugh all you want but bloody Filch deserves a medal. Hadn't it been for him, I'd be among the idiots right now, losing all my healthy brain cells."

"Fair enough, maybe you should get another detention then, I see it helps you grow. Though I think you should give some credit to me as well," Hermione said, wondering whether it would be a good idea to lock the door and draw the curtains, but realised it would probably do more harm than letting them observe the situation and see for themselves nothing was going on.

"Okay, okay, you deserve some credit too—but back to my question."

"Nothing happened," she replied, trying to justify her lie by finding a loop in nothing happened between her and Blair. "I'm just tired because I overslept, that's all." She shrugged, wondering whether she was being fair. Draco was honest with her and she—she was becoming this lying machine that didn't know when to stop— but she couldn't just tell him— it wasn't a good time, the right place and— damn it, she just wasn't ready!

"Oh look! We'll be at Hogwarts soon!" she noted quickly as the familiar surroundings started to make an appearance. "We should get changed. Would you believe they were trying to sell me a Gryffindor robe at Madam Malkin's?!!" she said indignantly, glad to have something to close the debate.

They made it to the Hogsmeade station safe and sound—not counting Nott's broken nose and a few Bat-Bogey Hexes missing Zabini and Crabbe by mere inches. Of course, Draco earned a detention,
but he claimed it was worth every sleazy snail he'd have to sort out starting tomorrow afternoon until the end of the week, the weekend included.

"You should have let it be as I told you, Draco." Hermione clenched through her chattering teeth as they waited for the carriage to take them to the castle.

"No, I should have aimed more to the left! That way I'd—"

"Oh, finally! Come on, it's freezing!" she interrupted him as the horseless carriage stopped in front of them. They quickly climbed inside, hiding from tiny raindrops.

"Mind if we join you?" A freckled face appeared in the open window and Hermione immediately recognised the features of Ronald Weasley. "Oh," he sighed as his eyes, too, sent his brain a note as to who exactly it was inside.

"Whatever," Draco replied, smirking at Hermione. "Look, it's your future husband!" He quickly leaned in, whispering.

"Not in a million years," she gritted back quietly, managing to kick Draco's leg before Ronald plopped down next to him and made some space for another passenger—of course, his best friend, Harry Potter.

"Hey, thanks for the ride!" He gave them a thumb-up and sat down next to Hermione. "We didn't want to wait, it was starting to get cold."

Hermione pursed her lips as if trying to smile. It was odd having them here after all those dreams, which miraculously stopped as soon as she got to Greece and reappeared with the first night once back home, taking quite an unexpected turn: Hogwarts joined a Triwizard Tournament, the same way it had two years ago, but with a slight change—id est, with Harry becoming the fourth contestant, which was, according to her, absolutely ridiculous. Everyone knew it was against the rules and the Ministry would never allow anything like that to happen. Ever.

She turned to him and put a searching look on the same scar which had been haunting her dreams for so long, not even realising she was probably being too bold. The boy sensed her attention, turned his head to her, and smiled.

"May I ask you something?" she blurted suddenly. Maybe it was worth a try.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Where did you get that scar? It looks like a bolt of lightning. Such scars are caused by strong cu—"

"By strong curses," he spoke over her, smirking. "Well, as much as I'd like to come across as a badass, I can't. This," he brushed his bangs aside to show off the scar, "wasn't caused by any curse, I was simply born with it—don't know why. It looks cool though, doesn't it?" He ran his hand through his hair and messed it up a bit, turning back to Ron, who'd been quiet like a fish the whole time.

"May I ask you another question?" she spoke again, earning a weird look from Draco, but she ignored him.

"Yup."

"What's your uncle's name?" She didn't even care she must have sounded like a complete lunatic
asking such bizarre questions, but if the boy told her the name, it might solve a problem or two. She couldn't have possibly known the real answer, though in her dream, the name was—

"Vernon, Vernon Dursley," Harry replied, slightly taken aback. "Why? Do you know him?"

Hermione froze, chills running down her spine. "I—" she coughed, quickly trying to recover, "no, not at all! It's just that I went on a vacation and overheard some man talking about his nephew and I thought he mentioned your name. He was there with his wife, Petunia, I believe, and their son—"

"Dudley?" Harry added instead of her and she nodded. "Must have been Dursleys, then. Funny people, I don't really know them, though. They want nothing to do with the likes of us." He issued a chuckle but Hermione was too busy trying not to faint to form a fake one. "Oh, here we are!" the dark-haired boy announced after a while. "Thanks again, I guess we'll see each other around." The carriage stopped and he got off.

"Bye," Ronald murmured in a hoarse voice, quickly following his friend. Hermione, too, was trying to get out when Draco put a hand on her shoulder.

"Where did you get that scar? What's your uncle's name? What on earth were you on about?"

"I have a tiny confession to make, Draco."

"Oh, don't tell me you like Potter now! Damn, and here I thought Weasel was the worst option possible. Clearly, I was mistaken."

"Can't you be serious for a moment?"

"I can."

"Thanks. Now hurry up." She was pulling him by the sleeve of his robe aside from the last students lingering around into the shadow of a big bush right next to the carriage.

"I mean, I'm not complaining, but are you trying to fuel the rumours or what?" he whispered as soon as she let go of him.

Hermione gave him an annoyed look but realised he couldn't see her. "Listen, Casanova, do you remember how I told you about those dreams I have almost every single night?"

"What's Casanova?"

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I didn't meet Harry's family on a vacation. I—I dreamt about them," she whispered feverishly.

"You dreamt about Potter's uncle?"

"Draco, please!"

"All right, all right, what was it about?"

"I don't even know where to start, there have been thousands of dreams already—it's like a bloody storyline and it's driving me mad! I've been dreaming about all of us ever since I was thirteen and I just don't get it! It's like some peculiar parallel universe."
Draco sighed. "Don't worry about it, it's probably just some—"

"Some what?"

"Most likely nothing alarming, Granger," he whispered, trying to calm her down. "Just a bunch of, I don't know, a bunch of crazy dreams."

"Bunch of crazy dreams, you say?" Hermione locked her jaw. "Come with me, then," she said firmly, looking around, making sure they were all alone. The idea came as abruptly as a lightning strike and she was determined to go with it no matter the cost. She grabbed the hem of Draco's sleeve and started pulling him towards the Hogwarts yard but took a sharp turn as they began approaching the entrance of the castle.

"I don't know how about you, but I'm not familiar with another entry." Draco pointed as he walked by her side, frowning at the gates.

"Oh, there are plenty of them," she let out, lengthening her steps. "Hurry up!"

She started jogging down the hill, barely recognising Hagrid's shack in the distance—it was getting late.

"Granger, would you do me the courtesy of explaining where the hell we are going?" Draco called after her but she wouldn't answer, only began to run faster.

She heard him curse.

They had been running for a few more minutes, inhaling the fresh scent of wet pine trees, when Hermione braked, blindly reaching for Draco's wrist to stop him as well.

"Are you bloody out of your mind?!" the boy whispered when he realised where exactly they had appeared and what exactly was in front of them.

"You see that crack right over there?" She pointed at the dark hole in between the roots of an odd-looking tree. "I had a dream that right under the Whomping Willow is a passageway leading into the Shrieking Shack."

"For Merlin's sake!" Draco whispered desperately, covering his eyes and turning his back to her. "You—I don't even have a name for the level of your insanity!" He turned back to her. "You wanna fight a furious tree, ten times stronger than you, for what? Just to find out whether there's a secret corridor leading into a haunted shack?!" He yelled in that whispering voice. "Hello, is anyone there?! It was just a dream! There's nothing underneath that bloody willow!"

"What if there is?"

"Weren't you listening, Granger?"

"Come on, keep quiet now!" She pressed a finger to her lips, pulling Draco by his robe. He widened his eyes, shaking his head, refusing to move, but gave in after a while. His sweaty hand grabbed Hermione's as they slowly approached the sleeping tree, trying to make as little noise as possible.

One step at a time, one step—crack.

"Damn," Draco whispered in a crying voice, "damn, damn, damn."
"Shush!" Hermione scolded him desperately, her eyes following a few leaves falling off of the slightly moving branches. "We cannot wake it or we're—"

"Screwed?" Draco yelled and violently pulled her aside as all of a sudden the tree came to life and smacked its biggest branch hard across the spot they'd just moved from. Hermione screamed, tightening her grip on Draco's hand as they had to bend their backs so that another thick limb wouldn't slap their faces.

"This way!" she yelled, pushing the boy to the right, but unfortunately, failed to see a long twig which smacked the boy straight across his chest like a whip. Hermione heard him yelp as he fell to the ground, clutching the pained spot. "Draco!" She quickly kneeled down, desperately pulling him by the arm. "You need to get up, come on, come on!" She was forced to let go of him and threw herself aside, hitting her spine against a big pointy rock. A searing pain cut through her skin, filling her eyes with tears, but she couldn't allow herself to pay the wound any attention.

"Granger, you all right?" Draco was now beside her, pulling her to her feet, but subsequently shoved her to the side to get her out of the willow's reach, while he himself had to jump over the tireless twigs, chasing him.

"Look, we're so close!" Hermione shouted as she noticed the hole just a few feet away from her.

"Brilliant!" Even in danger, Draco managed to let some kind of cynicism enter his words.

Hermione stood up but had to swiftly lower her head to avoid another punch. Hastily, she moved towards the boy, grabbing his hand and pulling him forward. Wrong move. The swishing twig hit their legs, making them fall to the ground just when the willow decided to use its entire force to mash them like bananas.

"Get over there, Draco, quickly!" Hermione got to her feet, almost slipping. Clumsily, she jumped over another furious branch, taking three steps towards the climbing boy and was forced to almost lie down on him to dodge another attack. Draco moved a step forward and they both felt a sudden pull as they started falling.

Hermione crashed into the blond boy the same way she had into Harry in her dream, just as they landed on the flat ground.

"Ups, sorry!" She apologised, quickly getting off, settling right next to him. The place was pitch black and it was impossible to tell where exactly they had arrived. A damp breeze, strongly reeking of mould, hit their faces and Draco let out a disgusted grunt.

Reaching into her pocket, Hermione took out her wand.

"Lumos!"

Blinding light hit the hole, exposing a long tunnel in front of them and quite a bit of space just above their heads. It wasn't enough for their full height but with a little bit of slouching, they could manage.

"Ha! I told you there was a corridor!" she let out victoriously, turning to Draco's pale face.

"Should I clap my hands?" he hissed, the irises of his eyes unbelievably wide. "You could have gotten us killed, do you realise that?! The bloody tree almost killed us!"

"Sorry!"
"Sorry"?! I've always thought you were mental but I've never actually realised the full range of it!
Draco dusted the front of his robe off and he, too, took out his wand.

"Look, I'll make it up to you later. Now we have to find out if this tunnel truly leads into the Shrieking Shack."

The boy almost stuck his wand up her nose as he angrily turned to her.

"No bloody way! You've proved your point—the weird-ass dreams are not at all dreams. I believe you. Period. Now your smart brain needs to come up with a plan how to get us out!"

"I'm trying to get us out, we just need to follow the—"

"Think of something else!"

Hermione sighed, pulling a damp leaf out of his hair. "Look, in those dreams, the shack isn't haunted! It's just a place where Harry's father, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and your uncle, Sirius Black, kept meeting up during their school years. Lupin's a werewolf and every time there was full moon—"

"A werewolf! I'll bloody kill you, Granger!"

"Calm down, Draco—people thought it's haunted because of the terrifying howling but—"

"Do you realise that instead of making things better you're making them worse with every word your mouth breathes out?"

"It's not full moon!" Hermione emphasised impatiently. "Remus Lupin lives only Merlin knows where! Might not even be real in our timeline or whatever this is!"

Draco's face, lit by both of their wands, seemed hesitant for a while. "Fine," he agreed finally, "but if something kills us, your afterlife shall suck, I promise you that!"

Hermione gave him a small, encouraging smile and took the lead. The boy was grumbling the whole time as he walked behind her, jumping at the slightest of sounds, but it was mostly just rats nibbling at the roots sticking from the sides.

"Bloody stinking creatures!"

"Look! There's a staircase!" Hermione pointed with her shining wand in front of her after almost fifteen minutes of walking. Truly, there was a shabby staircase and a damp-looking door ahead of them.

"Oh, thank Merlin!"

They carefully tried the first few steps and despite the eerie cracking sound, they decided to climb up to the wooden door. Exchanging glances, they took a moment before grabbing onto the handle, pulling it all the way down.

A room lit by beaming orange flames greeted their expectant faces together with none other than Albus Dumbledore, sitting on a rocking chair right next to a cosy fireplace.

Both of them froze.

"Ah, Miss Granger, Mr Malfoy." The old man bowed his head, observing the duo with those exceptionally blue eyes and Hermione had to do a lot not to scream. She pressed her hand to her
mouth, her missing sense of responsibility finally getting back to her.

"Well?" Dumbledore lifted his snowy eyebrows, pressing the tips of his fingers together. "Fun, wasn't it? I must say, some of your jumps were very impressive, Mr Malfoy."

Hermione turned her head to Draco who seemed either appalled or angry. At this point, she couldn't even tell, for she herself had kind of similar mixed up feelings.

The man had let them wrestle the insane tree and hadn't done a thing about it? Unbelievable, but honestly—served them right.

"Take a seat, take a seat." He presented the dusty couch to them with a graceful gesture of his right arm. The dust slowly started to disappear and by the time they approached it, the fabric looked completely new.

"Care to explain what you were doing, roaming around at such an hour? You haven't even been inside the castle and yet, still managed to get a detention," he nodded slightly, looking at Draco, who seemed to be shrinking in his seat—she, most likely, was too, "provoked a fight with the poor Whomping Willow and tried to sneak out back into Hogsmeade. Impressive—not even the Weasley twins made it this far on their first day, but as I say, there's still time, right?" he let out calmly but Hermione felt like he was yelling. She screwed up big this time. What was she thinking?

"I am so sorry, professor!" She bowed her head, unable to keep the eye contact any longer. "It's all my fault, I talked Draco into it."

"That's true."

The girl shot the blond boy a frowning expression.

"But," he went on slowly. "I'll take half the blame because I should have talked her out of it but didn't."

"You tried," Hermione uttered weakly, blinking as the first tears started forming in her eyes. Disappointing a teacher, let alone the headmaster, was her biggest nightmare, which even her alter-ego from the dreams shared with her.

"Should have tried harder."

'Oh, Draco!'

"Marvellous! Now if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to Hogwarts. I still feel like having another cauldron cake." Dumbledore suddenly clasped his hands, smiling, having both of the kids looking at him as if he had lost his mind. "Don't you?" He slowly stood up, towering over them, looking hauntingly impressive with his white beard coming all the way down to his knees, while still managing to sound like a madman.

"Come along!" he said cheerfully, already making his exit.

"We shall wait for the carriage to arrive," the man stated, swaying on his feet as they stood on the road, shivering from cold. Hermione must have admitted, she felt kind of disappointed the headmaster wouldn't use some other way to get them to the castle. She'd heard he owned a phoenix which was known for—

"Oh, but where's beauty in that?" Dumbledore asked abruptly, dreamily looking at the trees in the distance. "The most magical things are often just the most ordinary," he concluded and Hermione
blushed furiously. She looked at Draco, who gave her a look full of 'Run like hell, the man's mental', but she knew perfectly well he was the complete opposite of that.

"Oh Merlin, how lucky we are," the old man laughed as a carriage appeared out of the dark and stopped right in front of them. He opened the door and both Hermione and Draco climbed inside for the second time tonight.

They took another ride to Hogwarts, but this time with a merry-looking headmaster sitting opposite to them, humming the Hogwarts school song's melody. For the rest of the journey, nobody said a word, except for Draco's growling stomach.

When they finally arrived at the Great Hall, the food was already gone.

"Oh well, that is unfortunate," Dumbledore pointed. "Luckily, I carry sherbet lemons with me most of the time." He put one into her hand and one into Draco's. "There you go—well, I think you've had enough adventures for tonight. Head straight to your dorms and no running late tomorrow morning!" He frowned, raising his index finger. "Mr Malfoy, I'd strongly advise you to visit professor Snape: he shall tell you the password and while you're in there, you may as well arrange the conditions of both of your detentions." The blue eyes were smiling.

"And when it comes to you, Miss Granger," he walked with her towards the stairs as the frowning Draco marched down to the Dungeons. "The password you're looking for, I believe, is Venor Floccus." He winked, humming the same melody, leaving a stunned Hermione alone.
Hermione knew better than anyone about the scope of the curiosity ascending from the human DNA, for she herself was a being of a wondering nature—the same breed as the dear Alice, slipping into the sly land of 'curiouser and curiouser' just to suit her tremendous desire for the unknown.

Oddly enough, Hermione's very own unknown seemed remarkably similar to that Wonderland—an insidious place of twisted truth, replete with curiosity-starved beings, having no perception of boundaries whatsoever; specifically when her bond with Draco Malfoy was on the menu.

The suicidal escapade she and the boy had been involved in on the very first day of their arrival had swiftly become a number one topic among all the residents of the Hogwarts Castle.

Students, ghost, portraits, even some of the staff—Draco would swear on Irma Pince—had created their own extra-thrilling version of the actual story, spreading it faster than plague in the 17th century London—and all despite the fact that nobody had a clue what exactly happened that particular evening. It was actually pretty convenient because what better platform there was to start creating drama than knowing nothing at all; infinite possibilities just prompting the imagination to run wild.

Poor Hermione had to endure hours of interrogation initiated by Padma Patil, who seemed to have no sense of dignity or any kind of respect in general. No matter how many times the young witch emphasised she was in no relationship with Draco other than being friends and that it would be an obnoxious lie to assume they were trying to elope to Ireland, the snoopy girl was deaf to anything Hermione had to say, moonily proclaiming it was the most romantic thing to have happened in the history of Hogwarts.

It got to the point the young Ravenclaw had to excuse herself from the forced company of the Patil twins and their friend Lavender Brown, flat-out saying she was going to be sick due to their tireless praises about how brave Draco had been to face the entire world just to be with her—or worse, about his hair being just the perfect shade of platinum.

More and more often she found herself biting her tongue, resisting the urge to bark at them there was no way she would ever even consider dating Draco, for she felt more attracted to his mom than him alone, but the wayward thought brought so much heat into her cheeks that both girls took it as a silent confession for everything they so blindly believed.

To top this ridiculous misapprehension, Draco, who strangely seemed to enjoy being the centre of everyone's focus, had become responsible for an even greater fuss thanks to his stupid sense of humour and loose irony.

Hermione had caught him winking at the giggling girls numerous times just as he saw her walking by during breaks, saying he had to go 'cause his girlfriend might get jealous. The young witch had to literally pray to have enough restrictedness in her not to hex him in front of everyone as she dragged him by the elbow aside to ask him why he had to try her patience. He was already threading a very thin line as it was, because sadly, this wasn't the only thing he liked to make fun of those fine days.
It had been a solid week since their adventure, seven goddamn days since the atrocious mistake of telling him about the conversation she had had with Dumbledore, and she would swear the level of obnoxiousness his aura had flowered with had never been as vibrant as it was now.

It was the final day of their detention, which consisted of polishing squalid forks in the Hogwarts kitchen, and the boy had boldly brought and tied a coin skirt over his head and kept making mysterious expressions anytime Hermione glanced his way.

He had become such a nuisance she had silently charmed the skirt to stick to his hair for a couple of hours—and she'd have actually laughed at the sight of a cussing Draco jingling anytime he moved, had it not been for her determination to persuade the house elves to ask Dumbledore for at least a minimum wage. She was so persistent the little creatures had kindly asked them to leave earlier just to get rid of her and subsequently started banging their heads in sync against the counter to punish themselves for doing so.

Hermione had promptly tried to stop them, and even the chiming Draco had hesitantly approached one particularly old elf and after whole minutes of constant banging and screaming 'bad bad bad', they managed to halt the madness and leave.

Now, sitting in the library, they were trying to catch up on the essay for Professor McGonagall's class — leastwise, Hermione was, for the finally skirt-free Draco seemed much more interested in proceeding to irritate her than doing anything academic-related.

"I'd suggest going for a full look," he announced, placing his finger on the edge of Hermione's parchment, and slowly started dragging it away from her. "You'll need a lot of shawls and sweaters —glasses you can borrow from Potter, he can't see a foot in front of him even if he wears them, anyway." He smirked as the girl snatched her homework away from him.

"For the last time." She primmed her lips, frowning at the yellow parchment in her hand. "I'm not a seer! And neither is she, if you ask me, so please, give it a rest! Stop drawing pictures of me looking like her and, especially, quit shouting 'Trelawnger!' anytime you see me in the corridor!" Hermione dipped her quill into the ink bottle rather grimly. "It's not entertaining in any way!" She angled away from the boy and placed the parchment back onto the table.

"Don't be afraid of your calling," the boy proclaimed dramatically. "Just remember to be as negative as you possibly can. Watch and learn," he cleared his throat, attracting her reluctant gaze. "Thy future, my dear child, is as gloomy and sad as the mangrove swamps in South Africa," he whispered in some strange Romanian-like accent and Hermione decided not to right him that African swamps were anything but gloomy out of the fear she'd burst out.

"See," he went on, "it's that easy; and after you're done saying everything is hopeless and crappy, you'll—wait for it—you'll amaze them with this glorious—"

The girl watched him disappear under the table with a bad anticipation—and oh dear, quite rightfully so. Her eyes widened the moment he took out an enormous crystal ball out of his bag and dropped it onto their table with a loud thud.

"He did not!"

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," she raised her voice, catching the rolling item the last second. "Tell me you didn't steal that from the North Tower," she demanded, hoping he wouldn't be that stupid to nick things from classrooms right after being done with both of his detentions.

"I might have borrowed it."
Obviously, he would.

"What on Earth did you borrow Trelawney's crystal ball for, may I ask?"

"Just to wind you up." He gave her a mischievous look, trying to swing his legs up the table but Hermione smacked his boots and he ended up grasping the table, fighting for balance.

"You take that ball back right this instant," she seethed, her eyes narrowing. "What if she needs it?!"

"Well, look who's talking! You didn't think about that when you were thirteen and you yourself —!"

Hermione's cheeks went warm. "I am not discussing this any further," she snapped heatedly, forcing the heavy item back to Draco, who gave her a knowing smirk.

She'd hate to admit it, but he actually got a fair point. Back then she did knock the ball over but only because the woman had humiliated her in front of the entire class by prophesying that she couldn't see any man in her future. Thinking about it now, the girl must have confessed that, however talentless she considered Trelawney to be, there might have been something to her abilities after all.

"Stupid thing," the boy swore from beneath the table, apparently having quite a trouble fitting the ball back into his bag.

Hermione was on the brink of saying something acrid when a loud knocking sound from behind her startled her enough to make her jump.

"Ouch!" Draco had clearly hit his head, making the table bounce a bit. "What are you doing," he hissed reproachfully, rubbing his nape, but Hermione didn't listen. She was looking at the window behind her back, eyeing a huge grey owl impatiently pecking the glass.

Briskly, she stood up, letting in both the bird and the remarkably crispy cold wind.

"Bloody mail?!" She heard the boy come closer as she tried to untie the letter attached to the talon. "Who could that be from?"

Shaking her head, Hermione let out a clueless snort. Her mom had sent her an owl just that morning, writing everything was well, hence she doubted the letter could be from her. Maybe it was Victor—it had been quite a while since he had written anyway. She licked her lips, turning the letter to look at the handwriting, but surprise—strangely, it did not belong to her friend either.

"It's for you," Hermione said, frowning, offering the envelope to Draco after reading his name scribbled in large, rather slanted letters.

The boy gave her a perplexed look, taking the envelope into his hands. "For me? I haven't heard from my parents ever since they dropped me off like an orphan. Do you think they finally realised they cannot be mad any longer, or it's an official statement that I've been burnt off the family tree? Let's bet!"

"Maybe it's Astoria," Hermione suggested. "Though I'd anticipate her owl to be bright pink."

"Yeah, she would definitely use a nightingale and it would sing lullabies and burp glitters," Draco added, unimpressed, waving the owl off, but it did not move, only tried to peck his hand. "Berserk creature!"
"Shush, just open the letter," Hermione prompted, closing the window, for the temperature in the library was becoming fairly freezing.

"Okay, okay." Draco gave her a significant look, moving back to his chair. His bony hands unfolded the parchment and he dived into silent reading.

Holding her breath, Hermione was watching his every move, trying to detect any signs of emotions and had to frown upon seeing the boy tensing up. Could it be that bad? Had he truly got burnt off the family tree? No... if it had come down to such extremity, his family wouldn't have bothered informing him, Hermione was sure. They would simply settle with ignoring him for the rest of their lives, pretending they had never had a child in the first place.

Imagining such scenario, the girl immediately felt a lump growing inside her throat—the fault would be hers and hers only. She was the reason this whole fiasco was going on and if—

The boy let out a bated breath.

"What," she blurted impatiently. "What is happening? Who's it from?"

Draco gave her a quick startled look as if caught doing something improper. He was gripping the letter with both of his hands, pushing it towards his stomach, just as though he was afraid Hermione could read it from the distance.

"I... " he paused, giving another forlorn exhale. "It's from my aunt."

Hermione's stomach made an uncomfortable somersault and she had to take a moment to comprehend those two simple words. "Your Bell—I mean," she cleared her throat. "Her?"

His eyes strayed back to the letter. "I've got two aunts, Granger. I believe I've already told you about the black sheep of the family."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" She shortly covered her mouth with her hand. "Is—it from your aunt Andromeda? What does she—?"

"I'll tell you later, I shall reply to this first." He stood up, waving with the letter. "I—hey!" He jerked his hand as the owl, casually resting on the edge of their table, tried again for his fingers. "If you excuse me, I'll be in the owlery because clearly," he shot the owl a nasty look, "the bird is nuts!"

"Wait, I'll go with you!" Hermione reached for her books, quickly trying to pack up.

"Erm, on a second thought," Draco stated evasively, picking up his on a verge of tearing apart bag, full with Trelawney's crystal ball. "It's not that urgent, I'll probably go return this." He motioned towards the bulk. "And then—"

"What do you think you're doing?!" The livid voice of Madame Pince interrupted the subterfuge. She'd appeared out of thin air, her flaring eyes darting from Draco to the owl and then to the startled Hermione. "Gather your things, I want you out of here! This is a library! Not some filthy dovecote," she yelled, slamming her hand against the table, which forced the owl to shoot up and zoom around their heads, hooting crazily. "Out! Out! OUT!" The woman shrieked.

Draco swiftly shoved the letter into his pocket and practically sprinted out of the library, chased by the alarmed owl, cowardly leaving his best friend all alone.

"And you?! What are you still doing here," she snapped at Hermione, who was doing her best to
quickly pick up her stuff, which wasn't that easy since there were around fifteen books stacked on their table. "I don't want to see your faces until you learn to respect the rules!"

Oh well, there goes the theory about her saying they were a cute couple.

Under constant lashing, Hermione managed to jam everything into her bag, charmed by an enlargement spell, and swiftly leave the library, unbelievably upset she had barely finished the first detention and immediately got herself in dire straits for the second time in a row.

Damn it, if she had known that the friendship with the boy would bring her nothing but trouble, she'd have really reconsidered helping him out two years ago. She'd have been spared so much anxiety and—oh, who was she trying to fool, she wouldn't trade that prick for anything in the world, no matter how many times he screwed up.

She loved him too dearly; cared about him the same way she would about a brother, and seeing him so anxious had made her extremely worried.

What could this aunt of his possibly want from him?

The boy had once told her he would never even know his mom had another sister if it hadn't been for the conversation she and auntie Bella had had a long time ago. He could be around nine when he overheard them talking about 'traitorous scum' who didn't deserve to be born, let alone share their blood.

He, of course, had later tried to ask about it but didn't get a response he'd hope for—simply got sent to his room with a warning never to mention it again. Since his family had refused to tell him, he had stubbornly set his mind on finding out himself by inconspicuously asking professor Slughorn years later, and the man had told him such a story Padma Patil would die of excitement if she heard.

He had revealed Andromeda was the middle child, who, even though sorted into Slytherin, had never really seemed to share the common beliefs of her family. She had barely had any friends due to her lack of interest in bullying and swashing about supremacy Slytherins loved so much; that's why she had usually hung out with Sirius Black and his group of buddies.

The professor had admitted he was fond of all the Blacks, but found Andromeda the most delightful. He had even showed Draco a picture he had literally had on display in his office till his retirement, which was in their third year, but the boy had never really paid those photos any attention before so he'd never noticed the resemblance—the woman looked very much like her older sister, Bellatrix; however, Slughorn had said they could not be any more different when it came down to their personalities. While Bellatrix was a force to be reckoned with, Andromeda was this reserved, distant being, who showed her true charm only to those she found worth the trust.

It was in her sixth year when she secretly started dating a Muggle-born, Ted Tonks. They eloped right after their graduation, which was considered a huge betrayal of the entire Black family. She had ended up burnt off the family tree and both of her sisters were forbidden to mention her name ever again—needless to say, they had no objections.

Slughorn had admitted he'd once witnessed the meeting of Bellatrix and the little Tonks girl, Nympha-something was her name, and he described the situation as 'very sad and heartbreaking'.

Truly, the whole story seemed so very gloomy, yet it showed Andromeda wasn't made of such arrogance as both of her sisters, Hermione thought. Maybe she had heard about the gossips and was just trying to reach out to let her nephew know he wasn't all alone in this—though if it truly was the scenario, there was no reason for him to be so nervous; Hermione didn't need to be any fortune
teller to see something worrying was going on. She just hoped Draco would tell her.

As she walked through the corridor, ignoring the occasional whispering of Gryffindor's girls, she caught a sight of Dumbledore's long beard. She had not really seen him since that day he found her and Draco in the Shrieking Shack and it still put heat into her cheeks—Merlin, she was a prefect! She was supposed to be an example, a good example, not some troublemaker of ill manners. Unfortunately, the harm was already done and there was no other way to fix it than trying twice as hard to gain the lost reputation.

No more adventures and no more dream analysing!

Her mind slipped back to Dumbledore's mysterious words. *The password you're looking for, I believe, is venor floccus.*

Hermione was, even after a week, still at a loss for words. First of all, how come the man knew she was after some kind of an explanation, and second, how come he had one. Had he too read her mind just like Draco's aunt had? He must have. Hermione doubted there was another way he'd find out other than seeing her thoughts because, beside Draco, she hadn't told a soul. And even though she admired the old man greatly, she couldn't help feeling somewhat disappointed he would violate her privacy in such a manner; besides, he hadn't even told her anything she wouldn't know about. She was familiar with the term, of course, having stumbled upon it countless times but in her opinion, it was completely off point.

Every book offered the same definition:

**VENOR FLOCCUS /weːnər floc·cus/**

*noun, derived from Latin*

*Hunter of clouds; a trained person who gained the ability to access other realms and communicate with entities from outside this world.*

Hermione had read these mysterious beings were of pureblood ancestry; all of them monks living in deep forests far from any civilisation.

It was said they were born on the same day of the year that a gate to another realm opened, splitting the soul in half, sending each part to a different world. Some theories claimed they were the stray souls of people who committed suicide in their previous life—and as a punishment were bound to search for the other half of their soul for eternity.

However eerie that might seem, Hermione did not believe such thesis, for it was shared mostly among villagers who made up stories anytime they couldn't explain something.

What she believed, though, were the facts with a proper foundation. She'd read that to become a venor floccus, one had to be trained; there was not a single person who'd be born with abilities such people manipulated with; they gained the skills throughout years and years of practice of meditation and fasting.

It was an extremely dangerous and hard thing to do, though. Only the oldest and the most persistent of them were able to truly project and experience other realities. The scientist Elefteriou Narcissa Malfoy had told her about was rumoured by some to have died, while the others argued he had accessed another realm and got stuck.

Honestly, Hermione had no idea what it had to do with her. The glimpses came to her naturally while sleeping, whereas they did it consciously. She'd never met an astral being, never been to any
astral dimension where she could roam around freely—she just saw a different reality through the eyes of the other Hermione. She'd never trained and the books said it was impossible to achieve such an experience without a training... but most of all, she was no pureblood and thank Merl—

"Watch out, Granger!"

Hermione bumped into someone, stumbling. Startled, she looked up—it was McLaggen.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just—"

"Deep in your thoughts. Nothing unusual, but you might consider looking next time, you wouldn't want to miss this." He pointed at his chest, making Hermione raise her eyebrow.

"You're the last thing I would want to miss." The girl gave him a forced smile and moved along.

"When casting a Petrificus Totalus," she murmured to herself as she headed towards the Ravenclaw common room.

II.

Draco had received six more owls the following weeks—Hermione kept track—but he refused to tell her anything about it, always finding some excuse to change the subject. The girl had to often bite her tongue to stop herself from giving him a lecture on trust and friendship because she was well aware it would be nothing but plain hypocrisy to say so. She herself had a few secrets she was unwilling to give away, hence she had absolutely no right to be angry with him. Still, though, the urge to ask him anytime his eyes unfocused was nagging her like a particularly itchy scar.

"Trelawnger," Draco whispered one evening while researching the topic about the Potion of Living Death. They were finally allowed back to the library under the promise to behave the way sixteen-year-old people should and they were both determined to live up to their word.

"What?" The girl had just finished reading a paragraph, scribbling a note on her parchment.

"Yes or no?"

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Yes or no what?"

"The point is, you're not supposed to know."

"Then I'm sorry, I cannot answer," she replied, getting back to her article.

"Don't be childish!"

"Childish?! I'm not the one—"

"Okay, okay, wait! Let me ask you again, then." Draco rubbed his forehead, ignoring the whispering suite of girls watching them from afar. "What would you do if—if your friend wanted to see your other friend, but that friend didn't really want to see that friend very much, but let's say that the other friend—"

Hermione frowned. "I'm quite smart, I daresay, but I cannot tell for the world what you are rambling about."

"Forget about it," the boy dismissed, flicking a page of the book he had in front of him.

"No, what's on your mind?" Hermione frowned, putting her quill aside. "Who are you talking about? Am I the friend in this narrative?"
"No!" Draco forced out a very unpersuasive laugh. "No—well, maybe, I—" He gulped, his eyes desperately roaming around the library and eventually landing on someone.

Hermione cast a look behind her and to her surprise, she spotted a grinning McLaggen.

"No!"

"Sorry?"

"I am not going out with that friend! Fat chance," she whispered angrily. "He's so full of himself, honestly, I have no idea what you see in him but that's your choice of friends, I guess. Besides, I'm still—" Hermione went silent and her cheeks were hot again. What she wanted to say was 'I'm still not over Blair'.

"Besides you what?" Draco straightened his back, furrowing his brows. "You got a boyfriend? Did you meet someone in Greece and didn't tell me?"

"No, what I was trying to say was," Hermione went on, considerably, "I'm quite busy trying to figure out this whole Venor Floccus thing!"

Draco leaned back into his chair, obviously thinking. "What if I told you I could help," he suggested slowly. "Promise me—promise me you'll go out with my friend." He still refused to address him by name. "And I'll help you!"

Coughing out a laugh, Hermione folded her arms. "Help? Weren't you the one making fun of me, trying to read my coffee cup and leaving ouija boards, tarot cards, and crystals anywhere I moved?!" She splashed with a challenging look.

"I was just joking."

"The whole month?!"

"Yeah, you know me. Once I get a hobby, it's forever," he let out but immediately went on upon seeing that Hermione parted her lips in indignance. "Okay, I'm sorry, I'm an idiot! Should have believed you instead of joking around! I'm really really ashamed of myself." He looked up for a while. "I think I've mentioned everything, you can't touch me now, ha!"

"You're such an arse, Draco!"

"In what context? Like I have a good-looking—?"

"For Merlin's sake!"

"Okay, back to the topic! What do you say?" He looked at her innocently.

Hermione gave him one last sour look before giving a deep breath. Her eyes strayed to the girls, who immediately buried their noses in their books. "Thanks for the offer, but I doubt you could help me with that, no offence. Maybe I should see Dumbledore and ask him directly."

"Maybe I know a few things you don't." He shrugged, casting around for Madame Pince, but since he caught no sight of her, he pulled out an apple from his pocket.

"Don't even think about it! I'm not planning on getting thrown out again," Hermione hissed, forcing the frowning boy to put the apple back. "And honestly, how come you know more about it than I do? I have read every single book regarding the topic I could find," she proclaimed, unable to keep
the bossy tone out of her voice.

"But you haven't read every book you could find in our library." Draco retorted with a bratty smirk.

"And you're trying to tell me you have!"

"As a matter of fact," he raised his eyebrows defiantly but then frowned, "I have not—but I still got the information you'd definitely use."

Hermione pursed her lips together, shaking her head. "How come?"

"I'll explain after you promise—"

"Why not just tell me," she fumed, trying to keep the volume of her voice as low as possible. "McLaggen is a self-contemptuous prat, why would you want me to go out with him?!"

The boy shrugged. "It would be just a minute at most at Three Broomsticks."

"Draco, I don't understand-" Hermione folded her arms, frowning.

"Please, do it for me! I'll be there the whole time!"

"I swear, if you're trying to pull off a double date, I'll—!"

"No, I'm not, I promise!" He reached for her forearm in an attempt to reassure her but the loud gasps from the girls made him quickly retrieve his hand and drop his gaze back to his book.

"God, why do I have to be so irresistible to look at?" he lamented, making the young witch smirk against her will.

III.

"I cannot believe I'm doing this," Hermione grunted, marching along the blond boy through the milky haze straight towards the Hogsmeade inn. She was stepping angrily on every dry twig that came her way, trying really hard not to see them as tiny little Dracos (simple karmic reasons) who once again had persuaded her to do the things his way.

"Don't worry, I'll stay with you!" His elbow gently bumped into hers.

"What a relief," Hermione noted with vitriol, tugging her hood further down to avoid the cold wind.

"Look, I—"

They heard a distant yelp that made their heads jerk. A notably frightened Zabini emerged from behind Zonko's Joke Shop, running across the large puddles, splashing the water all around him. Casting around, his feet slipped on a cluster of wet leaves and he fell flat on his nose into the mud, making Draco roar with pure malicious laughter.

"Stop it! He seems terrified," Hermione said nervously. "We should help him, I suppose."

"Let it be, Granger," he breathed in between his laughs, slapping his thighs, "probably had a fight with some seventh year—heard he was trying to pull a—I can't!" Hermione had to wait for him to ease his amusement. "He was trying to pull a prank on Flint. Guess it didn't work out," he finished.
but burst into the third wave of laughter as Blaise stood up, his face unbelievably filthy.

"Stop it!" Hermione tried to scold the boy but the corners of her mouth lifted as well.

"Even if I could, I wouldn't!"

"Come on, you wanted me to meet with McLaggen! Want to get it over with as soon as possible." She grabbed him by the elbow, pulling his giggling arse towards the Three Broomsticks.

Hermione loved the place, especially during the cold months: it was so warm and cosy, not to mention the air was always filled with the scent of hot butterscotch.

"So where's he," she asked, taking off her coat as they settled with a table nearest to the fireplace. She was aware everyone was watching them and while it wasn't the most comfortable feeling in the world, she tried to think positively: maybe if people saw her with Cormac, they'd stop spreading the false gossips and finally get on with their lives.

"We're not meeting with McLaggen," Draco told her, messing up his hair.

"Yeah right."

"Damn, right. Look, he's sitting right over there!" He pointed somewhere behind her and upon turning around, Hermione truly spotted the boy sitting just a few tables away from them, trying to talk to Alicia Spinnet. "Don't you think he'd be already on his way here? Mind you, he's not a shy type."

Hermione parted her lips. "But if not him—" The blood in her veins froze. "Draco—are you the friend?" As soon as she let out those words, her cheeks started burning.

Draco, on the other hand, went unbelievably pale instead. "You think—you think I asked you out on a date?!"

"I mean—I..." Hermione stammered.

"I did not," the boy let out after a while. "But If I—I'm not saying now—I just—If I did—"

"Something to drink?" Madame Rosmerta, the landlady, stopped by their table.

"Eh, just two butterbeers, thank you," Hermione ordered, quickly pressing a few sickles into the woman's palm and ignoring Draco's protests, which fell silent as soon as she left.

Hermione's gaze dropped to her lap, feeling a great deal of discomfort settling in her stomach. She was trying her hardest to push the possibility of him liking her out of her mind but clearly, she couldn't pretend any longer.

What was she to do now? Should she tell him the truth? Should she tell him she was into women—one woman in particular? How would he react to that? Would he be mad? Repulsed? Would he ask how she found out? If she were to tell the truth, she couldn't possibly cover it with another lie, yet telling him about that time she felt like cursing Crouch Jr. out of pure jealousy because he had tried to hit on his auntie didn't seem like a good plan.

"There you go, two butterbeers." Two full glasses of warm steaming liquid landed in front of them and Hermione quickly took a sip, getting the froth all over her upper lip as usual. Noticing a tall figure approaching out of the corner of her eye, she quickly turned away to wipe the foam off with the back of her left hand.
"Hello, you two." Hermione glanced back, spotting a woman of wavy brown hair and a hostile expression standing exactly where Madame Rosmerta had stood just mere seconds ago.

"Hello," Draco finally broke his silence. "Eh, Granger," he stood up, barely looking at her. "It wasn't McLaggen who asked me to see you, or—it wasn't—eh," he struggled. "It was my aunt."

Hermione parted her lips, hypnotising the woman with a shocked expression. This in front of her must have been Andromeda then—but why would she want to see her? Merlin, did she want to give them her blessing? Or—

A bored exhale caught her attention.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Hermione Granger." She quickly stood up, offering her hand, but the woman didn't take it.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Andromeda commented snidely and walked over to the other side of the table, making sure not even her coat touched the girl.

Hermione frowned, a little startled by such a cold reaction. She hadn't even had a chance to say anything offensive—she'd only told her her name! Had she irritated the woman by taking so long to introduce herself then? If so—that was a silly, silly reason to act so arrogantly!

She let her hand fall to her side. The apple obviously didn't fall far from the tree—despite Slughorn's descriptions, Andromeda obviously seemed to share the same weird customs as both of her sisters. Why, she didn't understand, for the woman herself had married a Muggle-born. One would assume she'd be past the stage of exalting.

Trying hard not to show her feelings, Hermione slipped back onto her chair, looking over at Draco, wordlessly asking what the hell was going on, but he wouldn't spare her a single look. Her gaze jumped back to Andromeda, who took off her wet coat before sitting down herself. There was something familiar about her but the girl couldn't figure out what exactly... Maybe it was just those little parts of her sisters she saw in her—yeah, that must have been it: she had the same mannerism as Bellatrix, the same posture, same way of flipping her hair over her shoulder—even seemed to possess the same aura of arrogance... It was as if—

"I'd prefer to speak alone." Andromeda gave the boy a fleeting look and shook her head at Madame Rosmerta, who'd just approached—frowning, the landlady turned on her heel, walking back to the bar, clearly pissed.

"And I'd prefer to stay," Draco retorted but his voice wasn't half as confident as the meaning of his words.

Andromeda let out a short contemptuous laugh. "You are in no position to make rules, deary!"

God, even her voice resembled her older sister! How peculiar!

Or maybe not so much...

Hermione's head spun and her stomach twisted into a painful knot. Suddenly all of it—the movements, the voice, the familiarity of it—clicked into place like a bloody puzzle. This—this woman in front of her was Draco's aunt but it was not Andromeda, it was Bellatrix!

How stupid she was for not getting it earlier! Draco had been getting all these letters and suddenly knew something about her dreams she didn't?! Who could have told him other than his dear auntie? Stupid, stupid Hermione!
After everything she'd been through, after everything the woman had done to her, she had the audacity to ask for a meeting and wouldn't even bother showing up as herself?!

All her insides burned as she leapt to her feet, trying to leave the table, but Draco jumped up in front of her. "Wait! I knew you wouldn't want to see her," he whispered desperately, finally having the nerve to look at her, "but she could help you! She knows everything about venor floccus! She will—"

"Get out of my way, Draco," she gritted, her eyes unblinking.

Bellatrix let out a soft laugh.

"Granger, be reasonable!" The boy tried to shake some sense into her. "Do it for me! I swear, you —"

"For you," she interrupted, piercing his eyes. "You don't deserve me doing anything for you," she paused, shaking her head in disbelief. "How could you do this to me?"

Draco gulped, looking visibly hopeless. His eyes were widened, a thousand feelings projecting behind them, but he had no answer to that.

"Don't make a scene out of it, people are looking," Bellatrix remarked in a false sugary voice. "I'm not—"

"You don't want to be seen with a mudblood, do you?" Hermione snorted, feeling the nerves jumping in her stomach as if it was the trampoline. "Well, if you're so embarrassed, I don't see a reason to talk. Once you're brave enough to meet me in a proper way—as yourself—maybe then I'll be willing to talk," she finished, pushing Draco out of her way, marching out into the cold weather.
Somewhere in the distance, a male voice broke through the wild rainstorm but Hermione wasted no time turning around. Her body was a quivering mess and her clothes felt too heavy on her shoulders; the swollen drops were falling upon her like a myriad of silver bullets, whipping, creating a matching sensation to the dander raging inside her chest.

She'd known for quite a while Draco’s dear auntie was a raw epitome of insolence but had only now come to realise just to what grand extent. She wondered what evil, demonic force could have made the woman think it was okay to approach her like this—as though she and Hermione were old acquaintances meeting up for a chat over a steaming cup of cocoa; damn it, did she truly consider the girl to be so dreadfully shallow so as to expect her to forget about all the excesses—to be jumping at the opportunity to drink from the fountain of wisdom pouring from her noble lips? Clearly so—or perhaps—perhaps she just thought mudbloods as such were too dull to be capable of possessing higher values like pride or dignity; that maybe, they were too underdeveloped to even comprehend what self-respect actually meant.

Hermione's hands raked into the drenched wool of her sweater, the tensed knuckles turning white. She could feel her stomach twisting like a trapped animal as the pressure of bitter injustice settled inside its walls. From all of the insults Bellatrix had ever hurled onto her, this one by far cut the deepest—being thought of as dumb, just slightly smarter than a box of mountain rocks, was beyond anything Hermione could bloody abide. As haughty as it might seem, she had no problem admitting her intelligence exceeded that of half of the pureblood kids at Hogwarts and yet, in Bellatrix's eyes she still wasn't worth a pinch of recognition; she still refused to see that Hermione, despite being half-blood, wasn't dim-witted in the least—God, she had been there to witness how fast she got the hang of both Occlumency and Legilimency! She herself had watched her dodge all the spells at the ball, and that was just in terms of her magical abilities! What about her character? While she might have been a bit over too sensitive, she certainly wasn't any pudding-head and Bellatrix must have known that! They'd talked on numerous occasions—they'd fought on numerous occasions and Hermione had surely delivered satisfactory enough arguments to persuade the woman she was anything but simple-minded, that her feelings were just as intense as—

A jolt of electricity shot through her body as a mind-disturbing revelation fell upon her—Why on earth did she find the sole image of the witch thinking of her in such a poor way so frustrating? She couldn't possibly still long for her validation, could she? Of course not—there was not a single rational reason for such sentiment! Bellatrix was the vilest, the most self-centred, manipulative woman she'd ever encountered—her opinion meant nothing. Nothing!

Gritting her teeth, Hermione tightened the grip around herself as the rain mingling with the sharp wind pressed harder, moaning around the chimneys of the nearby houses. She couldn't see a solid three feet in front of her; the intrusive ponds were streaming down her face, making her palpebras flicker three times as often as they normally did; the soaked black sneakers striking puddle after puddle were the only sight she could behold. It would be impossible to get back to Hogwarts in such conditions without knowing the road by heart; one might as well stray to Scotland forests if paying zero attention to the subtle details indicating the direction of the castle.

Luckily, Hermione had been to Hogsmeade plenty of times to memorise where the oddly shaped branches meddled into the fence, marking a sharp turn, which had to be taken in order to reach the school.
It couldn't be that far actually...

"Granger, your coat," her attention had been brought back into focus by Draco's chasing voice. "You've left it behind!" The words drew somewhat closer but Hermione still chose not to react; she was well-aware 'your coat' was a metaphor for 'let's talk' and she didn't feel like talking in the slightest. Her blood was too hot with emotions to handle things objectively and if he knew any better, he'd let her cool down before provoking her into spitting senseless accusations she'd definitely regret saying once the row was over. They would discuss it, there was no doubt about that—but certainly not right now.

A single giant bough lying on the ground blocked her way but gave the breathless boy the advantage of shortening the distance between them.

"Come on," he rasped, clearly jumping over. "Hermione!" Finally reaching his target, he seized her arm but she jerked free as though burnt.

"Don't you dare," she snapped, turning around to face him—blinking, she'd noticed that he, too, wasn't wearing his coat, only had hers swung in the crease of his arm; his cheeks were blooming with faint pink spots and droplets of rain which were sliding down like petite waterfalls.

"I'm sorry!" He held out his hands. "Just... wait and let me explain!" Coughing, he reached toward his lungs. He was most certainly asking for a cold—they both were—but at that point, Hermione was too vexed to let it concern her.

"I don't want to hear it," she barked through the veil of water, squinting at the hazy figure in front of her. "You set up a meeting with that woman without my consent! What do they call it," she paused as though pondering hard. "Oh, I know—betrayal!"

"Granger, simmer down!" Draco's free hand pointlessly pushed the wet hair away from his eyes. "That woman" is my aunt! I know you're no fan of hers but God, don't you think you're overreacting a bit?! She was mean to you, yes, but so was Zabini—I don't see you storming off anytime he tries to talk to you," the boy fired back, a hint of irritation grazing his words.

"Excuse me?!!" Hermione took a few steps forward, unable to believe he'd have the nerve to defend her. "Is this your reason for running after me through this bloody rain? To mitigate her actions?! Don't even BOTHER—you know nothing about her, Draco, nothing! Contrary to what you might believe, she's no gracious angel! Do you have any idea how many times she'd trampled me? God, I could hardly sleep with her around; you have no clue—"

"And whose fault is that?" Draco stuck out his chin, cutting her short. "Whose fault is it really that I have no clue, huh? I've asked, remember?" he barked but unlike hers, his voice still managed to maintain a certain level of control. "I've asked you countless times but you've never said bloody anything!"

"Granger, what's going on—oh, it's nothing, don't worry about it!" He imitated in a girly voice and Hermione suddenly felt like punching something—him preferably.

"Why do you look like crying?—Oh, it's nothing!" He waved his hand dismissively before raising his voice. "It's always the same nothing so do forgive me for not being a damn mind reader!"

"You should have known!" Hermione screamed the irrational words. Her chest was heaving as she leered into his face, the rain covering the angry tears running down her cheeks. "You should have sodding realised I didn't want to go home just because she looked at me funny!" Her blood was boiling so hotly she thought it would melt her skin, splash over and drown the boy in her fury.
"Have you ever wondered why I didn't say anything?" she continued, clenching her shaking hands. "Because she's your family! I knew you'd be disappointed if you knew so I kept my mouth shut—just for YOU!" Hermione surprisingly took another step closer, poking him in the chest. "I didn't want to ruin YOUR relationship!" She gave his soaked shirt a slap. "I didn't—" Another slap.

Her words died as Draco grabbed the back of her neck, pressed himself against her front and smashed their doused lips together.

Hermione yelped as the oddest feeling of pressure, wetness, and heat overpowered her senses, making her stomach twitch in protest; her brain shut down, releasing all the thoughts until there was nothing left but a tremendous desire to free herself from his grip immediately; her fingers curled into the sodden fabric, fighting against the strong hold, desperate to push the boy off but to no avail—the demanding lips parted, trying to deepen the kiss but Hermione kept her mouth pressed tightly together, giving them no chance.

Struggling, her hands finally managed to grab Draco's shoulders and roughly shove him off of her. Quick as lightning, she backed away, almost slipping on the wet ground; her horrified eyes pierced his form, staring in disbelief. She must have been dreaming...

This couldn't have happened—Draco would have never done that; he just wouldn't, Hermione's brain kept repeating, utterly ignorant to the evidence imprinted on her swollen, blunt lips.

He hadn't kissed her!

_He-hadn't-kissed-her_, and so Hermione needn't think about how much she hadn't liked it; she needn't think about how much she wished to disappear—to let the rain drench her form until she was nothing but water soaking through the ground underneath their feet. She was still yet to have her first kiss with someone she really liked—soft and tender, a bit of magic even without magic; something she'd remember with great butterflies even after many years! No, he hadn't stolen that precious moment from her with such reckless mistake; he'd certainly think first about the consequences this would mean for both of them...

_'Oh Draco, what have you done?''_

Hermione heard a murmur of something but her ears were too deafened by her own rushing blood to make out any sort of meaning. Her gaze followed the boy who'd strode past her, hurrying into the haze.

She didn't have the slightest desire to stop him; her whole body was trembling from the sheer variety of emotions mingling into one; she felt a lump growing inside her throat as the first wave of guilt splashed over her like the unceasing cloudburst—this was her fault; if she hadn't yelled, if she hadn't provoked him, this surely wouldn't have happened! She had let her own frustration take the reigns, driving her into shouting senseless absurdities, blaming the boy for never noticing his aunt was a straight-up bully.

Maybe she was thick, after all...

Hermione was standing there, soaked by the rain, broken and confused, without any idea what to do. She slowly cast her eyes around—Merlin, if someone had witnessed this fiasco—but the streets were empty. Naturally; she wouldn't be trotting around in the battering weather herself if it wasn't for the woman she was trying to get away from.

Sighing, she lowered her back to pick up the coat lying in the mud at her feet. Maybe she should head for the castle—the freezing winter had already numbed her limbs and after everything that
happened...

She folded the dripping coat as best as she could and took the turn on the left, striding towards Hogwarts. Accompanied by the sound of her chattering teeth and her noisy traffic of thoughts, she couldn't stop her mind from wandering back to Draco—where would they go from this? She had to tell him she didn't feel the same way; she should have done so a long time ago, but no, she had had to ignore it and postpone until it was too late and such disaster must have happened!

It was like the entire Blair situation all over again, only this time it was her in the woman's shoes.

The girl wondered if, despite the obvious, Draco had been watering the hope that maybe somewhere deep down she might have had some feelings for him, just wasn't aware of them—Hermione herself had been hanging on such hopes, thinking Blair might have been holding back just because of the friendship with her mom; or perhaps because she thought the girl was too young to understand what she really needed and didn't want to take advantage of her. Why else would it take her so long to draw back when Hermione tried to kiss her that particular night? Maybe if she hadn't panicked, if she had kissed the woman right away, the things would have been different now. The young witch had been pondering about different outcomes of that situation ever since she came back from Greece, analysing every look, smile, or touch the woman had ever granted her with, though always coming to the same conclusion: Bill.

Blair couldn't have possibly felt anything for her if she still loved that man...

Hermione's eyes burned in the fiery rain. If Draco had been experiencing at least a drop of what she had, having all these feelings she couldn't reciprocate…

The sole guilt crying in the pit of her stomach intensified. Maybe she should try—he was a good boy, after all; handsome, funny—he always knew how to make her laugh. She should give him a chance and maybe, she'd get rid of all those feelings she had herself.

Yeah, she could do that. It would be the easiest thing in the world—if only she didn't have a heart. Deep down she knew this would never make her happy, therefore she'd never make him happy and he certainly didn't deserve that.

It was about time she put all her cards on the table—she didn't have a choice now.

She must tell him everything.

And she definitely would have if only the boy hadn't put an end to their interactions.

Anytime Hermione tried to talk to him, anytime she asked him if they could get together at least later that day, he'd always have some silly excuse up his sleeve requiring him to dash off. It made her unbelievably upset because she didn't want to let this one silly mistake get in the way of their friendship. She really missed the boy and just like Blair hadn't shut Hermione out just because of her feelings, the young witch, too, had no intention of abandoning their bond just because of the way he felt toward her.

"Draco?" She approached him after one of the Potion lessons, precisely two weeks after the incident—she had tried giving him some space to process his shame and hurt but honestly, he didn't even seem like trying. "We need to talk," she told his profile as he shoved the potion book into his bag a tad too roughly.

"Maybe later, got to run," he dismissed, cold as ice, as usually trying to flee before Hermione had a chance to stop him. This time though, she managed to take a hold of his right sleeve, softly pulling
him back.

"Harassing one of your classmates?" Snape drawled from the shadows, eyeing Hermione's hand with spiteful glee. "Twenty points from Ravenclaw! Just because you are a prefect, Miss Granger, it doesn't mean you're allowed to abuse that position for your own personal gain!"

The girl parted her lips, overwhelmed by all that hypocrisy. She let go of Draco's robe but her lips remained unmoving and so did Draco's; once free from her grasp, he simply took the quill from his desk and rushed away, not sparing her a single look, making it crystal clear the girl had lost another battle.

'Men and their egos…'

Lowering her head, Hermione ignored the smirking professor as she made her way out of the Dungeons, thinking how much she wished to have the power to halt people from pushing her away. She didn't want Draco to be upset over her; damn it, if she could like him back, she'd do so in a heartbeat, but she was no God to snap her fingers and alter her strange preferences whenever she felt like doing so.

"Get out of my way!" A deep male voice shrieked somewhere upfront, and she managed to step aside just in time to prevent a collision with a bunch of kids pushing each other, all trying to read from the parchment Filch had just nailed to the stone wall.

Knitting her brows together, Hermione moved towards the mass, hearing from each side: "What is it?", "Ouch, that's my foot!", "No, let me see!". Somebody pushed Colin Creevey out of the crowd's entrails and he landed on his arse right in front of the startled girl. "Have you seen already," he queried when she helped him to his feet, brushing the soft particles of dust from his bag.

"No, what's all the fuss about?"

"Oi!" Colin's eyes grew twice their size but before he could do anything more than gasp, his tiny form got pushed again. "Oh come on, guys." He let out, throwing his hands into the air.

"Don't get excited, leprechaun." Montague walked by with a nasty smirk, making Hermione severely tempted to stripe him off at least twenty points. "It's solely for the sixth years—like here, Malfoy's ex-girlfriend." He sneered even wider, high-fiving another Slytherin student as they strolled away, chuckling like the pair of pricks they were.

Hermione clenched her teeth but let the comment slide, knowing her reaction would only add more fuel to the fire. She didn't need any more scandals, not now when she—

"Have you two really broken up?" Colin interrupted her inner monologue, gazing at her with pure curiosity.

'Damned gossips!'

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, folding her arms. "I hardly think it is any of your business, Colin," she retorted, slightly cocking her head. "Better invest that attention into keeping track of time! Got Potions next, haven't you? Should really hurry up before professor Snape makes you try out expired potions for running late. You've got precisely twenty seconds not to miss the start," she motioned towards the Dungeons she'd just left.

Colin gulped, clearly uncertain whether to believe her or not, though as she glanced at her wrist, he quickly turned around, rushing down the stone staircase without anymore to say.
The girl formed a small smile, recalling Draco telling her memorising everyone's timetable was a waste of time; now he would see it wasn't—he'd see if he had decided to do her the courtesy of letting her talk. Hermione cast around, hoping she'd be lucky enough to see his blond hair somewhere near, but there was no sight of him.

Disappointed, she sauntered along the corridor, almost cleared of all the students now, eyeing the shining parchment framed in silver steel and nailed against the stone wall. 'Advanced lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts.' The title read. 'Monday & Friday, at five o'clock...' Hermione strained to read through the moving sea of hair. '...for the students of the sixth year... to prepare for the N.E.W.T... sign up with professor Prewett.'

Her heart jumped—finally some good news; something to take her mind off Draco. Defence Against the Dark Arts was particularly difficult this year—even for her. It was hard to admit but she'd noticed having a tiny bit of trouble with getting a knack of non-verbal spells. She wasn't the worst but certainly wasn't the best either. The shielding charm was slowly becoming her nemesis and she just hated the fact Harry Potter had managed to master the spell before she did.

Considering she still had some time before Herbology, she decided to pay Professor Prewett a visit. Instead of going outside then, she directed her steps towards the moving staircase; on her way up, she bumped into the Patil twins, who now, after they heard Hermione and Draco were 'no longer together,' lost all the unwanted interest in her. They barely gave her a sad smile as they passed by, probably analysing another unfortunate Hogwarts' pair, Hermione reckoned as she continued walking up.

By the time she reached the third floor, a long queue ending two doors away from Prewett's office had formed, consisting of three quarters of her classmates. Afraid anyone else might get ahead of her, the girl swiftly stood behind Neville Longbottom, who was jovially talking to his best friend, Dean. Observing his careless smile, she couldn't help noticing a huge difference between this Neville and the Neville from her dreams; the boy in front of her seemed quite confident and phlegmatic; nothing could ruffle him—even professor Snape had stopped trying a long time ago. She wondered what could have possibly happened to the other Neville to make him so nervous and distracted all the time; surely, it couldn't have been all due to the strict raising methods of the other grandma Longbottom; Hermione knew the boy lived with his nana who as the rumour had it, was stricter than Professor McGonagall herself—blimey, the discipline which must have reigned in their household...

"Hey," Neville startled the spaced-out Hermione as he turned to her, most likely sensing the persistent gaze etched into his form. Letting out a soft exhale, the girl quickly halted her musings, smiling at him. Glancing away so as to not weird him out, she considered the number of people in front of them. She could see the line had already shortened up by half; soon it was Dean slouching over the teacher's table, scribbling with a quill, and then Neville.

"Ah, Miss Granger, I didn't think you'd miss this opportunity," professor Prewett greeted as she sauntered into his office. She smiled, pausing by the table to have a look at the names on the parchment; there was already too many of them but as she swiftly skimmed through, Draco's was nowhere to be found.

"Having a change of heart?" The wizard implied, kindly making the girl aware she was taking a bit too long.

Hermione moved her head to the side and took the quill into her hand, dipping the tip into the atrament. "Not at all! I'm really looking forward to it, thank you for doing this for us, professor," she let out sincerely as she drawled the last wave on the letter r.
"I'm afraid I can't take credit for that," the man sighed, feigning disappointment, which earned a perplexed look from the bushy-haired girl standing beside him. "There's going to be someone else teaching you! Someone awfully famous, a writer you've certainly heard of! I'm sure you'll all be delighted." He winked, smiling with just the right corner of his mouth, motioning to the next student to approach.

"Who..?" The curious voice of Gryffindor's Fay Dunbar asked as she took Hermione's place in front of his desk. They were both looking at the professor with wonder but he only clasped his hands.

"Holy crickets, when did you kids stop being fond of surprises?" He shook his head, beckoning another student to come up. "Just you wait, I promise, they're worth your waiting!"

The following week no one talked about anything but the extra lessons—or more specifically the extra 'teacher'. Students speculated at length about numerous possibilities and the most popular one resulted in Gilderoy Lockhart, the famous writer, traveller, and the most charming fellow on the entire land, as Padma put it at breakfast, flashing one of her dreamy smiles. Hermione scrunched her nose at the statement. She dropped the half-eaten toast, sulkily heading for the exit; she hadn't had a decent conversation for three long weeks and it was slowly starting to get to her. She didn't even mind the irritated look on the girl's face as she walked past her.

At least she had the lessons to look forward to.

When it came to day D, there was almost a raw taste to the excitement transmitting among the sixth-years, who could hardly wait for the torturous History of Magic to be over so they could gather up on the third floor to start with the extra classes. Hermione alone was so restless she couldn't even pay attention to Professor Binns going on and on about Herpo De Foul. (She'd already written an essay on him, so there was hardly any harm in her lacking attention.)

The clock marked about ten before five p.m. when the students finally repleted the dimly lit classroom with their frenzied whispering and the electric anticipation almost tangible in the thick air. Their heads were turning in all directions as if pulled by an invisible thread, each trying to spot 'the professor' first.

Hermione was standing right next to Ernie Macmillan who was practically shaking, holding Hannah Abbott by her hand. Draco, as usual, was nowhere to be seen.

There was a synchronised sound of breath hitching as a soft, stealthy puff of mist started dragging across the floor, making the students head to the save corners of the four walls. Upon casting around, the young Ravenclaw realised she was the only one raising an eyebrow at such dramatic intro.

A complete silence fell onto the group. Hermione was leaning against the wall, her arms crossed. From a psychological point of view, 'the writer' must have been slightly narcissistic to have chosen such a theatrical entrance. Pity.

"God!" She grunted as her and many other students' hands jolted towards their mouth, startled by a loud sound resonating through the entire classroom like a revolver shot; a sudden grim smoke in the middle of the room revealed a tall blond man of about forty; his hair was a blinding gold, his choice of attire practically the same. He took a moment before cracking a smile as the space filled with clapping and whistling.

"Thank you, thank you!" the man winked at the shrieking girls, grinning even wider. "But let me introduce myself first." He jogged up the small staircase leading into the abandoned teacher's office and looked at them from above, pausing—again. "Gilderoy Lockhart." He let out finally,
making a small courtesy. "Yes," he added as he straightened his back, flipping his golden locks. "It's me—" his hand pressed boldly against the golden vest. "The writer of eight bestsellers and the five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award."

This was too painful to watch. Hermione was finding it hard to believe anyone from Hogwarts would hire this self-loving fellow to teach them; she didn't want to be rude, he surely was gifted, however, if the rumours regarding the man were anything to go by, she'd better run like hell—and she did; though it was more of a tiptoeing than running, her feet inconspicuously moved towards the exit, ready to call it a day. She traded places with a smirking Cormac guarding the tattered doors like Cerberus himself. She tugged on the handle, quietly pushing the wood to reveal the empty corridor.

She gasped for air as she felt the hot blood freeze in her veins—the passageway wasn't empty at all; as she pushed the door open, she came face to face with her.

Bellatrix—she was there, she was there, exactly where Hermione was—at Hogwarts, the only place to actually guarantee a decent amount of safety.

Clearly not anymore. What a fool she was to think her insolence could have passed without any consequences...

Standing stupidly with her palm still on the handle, Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from the frightful yet striking woman, who too paused as soon as she noticed the petrified girl; her crimson lips parted and immediately curled into a faint, surprised smirk while her head tipped slightly to the side—she was looking every bit of herself, just like Hermione wanted, just like she told her to.

She was dead, dead meat.

Gulping, the girl backed into the classroom, almost crashing into McLaggen, who swiftly ducked away. Bellatrix followed her in, her dark eyes gleaming.

"...about me, as hard as it is to believe there is someone even more charming than—" The writer's rich voice outshouted the ringing in Hermione's ears.

Bellatrix averted her attention toward him. "Yeah, all right, Lockhart, you've said enough," she said dismissively, lengthening her steps. She passed by the dumbstruck Hermione, walking toward the man who climbed down the stairs, ready to greet her.

What the hell was going on?

Somebody seized Hermione's arm, pulling her into the mass of students. Looking over her shoulder, her widened eyes fell upon Lavender Brown's face observing that of hers with concern. "Are you all right?"

Hermione had to take a moment to answer. She blinked, forming a very unpersuasive smile. 'Just don't say you feel queer. Give it a few hours and all of a sudden you'll be pregnant.'

"Sure, I'm fine, don't worry, Lavender," she replied finally, softly releasing her hand from the girl's grip, turning to the pair of wizards in the middle of the room.

"Madame Lestrange, ladies and gentlemen," Lockhart announced, making the students applaud again; Hermione noticed with great distaste it was especially boys who clapped with unusual eagerness. Bellatrix, too, didn't seem pleased in the slightest; it was almost as if the attention irritated her; she crossed her arms over her chest, looking incredibly unconcerned, gazing at the stained windows.
What was she doing here?

"...together we'll teach you the most ancient of spells..."

Teach?! Was Bellatrix here to teach? No chance… She wasn't generous like that!

"...the most mysterious of charms you haven't even dared to dream of…"

An audible and most certainly intentional yawn escaped Bellatrix's lips, earning a perplexed chuckle from Lockhart.

"Am I boring you, Bellatrix, dear?"

Without even looking at him, the woman shook her head, the thick curls bouncing against her shoulders. "Oh not at all, dear! Yawning's just my ultimate expression of interest."

A great number of students started coughing just to halt the inappropriate laughter. Hermione had to bite her inner cheeks not to do so herself; she had no intention to acknowledge Bellatrix's sense of humour for she wasn't funny in the least, just straight-up abrasive.

"Please, you cannot possibly expect anyone to stay conscious while listening to this cheap stagecraft." Bellatrix went on blatantly, rolling her eyes. "I'd suggest we rather show them than being all talk... I'm afraid they're a bit too old for fairytales," she finished, eyeing the man with a challenging look before forming one of her angelic smiles.

Hermione's eyes jumped to Lockhart, curious as to what his reaction might be and she almost sighed out of pure indignance.

Like a lovesick puppy, the man was bloody smiling back.

The young witch could not believe this; Bellatrix had just humiliated him in front of the entire sixth year, shattered at least half of his authority already and her bat her eyelashes was all it took to compensate the shame?! Incredible, what a bit of beauty could do, Hermione thought, frowning at both of them.

"Well... of course," Lockhart paused, scanning the students with a lost look of someone who'd just got the earth snatched away from beneath their feet. Biting his lower lip, he gestured vehemently. "All right, listen up, everybody. Grab a partner, we'll start with the..." His questioning eyes went to Bellatrix.

"The Shield Charm," she filled in with a risen eyebrow, drawing more strangled laughs. Hermione was positive all of it came from the male part of the group; the girls were too busy scowling at the witch with the same distaste as her—for utterly different reasons, of course, but it still counted just alright.

"Ah yes, the Shield Charm!" Lockhart's hand shot to his forehead, softly slapping the skin."We've had a rap with Professor Prewett who told us it is quite a trouble even for the best of you so we've figured, what better start..."

Hermione stopped listening; she gulped, her betraying eyes straying to the unimpressed Bellatrix—what was she up to?

Weeks after their affray she'd decided to magically appear just to teach the poor students the secrets behind the Shielding Charm? Likely story! This was no coincidence, Hermione was certain of it.
The girl inwardly snorted as her brain reconstructed Draco's desperate attempt at making her stay and listen to his aunt back then at Three Broomsticks. The entire concept was positively absurd; Hermione couldn't imagine a single parallel universe where Bellatrix would fancy helping her willingly!

"We'll demonstrate, first," Lockhart tore her inner monologue apart. "I, of course, have a to be a gentleman and let the lady win." He flashed a smile at the girls, taking off his golden cape in one swift movement.

Hermione almost laughed. Despite her great aversion toward the woman, there was no denying her magical abilities were anything short of incredible; such compassion wasn't needed and Bellatrix's bared teeth suggested quite the same thing.

"You don't have to be gentle with me." She challenged with a dangerous smirk the girl knew far too well by now. "I'm positive I could take you down either way."

"You're one dangerous woman, Bella." The man murmured quietly but the cringing Hermione and a few other students unfortunately managed to catch the remark, too—Lavender Brown in particular: Hermione heard her gasp. She turned to her, catching the girl exchanging significant looks with Parvati Patil. Rolling her eyes, she leaned over and whispered: "For quick reference, she's married so knock it off."

"Oh, so a love affair," Parvati peeped back quietly, narrowing her eyes at Hermione's mocking expression. "This is straight up flirting, look at their body language!"

"Exactly," Lavender nodded, gazing at the young Ravenclaw as though it was the most obvious thing.

"Body language?" Hermione whispered, irritated. "Seriously? If that gaze meant attraction, she'd be fond of every single person in this room! Just look at her, it seems more like 'I want to kill you' than 'screw you'."

Parvati's and Lavender's eyes went unbelievably wide after that statement; they'd never heard Hermione use that kind of language before but they better get used to it—she had had them up to here with Draco and she had them even higher now.

"It looks like you're jealous," Parvati suggested slowly when she recovered from her shock.

'What?' Hermione felt the heat burning inside her cheeks.

"You so are!" Lavender agreed with a such smirk that the young witch had a sudden urge to slap away. "Understandable. You want Mr Lockhart all to yourself, but—"

"Are you truly that thick?! First you started accusing me of dating Draco and now—" Hermione splashed to the horrified girls but before she could finish, she heard a soft cough behind her back.

"Miss Idontknowyourname," Hermione turned around, seeing Lockhart's azure eyes staring directly into hers. "Do you realise you're interrupting my lesson? If you're not interested, dear, there's a door, I wouldn't want to waste your time, though I suppose boy problems you may discuss later."

She blushed even harder and carefully avoided looking at Bellatrix; she was in no mood of seeing that signature smug expression of hers just now.
She was torn between her curiosity to know what would happen if she stayed and the urge to take the chance and leave while she still could. If she left, Bellatrix might go after her; if she stayed, she could leave in the safety of some small group of people...

"I'm sorry," she apologised to the man after considering her options. "It won't happen again."

"It's all right, it's all right," Lockhart smiled schizophrenically at her. "Just wouldn't want you missing out on the glorious fight you're all about to witness."

"Ready?" he asked as he got back to Bellatrix. Hermione dared to spare her a look and saw her merely tipping her eyebrow at the ridiculous question—of course she was ready, she was always ready to beat the crap out of everyone, Hermione had experienced that first-hand.

Her eyes snapped back to Lockhart, who was standing with his back and knees slightly bent, grinning as though trying to charm the dark witch with his dazzling teeth while Bellatrix didn't even look like dueling; her posture wasn't any different from her usual one and her wand floated loosely in her pale hand.

The whole room was so silent one could hear a hair fall; everyone's eyes were flashing between the pair, waiting as to who would strike first.

It was Lockhart.

There was a movement in his hand but barely a millisecond had passed and the tip of the wooden stick didn't even have a chance to form a flash of light when it flew out of his grip and the force of the spell itself knocked the man down to the ground—and Bellatrix wasn't even looking.

"Damn, she got him good," someone whispered through the concerned girlie gasps as the man struggled to stand up.

The moment of surprise caught Hermione off guard, too, and she couldn't halt the tide of admiration washing over her, drowning her in. Bellatrix possessed, without a doubt, prodigious skills and the triumphant look on her face was just the most beautiful thing to—

The girl quickly shook her head. 'Stop thinking about her like that!' Angry with herself, she immediately focused on the man who had finally managed to scramble back to his feet.

"As I said, let the lady win," he chuckled nervously, smoothing his hair. Bellatrix's jaw seemed to be tensing and the girl too felt a strange feeling of unfairness settling inside her chest; there was no need to take away from the witch like that. Attributing her victory to the fact she was a woman and he was just being polite was, according to her, completely and utterly sexist.

"Everyone's got a partner?" Lockhart shouted, his eyes searching through them.

Gulping, Hermione brushed off her musings, her eyes feverishly tripping over her classmates. She didn't know who to ask: Ernie had already teamed up with Hannah and Padma, out of pure sulk, chose Seamus Finnigan over her. Merlin, even Loony Lovegood had managed to find someone.

She cast a desperate look over the few remaining students, afraid she'd be forced into partnering up with Bellatrix.

To her relief, she saw that Fay, the girl she'd met earlier that week in professor Prewett's office, was also without a partner. Their eyes found each other at the same time and both girls smiled as they approached each other.
"I see we're both the last resorts," the girl whispered, rolling up her sleeves, and Hermione merely nodded her head, waiting for further instructions.

"All right," Lockhart began after making sure everyone had someone to practise with. "What I want you to do is to use whatever simple spell you can think of, nothing dangerous or any funny business, mind you, and your partner's job is to try and deflect it. Remember, we're using non-verbal spells here! I don't want to hear any whisperings!" He gave them a searing look. "Everybody knows what to do? Brilliant! On the count of three!" His voice resonated louder. "We'll have a go, looking around, correcting, giving some tips."

'Oh no.'

"One..."

Hermione's eyes locked with Fay's. "You try the Shield Charm first," the Gryffindor whispered and Hermione didn't argue even though she'd prefer it the other way around.

"...two..."

She could feel the tips of her fingers tingling as she aimed her wand at Fay.

"... three!"

The room stayed quiet; maybe a few giggles had slipped past lips at the odd silence. Hermione waited on pins and needles, shifting on her feet but Fay's wand was stubbornly still even after half a minute.

"Well, maybe we can try it the other way around," she suggested after more of Fay's unsuccessful tries—the girl shrugged, visibly unsatisfied with herself.

Hermione, though, didn't have much luck either. Every time she tried firing a spell, something blocked it and the same thing kept happening over and over again. She had a pretty good feeling as to who the source behind her failure was, but anytime she glanced at the dark witch, the woman seemed to be wrapped in correcting some of the students way over there at the opposite side of the room.

"Maybe we should swap again," Fay insinuated, looking much more relieved when she saw Hermione couldn't perform the spell, too.

"What's up, Granger," Zabini, who was waiting for his partner to shrug off a Petrificus Totalus, called out. "Seems like the breakup took away your powers."

Hermione ignored him. Somebody had just paused behind her back and her stomach made a tiny flip as she inhaled a familiar, pleasant scent; her hand trembled as she raised her wand again. She didn't want Bellatrix to see her not being good at this. Waiting, her breath quickened but the girl opposite her didn't strike.

"Loosen the grip, deary," Bellatrix advised after a while, approaching Fay, and to Hermione's dislike her porcelain hand reached to hers, her fingers sliding over the girl's, making her relax the hold.

Hermione seethed; the Gryffindor's girl was a half-blood, too, and for some reason, it was no problem for Bellatrix to touch her while she couldn't even shake Hermione's hand!

"Thank you," Fay almost whispered, giving the woman a smile before looking back at Hermione,
whose face was as stiff as a stone.

"Ready?" she mouthed and Hermione tipped her chin down, completely aware of Bellatrix's eyes on her but she was determined to stand her ground and ignore her for all she was worth, bracing herself. She really wanted to use the non-verbal spell, she really did, but if she failed to defend herself, if she—the spell finally shot toward her but instead of using her wand, Hermione jumped aside in a strange pirouette and immediately felt like an idiot.

"Highly miserable and ... muggle-like," she heard a silvery voice, knowing very well she totally deserved that. Embarrassed, she waited for more acid comments but none of that came. Glancing up, she realised Bellatrix had already moved ahead to Nott and Avery.

Her ashamed eyes paused on the latter boy, who was inconspicuously eyeing the woman's cleavage and she felt a sudden urge to pacify him but quickly snapped out of it. This was absolutely ridiculous—she had feelings for Blair, goddamnit!

Why the insane jealousy then?! the inner voice nagged. Perhaps just the remnants of the first revelation of her sexuality, the girl tried to reason out; she was a teenager after all, the raging hormones were nothing unusual, didn't have to mean—

The moment of distraction cost Hermione a crash with an unusually forceful spell; a flash of blue light hit her stomach, sending her flying into the air with a couple of somersaults; she slumped onto the wooden floor face down, her head bouncing off of the hard surface.

A sharp, throbbing pain perforated through her entire front, paralysing her limbs for what felt like an eternity; it was like she'd just smashed half of her body and she wanted nothing more than to stay lying there forever.

"It's all right, I'll take care of it." Hermione heard it as if through a couple of plastic wrappers. Her head was burning, everything was impossibly hot and she quickly needed something cold to press to her face. Struggling, she tried to move, propping herself on her hands, but they were shaking so badly there was no way they could support her. Trying again, her lips parted to get in some oxygen but she got more than that: a full taste of a warm metallic liquid inside.

"Get up, Muddy!" It was clearly Bellatrix whispering in her ear. "See? This is what happens when you're too confident, saying the wrong things to the wrong people..."

For Merlin's sake, had the witch just hexed her?! Could she really have attacked her with so many people around?!

"Had your five minutes of fame," she continued, "you may stop being an attention-seeking piece of garbage now."

'Damn you Bellatrix Lestrange, damn you, damn you, damn you!'

Hermione felt a pull at her back as if she had a tiny little hook etched in between her shoulder blades, making her leap to her feet; the sudden movement made her head spin and she had to fight for balance, for the sharp pain was hitting her with a full force now.

Hissing, her trembling hands reached toward her features; she couldn't see properly: her eyes were flooded with tears but it didn't take quantum physics to figure out she had become the object of everyone's attention. Despite the pain, she could feel a great deal of humiliation washing over her as she realised she was on display in such condition.
"There's nothing to see, carry on with your practice," Bellatrix pointed after a while, probably after she made sure everyone had taken a good look at the injured girl.

How she hated her for thi—Oh...

Hermione let out a soft gasp of surprise as she felt a faint pressure of hands on either side of her upper arms.

Was the woman touching her and not actually causing pain? It was gentle, unbelievably gentle, and she couldn't believe how a simple unexpected touch could make her stomach jump like this.

What was wrong with her?!! She was hurting all over, bleeding all over—which she had this woman to thank for and she seriously felt all giddy just because her hands rested on her?

"Come, deary, I'll take care of you!"

'Sure you will—Oh God, help me someone!'

"Doh!" She tried to protest with her nose full of blood, but she stood no chance as the woman propelled her forward; she couldn't do anything but trust her since her eyes couldn't see more than the swell of her own eyelids.

'You are doomed, Hermione, so doomed!'
They were walking in silence. The unruly butterflies which had been intruding Hermione's stomach had finally subsided, dissolving in throbs of pain that demanded of all of her attention now. She was leaning slightly forward, keeping her hands mere inches away from the swell of her injured face. The gushing flow of the warm fluid was leaking everywhere: it broke into her stifling mouth, lacing over the sensitive teeth, dripping, salty and warm against her tongue; she could feel it pool in her palms, seeping through her trembling fingers into the sleeves of her robe, pestering the soft skin underneath.

Bellatrix's hands were still guiding her, making her turn into all sorts of directions. Hermione had no idea where they were going but knew with certainty it would be no hospital wing. Strangely, she didn't even mind—had it been the pandemonium itself, she would be glad to reach it regardless. Hermione desperately needed to repose; that horrible blend of a headache and nausea was gradually blunting her perception of time as well as space and she was starting to worry she wouldn't be able to make it without either vomiting or passing out.

If only she was granted at least a second to rest.

As though Bellatrix had heard her, she stopped right after, the sudden halt sending a fresh jolt of pain through Hermione's forehead while forcing an embarrassing hiss past her teeth. The pressure of the woman's touch on her shoulders fell away immediately and she could hear an energetic ruffling sound as if a wiping of hands against fabric.

"Straight ahead, Muddy," Bellatrix spoke and even though her voice kept the sweetness, it lacked the caring undertone she'd used earlier in the classroom. "Come on, move!"

The order was presented so boldly it instantly aroused a need to oppose. Unfortunately, Hermione was in no state to argue: her nose was persistently leaking and her gasping mouth yearned for oxygen more than any words.

It was a basic survival instinct suggesting compliance would be the most logical of her options right now.

Despite the fact she still couldn't see more than a blurred flush of colours in front of her eyes, she suicidally decided to trust the woman and follow her instructions. With her right hand kept at the same level with her chin and the other one outstretched to gain some perspective of her surroundings, she hesitantly moved forward. She was trying her best to edge as carefully as she could but lo and behold, after the first few steps her hands had somehow missed the stone, resulting in a meetup of her already hurting face with a rigid wall. The doubled blunt pain shot through her features, drawing a blaring cry out of her mouth, her body flopping down like a ragdoll.

Bellatrix gasped: "Oh my, did I say straight? I actually meant left," she purred in a voice full of clean uninhibited mirth which only managed to increase the scope of resentment Hermione felt for her. She couldn't understand it. Why did Bellatrix have to be so awfully callous all the time? How come the incident hadn't invoked at least a tiny bit of remorse in her? Being compassionate was a basic natural tendency; even animals demonstrated helping behaviour and not only towards their own species.

"Aww, does it hurt that much," the woman taunted, interrupting her musings. "Does little muddy
"A girl want auntie Bella to kiss her boo-boo?"

Had those words been spoken some other time, Hermione would have blushed insufferably. Right now, it had but mere effect on her. She huddled closer to the wall, gingerly wiping the excess blood off her skin.

There was a tapping on her shoulder and she had a bad feeling it was Bellatrix's crooked wand demanding her attention but she wouldn't dare to let her hands move past her face and risk another form of attack; she doubted she'd be able to endure any more of that without actually sobbing like a child and maintaining at least a modicum of dignity; she stayed silent, determined to ignore the witch for all she was worth.

Bellatrix though was having none of that; she heaved a sigh and Hermione instantly tasted a horrible, dull pain smacking her marred face, feeling as though her bones were moving underneath her skin. It hauled another high-pitched cry from her dry throat but she wasn't even ashamed at that point; hopefully she could attract someone's attention and save herself from the further mutilation.

But the agony disappeared before she could dive deeper into the horrifying concept.

Hesitant, she took a moment and slowly opened her squeezing eyes, realising she was able to fully see again; there was no more flowing blood and she carefully tried breathing in and out through her nose so as to test the range of the healing. Her upper teeth touched the lower row, experiencing no more pain—even her chin was free from all the numbness. Her hands cautiously checked the rest of her face, finding no swelling whatsoever. Everything seemed to be back to normal, though the sight of the slowly drying blood painting her hands red suggested anything but. Her eyes jumped to the smirking Bellatrix standing all high and mighty above her, a few of her curls falling into her face.

The anger she couldn't have fully grasped due to the nasty injuries hit her with an incredible force now. She scrambled back to her feet, a mild, residual pain still shooting through her head. She bore her eyes into those proud ones with pure, unmistakable resentment directed at both of them; at Bellatrix for butchering her face like a damned steak, and at herself for knowing she'd let her get away with it despite the fact the whole thing was more than worth reporting.

"Don't be shy," the dark witch motioned toward the open door in front of them, observing Hermione's vibrant signs of anger with sadistic glee. There was not a hint of remorse in her face, just raw satisfaction and it was the most disturbing sight Hermione had ever seen.

What was wrong with this woman?

"I said," Bellatrix repeated slowly, her eyes focused and unblinking. "Move it!"

But Hermione didn't feel like doing so; her fingers reached into her robe, fishing for the wooden stick, ready to fight her way through if needed, but froze upon realising her pockets were dry empty.

"Looking for this?"

To her horror, her eyes spotted Bellatrix's hand waving the vine wood wand in front of her face. The back of her neck bristled with cold sweat, her hand immediately reaching out, but the witch drew hers away.

"Can I have my wand back?" Hermione more demanded than asked, voice trembling; she was striving to appear confident but was finding pulling that one off rather difficult for obvious reasons.
"Well, it depends." Bellatrix pouted, trying the flexibility of the thin wood by bending it against her palm. Hermione's heart leaped at the sight—if Bellatrix was to break her wand... but she couldn't do that, could she?! Of course not! She was just trying to instill fear in her so that Hermione would do exactly what she wanted. It was just another one of her mind games but... was she willing to risk that? Hermione knew she wasn't. There was no point in arguing or fighting; she stood no chance without any wand in her possession.

Bellatrix's lips were curling as she watched her come to the only conclusion possible.

She had no choice.

Swallowing hard, Hermione's feet reluctantly moved forward and entered the dark classroom. The thick floating candles above the door immediately sparked to life, revealing the empty desks and chairs huddled in the middle under the broad ceiling.

She turned to the witch who had followed her in, the dim light casting frightening shadows over her features. "I'd like to have my wand back now!"

Bellatrix smirked, her coal eyes scanning over the girl's unnerved form. She took her time but eventually tossed the wooden stick back to Hermione who caught it with great relief, partly taken aback the witch returned the wand at all.

"Are we forgetting our manners? I didn't hear a thank you."

Hermione almost choked: She didn't what? She didn't hear her say thank you? She would say her thanks, oh she would! Just—

A cold splash of water hit her face and she inhaled instinctively, filling her barely healed nose with a sharp pressure; she could feel the flow travelling through her nasal chamber into her mouth, leaving her coughing and tearing up all over again. After a few embarrassing seconds, she wiped the lingering droplets off her face, scowling at the unpleasant taste at the back of her throat.

Bellatrix waited expectantly.

"Still no thank you? Well, I thought I'd show some class by regarding your insolence with generosity and help you get rid of all that dirt but—uhm," she snickered and before Hermione had a chance to snap at her for regarding her blood as dirt, she continued. "Perhaps, being a mudblood and all that makes it difficult to understand certain ways of—"

"It is not difficult for me to understand any ways of approach!" Hermione cut in, finishing the sentence before Bellatrix had a chance to use the word that would make the whole statement twice as offensive. "Actually I can read them quite well!" Her trembling hand squeezed her wand tighter.

"And I'd definitely express my gratitude if only certain actions covered the basic definition of helping, which is being of assistance or support to those in need."

"But I've been of assistance!" Bellatrix pressed her hands to her chest as though hurt but Hermione caught a small smirk as the woman swept past her, making her way to the desks, hopping on one of them and sitting down.

"You've attacked me!" Hermione faced her and stepped closer, though still maintaining quite a distance between them. "You have deliberately—" Her eyes involuntarily slid over the contour of Bellatrix's thighs as her legs crossed under the ebony skirt. A sudden vision of the dream involving both of them in the Malfoy's library formed inside her mind and she could feel a feverish heat spread throughout her cheeks all the way to her ears' helixes; the words got stuck inside her throat.
and she quickly moved her head aside, absolutely furious with her betraying hormones.

"Couldn't pick a better time to remember, could you?! Sweet mother of Merlin, don't let her see it!"

"Oh, that? Sadly, it wasn't me," Bellatrix said, utterly ignorant of her unease; she sounded genuinely disappointed that somebody else had thought of cursing Hermione before she could have done so herself. "I had something better for you in store but the humiliation itself should teach you a lesson. It hurt, didn't it?" Hermione shot her a quick look, seeing her pout, which her stomach handled with a double flip.

How filthy sick was that?

Alarmed, she ran her hand through her hair, angrily pushing a few strands into her face. Why was she having all these feelings after having been treated worse than some dirty rug; was she getting off on that?

Her eyes didn't know where to go.

'Hermione Granger, you are NOT allowed to analyse this NOW! Actually, you're not allowed to analyse it ever!'

She should get out of here; it was just a matter of time before she'd out herself and that she wasn't far from it: blushing, not being able to look Bellatrix straight in the eye, blubbering like an idiot; maybe she could try to sell it as fear... maybe post trauma, but the woman wasn't stupid; eventually she'd come to realise what was actually going on.

Come on, she urged herself, move, please!

But she couldn't; it was like being paralysed by some strange vile feeling she'd refused to label or actually fully perceive—but there was no time for studying it even if she wanted to; Bellatrix had just confessed it wasn't her who made a meatloaf out of her face.

Clearing her throat, Hermione crossed her arms over her chest like an invisible shield; her brows snapped together and her eyes pierced a hole in the wooden floor under her feet. "Right, so who was it then," she asked in the frostiest tone she could muster.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you because I do not know myself but if you manage to find out, do make sure to congratulate them on my behalf—saved me a lot of time."

Hermione's teeth clenched so hard she thought they'd break; she had no idea what she was still doing here; Bellatrix kept blatantly hurling the insults her way like ping-pong balls and the worst thing was that she was willingly taking all of that. She'd never noticed such self-destructive behaviour in herself before and it was something she really needed to look into.

"But enough of the pleasantries." The witch clasped her hands, sensing Hermione was concentrating on her own thoughts rather than her. "Let's get straight to the business. I came here just as you demanded, even dressed up for you," she joked, her fingers running down her corset, tracing the dark leather. "Will little muddy talk to me now?" she let out in a low raspy voice.

Hermione shivered. Her forehead frowned as she tried to ignore the things that the gravelly sound was doing to her. The situation was getting out of her hands and she couldn't help thinking Bellatrix might have had some clue about her not so innocent inclinations and was talking to her like that on purpose.

It scared the hell out of her and she knew it was necessary to fight back—the anger strategy was by far the best one working. With a famous 'Attack is the best form of defense', she shook her head. "Depends. Would you talk to someone who spent half of your summer vacation making your life a
living hell?! Someone who likes to bully children half their age just to feel better about themselves?"

Bellatrix leaned in from the desk she was seated on, strangely expressing no signs of anger whatsoever. "What are you talking about?"

"You've assaulted me," Hermione almost yelled. "Numerous times!"

"I did what?!" Bellatrix let out a surprised laugh, rising her eyebrows as if that statement was the most ridiculous idea she'd ever heard. "You mean those harmless spells that not even once touched you, while you directly hit me with yours?"

"I mean that time you had me on the floor," Hermione's cheeks heated up like a teapot.

"Oh right, I've forgotten all about that!" Bellatrix waved her hand dismissively and scrunched her nose, perhaps silently cursing the intoxication which had made her do it. Hermione knew she didn't like making any kind of physical contact with her and that night, there had been quite a lot of that.

"Well, I didn't," she proclaimed frantically. "I couldn't have!"

'Shit up, shut up, shut up! When did you develop a habit of making things worse for yourself?!

But it was too late.

Bellatrix's piercing eyes locked with hers and the blood-red lips curled into a disturbing smile. "Don't tell me I made such an impression," her eyelids lowered a bit, which made her gaze all the more intense. "Dear God, must have been quite an experience for you."

Hermione kept her mouth opening and closing like a fish, unable to form a word. The statement had stolen the wind from beneath her wings and she would slap herself if she could for bringing this upon herself; she was so flustered, most likely crimson in the face and she was still yet to react! But what would she say? Maybe an expression full of hatred would do just fine!

"Awww, Muddy!"

It didn't.

"My name's Hermione," she blurted hotly, the adrenaline producing the venomous tone quite naturally.

"Did you hear that? It almost rhymes!" Bellatrix chuckled, biting the tip of her tongue. "So Muddy, sweetheart, tell me."

Hermione's nostrils flared as her right hand curled around her wand even tighter. For a split second she considered retorting 'What is it, Bellatrix, sweetheart', but thought better of it and shook her head instead. "No, I'm not doing this. I'm not going to talk—I thought I made myself clear weeks ago."

Bellatrix seemed taken aback for a moment. "You made it clear you'd talk once I come as myself! You have me here so what's the problem?"

Hermione decided to ignore the last part of that question. "If I remember correctly, and I'm positive I do, I said a simple word maybe, so..."

"Ahaaa, clever little witch, aren't you?" Bellatrix bared her teeth and for the first time looked a bit
irritated. "Do you think a little persuasion could help you decide," she asked, slightly tipping the corners of her lips down before parting them. Her wand was back in her right hand, its tip tracing the creamy skin of her neck.

Hermione gulped, squeezing the wand so hard her knuckles hurt. "Attacking a student at Hogwarts would—"

"Moralising again? Is that your defence mechanism," the dark witch asked, getting down from the table.

'Quick, Hermione think!' she urged herself desperately as Bellatrix licked her lips, slowly approaching.

"Well, what—what do you want to talk about anyway?" she blurted, all the words blending together as one but it was enough to make Bellatrix stop from coming any closer. "Venor floccus? I don't think so. I mean, what is the point, it's not like you—you and me—" That sounded so bizarre. "We don't necessarily get along and yet you'd want to help—oh!" Her lips parted at the sudden revelation.

"You don't want to help me," she breathed slowly. "You want my help!"

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "Don't flatter yourself!"

"You do!" Hermione couldn't believe it—how bloody ignorant and stupid must have she been for not taking such possibility into consideration! Blimey! It should have been clear to her since the beginning! Bellatrix had kept deliberately seeking her out and it sure as hell wasn't because she'd missed Hermione's company; she must have wanted to know about her dreams... The question though was why?

"I don't want your help, mudblood! What I want is a compensation!" Bellatrix barked but it didn't stop Hermione from forming a small, victorious smile, which obviously left the older witch seething.

What a paradox. She bloody needed her! Hermione's mood scooped ten levels higher. Now this changed everything. "Compensation for what," she asked succinctly, eyeing Bellatrix's tensing jaw. Let's just not overdo it with the brass, she decided inwardly. Maybe she seemed to be the one with the upper hand but she wasn't as stupid as to forget who truly held the reigns here.

"Is it really necessary to answer that?" Bellatrix shook her head in disbelief, her eyes radiating so much hatred Hermione felt her smile melt away like smoke. "How about I start with you being born? Hm, muddy?" Her eyes were deadly serious. "Then I could continue with you surviving and growing up, discovering you can do magic... Attending Hogwarts and befriending that traitorous boy my sister gave birth to! What else? Oh," she gasped dramatically. "Perhaps, the breakage of our family and the fall of our status!" Bellatrix's lips curled in revulsion. "Thanks to you, our name is less than MUD! Have it ever crossed your mind what could that precious friendship of yours do, you selfish little punk?!!"

Small ghosts of tears formed in the corner of Hermione's eyes, but she refused to shed them. "I'm sorry—but this is hardly anyone's fault!" she objected and blessedly, her voice stayed firm and clear. "Of course, I cannot say it may partially—"

"No, we're not discussing this!" Bellatrix cut her off. "You've asked for the reasons and I gave them to you—end of story! Now we'll talk about venor floccus!"
Hermione shook her head. "No."

Bellatrix looked as though she’d been slapped. "No," she half-whispered, her eyes glowing dangerously.

"No," Hermione repeated, heart racing. "Not quite yet."

"What? Do you need gold to get your lips moving?" The dark witch snorted loftily. "I'll give it to you; I don't care how much."

"I don't want any gold!" Hermione snapped, feeling grandly offended. "But—" a sudden thought sprang inside her mind. "I'd like to ask for something else."

"Oh really? And what is it?"

"You—you being civil to me," she let out in a soft voice. "Just talk to me like to a fellow human being. Drop the demeaning nicknames. That's all I'm asking for."

Bellatrix's eyebrows shot up as she let out a short-lived laugh. "You want my respect?"

"Tolerance would do just fine," Hermione clarified, her gaze firm.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then it's no deal."

"You do realise I could make you talk if I wanted to?" Bellatrix gave her a challenging look, clearly meaning to scare her off but Hermione stood her ground.

"It wouldn't suffice in the long run considering I have new dreams every single night," she replied, doing her best to keep still; she wanted to appear as serious and certain as she possibly could. "I don't suppose this is going to be just a one-time thing."

Bellatrix was unmoving for a couple of seconds but then turned on her heal, meandering toward the large empty cage in the corner of the room; it looked as though she was considering each step, probably trying to buy some time to think. Hermione's eyes slid over the cascading curls snaking along Bellatrix's shoulders and back, glistening in the faint source of light.

She was unable tear her gaze from her (mainly for safety reasons) while battling the confusing row within herself. She wondered when exactly the transition from a total refusal to talking to Bellatrix to 'sure we'll talk but under my conditions' happened. How did she even get to that point in her head when she said to herself, okay, we'd do this? What was the breaking point? It couldn't have been the desire to solve the bloody venor flocuss business even if she wanted it more than anything in the world! She would rather ask Dumbledore than accept Bellatrix's help; she'd been stubbornly repeating that over and over every single morning after waking up clueless again.

If only Dumbledore would bother showing up for more than couple of seconds. The old man was the only one worth trusting and if she truly was to share her burden with someone, it would be him and him alone; she'd be a fool to put her hopes into someone who kept stabbing her back over and over again and wouldn't feel an ounce of guilt about it.

Still she'd already given her consent. 'Stupid, stupid, Hermione! Will you never learn?'

All she was left with was a hope Bellatrix would find the condition too degrading to actually go with it; it was far too bizarre to even imagine her being polite.
"All right."

The cinnamon eyes widened. Bellatrix made it back, stopping four feet away from the gulping Hermione.

"I'll do it but let's get something straight before you start getting any ideas," she proclaimed, folding her arms. Hermione blinked, a bit too distracted by the dark spots circling Bellatrix's eyes and the unhealthy pallor of her skin—she seemed profusely more exhausted than Hermione remembered. "This relationship will be purely professional—I don't want you thinking we're friends now or anything for that matter, is that clear?"

Focusing again, Hermione nodded—Bellatrix's state of health was none of her concern anyway.

"All right if this is settled." The dark witch walked towards the mass of chairs and tables and with just a flick of her hand made a pair of them lift and move forward. "Shall we actually get to the real talk? We have lost enough time already with this stupid quarrel." She let out a bored sigh as the wooden furniture stopped right next to her and flopped down, causing just a faint ghost of a noise.

Hermione found it amusing how Bellatrix always seemed to be in a hurry. Even back at the Manor when teaching her, Draco, and Zabini the Occlumency. She claimed she wouldn't waste her time with definitions and small talk because she was more for a practical approach person, yet with Hermione she always seemed to find some time for a nice chat, especially if a chance to humiliate her was at hand.

"What are you waiting for? I'm not going to scream over there so you could hear me!"

Hermione realised Bellatrix was already seated and expected her to take a seat as well. Slowly, she moved forward, considering her options. She sure as hell wouldn't be sitting anywhere within Bellatrix's slap range but knew she needed to get close enough to give off an impression she also wasn't afraid of being near her. She opted for the place a table away from Bellatrix's, the choice earning a knowing smirk from the carmine lips.

"Of course, we could have done this weeks ago if you had some respect for a fellow human being's time," she pointed mockingly, referring to Hermione's earlier remark, but then used a surprisingly casual tone. "But since we're finally here, let's cut straight to the chase. Tell me, how much do you know already?"

Hermione parted her lips, exhaling. "Well," she began, her eyes roaming around the room. She was still in doubt whether to trust the woman, especially with something so delicate, but realised it was already too late to chicken out now. Besides, she didn't have to reveal everything, did she?

"Honestly, not as much as I'd like to," she confessed finally, placing her hands onto the cold desk, her fingers never leaving her wand. "I've gained a great deal of knowledge studying the related subjects, yet not a single one of them has actually offered any decent explanation. Just recently I've—I've been told to look into venor floccus."

"By Dumbledore. Draco mentioned him in the letter," Bellatrix pointed and Hermione felt a fresh wave of anger rising at her best friend for ratting her out like that; she told him that this piece of information was confidential and she would prefer to keep things that way.

"Forget about the boy now," Bellatrix barked, making Hermione flinch. She immediately raised her mental barrier even though it was probably the frowning look on her face that had given her away.

"Did Dumbledore tell you anything else?"
She shook her head. "Nothing and I have no idea how he found out in the first place. Nobody beside Draco knew." Pausing, she licked her dry lips, a lingering question on the tip of her tongue. "Do you—do you think it is possible Professor Dumbledore had read my mind?"

"Absolutely." The tips of Bellatrix's lips curled slightly down, her gleaming eyes full of unexpressed thoughts. "But I suppose he's known about your issue for quite a while now."

Hermione's jaw slacked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Dumbledore's an old manipulative gaffer; he is insane, no doubt, but nothing's ever that simple with him. Do you think he would just tell you out of the kindness of his heart? Just because he saw your sad little face and decided to make it all better? No dear, he's dropping the clues," Bellatrix proclaimed in a silky voice. "I think he's got something to gain from it, too. I'm almost positive he'll come to talk to you again once the time is right," she added, eyeing Hermione's arms of which the girl suddenly became aware of. She adjusted them slightly, her gaze lingering over Bellatrix's veiny eyelids.

It was hard to believe such admirable, considerate man as Dumbledore could be as calculated as the woman described him; it sounded more like she was talking about herself rather than him.

Hermione wasn't convinced. "What and most importantly why would he—"

"You can ponder about that in your free time," Bellatrix interrupted harshly. "We need to move on! So he told you to look into venor floccus—have you?"

"Yes—well," she replied slowly, still wrapped up in the thought about the possibility Dumbledore could be using her like that. "I've read about them before and while it's the closest I've ever got to solving the puzzle, the definition doesn't quite apply to me."

The wooden desk squeaked as Bellatrix leaned in, her left hand supporting her jaw. "What makes you think you've read the right definition," she suggested, almost whispering. "There's always more than just one correct explanation—besides, I wouldn't trust books on this one."

"Venor floccus cannot be anyone who hasn't trained!" Hermione objected, aggravated as always when somebody dared question the credibility of books.

"That's precisely why it's so interesting." Bellatrix's eyes widened momentarily. "You've never practiced and yet, you still possess a mind of a trained venor floccus."

"Impossible," Hermione objected, ready to argue as much as needed. "The abilities of venor floccus are gained, it is not a talent! I couldn't have just had it all along, could I?"

"Well, maybe you are special," Bellatrix taunted in a silvery voice, smirking.

Hermione couldn't help herself and gave her a dirty look which subsequently surprised both of them.

"I'm sorry but is this another way how to get to me," she bursted, feeling wild tides of paranoia washing over her. "If so I'm not interested in taking any part in it, not that I've been before but—"

"My, my, aren't you one egocentric little thing," Bellatrix tsked, shaking her head. "Snap out of it," her hands clasped, making Hermione flinch. "I got better things to do than compliment mudbloods just so that I could drag them later."

"You've broken the agreement!"
"The hell with the agreement! Don't you wanna know anything? So far you've been such a nuisance I'm starting to wonder if I really made a right decision coming to you! I don't know what I was thinking; you're just a bloody kid after all. What could you possible do to help me!" Bellatrix leaned away, her arms folding.

"So you do need my help," Hermione decided for a retaliation and strategically pinpointed the one thing which could actually hit the right nerve.

"It just happens that you need that of mine, too." Bellatrix replied after a couple of strained breaths and Hermione's eyes widened at the indirect confession. She had expected any sort of reaction—even a curse—but this went far beyond her imagination. "Now if you're done making stupid remarks…?" Bellatrix raised her left brow and since Hermione remained silent, she went on.

"Considering you weren't properly educated in Occlumency—yes, it is linked—I'll try to break it down to you as plainly as possible." Her fingernails scratched just below her collarbone and Hermione's eyes lingered over the thin angry marks which were left behind; Bellatrix's skin seemed so delicate, as if the softest touch could bruise—

'Bloody crap-filled hell, stop thinking about her skin and focus! As if you hadn't dreamed about figuring this out ever since you were thirteen!"

"...different areas of substances reside in the human brain; normally there's five of them—"

Hermione's slipping attention finally decided to collaborate—she had read about this!

"Those are hopes, dreams, opinions, fears, and memories—they each vibrate at a different frequency, that's how it's possible to tell them apart!" She had almost jumped from her seat, eager to spit her knowledge, clearly forgetting this wasn't just another lesson and there were no points awaiting, just a loud slam against the table.

"I'm sorry…"

"As I said," Bellatrix raised her voice. "There's five of them. Your little brain, however, has got six of those areas."

Hermione parted her lips, petrified. She'd never heard of anything such as the sixth area. What was it for? When it came down to her, dreams, obviously—but those already had their own place, didn't they? Why the extra sphere? Had it been there all along or had her brain somehow created it once those odd dreams started coming to her?

"You hadn't always had that additional area, though." Bellatrix proclaimed as if having read Hermione's mind, which she truly hoped she hadn't. "I'm guessing maybe two or three years prior was the breaking point."

Clearing her throat, Hermione nodded. "Yes, it's been precisely three years since I started dreaming like that. Something must have happened at that time then, something that brought the dreams to me. I've been trying to figure it all out but—"

"But couldn't," Bellatrix added, yawning, keeping her palm close to her lips. "Well, now you have."

"No, I haven't!" Hermione objected, frowning. "I don't know anything about how it happened, neither do I know what the dreams truly mean or why I have them!" She was breathing hard, considering whether to ask Bellatrix or not but decided to go for it; there shouldn't be any harm in seeking answers, even though with her one never knew…
"Can I ask you something," she ventured, her heart practically punching her ribcage. "Do you—do you happen to know anything about it?"

Bellatrix didn't say a word, only kept looking into those eager eyes, her lips slowly twisting into a cruel smile.

"No," she replied finally, her voice soft as pillow. "And honestly, I don't even care. I did my job; I helped you understand, now it's my turn."

Hermione drew closer, her eyes exasperated. "But I didn't learn anything new! I'm still—" She inhaled sharply, eyes closing. "You must know something! Please, just tell me what it means! Why do I have them, what is it I keep seeing every single night?" She couldn't stand having the answers so close and not being able to get them.

Bellatrix, not at all eager to respond, smirked as Hermione's tone became utterly desperate. She stood up from her chair and slowly came to the front of her table, much too close for Hermione's comfort. The young girl was sure if she tried outstretching her hand, the tips of her fingers would brush against the leather corset. Gulping, she leaned back into her chair but wouldn't let her eyes slid from the woman's face.

The plump lips had finally parted.

"Have you ever heard of multiverse?"

Hermione suppressed a disappointed gasp. "Why, yes—but that—that's just a theory, just like a million other theories, isn't it? No scientific research could confirm its existence."

"What about venor floccus then? What are those realms they keep visiting?" Bellatrix feigned confusion and Hermione was all for it.

"That's different!" She shook her head. "I'd say those are rather spiritual places, you can't physically get there, right? There's no real concept of time or space!"

"Do your dreams have any concept of time or space?"

Hermione bit her lip, her hand scratching the back of her head. "Yes but that's still no proof!"

"Tell me the definition of a multiverse," Bellatrix demanded, partly sitting down on her desk.

"It's a theory," The girl emphasised stubbornly. "A hypothetical collection of an uncountable amount of universes. Supposedly, anytime we make a decision, our own universe splits, creating another one where we went with the other option. So theoretically, there's one where I didn't choose to speak to you today, then another where I didn't leave the Three Broomstick…" She shook her head. "I'm sorry but it's just a bit too bizarre to imagine tons of venor floccus Hermiones somewhere trillion light years away."

"Well, I don't fancy the concept of countless little mudbloods myself but that's the sad reality," Bellatrix tilted her head, her lips twitching, threatening to crack a smirk. "What can you do?"

Hermione blinked a couple of times. That was a punch straight to the gut. It was as though she had forgotten who was she actually talking to and started losing herself in the conversation, sort of enjoying the little back and forth bickering… She wondered whether Bellatrix possessed some extrasensory perception telling her to insult Hermione anytime she was starting to feel a bit more comfortable around her.
"Those dreams you have are actually no dreams, but glimpses," Bellatrix went on as if she hadn't said anything offensive. "Somehow—I don't know how—you've gained the ability to access the mind of a version of yourself from another universe."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Hermione let out, her voice strangely upset. "Why—what for?"

"Well, that goes beyond my knowledge," Bellatrix shrugged indifferently, blowing away a curl, which was blocking her view. "I've told you everything I possibly could, now it's your turn."

Hermione adjusted in her seat, a bit alarmed she didn't get these things straight before offering her help. "What would you want me to do?"

Bellatrix tilted her head. "I need to see them," she said, making Hermione freeze on the spot.

No, no, no!

Panic struck through her like electricity. She didn't like the idea of Bellatrix being inside her head, not at all! It wasn't a place to wander around like some garden, it was a haunted graveyard with no desire to let the skeletons out of the earthy tombs! She suppressed a shudder upon imagining every little thing Bellatrix could possibly see.

"What for," she blurted, feeling her cheeks heating up.

An arrogant snort made it past Bellatrix's parted lips. "Do you seriously think I'd tell you?"

"I have a right to know to what cause I'm going to be contributing," Hermione objected firmly.

"Actually, no, you don't. As I said, you're doing me a favour. I, on the other hand, don't owe you anything! Quite easy to comprehend, isn't it?"

"I—"

"Shhh, none of that!" The dark witch leaned in and Hermione slided on her chair a couple of inches backwards. "It's far too late to back down. I did my part in this, now it's all you. You do remember how you let me inside your head for the first time, don't you?" Bellatrix smiled charmingly, sending a mild trail of goosebumps down Hermione's arms. "How about we do that again?"

"Wait, there's no need for Occlumency!" Hermione leaped from her seat in a swivet. "I— I've been keeping track of the dreams. I wrote it all down—in a diary, there are all the details!" Some of which she'd really like to keep to herself but it was either that or letting Bellatrix in. "I could lend you it if you like."

"No, I'd prefer to see, there's something you might have missed."

"I never miss anything!" Hermione objected almost hysterically.

Bellatrix's eyes glistened in a light and her lips parted. They were looking at each other without a word for a couple of seconds and Hermione stupidly almost thought they were having a moment until Bellatrix barked: "What are you waiting for then, go get it!"

"After... after you tell me—"

"Don't you dare blackmail me," Bellatrix shrieked, making Hermione move a couple of steps back. "I promised to be tolerant but if you try my patience one more time I swear your little brain will lose its sixth area!"
Hermione couldn't believe she'd actually moved and went to fetch the item. She thought of staying in the girl's dormitory without actually coming back but knew it wouldn't be the smartest of ideas; Bellatrix would always find a way to get to her and retaliation wouldn't be pretty.

"Oh Merlin, Hermione! Are you alright? That looked positively scary!" Padma Patil squealed as soon as she saw her enter the common room; Hermione merely smiled, brushing the question off by murmuring she was fine and quickly climbed the stairs leading into the girl's dormitory. She ran straight to her bed, snatching the thick diary from beneath her pillow and turned on her heel, dodging more questions on her way back. She specifically had to threaten Colin Creevey with taking twenty points away from Gryffindor if he didn't stop bugging her but eventually got rid of him. By the time she'd reached the third floor, she was left completely alone.

Bellatrix was waiting for her at the door; once Hermione was inside, she took the book out of her reluctant hands and immediately started flicking through the pages. The girl regretted bitterly having not erased at least a few pages regarding the tender feelings the other Hermione held towards Ronald Weasley.

"Is this the first dream you've ever had?" Bellatrix turned to her, holding the open diary in front of her face, the dark ink still shiny against the yellow pages.

"Yes," she nodded, watching the woman slowly move back towards the tables; a faint beck of Bellatrix's hand made her follow. She took a seat behind her old desk while Bellatrix leaned against hers, still buried in the diary. Hermione's eyes curiously travelled over her face. She looked different while concentrating; the feverish glow that had spread through her features transformed her overall look completely. In quite a positive way.

"You've missed a couple of days here," Bellatrix stepped forward, placing the diary on the table, and inclined over her. Hermione's stomach jumped as a couple of dark, silky curls brushed against her cheek, a rich, dizzying scent planting fluffs of mist inside her head. "And look, there are whole weeks without a word right after you'd left the Manor!"

'Focus, Hermione, focus!'

"I didn't—" Her voice came out raspy. She cleared her throat, bravely going on. "If there's nothing, it means I didn't dream those nights.

"You didn't? Why?" Bellatrix asked almost childishly and even though Hermione kept her head lowered over the blank pages, she could feel the warmth of the question against her right cheek, penetrating the sensitive skin, making it produce the heat on its own.

"I don't know," she squealed, embarrassed of the sound of her own voice. She felt a desperate urge to swallow, but fought it with all her might, clearing her throat again.

"Strange," Bellatrix commented, finally moving away, and Hermione realised her nails were digging into her thighs; she quickly released the grasp. Standing up from her chair, she finally swallowed the excess saliva and moved a few steps aside.

"Well, this will be useful." The slender fingers drummed against the leather binding and Hermione suddenly felt a great deal of unease over leaving the item in Bellatrix's hands. "I'll give it back tomorrow once I've read it... Do write down the next dream though—or don't. You may show me, instead." Bellatrix formed one of her deeply disturbing smiles but her eyes stayed rooted to the diary.

'Unlikely…'
Hermione shrugged, awkwardly shifting on her feet. Now what? Should she leave or go for more questions? She kind of wondered what would happen if she asked Bellatrix about her motives again.

"So..." she started, hoping to sound casually. "How exactly are my dreams—?"

Bellatrix looked up from the diary, eyes narrowing. "I think your nose is starting to bleed again," she interrupted Hermione's unfinished question. "You should see someone about that or would you prefer my help?" She smirked, prowling closer.

Hermione smeared her hand against her face but saw nothing. She got the point though and stepped back, almost tripping over her own foot.

"Go now."

There was no point in arguing.

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Head buzzing with thoughts, Hermione couldn't bring herself to return to the Ravenclaw common room just yet. She nestled in one of the obsolete classrooms on the first floor, right next to Professor McGonagall's office, hoping for no disturbances. Seated at the largest window, one leg hanging down, she was tracing the fogged up panes with her fingertips, drawing tiny stars all across the glassy surface.

The more she thought about Bellatrix's explanation, the more anxiety fizzled inside her belly.

Hermione had always found the multiverse theory deeply disturbing. It suggested a futility of decision making and a complete loss of control and freedom. She didn't like to think of her life as some sort of an experiment—a hazy image of a pondering faceless being standing over an ocean of universes formed inside her mind: Since Hermione nu. 5353456 didn't do this, let's try with Hermione 20005 and see how it plays out.

Her stomach let out a distressing growl.

She loved to read and learn about lots of things but this particular field was something she'd always tried to stay away from. Drilling into theories of universe or life and its meaning in general was utterly pointless; assumptions without any empirical validity were nothing but fairytales. Why fill the mind with twaddle when—

The door she'd carefully closed behind her half an hour ago creaked, letting in a soft stripe of a dim light.

"Granger?"

Hermione froze, her mouth agape. That drawling voice, peppered with a hint of concern and calling her name into the dark space, unquestionably belonged to none other than Draco—that Draco who hadn't been acknowledging her existence for precisely twenty seven days and eighteen hours. Hermione didn't know what to do; should she reveal herself or ignore him in the same manner he had been ignoring her? Four seconds had passed and her feet dropped to the floor—if the bloody multiverse truly existed, she could talk to him in this one while still ignore him in the other.

"In here!"
The door was pushed further, welcoming in more light and the sight of a tall figure of her best friend. "Why are you sitting in the dark," he asked, hesitating, his hand still gripping the handle.

"Any problem with that?" Hermione folded her arms. "If so, you may close the door from the outside!"

"No, it's fine," he said quickly, closing the door against all sources of light but the pale moon coming through the window blocked by Hermione's torso. Her eyes watched the silhouette amble forward. She wondered what could possibly have happened to make Draco get over his ego and see her. She'd bet ten galleons on her recent accident.

"Heard what happened today, are you okay?"

She won.

Hermione slipped from the windowsill and settled right under, the stone wall freezing against her back. "Sure, hadn't it been for your aunt, I'd have bled to death. I guess I was wrong about her all this time," she proclaimed sardonically, pulling her knees toward her chin.

Draco let out a deep exhale. He stepped a bit closer and sat down, his frame blending with the darkness of the room. "About that," he started slowly but Hermione interjected.

"It's fine, I don't need to hear about that or about how you tattled on me everything you possibly could. Really, I don't hold it against you... I just wonder why you couldn't find an ounce of integrity in you to face whatever happened outside the Three Broomsticks and talk it over with me," Hermione finished, grateful for the surrounding blackness; she was certain it would be three times harder if not impossible to address the issue in broad daylight with a clear view into Draco's eyes. Her directness was a punch straight to the gut, no doubt, but if they wanted to move on, they needed to communicate and figure things out once and for all. Biting her lip, she waited for an explanation, however painful or unpleasant, but Draco kept quiet.

She wondered whether she should say more just so that she could slip a bit of benevolence into her voice and ease the tension. She decided she would.

"I'm sorry," Draco whispered after her lips parted. "I shouldn't have done it, I don't know what came over me."

Like salt to a wound, a memory, still vivid and painful, sprung in her mind: the cruel warmth of Blair's shoulder covered by a chiffon top and her disappointed tears—right in that moment Hermione had been this close to making the same mistake as Draco. Her hands shifted involuntarily, as though wishing to pull him into her embrace. She finally understood the reasons behind Blair's gentle comforting; sadly, it wasn't the need for Hermione's proximity to relieve her own frustration of being unable to reciprocate her feelings for the moral reasons. No, she felt guilty because she had caused so much pain to someone she cared about deeply and there was nothing she could do about it.

"I do," Hermione let out softly, bowing her shoulders. "And it's all right."

What followed was another period of silence in which Hermione set her mind. She released a shaky breath, feeling her heart rate increase rapidly. Her palms became sweaty as she pressed them together and her stomach turned into a wobbly gelatine.

"I," she whispered but subsequently closed her mouth. Three seconds had passed and she cleared her throat, trying again.
"Draco, I... I think I like girls."

As soon as the last syllable left her tongue, she felt like taking it all back. An unimaginable wave of shame washed over her, as though she had said something vulgar. Her teeth sunk into her inner cheek, almost drawing blood. She didn't dare expect Draco's reaction; it was a well-known fact pureblood families resented the idea of a different sexuality. Based on everything Hermione had read, they considered it an illness worth the harshest of treatments.

"You wouldn't let me explain back then," she went on quietly. "Draco, please, say something!"

She heard him shift. "Why didn't you tell me earlier," he asked in an emotionless voice, which managed to ease Hermione's anxiety at least partially.

"I don't know—I mean I didn't know, I've just recently..."

"When?"

"In summer," she confessed, her cheeks burning.

"Summer, huh," Draco repeated, irritation creeping into his voice."That makes let's see... June, July, August... ta da da seven months, wow, that's so recent!"

"You know, it's not that easy to acknowledge something like that! Besides, you yourself didn't say anything about your feelings! Maybe I should be angry too," Hermione fired back.

"Are you serious right now," he growled. "You don't give a damn about my feelings so why do you care whether I told you or not?!"

"I deserved to know," she snapped back. "Because—because those feelings are beautiful! It's good to know—!"

"Beautiful!" Draco seethed, jolting up. "It matters shit!"

"Don't say that!" Hermione, too, leaped to her feet. "It matters a great deal to me. Even if my feelings aren't the same, I still appreciate yours! So, so much! Draco, you are amazing, the most amazing boy I know! If I could change the way I feel, I'd do so in a heartbeat—just like this!" She snapped her fingers, feeling the first few tears escape her eyes. "But I can't!"

"Have you tried?"

Hermione's heart broke upon hearing that. "Of course I have! Do you think I like being queer? You have no idea how hard it is to deal with something like that," she pointed her index finger at the dark figure in front of her.

"Well, we all have our cross to bear, don't we," Draco proclaimed coldly and stepped towards the door.

Hermione's cheeks were completely soaked at that point. "So—so my feelings don't matter anything," she called out in a desperate attempt to stop him.

Draco hesitated, turning back to her. "I appreciate them," he said cruelly and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione stayed alone in the quiet dark classroom, feeling completely abandoned. 'Draco didn't understand.' She drew in a strangled sob, her hands covering her cheeks. He didn't understand and
it hurt more than she had imagined when rehearsing the moment in her mind over and over again during all those long weeks spent without his presence. She thought of the bloody multiverse again and envied the other Hermione who was still leading the conversation with the other Draco, who understood.

Her breath hitched as someone opened the door for the second time tonight and Hermione hastily wiped her cheeks, praying for it to be anyone but Bellatrix Lestrange or Professor McGonagall; she didn't feel like dealing with either of them.

"I'm an idiot." Draco stepped in and closed the door, scuffling toward her. He sat down on the same spot, leaving Hermione absolutely speechless. "I'm sorry, Granger, I shouldn't have said that," he added. "Of course your feelings matter."

"Just like yours do," she said quickly, copying his movements, and she too plopped down to her previous spot. "And correct, you are a jerk!"

"I'm sorry," Draco apologised again but all the harsh words were already forgotten. "Just... why didn't you tell me earlier? Why keep it to yourself? I probably wouldn't have..."

"I know," Hermione gulped, wiping the last traces of tears. "I should have but like I said, it's not easy to confess something like that. Besides I still haven't completely figured it out."

"What do you mean you haven't? You just said, not a minute ago, you can't change and—"

"It's complicated," Hermione gasped, tugging her hair behind her ears. "I mean, I don't really find boys interesting but nor girls."

"You've said you like girls," Draco drawled. "Are you screwing with me or what?"

Hermione shook her head but realised he couldn't see her. "No, I'm not, perhaps I should have put it in a more comprehensible way. I was thinking about some level of sapiosexuality or I don't know... some kind of you know—queer sapio-demisexuality, if that's even a thing."

"Explain, Brain," Draco demanded and Hermione's stiff cheeks experienced the first tugs of a smile after a very long time.

"Well, the term sapiosexual is derived from latin sapiens which means 'wise'," Hermione recited, squaring an ankle over one knee. "The most attractive trait you find in a person is their mind, their intelligence."

"I'm not smart enough, is that what you're saying," Draco asked in a playful voice.

"No! God, no! That sounded wrong." Hermione chuckled. "Well, I do find intelligence really really attractive but that's not the only—"

"Bona fide, de facto, ergo, per se... I can tell you the first few digits of pi 3.141eh..5?... Feeling something yet?"

Hermione burst out laughing. It felt so good to be able to relax like that, so bloody good. She wished with all her heart she was straight and had this boy along her side all the time.

"I'm not only attracted to the intelligence," she clarified as she calmed down. "I'd fancy Dumbledore, too, then, wouldn't I?"

"Gross!"
"Listen," Hermione licked her lips, slightly shaking her head. "The other term was demisexual. Demisexuals don't feel a sexual attraction unless they form a strong bond with another person."

"Come on, Granger!" It sounded as though Draco had slapped his thighs. "I'm both intelligent and have a bond with you!"

"Somehow it applies only to w—well females," Hermione shrugged, careful around the word 'women'; she was not quite comfortable confessing the object of her desire was a woman seventeen years her senior just yet.

"So tell me finally, who is she?"

Hermione's froze for a moment; she turned to Draco with a hesitating look but again, he couldn't see anything beside the stripe of light coming from the window above her. Thank God. She would never scoop up enough courage to spill the beans otherwise.

"Come on, tell me, I've known you were hiding something for quite a while now!"

"I—"

"What is she like? Screw the fact she's a girl," Draco uttered. "Just be honest with me. Tell me the first word that pops in your mind when you think of her."

"All right," Hermione cleared her throat, an unexpected wave of excitement spreading through her chest. "If I had to pick one, just one word to define her," she started softly, her eyes unfocusing. "I don't think I'd be able to. She's a contradiction of traits; charismatic, too charismatic for her own good—she's like a magnet, you cannot help but be pulled in; she's got this ability to make people think they're the most important in the world; the attention she gives them; it's scary how attractive that kind of persona is and what it does to men, well, women too, obviously," Hermione paused for a second. "She's just so glamorous while plain cra-zy." She cracked a smile, taking the laces of her shoes in between her fingers. "I've never met anyone who can pull it off quite like her."

Draco murmured something but Hermione didn't listen. "She's goofy and witty; doesn't give two damns about anything... Once." She giggled, her eyes closing. "Once she talked me into this karaoke event; a couple of guys started hitting on her— they just wouldn't leave her alone until she agreed to sing with them. She'd made the DJ play some chirpy Italian song, grabbed our tablecloth and tied it over her shoulders. She danced and sang in a way I'd never seen before—I seriously doubt I will ever again," Hermione laughed. "It was the wildest and funniest thing I'd ever witnessed. It didn't scare anyone off though, just attracted more male attention; I think it's her curse to look good even if she's trying her best not to."

"She seems pretty mental to me," Draco teased.

"No, she's hilarious! Also really really intelligent and well-educated!"

"So she's already finished her studies, right?"

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat—careful now. "Uhm, yeah. Art degree."

Draco snorted. "A muggle."

"Yes," she affirmed defensively, eyes narrowing.

"A pretty one?"
A surprised gasp leaked from her throat. It took her a couple of seconds to recover from the shock Draco didn't say anything offensive but asked a relatively sweet question instead.

"Well, it's rather her persona that makes her so beautiful but God," Hermione bit her lower lip. "She's gorgeous regardless. Such a melting smile and her laugh is bloody contagious!" Hermione rubbed her hands against her cheeks, hot with emotions. "She's got two beauty marks, one over the other right here." Smiling, she pointed to the skin just beside her nose but again, Draco couldn't see. "Doll-like eyes and plump pouty lips... blonde bob with bangs."

"Bob," Draco repeated, confused.

"Her hair; it's cut like," Hermione moved into the light coming from the window from above. "Like this." She lifted her hair until they were slightly above her shoulders and then sat back. "She sings and dances too; her physique is amazing and she's got the best pair of legs you'll ever ever see." Hermione let out, lost in her own world; it was already too late when she realised what had come out of her mouth.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "I… I mean—"

"I know exactly what you mean." Draco let out a chuckle. "I see we won't have fights over girls. I'm more into eyes."

Hermione laughed, relieved he didn't take the piss out of her in a more taunting way.

"How did you meet?"

"I've known her for quite a while now," she admitted carefully and hoped her voice sounded less guilty in Draco's ears than it did in hers.

"Is it someone from Greece," he went on.

"Technically not but yes, I mean we—uhm"

"Granger you're stuttering... that's so unlike you!"

"I know," she squeaked, angry with her sudden inability to talk.

Draco shifted, moving slightly closer. "What the hell is going on? Why are you nervous?"

"I've just come out to you, what should I be nervous about?"

"You tell me," he challenged and Hermione suddenly felt like a child, guilty of having broken her mom's favourite vase. "How do you know each other?"

She let out a deep exhale, inwardly deciding for the truth. "Promise me—if I tell you—promise me, you won't think I'm weird!"

"As long as it's not from something dangerous… that way I'd have to feel deeply offended you hadn't let me tag along!"

Hermione chuckled. "Promise?"

"Yeah."

"I..." For some strange reason, confessing to liking an older woman was like coming out for the second time in a row for her. She let out a frustrated sigh which made Draco lean forward and
nudge her arm.

"Come on!"

"Okay... eh... apart from being my friend, she also happens to... well, happens to be the best friend of my mother." Stammering, she finally managed to get it out, feeling as though her heart was trying to run away from her chest.

"What?" Draco let out a forced laugh and she could practically sense him raising his brows. "Granger, how old is she?"

"I mean..." she shrugged slowly, her lips opening and closing.

"You mean? Tell me, she's not my mother's age!" Hermione stayed silent, feeling hot flashes washing over her. "God... Okay..." Draco blew out his cheeks. "That's one hell of a weird crush I guess," he proclaimed in a strangled voice.

"It's not a crush," Hermione objected. "I really really like her..."

"Does she know," he asked, moving into the light, his eyes as wide as plates. "Have you told her how you feel?"

"Oh yes but she doesn't feel the same way. Besides, She'd never... you know." Hermione blinked, still playing with her shoelaces.

"Well, on one hand that's a relief," Draco frowned, his eyes focused exactly where Hermione's were hiding in shadows. "On the other—hello?! How could she not?"

Gratitude mixing with an odd form of sad happiness washed over her upon hearing those words; it brought drops of tears to her eyes. "Draco, thank you... for everything. You listening to me sing her praises like a complete nutcase and... getting it, being understanding. It means so much to me!" She leaned over to embrace him but he moved away.

"None of this just yet unless you want me to start reciting similar poems about the girl I like...I'm telling you, it would be kind of awkward," he snorted, smudging Hermione's relief with guilt.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "You have no idea how much I—"

"Forget about it, we have a more pressing issue on the menu right now," he cut her off and Hermione tilted her head in confusion. "Tell me what I do now," Draco went on. "I'm in desperate need of a girlfriend; Zabini's been teasing me like crazy since our 'breakup."

"He's been on my back, too, " Hermione nodded eagerly. "He's such a git, I never really understood why girls liked to hang out with him so much.

"Maybe it's his appearance," Draco curled his lips down, shrugging. "I always thought he looked kind of exotic; you know... something between an ostrich and an alpaca."

Hermione burst out laughing until teary eyed. How had she missed moments like these. Against all Draco's protests she threw herself on him, hugging him so tightly he started complaining about being strangled.

There was little time for any further conversation; it was almost curfew and they really needed to get a move on if they wanted to avoid running into an irritated Professor McGonagall. They made plans for tomorrow afternoon and with that promise parted their ways.
With a smile plastered across her face Hermione made it back to the Ravenclaw common room where she immediately became surrounded by all its occupants asking for the details regarding her 'flying lesson' in DADA's class earlier; she freed herself from Parvati's half-hug, saying she felt alright but a bit exhausted and with that slipped into the girls' dorm.

Six hours later she lied supine in her bed, still wide awake, thoughts swirling inside her mind; Bellatrix, Dumbledore, Draco, but it was mostly Blair who wouldn't let her eyes and heart rest. Reliving the moments today, reminding herself of all the details she didn't even dare say out loud triggered a deep longing inside of her.

Hermione thought of their last evening together; they'd been sitting next to each other on the floor, slumped over the wool velvet sofa; two crystal bowls stuffed with Matcha gelato lay on the table in front of them, the silver spoons jutting over the edges. It was her last night in Greece. Blair had offered to take her to a gay bar and dance the night away, which Hermione flatly refused, not at all comfortable with such bravado just yet; she'd asked for a simple evening spent in her company instead.

She remembered no perfume radiating off Blair's pulse points that night; her face didn't have any traces of foundation and the crepe shirt wasn't hugging her body in the manner her clothes normally did. The change pushed heat into Hermione's cheeks; Blair was obviously trying to make things easier for her, though her efforts hadn't done anything, if only made the situation twice as difficult.

Without the expensive makeup, her olive complexion had become less dewey though it still looked positively radiant; her hair, usually coiffed and glossy, had been handled in a careless messy way and her bangs had been pushed aside; Hermione thought the laid-back look suited her even better than her usual sleek glamour.

"I remember my first crush," Blair confessed, putting her elbow on the sofa, supporting her chin in her right palm. "He was an exchange student, really handsome and so so... dumb; God, I learnt to speak Italian for him; then I learnt spinning back fist." She nodded, lips curling down. "Also for him."

Hermione smirked, closing her eyes. She reached for the bowl of ice cream and placed it onto her stomach, scooping a spoon of the melting emulsion into her mouth. It tasted slightly bitter but she liked it very much regardless.

"You know, this lesbian idea doesn't sound so bad actually."

Hermione almost gulped the spoon; her heart skipped a few beats until it started galloping for dear life. She straightened her back, swallowing the ice cream much sooner than she'd intended; maybe thanks to that she didn't blush.

A few murmured words interrupted the reverie; Hannah Abbott sleeping a bed away from her was talking in her sleep, asking Anthony Goldstein to lend her a quill. Hermione sighed in her bed, turning to the wall, putting her right hand under her pillow. She missed Blair so much; her deep rich voice, broad smile, and her winking eyes.

Her arm shifted, hesitating; it was creepy she figured as much but—God, how she wished to be near her at least like this...

Slowly, she slipped from her bed, tiptoeing toward the wardrobe that had all of her clothing; she dug up a plain mint-coloured top and returned to her bed, throwing the covers over her. It was the shirt Hermione was wearing the last day of her vacation in Greece, the last day Blair's wrists and neck were pressed against her; she had been keeping it in her suitcase ever since, never wearing or
touching it.

She placed the shirt right next to her face, her stomach tightening as she inhaled the still lasting gardenia perfume. Hermione would have given the world to see her right now. Closing her eyes, she let out a forceful yawn and went back to the scented memories, suddenly much more vivid and exhilarating.

"I mean," Blair continued, her sapphire eyes narrowed. "Men would be no trouble. I'd go to a pride and sing 'You Think You're A Man' all day long. Tell me... how do I transition?" She turned to Hermione but her smile froze. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to offend you in any way, sweetie!"

"No," Hermione protested as she placed the ice cream back on the table, away from the danger of her trembling fingers. "You didn't—I just—" The words failed her; she tried her best not to look for any double meaning behind Blair's statement but it turned out to be impossible—her state was impossible. Stupid stupid infatuation for making her blind and deaf to the flatterest of no-s and scrambling for the faintests of yes-es even though they were meant as a joke.

Blair's satin hand slipped over Hermione's cold one, making the breath in her lungs hitch. Blinding hope intoxicated her entire being, the electricity of the touch erasing yesterday in a matter of seconds; when Hermione thought about it, Blair'd never openly said she wasn't interested in her like that; only had expressed it wasn't a right thing to do—perhaps she...

Hermione's hand stirred. With a beating heart, her fingertips brushed against Blair's, hesitating, but upon meeting no resistance they slipped in between her fingers, slowly sliding down until they pressed tightly into the back of her hand.

She didn't dare look at her—didn't dare move in fear she'd ruin the moment; only after a couple of seconds did her hand slacken its grip as the tiny drops of sweat formed in between their palms.

So far the touch didn't look like anything but an innocent consolation of two friends. Hermione could leave it at that—she should have left it at that; forcing herself on Blair or doing something she wouldn't be comfortable with was the last thing she wanted but the sensation of the skin beneath her fingers wouldn't let her hand move away completely.

Instead, she moved higher, tracing the smoothness of Blair's wrist, making flutters of butterflies leap from every corner of her body. She pressed her trembling fingers firmer against the warmth, waiting, terrified that Blair would pull away but she didn't move an inch.

With two clumsy shifts, Hermione turned her body more to the side, her hand still lingering over Blair's lower arm. Breathing hard, she looked up, resting her eyes on the beautiful profile of the woman in front of her; in that moment she could be easily mistaken for one of Michelangelo's sculptures, as still and breathless as his Madonna.

Hermione tried inching closer, then a little bit closer until her leg touched the tight slacks, radiating so much heat she had to bite her lip to halt the gasp escaping her lips. Her eyes closed, praying Blair would pull away but she didn't move an inch.

She wished for nothing else than to grab her pliant waist and pull the woman into her lap to feel her body tightly against hers; God, she wanted it so much it made her stomach hurt. Her hand involuntarily reached out, meeting the curve of Blair's hip bone.

Liquid heat spread through her lower belly as Blair's blank face slowly turned forward, her big eyes glowing upon meeting hers; Hermione couldn't concentrate on anything else but the
neverending depths, surrounding her like the infinity of the sheer universe. She got up from the floor, acting purely on the blazing desire, straddling Blair's lap, her legs wrapping around her slender body. The burning sensation dispersed into her veins like a strychnine and Hermione couldn't reason any longer.

She pressed her face against Blair's neck, inhaling the maddeningly sweet scent of her skin. Her lips parted, letting out the short audible gasps she had no chance to control anymore. Her upper body was slightly rocking back and forth as she struggled for oxygen, her head spinning uncontrollably.

"I love you, Blair, I love you so damn much..."

She kept her eyes closed and nuzzled the silken skin with her face, moaning, moving up until they were cheek to cheek. A few excruciating seconds of control and Hermione pulled away.

She needed to get closer; desperately needed to feel Blair's lips against hers; God, she thought she'd die without her touch.

Gasping she leant forward.

Her stomach tightened in indescribable pleasure as her groaning mouth pressed against the pillow soft lips, so hot it burned through her skin; she could feel the thick flames bursting inside her chest, moving into every inch of her body like a river of fire; never in her life had she experienced something so electrifying, so divine.

She ached to move even closer to blend into the softness; she pushed forward until her loins met with the wide hips and pressed tightly against them, inducing another frenzied moan.

She needed more, so much more.

"Please," she whispered feverishly against the stiff mouth. "Please, let me..."

As the luscious lips parted, sensually breathing into hers, she felt a jolt of excruciating heat spread inside her lower belly.

Panting, she surged forward, her mouth meeting the moisture and heat of Blair's, leaving her both dying and springing back to life at the same time. The fuller lips brushed against hers so fleetingly and slowly that the desperate Hermione had to grab onto Blair's smooth arms, pulling her even closer to get the full contact. Their lips slipped in between each other's and she couldn't help moaning upon the sweet taste of Blair's saliva.

She almost fainted. The touch, taste, smell; it was all too much yet not enough.

Her hand slipped into the soft hair but Blair pulled away, their lips parting with an intense sound, driving Hermione senseless. She wanted to kiss her again, she would spend her entire life kissing her if she let her.

They stared into each other's eyes and Hermione felt like perishing a little with each passing second. Blair was breathtaking, her eyes, her beautiful glowing eyes; they were killing her.

The prominent jaw lifted and Hermione immediately placed the first sensitive kiss on her neck, feeling drops of tears forming inside her eyes; she dragged her mouth lower, ready to press all the kisses she could onto the warm inviting skin when something as equally soft as Blair's whole body pressed against her back.
She stirred, trying to glance behind her back, but only managed to move her head to the side. Her eyes landed on Blair's glistening lips just mere inches from the crimson ones, framed by the thick veil of jet black curls. She watched the darker lips lean in closer, grazing Blair's from the bottom up, the pressure making them plump up before the tongue darted out, slipping into Blair's hot open mouth and Hermione had to grab onto the sofa to endure the sight of the sensual act in front of her; the full lips sliding over each other slowly, too slowly, the doused sounds unleashing something dark within her.

She woke up moaning, her pyjamas sticking to every inch of her body. A throbbing sensation burned inside her lower belly and she felt wet moisture soiling the skin between her legs.

Frightened, she jolted up in her bed, looking all around. The room seemed still, only the soft breaths of the sleeping girls resonated through the air.

Hermione wiped the lingering beats of sweat from her forehead, her trembling hand reaching into her pants. The shaky fingers slid over the wet thighs; she pressed harder, pulling her hand out, rubbing the moisture in between her fingers, hoping for menstrual blood.

In the pale moonlight she saw nothing but the gloss of disturbing arousal painting her fingertips with even more wanton and shame.

"Do write down the next dream though—or don't. You may show me, instead."

Hermione shuddered.
Hermione was sitting at the breakfast table, her sensitive loins tightened in between her crossed, bouncing legs. There was a fresh spill of Earl Grey right in front of her, missing her teacup and pleated skirt by mere inches; over the muddle, it was her trembling hand clutching the handle of a steaming, blue-glazed teapot, the undeniable culprit. Hermione took a sharp intake of breath before retreating and setting the pot back on the tray. She grabbed hold of her robe instead and shut her eyes, scrunching and squishing the thin fabric until the tension in her fingers became unbearable. She could hear a jovial noise of chatter, students chewing on the crunchy toasts and sipping their coffee while she sat among them, different and in a tizzy, unable to concentrate on anything but the sensation of Blair's saliva inside her mouth.

Étoiles Filantes.

The steamy images held Hermione petrified until the sky outside the lattice windows turned lilac grey. Only then did she dare untangle herself from the drenched sheets and slip into the prefect's bathroom without fear of getting herself in trouble. She ran a shower, turning the water as cold as she could bear and ridding herself of the sullied attire before she stepped in. For a few, both, excruciating and blessing moments her mind went completely blank; then the water ceased flowing and it was just her again, swaddled in a woolly towel torturously sliding over her famished, needy skin; and as she stood there covered in goosebumps and desperation, she thought of the lips tasting of bitter ice-cream and melting inside her mouth like salt crystals; she thought of a warm, balmy neck and arching collar bones; the supple hips inside her thighs...

It was enough to make her adductor muscles flex; it was enough to make her realize how helpless she was against the carnal frustration pulsing through her like the undercurrent of her heartbeat. But it wasn't enough to make her do things—and not because she lacked the knowledge of how to do those things. Hermione was well acquainted with human anatomy; she had read enough books to know how certain organs worked and what had to be done in order to achieve their muscular contractions. It's just that the concept of being so intimate with herself made her extremely uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the fault of London's Estate library. Hermione remembered being ten when she stumbled upon a detailed article in 'Catharsis', a psychological magazine she'd borrowed for a bit of personal research. A child squeezing literature aimed for individuals twice her age—perhaps that's why the old librarian gave her a baffled look. He gave her another one when Hermione returned the magazine the next morning with a stiff, shameful expression—that kind all children acquire upon finding their parents weren't really playing a sandwich game in the middle of the night as they had initially stated.

'Nymphomania as a mental illness' was the title of the article Hermione'd read—Jocelyn Fitzgerald was the name of the fifteen-year-old patient who tore her inner walls by putting a rusty knife sharpener inside herself and died of infection. The story didn't sit well with Hermione then and it didn't do now, six years later. It was as though Jocelyn had instilled this aversion into her mind which made such natural act look like something filthy and while Hermione knew it was anything but—knew there were ways to do it other than using old unsanitary objects—she couldn't help feeling afflicted at the idea of easing sexual frustration with her own hands.

She had never really put much thought into the idea of being intimate with someone else either. What would be the reason? She'd never had a boyfriend, never liked a boy—never liked anyone, for that matter. Hermione remembered all those times she'd hear the girls in her dorm, huddled on
one of their beds, giggling and whispering while she lay in hers, wishing they would stop appraising Cedric Diggory’s body and rather invested their time into something much more productive. Still, her eyes curiously darted their direction once or twice during those midnight rendezvous. There was a part of her that was a little envious of their flushed faces and puerile carelessness. Deep down she wondered why it was taking so long for her; she was the only girl who had nothing to say when it came down to romance. Hermione could easily recall the nights she’d spent worrying about her lagging maturity—or perhaps that she’d skipped it altogether and jumped straight to the mental age of seventy without really tasting the youth.

However, all the doubts and questions had cleared up after meeting Bellatrix, which triggered that initial wave of her epiphany; then there came the second of the revelation that her childhood sympathies toward her mother’s best friend had always been so much more than that—even if she hadn’t recognized them as such at that time. It was that first brick that laid the foundation, a silent, growing promise of something stronger to come.

And Hermione kept asking herself, how could she not have noticed before when 'tiny 'Mione', as Blair used to call her, longed for her nearness more than anything such a young girl could even long for. She still remembered how she wanted to sit on Blair’s knees instead of her favourite taffy chair and snuggle in her arms the tready hem of her shirt with her tiny little fingers; play the game of blowing into each other's faces and as Blair's eyes squeezed shut, watch the tips of her lashes graze the peachy skin just below her brows—she’d scrunch her nose too and grit her teeth in a smile that always made that one faint line in the middle of her lower lip flatten. Hermione remembered looking at her and thinking she must be the most mesmerising creature there was; she remembered telling her so, too, but mispronouncing the word 'mesmerising' so bad it made Blair tilt her head back in laughter—and despite the fact Hermione hated being mistaken, this time she didn't mind one bit. She laughed too, then tore a couple of wild daisies from the grass beside her imprinted knees and, drawing closer, tucked them gently into Blair’s lustrous hair, completely unaware that each stalk she touched planted a seed inside her too. That it would wait patiently and bloom with time, making a lush garden out of her body as soon as their paths met again.

Maybe those seeds were the reason why she preferred Blair over her own mother to kiss her goodnight anytime Blair spent those very few days at Grangers'. Hermione could still see her sitting on her amaryllis-printed bedsheets, next to her small arm which always managed to sneak up close and press against the warmth of her thigh. As a bedtime story, Blair would choose to read to her from the Little Women instead of Rapunzel which her mom left for them on her nightstand; Blair reasoned Jo would teach Hermione much more valuable lessons because unlike little miss Goldilocks, she didn't wait around for anyone to save her bum; she saved it herself. And Hermione would listen attentively and wish for something wicked to happen so that she too could chop off her hair and by selling it earn some money for her parents so that Blair would feel proud of her. She'd listen to her lips shape more and more words and would forbid herself to fall asleep before Blair had placed the book down and brought her mellow lips to her forehead—then she'd hear her apologise and feel her warm palm wiping the sticky lip balm kiss off—it never came off entirely though, Hermione could still smell mint and roses on her pillow the next morning.

It was all so painfully obvious that she thought her being surprised at how her feelings turned out was painfully stupid in itself; goodness, she’d do anything for her even as a child—she’d stop breathing if that's what Blair asked of her; and last night, she didn't even have to ask.

That glimpse—it almost killed her; all she could do was flex her stomach and hold her breath, pushing it back into her lungs as though she had no need for it; perhaps she truly didn't. Because there was a part of her that bubbled with euphoria, making her dizzy and likely to bite her chapped lips until they bled at the possibility of the dream being a bona fide reality—a possibility that somewhere out there Blair had let her kiss her and she’d let her get close and touch her in a way she
would never let her otherwise.

But then there was this other side to the story which prompted her hands to punch her feverish face into passing. Because if that kiss truly was no dream, Hermione should feel ashamed rather than happy that she had the guts to inflict herself on Blair like an unhinged, wild savage—she was being invasive and rude, too preoccupied slaking her own desire to register whether Blair felt comfortable or not. God, she had begged her for that one kiss and despite the fact Blair didn't halt her touches, something was off. Hermione could see it crystal clear now. Those lips she'd covered with hers were still—she kissed them but they did not kiss back. They let her in but didn't really move—Blair hadn't initiated anything.

Putting one and one together, Hermione hoped for the whole thing to be just a figment of her imagination—the way her mind dealt with the longing she'd felt before she'd fallen asleep. Hermione would hate herself knowing she or some version of her was capable of disrespecting Blair in such an awful way. She was too dear to her to be treated as just a skin to be taken advantage of.

But what if she actually did force herself on Blair; what if it was a glimpse of some distant parallel universe? It could be—the basis of the dream was identical with reality: they'd been sitting in the exact same room that last night in Greece, in the exact same clothes and talking about pride, the only difference was that Blair hadn't touched her hand. That only happened in Hermione's dream. Taking the theory of multiverse into consideration—did it mean Blair had thought of conforming her like that? And if she did, was this what would have happened if she had acted on it?

Butterflies: Purple Emperors, Swallowtails, Marbled Whites; Hermione imagined it was them maneuvering through her ribs and bumping into the walls of her stomach just like birds into the glass, their wings flapping and tickling everything they touched.

She couldn't help wondering how far Blair would let things go with her; with her and—wow! No, no, no! No!

Somebody had just called her name but it did not matter.

Hermione pinched her flank as her hand gripped her robe even tighter. She skimmed the teacher's table; she'd checked it five times when she arrived into the Great Hall just to make sure Bellatrix Lestrange truly wasn't present. She didn't feel like facing her just yet. The woman too had made her appearance in her dream, acting rather amiable with Blair, while Hermione couldn't do anything but stare at them, arousal sliding onto her thighs. And she couldn't lie to herself, she liked what she'd seen very much; in fact, she—

"Hermione," a patient voice to her right repeated, making her snap out of her reverie. Her gaze fell over Luna Lovegood hypnotising her face with those big teal eyes of hers.

"What," Hermione peeped guiltily.

"Oh, nothing major." The girl shrugged, holding a spoonful of thick chocolate pudding in front of her mouth. "It's just that your elbow is in butter."

Hermione looked down. Cursing, she jerked her arm, noticing the melted grease painting her already black robe even darker. She heard a snort of laughter from behind her and turned, her eyes landing on a leather corset; she felt no need to look any higher. Her cheeks immediately flushed, partly because of her dream and partly because Bellatrix had just seen her with her elbow parked in a butter bowl-
"We need to talk," the witch opened her mouth without any greeting, a perfect way to send Hermione's heart galloping into her throat because the first thought that popped into her mind upon hearing the 'we need to talk' was that Bellatrix knew. Hermione quickly sobered up though, figuring that that would be practically impossible given she'd been keeping her mind closed since she left the bathroom—with such dreams, she'd be a fool not to. Bellatrix probably wanted to discuss the diary; nothing else… nothing except—and Hermione's heart galloped even faster—except for the dream.

"I'm afraid it would have to wait," she quaked, turning back to the table and taking out her wand; she cast a quiet 'Tergeo', which sucked the grease out of her sleeve. "I've got Herbology in five minutes."

There was a group of passing students who each said their polite hellos but Bellatrix ignored every single one of them. "I've talked to your professor," she stated. "You may bunk."

Hermione's stomach clenched. She seriously doubted Bellatrix had bothered asking professor Sprout to let her skip, not to mention taking the time to find out about her timetable to learn who to approach in the first place. "Er… I don't know about that," she began avoidably. "I think I'd rather —"

"But I'm not asking you, butterfly, so move it before I make you," Bellatrix interrupted and despite her warning sat down right beside Hermione, facing the aisle between the Ravenclaw's and Slytherin's tables. Hermione automatically moved a couple of inches closer to the placid Luna, feeling as though it was a troop of monkeys that started jumping inside her belly. The proximity! That damned proximity and—wait, did she just say she'd make her go? What did she plan on doing? Dragging her outside?

Hermione swallowed hard, trying to focus. "You—people are watching, you—" Unable to talk with her so close, she passed Luna a helpless glance but the girl's face stayed deadpan.

"I think you've got a pretty good idea how much I enjoy using nonverbal spells," Bellatrix stated casually and Hermione's eyes pierced the still present puddle of the tea next to her empty cup. "Impervius is my favourite; so if you fancy kissing… let's see... ah, Longbottom boy right over there on our way out, then by all means."

Hermione got the point immediately. She wasted no more time questioning whether Bellatrix would or wouldn't use the unforgivable curse with all the teachers around, or use one at all for that matter; firstly because the risk was too high and secondly, Bellatrix here was most certainly insane; better not test her. "All right, all right, I'll go."

Bellatrix chuckled. "On second thought… might be actually entertaining to watch."

"Please, don't! I said I'd go!" Hermione held out her hands and shot the still silent Luna a dirty thanks-for-the-help look. She'd never liked the girl and her current lack of solidarity toward Hermione's situation only emphasised the feeling.

With a swooshing sound, a whirlpool of owls streamed into the Great Hall, one of them a pretty barn owl landing in front of the anxious Hermione. She rushed to untie the letter marked with her mom's handwriting while the bird pecked the stray toast laid between the bowls of porridge and scrambled eggs. She'd finally loosened the ties and shoved the letter into her pocket. Bellatrix stood up from the bench. Hermione got to her feet a couple of seconds later, still trying to come up with an excuse so as to avoid the conversation but failed. She followed the dark mane of curls out of the Great Hall, disregarding the curious looks of the students as they passed them by. Her eyes landed on Lee Jordan at the Gryffindor table, who was just licking his palm only to smash it into
the bowl of cereals the next thing and, accompanied by a loud roar of encouragement, tried to eat as much of those stuck to his hand as he could before they fell off. Frowning, Hermione looked away; she needed to concentrate—only a moment divided Bellatrix from asking her to show her the dream and the young girl was drawing a blank as to how to save her skin. Perhaps if she had utilised the time better and hadn't spent the night etching the dream into her memory, she'd have had a good chance to whisk a decent plan.

'Irresponsible!'

Hermione anxiously scurried behind the witch, her heart beating wildly. She prayed they wouldn't go far in case she would need to make a run for it; Thank Merlin, they didn't—Bellatrix chose the exact same classroom in which Hermione chatted with Draco yesterday; a couple of doors away from the Great Hall and just one door away from Professor McGonagall's office. Upon entering, Hermione briefly scanned the room; the daylight revealed how crumpled it actually was: there was everything from oil paintings leaning against the scrappy wallpaper and refracting telescopes to the centaur statues and taxidermied animals, which she immediately looked away from. Her gaze fell on Bellatrix instead, who stood just a few feet away from her and Hermione for the first time today got a full view of her face. The witch looked dreadful. Her eyes; scleras, eyelids, the skin underneath them; it was all red, her complexion almost transparent, showing off the faint blue veins snaking along her jaw.

Hermione blinked a couple of times, reflecting whether she'd ever actually seen Bellatrix in broad daylight. She didn't think she had. And while the witch might have had that constant worn-out look about her, it had never stuck out as much in the dark as it did in the light.

Concern flooded Hermione's chest.

"So? Any news in Potter's universe?" Bellatrix started and, leaning against one of the colossal paintings, folded her arms.

"Not really… no," Hermione replied, tearing her eyes from the reddened skin, and instead focused her energy on whipping some sort of an explanation. For the first time in her life she wished to have the imagination of someone like Luna Lovegood; that way she'd come up with five different ideas every two seconds... Wait; Luna—like for the moon...

"I didn't sleep well, I had a lot to think about after our conversation," Hermione presented carefully. "Besides it was a full moon, perhaps that's part of the reason why the dream didn't come." She shrugged. The statement sounded stupid even unspoken but she went with it regardless—at least it was something.

"It wasn't a full moon, sweetheart, surely you must know that," Bellatrix winked and Hermione had to look away. "Even if it was, it has nothing to do with those glimpses. I've gotten through the moon phases, constellations, and planet motions trying to figure out why on specific days there were no dreams; from what I've gathered, the full moon doesn't have any impact on them."

Hermione's face faltered; she too had done the exact same thing and came to the same conclusion but in her case, it took whole weeks. She also knew she should be interested in whether Bellatrix had worked something out or not, but strangely found herself concerned with something completely different. "You did all that in one night," she asked with an uneasy twinge. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows, which managed to put more heat into Hermione's cheeks—she shouldn't have asked anything.
"What did you dream about," Bellatrix inquired again, thankfully ignoring the question. "And no lying!"

"I told you the truth," Hermione objected, trying to shake off the senseless worries—it was her life on the line after all; the only argument she had up her sleeve had just blown up in her face.

"So you had no dreams whatsoever, is that what you're saying?"

Hermione's hands started perspiring. "I did have one," she confessed slowly. "But it was just a regular dream. It wasn't connected to those I've been writing down in the diary."

"How come you know it wasn't?" Bellatrix voice sounded low and interrogating.

"Because it felt different," Hermione stated truthfully—the dream did feel different and had nothing to do with the world of the other Hermione who had no idea somebody like Blair Alderidge even existed—Blair and Bellatrix both.

"It felt different..." The witch made a short humming sound, feigning hesitation. "I don't know, we should perform Occlumency—you know, just in case." Lowering her eyelids, she bore her gaze into Hermione. "I can tell the difference by the frequency—"

"No!" Hermione felt her whole body tensing. "Why can't you just believe me?! It's enough I had to share the venor floccus dreams, why can't these few I have aside from those stay mine and mine only?!" she finished with a hint of hysteria and immediately understood: snapping like that was a fatal mistake. Hermione risked looking at the woman: her head was tilted, face gleaming with a curious smile.

"Why so defensive? Is there something you don't want me to see?"

Hermione folded her arms, feeling as though her ears were about to emit hot clouds of steam; she dropped her gaze to the ground. "Yes—I mean no! I—I just prefer to keep some things to myself."

"Some things? Did you have a sweet dream about Weasley?" Bellatrix teased and Hermione parted her lips, confusion and indignance mixing as one. She blushed even harder. "Oh, you did!"

Bellatrix was laughing now, most likely thinking she'd hit the nail on the head.

A heavy sigh escaped Hermione's lips. She would rather eat a dozen snails than admit to such a lie but knew her options. She should be grateful actually... Hermione reasoned it would be much better to leave Bellatrix thinking she'd dreamt of Ronald than of a three-way kiss Bellatrix was very much part of, herself. Yeah... she'd better remain silent and try for that hopeless busted look.

A weird sound, something between gagging and snorting left Bellatrix's throat as her laughter died. "Well, since I don't trust myself to be capable of enduring something so repulsive, I should just take your word for it, shouldn't I?"

Hermione's breath hitched: could Bellatrix eat that up? Just like that? She regarded the woman with a quick look and immediately let her gaze fall back to the wooden floor. A tremendous wave of relief washed over her upon seeing Bellatrix's scrunched but convinced face—she did, dear God! Quick, as to not risk the woman changing her mind, Hermione slowly took a few steps back. "Right... so if that's all..." she began, trying to reach the door. "I should probably get to the Herbology class now."

"Not so fast, Muddypie," Hermione's eyes jolted up. Bellatrix was smirking again, her left hand pulling at a loose curl of her hair. "I've got a surprise for you!"
The young witch could feel her stomach tightening—she fancied no surprises, especially not those coming from Bellatrix.

"You see, that diary of yours was quite helpful; I thought I should repay you," the woman purred sweetly and, pushing her back away from the golden frame of the painting, rubbed her hands together. Hermione let a part of her mind wonder at how graceful the movement looked, how Bellatrix's slim fingers curled and slipped over—focus!

Pursing her lips, she shook her head. "That's all right, I'm glad I could be of help."

"Don't be so modest, deary," Bellatrix tsked, shamelessly enjoying the unease she was inflicting on the girl. "You deserve a reward!"

Hermione caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. A tall man of an unguessable age emerged from behind a heavy-looking renaissance painting on her left, slowly walking forward. He was poised and clad in a simple black robe, covering him from neck to toe. His ivory face had an excessively gaunt glaze but the skin seemed smooth and healthy without any traces of time. A fleeting look would suggest there wasn't anything unusual to him; a closer one, though, would draw the attention toward his eyes. They were empty, as though blind; the dark pupils were missing, leaving just empty rings in the middle, almost as fair as the thick slate hair meandering down his arms like boas.

Startled, Hermione backed away, her eyes jumping from Bellatrix to the man. A sharp gasp drew out of her throat as her shoulder blades collided with a harsh pointy something behind her back.

"Surprise," Bellatrix sang and stepping closer, gave Hermione a sweet but all the more disturbing smile.

"What's going on," Hermione asked, her right hand reaching inside her robe, fingers brushing against the letter from her mom before they closed over her wand. The man bore his terrifying eyes into hers and she instantly obtained this odd feeling that he could see, that he knew about the tiniest little thought occupying her mind; it made her spine break out into goosebumps.

"She cannot project," he averted his eyes and declared in a clear, tranquil voice, which strangely seemed to ease up the paralysing fear inside her. Project? Project what?! Her fingers loosened the grip on her wand.

"What do you mean she can't?" Bellatrix took a few quick steps toward him, her cheerful mood suddenly gone. The man did not repeat himself.

"Why not? What's wrong with her," she demanded.

Hermione's eyes were shifting between the pair like a metronome, from Bellatrix to him, then back to Bellatrix. What were they talking about?

"She's not in a relaxed state of mind," he explained finally. "It could be dangerous."

Dangerous?!

"Excuse me," Hermione interfered, beginning to feel aggravated at being the subject of the conversation without actually participating; besides, she had a right to know what was going on; especially if she was required to do something risky. "I—"

"Oh please," Bellatrix cut her off. "Just let her try!"
"The girl is sexually aroused; She might end up in places which are not necessarily safe," he said placidly as though talking about his breakfast.

Hermione froze with her hand half-way out of her pocket. Her eyes widened and her face became so hot she thought her skin would melt easier than the wax under the burning knot of a candle. She could not believe her own ears! The man—did he just say she was sexually aroused?! And in front of Bellatrix?! If given a gun, at that moment Hermione would most likely shoot herself—or better—she could shoot him… How the hell could he know anyway?! She opened her mouth, wanting to defend herself but the words couldn't find their way out of her mouth.

"Aroused," the surprised voice repeated.

"Yes, the aura's very vibrant… it wouldn't be wise to do it now."

"No, no, no," Bellatrix pressed. "It can't be that much of a problem, you can take care of that somehow, can't you?"

Hermione glanced up in alarm and flinched because the fair man was suddenly right in her face. He placed his bony hands over her cheeks and she instinctively locked her eyes with his eerie ones, losing herself completely; she felt a warmth, so much warmth and serenity that the worries and embarrassment blew out of her body as though by the wind.

Then his hands retreated. "You need to leave," he spoke and the dizzy Hermione furrowed her brows.

"Wha—where do you want me to go," she asked wearily.

"No, not you."

"Excuse me?!" Bellatrix's angry voice roared from behind the man.

"You're making her nervous," he announced and Hermione immediately recovered from her dizziness, blushing even harder than before. Please say no more, please, please, please just don't tell her anything!

"I'm not making her nervous," Bellatrix snorted as though it was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard. Her gaze jumped from the man to Hermione's burning face. "I'm not making you nervous, am I Muddy?"

Hermione let out a nervous chuckle. "No, of course not."

"She is lying," the man proclaimed placidly. "If you want her to project, you must leave. She won't be able to relax in your presence."

What the hell was wrong with this man?!

"I'm not going anywhere!" Bellatrix objected defiantly and Hermione would bet that if she regarded the witch with a look, she'd see her pout.

"Then I'm afraid I cannot do anything."

There was a moment of silence. Then, swearing under her breath, Bellatrix strolled out of the room, slamming the door behind her so hard the force knocked a small paraffin lamp off the coffee table right next to the entrance.
Neither Hermione nor the man moved or did anything to clean up the tiny pieces of glass that shattered across the floor.

Mortified but still oddly relieved, Hermione only gripped her upper arm and sunk her fingernails into the skin covered by the thin sleeves. She couldn't stop her mind from rumbling. He knew. He bloody knew. He must have seen the dream inside her mind—but in that case she should thank heavens he hadn't told Bellatrix explicitly. Dream or not, Hermione supposed she would not approve...

"It was a dream—nothing else." The man startled her and, sauntering into the middle of the room, conjured a long wooden board out of thin air. "It wasn't an insight into one of the parallel universes. Your mind made that up."

Hermione's eyes bulged. How come he heard and went through her mental barrier? How come he talked about parallel universes and projection? She watched the lauan coloured wood float above his outstretched arms before it slowly landed on the floor below. She was speechless, oh and surely a bit disappointed while so, so embarrassed—she'd never felt more embarrassed in her entire life.... outed against her will like that. He must have thought she was a harlot! Dreaming such dreams and —

"It's not my place to judge," he reacted to yet another of the unspoken, kneeling down and beckoning her with his left hand. Hermione felt a hot flash wash over her face. Her feet moved, carrying her reluctantly forward.

"I'm here to teach you how to astral project," he spoke, his long grey hair spilling over his shoulder as he inclined over the board. "I've seen your mind and I know you're capable of doing so unconsciously while you sleep. Now you're to learn how to do it in a meditative state but instead of being unaware of yourself..." his hands ran over the wooden surface. "...you'll stay wide awake, observing the other world with an open mind—lucidly."

Hermione listened with her lips parted. She didn't even realise that she'd sat down onto the cold floor beside him. Teach her? This in front of her must be a venor floccus, then—a real venor floccus. But how did Bellatrix manage to get him here? From what Hermione knew, they never interfered with the outside world.

"Lie down onto the board."

"I..." Hermione started and, turning her face toward him, cleared her throat. "Could we talk a bit first? I mean, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask a few questions.

"Lie down onto the board," he repeated calmly.

"And then we'll talk?" Hermione waited for an answer but the man stayed quiet. "You didn't say what your name was," she tried again.

"I don't have a name. None of us does." He turned to her and she instantly retreated under the pressure of his gaze.

A venor floccus indeed.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to come across as rude but I don't really understand the reason behind all this," Hermione blinked, trying to focus on the spot in between his brows instead so as to at least appear she was looking into his eyes. "I know you said I'm here to learn how to astral project but why is it necessary? I mean, did Madame Lestrange say anything?"
"She's said a lot of things of which she doesn't wish to share anything with you," he stated and
despite the biting meaning of the words he managed to present them kindly.

Hermione bit her lip. "All right, I understand." She nodded more out of politeness than honesty,
thinking it was unbelievably unfair of Bellatrix to keep her in the dark like that. "But what am I
supposed to do while astral projecting?" Once again she was met with silence. "Could you at least
tell me if learning it is supposed to provide me with some kind of control over the dreams? I mean,
if I learn it—which is, I'm afraid, close to impossible, since I've never done it consciously and the
Great book of Transmutation mentions it cannot be done without everyday training sessions for at
least four decades… which actually brings me to another question—how—"

"Your mind is too noisy," he cut her off and motioned toward the board, letting her know for the
third time he wanted her to lie down onto it.

What was she to do?

"Can I ask one more question," she gulped as she crawled onto the surprisingly warm and
comfortable wood, slowly lying her back flat against its surface; it made her feel as though she was
floating on water.

"You want to ask more than one." He leaned over her. "I've seen all the questions poisoning your
mind; to many of those, you already know the answer. You just need to dig deeper."

Hermione furrowed her brows, stirring as his face came far too close to hers. "Be still," he warned
and she squeezed her eyes shut. Surprisingly smooth hair, smelling of sage and winter air, fell over
her skin. "As for astral projection, you know enough to get you by; you also know I cannot choose
the place where you're going to go: it's the vibration of your thoughts— your energy, that is the
driving force," he merely whispered as his finger touched her jugular notch and gingerly pressed
down. Hermione resisted the urge to push his hand away. "That's why it's imperative to do this with
a clear mind." His finger slid higher along her neck and chin, over her lips and bridge of her nose
until it stopped right in between her eyebrows. Then he pressed down again. "You have to let go of
all the distracting thoughts and feelings." Breath brushed against her pursed lips and Hermione
heard him suck in the air. Her eyes snapped open in shock as she felt the oxygen being forcefully
drawn from her lungs, too. The man's face was dangerously close, his eyes, those terrifying eyes,
digging into hers. She couldn't breathe, the panic spiraling through her like a maelstrom. What was
he doing?! Her lips parted and her back arched as she tried to inhale but it seemed impossible.
Body writhing, she grasped onto the man's arms. Her throat released a sharp choking sound but it
only rebounded off of the man's lips. There was a pressure travelling through her entire body, so
strong it made her head spin. Her widened eyes couldn't blink, only plead helplessly but all to no
avail.

She thought she was dying.

But the pressure suddenly disappeared and Hermione bounced off the wooden board before bolting
straight upright and inhaling the air in long deep breaths. Her shoulders were heaving back and
forth as though pushed by two forces of wind from each side but her previously tensed muscles
seemed to have relaxed now and she could feel a strong rush of warmth flowing into her chest.

"Your breathing was too fast," she heard. "It didn't give you any time to exhale fully and the
excessive air kept piling inside your lungs, taking too much space. You needed to get rid of it in
order to calm down. You'd never relax quickly enough if I hadn't done it."

"A warning would have been nice," Hermione choked out of her and, coughing, lay back down
onto the softness of the board, feeling profusely lightheaded. Her eyes started closing.
"How do you feel," the peaceful voice whispered somewhere above her.

"Tired…"

"Good… try to stay calm."

Hermione gulped, blinking a couple of more times before everything went pitch black.

"Wherever you go, you're safe—as safe as you can be, remember that," the voice echoed through her mind, so calm and soothing it lulled her into sweet tranquility. "Now… I'd like you to imagine this room… in as much detail as you can… the flooring, the objects all around you… imagine yourself standing up and touching things…"

Hermione concentrated on visualising herself getting to her feet: her knees bending and elbows propping her so she could push herself up. She felt herself walking toward that small piece of a blank wall above the broken glass at the entrance, her fingers reaching out and feeling the harsh texture of the stone. She could see all the old lamps and statues, all the colours of the paintings and the patina on their frames as she passed them on her way to the oriel windows. Her hand pushed onto the glass. It opened easily, letting in the cold winter air which stirred through her hair before moving past her.

"... try to visualise your astral body," the mellow voice suggested. "Imagine everything you possibly can. Your limbs, fingers, and toes. The way your arms and legs move. Imagine yourself lying within the physical shell…"

And Hermione did. She felt it; she felt it so that the sense of her physical body almost disappeared. There came the waves of tremendous heat and buzzing, every inch of her tingled as if covered by moving ants. The loud white noise filled up her ears.

"Imagine yourself moving…"

There was a heavy pressure in her eyes, head, torso, and her knees—she felt as though her skin was breaking apart, except there was no pain whatsoever. And then she descended; through the darkness and light, she could not fully perceive due to their speed and capricious motion—both trying to lure her in, battling in a full swing. She was falling faster and faster until something very close to elastic by structure pressed against her and pulled her through.

And just like that, Hermione found herself surrounded by deep darkness—not a terrifying kind, nor horrible; it felt strangely placid, a sort of a familiar place, letting even her eyes see, as though it was a clear day. Hermione observed her form: it appeared exactly like her physical one, dressed in her school robe of a black skirt and a starched shirt, except there was a sangria tint radiating about ten inches above it—the aura. Hermione tried to keep her excitement about seeing the colour at bay because she knew strong emotions could shove her right back into her body. She moved her hands, bringing them together, and found she could feel the touch.

Now, that was highly unusual. The astral body was not supposed to feel solid, for it was based on pure energy. Maybe she didn't do it right? Hermione felt uneasy. What if she'd fallen asleep and this was just a dream? No… the man told her to always go with her guts—this was real; she felt it was.

A sudden noise filled up the room and Hermione cast around, finding she wasn't in the dark anymore.

What the…?
From all the ethereal places of rainbows and galaxies she'd have imagined the astral world could offer, Hermione would have never guessed she'd anchor in one that would resemble a positively earthly trippy bar. The neon lights of colours she'd never even dreamt of existing shone brightly over the motion of shadow figures that started to materialise and surrounded her like an expanding wall. Hermione had to remind herself to stay calm; she couldn't afford to lose her head. Giving them a closer look, she tried to figure them out to shake off the growing fear of the unknown. They appeared as man-like shapes of ash smoke, intertwined with one another just like lovers. The psychedelic music was blasting loudly and they were moving in torrid sync—Hermione herself felt an abrupt urge to join them. The sound wasn't just around her but permeated into the very core of her being, vibrating and drumming like a ghost of an absent heartbeat inside her chest. It felt strangely alluring.

Taking a few steps forward, Hermione felt the atmosphere thicken and fill her nose with the scent of fruity gummy bears and sweet booze. Booze—in the astral realm, not to mention the sense of smell itself—unthinkable! Hermione glanced at the nearest shadows, seeing their blank faces transforming right in front of her eyes. It was profoundly unsettling but she managed to keep her shock under control. She didn't want to wake up without seeing as much as she could—who knew when she'd have another, if any, chance to experience it again. She skimmed through the peculiar faces, their eyes yellow and soulless. A few of their owners pulled away from each other, watching her and as she walked by, their heads tilting and twisting on their airy necks as if they were made of rubber. Hermione could see those who hadn't spotted her just yet making out heavily: in pairs, groups, altogether, moving from one to another and blending into each other better than mixed up paint. Normally, Hermione would look away but there just wasn't any shame to hold onto.

She felt a touch on her forearm and, puzzled, turned around. Behind her stood a creature of towering height and amethyst irises covering at least one third of their chiseled face; etched across their brow ridge gleamed a variety of geometric marks of which Hermione recognized just the two: the Metatron's cube and the flower of life; both very powerful sacred symbols. Their naked body appeared indigo blue and plasmic and it was proportioned peculiarly: the waist, too thin compared to any human's, was belted with metallic scales of diverse shapes and Hermione couldn't even put her finger on their gender for it lacked both masculine and feminine attributes. (She didn't feel one bit embarrassed as she ran her eyes over the skin, flat at the chest, flat at the groin too.)

The oddity did not scare her; those six years at Hogwarts had made her immune to getting frightened at certain types of appearance; she'd surely seen stranger—besides, there really was nothing to worry about. None of those beings could cause her any harm unless she'd let them. Still, her intuition urged her to stay alert, for there might be something dusky going on. Their energy didn't feel true and Hermione had a strange feeling they were only trying to lead her up the garden path with all that amour fou—why, she had no idea. And while she knew dishonesty wasn't a good sign even in astral realms, her feet didn't move an inch. It was that damned curiosity of hers that kept her rooted to the spot—after all, it might be just a once-in-a-lifetime chance; wasting the opportunity to learn about different entities first-handed wasn't an option she was willing to go with.

Hermione locked their eyes. "Who are you," she asked and despite the loud music could hear herself perfectly clear.

'A friend.' The soundless voice resonated through her mind after moments of intense eye contact which only deepened the feeling of wary inside her and suggested that the being might be lying but she still chose to ignore it.

A hand slipped into hers and as Hermione glanced down, she could see her own radiating much brighter aura than the blue one. High on confidence that nothing could happen, for her energy was
more vibrant—more powerful; that in case of need she'd be able to defend herself easily, she let herself be pulled away.

They were walking through the crowd of shadows which seemed to be fading with their each passing step. Then everything darkened and Hermione found herself all alone in the midst of a pure void.

A bad feeling settled inside her. She looked to her right, then left. Nothing. She took a hesitant step forward but retreating glanced behind her.

In a flash, there grew a magnificent room around her, dimly lit and familiar, smelling of gardenia flowers and white tuberose. If Hermione had any breath in her, it would definitely hitch. Because she recognized the sleigh bed, she recognized the French vanity, and turning around, she definitely recognized the soft satin drapes flowing in the wind in front of the half-opened balcony door. And there, behind them—

The excitement arose in her like a plunging wave. Hermione tried to tame it instantly for she knew even the slightest stir could wake her up and that was something she mustn't let happen; not now when she needed to see—because behind the door, she could definitely see a silhouette. Hermione advanced forward, every step she'd taken feeling like a risk to the unceasing thrill that infused her being at the hope that—her hand reached and slowly pulled the drapes apart.

It was her.

Attired in a jet black dress, she was leaning against the white steal of the door and holding a cigarette of which the lace smoke curled up in splendid whorls; there was an enigmatic smile upon her lips as she slowly turned her face to Hermione. The salty breeze was blowing kindly through the locks of her golden hair, bringing their sweet scent right toward the emotional girl who wanted nothing more than to cry stupidly as the outpouring of love flooded her entire being. A part of her knew; the rational part knew this wasn't her Blair, yet she still couldn't help coming up to her, and reaching her hands tenderly to caress the blush-covered cheeks with her fingertips first, before allowing her palms to touch the burning skin fully.

Could it be…?

Hermione let her eyes hunt for all the little things: the line in the middle of her doused auburn lips; and those seven beauty marks on her lovely face—two beside her nose, one below the outer corner of her right eye; one on her bronzed cheekbone and one on her jaw; another above her upper lip and the last one no bigger than a pencil dot on the left side of the tip of her nose; not one was missing.

She glanced into the sapphire eyes, oddly depleted of their signature vibrancy and childlike spark and almost fell to her knees in madness. Those depths—they were looking at her so heatedly, there wouldn't be an atom found in her body that wouldn't have stirred upon recognising the frenzied lust radiating off the woman like the wildest of flames. At that point, she was certain the sight alone could pull her back into her body any second now even though she desperately wanted to stay here with this creature who logically couldn't be Blair but looked every bit like her and that was somehow enough even if Hermione was to just stare at her. She wanted to engrave the blessed moment into her memory for this was probably the first and the last time she'd ever see Blair looking at her as though she was the missing breath inside her lungs.

Backing away, her hands left the beloved face, knowing she needed to swallow the emotions down; but the more she tried, the more they flourished inside her. And so desperate she waited as if sitting on an electric chair, anticipating the end which somehow wasn't coming…
'You don't have to go anywhere if you don't want to,'

It was Blair's deep modulated voice inside her head; she pulled herself off the door and cast a seductive smile before lifting that delicate jaw of hers and keeping her eyes on Hermione who could go just crazy, took a drag of her cigarette. The girl watched her cheeks hollow as the little flame consumed a bit of the tobacco rod.

She was mesmeric.

Keeping the smoke inside her mouth, Blair sashayed forward and paused just as she was mere inches away from the overwhelmed Hermione. Slowly, very slowly she leaned in and, pursing her lips, blew the hot fume into her defenseless mouth, a few fluffs of an exotic coconut scent straying into her nose.

Hermione inhaled erratically, eyes closing.

There was breath in her body now, and there was a pained heartbeat inside her chest. Could it be that she… did she wake up? Please, no! Not yet!

Snapping her eyes open, she let out a helpless moan that cut through her belly like a knife.

Because there in front of her still stood Blair, biting hard on that juicy lower lip of hers, her teeth glistening in the pale moonlight; and as she tilted her head and shifted forward, Hermione's newly acquired senses lost it completely. The luxurious room span and her stomach dropped as though she was falling into a bottomless pit without any chance to survive. She felt a firm, lingering kiss just below her left cheekbone, the heat of it spreading across her skin and making her exhale hungrily against Blair's hair. Hermione ached to kiss her too, to take her face into her hands and taste every inch of it but as she moved, Blair retreated; she locked their eyes in a silent promise before turning and sauntering into the room, having Hermione follow as though an ocean after the Moon.

Maybe she shouldn't have.

A single voluptuous look over the slender shoulder and the last traces of logic and sobriety left her mind because there was nothing that would matter anymore except those deep glowing eyes.

Inside the room Blair paused beside the soft brocade armchair, grazing its backrest with her manicured nails while waiting for Hermione to come to her; and she was smiling like only angels did when the barely breathing girl stopped a step away, unable to keep a further distance. She took a strand of the frizzy hair in between her fingers and slid them along its length before tucking it behind Hermione's ear. The young girl let the faintest gasp escape her lips as the painful warmth spread through her lower belly; her hands bolted up and trapped the graceful palm within hers. She brought it to her face and, closing her eyes, nuzzled the smooth skin with her cheek before kissing it once, twice—again and again, hastily running her lips along, trying to pour all the love she felt for her through.

Without freeing herself from the grip, Blair reclined down onto the white brocade behind her back and Hermione let her teary eyes slid over her body. She could see Blair's thighs opening and trace the dark fabric over them with her free hand. She knew instantly that the woman was offering that timeworn privilege of her arms; that privilege Hermione used anytime when given a chance as a small girl.

She let the hand slip from hers, waves of a hot flash washing over her body. She'd be lying if she said she hadn't dreamt of similar scenarios at least five times a day ever since knowing—but now, when it was happening, the certainty didn't come as naturally as she had imagined. There was no
confidence in her body, no clear focus. She'd dreamt of the way her hands would move across the olive skin but they became heavy and stiff as stones, afraid of making a wrong move. What was she to do?

She took an unsure step forward and trembling all over settled in between Blair's legs, gingerly placing her knee pits over the woman's thigh. Her side pressed against the soft breasts and there was nothing she could do about the sudden raspiness of the breath leaving her throat in such short audible gasps it must have sounded as though she was running to the other side of the world and back. Was she being too bold? A gentle hand reassured her she was anything but by making her left temple rest against the heated neck. The scent, the warmth of her skin—it was a bliss bordering with insanity. Hermione's eyes closed, her insides suddenly burning.

"Just like when you were little," Blair whispered above her. "My little girl…"

Hermione shivered. The way Blair had presented that innocent childhood memory with a voice, heavy with lust—though of course, perhaps she was mistaken; but if she—if she discerned it correctly… it would be deeply unsettling; she was only a child then; the suggestion—that deeper meaning was just wrong on so many levels. Though what felt much more distressing was that something about that perverse idea made Hermione's loins respond in a totally unexpected way. She didn't understand it: how could she feel aroused by something so sinister? Hermione had never felt as sickened with herself as she did now. What was it with her? This wasn't right, this wasn't right!

"Shhh…" Blair's hand slipped over the heaving ribs, her arm almost touching the small breasts as she tried to keep the shifting girl tightly against her. Hermione froze immediately. The first rush of wetness slid down the throbbing folds and she couldn't help another pained whimper, softer but more desperate this time. She could feel Blair's nails brush her hair aside and, moving to her neck, briefly slide across the goosebump-covered skin, down the tensing arms toward her wrists. Unbuttoning the sleeve of the white shirt, she gently pushed the fabric up and ran her nails along the sensitive skin of Hermione's forearm.

The breath, thick and moist fell against Blair's neck, the audible plea—she was being destroyed; physically, mentally, emotionally.

"My beautiful girl," Blair murmured and the barely alive, barely anything, Hermione pulled away ever so little just so she could look at the gold-dusted face to find whether she wasn't mistaken, whether she wasn't misreading the signs. And it took just a single glance into the large lustrous eyes for the frustration inside her to turn unbearable. Because in those depths she had found no motherly love, no endless empathy—she hadn't found anything besides the dark desire and corruption.

This wasn't reliving the childhood memories and there was no more innocent affection.

Hermione stirred in between the unmoving legs. Would she…?

"Ask me," Blair's husky voice brushed up against her cheek, answering the unspoken. "Tell me you want it and I'll—"

"I do," Hermione interrupted hastily, her stomach twisting in excruciating lunacy. "I do; I've never wanted anything—anyone as much as I..." she faltered, unable to tear her ardent eyes from Blair's—didn't she know she was the sun, the moon and everything in between to her? She wanted to surge forward and take the entirety of her body and soul but she... she could not; not before she knew she wasn't alone in her misery.
She asked her just so, blushing, her voice childish and breaking. She was breathing heavier and heavier at the mercy of the intense, unreadable gaze, gravely afraid of the two simple letters. What if she rejected her? Again. How would Hermione ever survive that?

Blair didn't answer; she kissed her, surrounding, hot and open all over her lips like a liquid flame, destroying every little doubt inside her head. She was soft; so soft as though she was made of almond blossoms and Hermione groaned into that sweet mouth, tasting so much heat and saliva she could not think straight anymore. It felt like breathing fire; her chest, her stomach, lower belly; everything burnt and she had to grasp onto the slender shoulders for support. The arousal was sliding down her thighs like thick honey and there was no way it wouldn't get onto Blair's legs. But Hermione forgot to care. She opened her mouth wider and tilting her head, slipped her cupid's bow into the corner of Blair's lips before surging up and savagely going after the pouty upper one. Ravenous and clumsy, she didn't exactly know what to do and her cheeks kept getting hotter and hotter with each unsuccessful try to seize her delicious mouth properly. She touched Blair's face and braided her fingers into her smooth thick hair, keeping her as close as she could, feeling she was slipping away from her.

And she did; Blair pulled away and, locking her eyes with Hermione's desperate apologetic ones, giggled.

She didn't like it, rang in Hermione's mind, she wouldn't have drawn back if she did. But Hermione was doing what she could… Her hands fell into her lap.

"Slower," Blair whispered and to Hermione's delight leaned back in, giving her another chance; her parted lips came in between Hermione's and the girl placed a tentative, quivering kiss onto the dewy flesh. She kissed her lower lip next, then both at the same time, gently, kindly as though Blair was a fragile violet. Hermione wanted to drown her in the tenderness the parts of which she'd buried, forlorn and needless in the corners of her lovesick ribs and arid lungs. She ached to show her how much love she'd awoken; that she was the reason of the blossoming field inside her and how all those lush flowers belonged to no one but her.

"Open your mouth," the woman breathed against her, making the hair on Hermione's arms stand on their ends. She did as she was told; opened her lips without breaking apart, letting them glide over Blair's. Then the world spun uncontrollably as her loins began pulsing with frenzied spasms. An agonizing moan drew out of her throat because a soft, delicate tongue had slipped into her mouth. It slid across her own for the first time, then the second and third, grievously slowly as though testing how much Hermione could bear; and what thin line Blair was treading, for Hermione was already halfway into purgatory through the heavenly fires of hell. Because now she could taste her everywhere; the sweetness came upon her tongue, her teeth, her lips, and chin; all covered by hot saliva.

It was agony.

A hand tugged onto her hair, tilting her head to deepen the intimate touch. (Menacing, menacing woman.) And Hermione couldn't keep the moans under control any longer as Blair's teeth grazed her jaw and nipped, the swollen lips teasing hers the next thing. And as they brushed fleetingly, the unhinged groans were falling into Blair's mouth with every desperate breath Hermione managed to take and release. Hands reaching to the swan-like neck, she leaned in closer but the woman pulled away. Breathing hard, she blinked. Blair's eyes were half-closed, tongue running across her own glistening lips.

Hermione's heart ached at the sight.

She had never thought of having sex before. But now… it was the only thought inside her
desperate starved mind.

"Come," Blair whispered as though she’d heard, pushing her off her knees and, standing up herself started walking toward the large bed opposite them.

Knees shaking, Hermione followed closely behind. She was so broken she could no longer think clearly. Her hands touched the small waist and, halting the woman's steps, came in front of her. A sloppy kiss landed on the puffed up lips, asking for more, but Blair placed her hands over the rounded balls of the girl's shoulders, forcing their lips apart and pushing her onto the bed; and as Hermione hit the velvet sheets, Blair climbed right next to her, leaning over. She glanced at the feverish girl with an odd so unBlair-like look before caressing her cheek with her index finger. Something wasn't right… The first drops of tears poured out of Hermione's eyes, but there was more—she was giving out something more.

She was weakening.

There was a tiny spark of clarity inside her mind. What was she doing?! This wasn't Blair! This wasn't her! She had to stop this immediately!

But the pliant mouth pressed against hers again, firmer than before, blending and sliding so smoothly, so passionately that Hermione lost the touch with herself altogether. The next thing she knew, Blair's face was against her neck, the silky hair caressing her skin before the teeth bit down. Hard. Gasping, Hermione stood no chance. She jolted up and rolled the woman over, her body lying down onto the warm, soft one. Instantly her knee tried to force Blair's legs apart, but couldn't because of the long dress standing in the way. Frustrated and burning, she grasped at the fabric, violently pushing it up, her knees bumping into Blair's as she shifted gracelessly to get the dress from between them. Then their legs touched; skin on skin and it was as though her insides were poured over by gasoline and lit on fire. Crying out, Hermione buried her face into the smooth shoulder as the soaked underwear came into the first contact with a bare thigh. 

*Ecstasy.*

Because the intense pleasure hadn't stayed only in between her legs; it moved into her entire body as though all those sensitive nerves that were supposed to be solely *there* spread along her skin like a heat rush.

Hermione lifted herself just a little bit, grasping at the prominent jaw; she wanted to look at her, she wanted to see her reddened lips and gleaming eyes as she would—she wanted—

But Blair turned her head aside like a restless puppy. Pushing forward, she switched their positions and pressed her thigh firmer against the throbbing groin. Practically sobbing, the worn-out Hermione curled her calf over Blair's leg as the wave of pleasure hit her folds, her chest, the tips of her fingers. God, she could feel it *everywhere.*

She'd closed her eyes for just a second before opening them and yelping in horror. Because where there was strawberry blonde hair before there was now an outpouring of curls falling over her flushed face like a dark curtain. At once she tried to prop herself on her elbows and crawl away but the firmness of Bellatrix Lestrange's body against hers wouldn't let her.

What happened? Did she wake up or did the woman perform some kind of Legilimency spell Hermione didn't know about just to make her return?! If the latter, was she taking too long in the astral realm then? Maybe so; Hermione had no idea how much time had passed anyway.

But then… Bellatrix must have seen everything!
They were inches from each other, Hermione's heart on the brink of blotting her out. Was it fear? It must have been. The dark eyes were boring into hers with a silent promise of a hell of a storm coming and all Hermione could do was gulp in the air and wait for it.

"Missing your fox blonde?" The woman smirked as Hermione tried not to move with a firmly placed thigh in between her legs. "I bet I could do a much better job at making you scream."

Oh dear God!

Hermione could feel a touch of fingers crawling up her upper stomach and gasped in shock as the woman yanked at her shirt and tearing it open sent the buttons flying everywhere. Hermione's hands sprung up, trying to cover her exposed chest but Bellatrix seized her arms. A strangled whimper escaped her throat upon feeling a smooth tongue running across the naked curve of her breast all the way up to her jaw, the glossy hair leaving a trace of painful goosebumps behind. Hermione was already so aroused, so weak, she had no chance to fight it. Her shaky hand sprung up, lingering above the ebony locks not even knowing whether it was for keeping Bellatrix there or pulling her face toward hers when the excitement suddenly became too overwhelming. She couldn't endure any more of that, and, feeling herself fading away from whoever was making her feel all these emotions, her eyes snapped open. The sharp light hit her irises, making her blink a couple of times before being able to see Bellatrix still leaning over her.

Swimming in the tides of intoxication, Hermione bolted up, wanting to kiss her dry lips and cover them with moisture when she froze in mid air, reality hitting her hard.

She was back in the old classroom. She had been astral projecting but she was back now and this—

She could see the shocked witch trying to pull away from her but without much success, because something seemed to be preventing her from moving further than a few inches. They both glanced down, seeing Hermione's perspiring fingers gripping Bellatrix's cold pale wrist. Gravely embarrassed, Hermione released her immediately and crawling backwards, crushed into something solid, hitting her elbow. There was no room for perceiving the pain, no room for anything other than panic.

How on Earth could she explain?!

"You're lucky you've woken up!" The quiet voice said somewhere from behind, making her head turn. It was the venor floccus man, standing actually not that far from the old painting Hermione had just smashed into. "I could feel your energy draining but you got away just in time."

Breathing hard, Hermione furrowed her brows in confusion.

"Incubus," he explained. "He was successfully trying to seduce you into having sex, in other words, to steal your energy."

The rush of blood filled Hermione's ears. No. He did not say that out loud for everyone to hear. Hermione refused to believe he would be so cruel. She was dreaming. She surely was dreaming!

Her eyes watched his jump to Bellatrix. "I told you she wouldn't get where you wanted her to go, for she wasn't in the right state of mind. Not the smartest to force things. It could have knocked her out for a couple of days. It's not all fun. The demons, I mean. You saw what it did to her; how infected she was, she went for you straight away even after waking up."

Hermione wanted to cry. Inhaling sharply, she got to her feet, spinning and springing for the door.
She grabbed onto the handle and yanked but the door wouldn't move. Shoving her shaking hand into her robe, she hunted for the wand, fingers brushing against a small parchment. She managed to whisper the Alohomora when Bellatrix called after her.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

"Away," she snapped, trying her best to keep her voice from breaking.

"No, you're not," Bellatrix's voice was moving closer. "Let her try again," she added, clearly addressing the man.

Maybe it was the frustration, maybe it was the long-repressed anger, maybe all mixed up together. But suddenly, Hermione burst like a volcano. "No! I'm done with this! I'm not constrained into doing every little thing you say! I'm neither your family nor your sidekick or bloody marionette without any brain. I'm done with helping you!"

In a second, Bellatrix's face was in hers, Hermione's feverish breath grazing the long curl across the snowy temple. "Don't you dare—"

Hermione was too pump to get scared off now. ""But I must dare! Otherwise I'll end up a coward, just like your husband."

The words were out before she could stop herself. In a second her body slammed into the door under the force of a heavy slap which had landed across the right side of her face. Ears ringing, she could hear dim voices, someone arguing and shouting but all she could do was hold her hand to the burning cheek and count the little lights flicking across her eyes like Perseids.

Come on, Hermione, stand up, she encouraged herself.

Clumsily getting to her feet, she wouldn't give Bellatrix or the man a single glance as she slipped out of the classroom, not at all bothered to close the door behind her as she started running forward the curled up staircase.

First of all, I'm really sorry for making you wait for almost two months! One day I'll tell you all about the story which goes behind (or maybe I won't) but for now I'll keep it quiet.

Anyway ^_^ I really hope you enjoyed the new chapter; it's almost as long as the previous one and I seriously planned on making it even longer but then I realised it would probably take me another month to finish with all the scenes I wanted to include, and so not to make you wait any longer I decided to sacrifice those scenes and update without them. /breaks my heart, mind you, but I'll find a way to sneak them into the next chapter/. All purely out of my love to you. Which reminds me—thank you for being so patient and SO sweet! I honestly can't even express how grateful I am and how greatly your words improve my days! You are my hottie-po-totties and I couldn't love you more!

Special thanks to Irymia, who's being the best beta reader in the entire world!

Also I don't know how many of you've seen my tumblr post about Blair. But if anyone's interested in who the fox blonde was inspired by look no further. ( youtube — /watch?v=FEZlf_AbEMA)

On a bit of a bitter note—I'm not sure when I'll be able to write again for there might be a couple of changes going on in my life right now but I want to reassure you that even if it's taking me ages, I'm NOT abandoning the story. If I ever decide to do so, I'll tell you. Promise!
Love, AP
Hermione was taking the stairs three at the time as she hurried up them to the seventh floor. There wasn't a soul about which briefly reminded her of the classes she was missing but the burning sensation in her cheek drowned all, even the most substantial of her academic concerns.

She didn't want to see or talk to Bellatrix ever again—not after being treated like a damned slave for simply opening her mouth and telling the truth! Hermione was stupid for running away! She should have stayed and hit Bellatrix right back! So what she was an adult; so what she was her teacher now! With manners like that what kind of reverence did she deserve? Eye for an eye, Hermione thought, angrily wiping off the tears oozing down her face.

If this was a perfect world, respect would be proportional to one's behaviour and not just given away for reaching a particular age or having a reputable job—especially not when one acted like a prick most of the time rather than a decent human. While Bellatrix might think aristocratic origins and a vault dripping with money gave her a certain right to act any way she pleased, that it counted more than the integrity, that it made her somehow superior to Hermione, in the girl's eyes such misconceptions only made her look pathetic and poor. Sure, Bellatrix might be big in terms of money, however there were still things like manners or compassion that she could never never afford. Oh, and that blood status she loved to boast about so much? She was so rotten that it wouldn't balance her ugly behaviour even if it was gold running in her veins! Damned woman; and she had the nerve to berate Hermione… She didn't deserve any respect! Any!

There was a shrieking sound behind Hermione's back and, spinning, she caught sight of Peeves just in time to swerve so that his transparent chest wouldn't fly through her head. The hasty movement, however, made her shoe slip and she fell, skinning her knee on the sharp edge of the marble stair. Hermione hissed, feeling warm blood blending into her knee-high socks. Peeves, floating above her, roared in laughter before reciting:

"Lookie here at Granger, she can hardly walk! They say she's smart but Peeves knows she's just a clumsy dork!"

"Leave me alone," Hermione gritted through her teeth as she struggled to stand up. She'd felt weak and lightheaded since waking up from her astral trip but now it was most likely the sugar in her blood dropping to an extremely low level which made her want to stay in place until the dizziness subsided. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford to wait around with the lunatic witch somewhere close. Scarcely she scooped herself up and without inspecting her stinging leg continued rushing upstairs. The irritating poltergeist decided to pursue her, singing his stupid rhyme over and over until Hermione hit the point of such unbearable fury she shot a Petrificus Totalus at him. She'd missed, of course, hitting the stone baluster of the stairs instead and although it stayed completely untouched, the banging sound was enough for Peeves to turn thespian and zoom off, screeching like a banshee. Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, hoping the noise wouldn't alarm any of the professors that might be lingering nearby and hurried up the stairs as fast as her spinning head allowed her to. Thankfully, by the time she'd reached the seventh floor, Peeves was all gone and there was no sign of anyone approaching either.

Hermione scanned the empty corridor, her gaze pausing on the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy before landing on the bare ash-grey wall straight across from him. 'Please, don't let me down.' She staggered forward and, facing the wall, squeezed her eyes shut. Three times she walked past the...
place before opening them and spotted a polished ornamented door that definitely wasn't there before and through which she pushed past immediately. As it closed behind her back, she took a rough notice of the cosy room before collapsing onto the cloud-resembling four-poster bed that stretched in front of her. The feathery blankets smelling of lavender oil moved and closed around her body like soothing arms, probably trying to provide her with a bit of comfort and lull her galloping heart. Hermione let herself relax as much as she could in spite of the terrible symptoms of hypoglycemia. She knew she had to get something sweet into her system to steady her blood sugar levels and stop the shaking but she had nothing at hand. Her bag, which usually carried at least a granny smith apple for a quick snack had stayed in her dorm. She didn't need any books or writing supplies until much later today, so she thought she'd go and get them after the double block of Herbology—bugger!

Without even checking, Hermione was positive there was nothing to eat in here either—this was the Room of Requirement she'd read about in *Hogwarts: A history* quite a long time ago and which she'd discovered randomly in her fourth year upon leaving the North Wing, annoyed she had nowhere to study because thanks to the Triwizard Tournament there had been people everywhere. It had saved her skin plenty of times since then. The room was believed to have some level of sentience because it appeared for anyone in need, equipped with just what the individual desired at the moment. It was a brilliant—*brilliant* place,—which, however too, had its limitations, like creating meals. The thing was, food was the first of the five principal exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration; it could be summoned if one knew where it was kept, could be doubled in amount but could never be created out of the clear blue; therefore Hermione didn't even bother searching.

Trying to roll onto her stomach, her injured leg brushed up against the linen sheets, halting her attempt. She freed herself from the cosy blanket and pulled her right knee toward her face. Rolling down her sock to her ankle, she revealed an about two inches long horizontal cut on her shank from which blood traipsed in a thin stream. It didn't look that bad. Hermione wiped the carmine fluid off with her index finger and, closing her eyes, plopped back onto the bed, breathing hard and listening to the cracking sound of the fireplace somewhere to her left.

Perhaps she could try calling Sammy, the smiley house elf she'd remembered from her detention at the beginning of the school year. She wasn't in charge of him so it wasn't like he'd have to come plus it was strictly against her beliefs but... desperate times called for desperate measures; besides, she could still bring him a couple of galleons later today.

"Sammy," Hermione called weakly and let out a sigh of relief upon hearing a soft crack.

A surprised voice squeaked at her feet: "Miss?"

Hermione sat up with a martyred groan, her eyes landing on a tiny creature of huge grey eyes and even bigger ears. "Hello, Sammy!" She tried for a smile but the muscles in her cheeks didn't collaborate. "I hope you remember me. My name is Hermione. Hermione Granger. I helped you in the kitchen… in September with my friend, Draco..." she inhaled, deciding not to talk around.

"Listen, Sammy, I don't mean to bother you in any way, I know you're super busy but please, could you get me something to eat? A fruit; a small piece, doesn't matter what kind… I'll be grateful for anything sweet actually."

"Of course, Miss! Sammy will be right back, Miss!"

"Thank—"

*Crack!*
"—you."

Not even three seconds later, he was back with a stuffed tray in each hand and balancing the third one on the top of his bald head. He placed the food right next to Hermione, the glistening pieces of evenly cut fruit making her already salivating mouth water even more. Her trembling hand grabbed the triangle slice of watermelon and took the first bite, its juice splashing inside and over her mouth, dripping onto her robe. Hermione didn't even care, she probably looked like she hadn't eaten in months. What mattered was that she was feeling better with each bite travelling down her throat into her growling stomach.

Hermione ate two more triangles before glancing up at Sammy and giving him a small smile as he handed a big snow-white napkin to her.

"Thank you! You saved my life!" She wiped her fingers and pulled her wand out but before she could clean up the rest, Sammy snapped his fingers and the sticky rosy pink juice disappeared from her robe, her face, and the ocean blue bedding.

"You're too kind, Sammy," Hermione said, making the little creature blush and bow his head.

"It is Miss Hermione Granger who is too kind! Could Sammy do anything else for her?" He beamed, looking as though he'd take a bullet for Hermione.

"No, you've already been of great help!" She pulled the trays toward him. "Thank you!"

Sammy's eyes filled with tears before they slid to her broken knee and his face faltered.

"It's nothing," Hermione waved her hand dismissively upon noticing his expression. "I can heal it in the blink of an eye, don't worry!"

The little house elf looked unconvinced. "Is Miss Hermione Granger sure? Sammy could help," he offered and it hit Hermione right in her freshly filled up stomach, just how big of a heart did this little guy have; much bigger than the whole Lestrange family combined for sure.

"I'm positive," Hermione nodded. "But thank you anyway!" She bit her lip before continuing. "Sammy… it would mean a lot to me if I could pay you for your services."

Sammy's eyes widened in horror. He shook his head, his ears slapping his face. "Oh no, Miss! Sammy could never accept anything from Miss Hermione Granger! Sammy was just doing his job!"

"Exactly—job! You're an employee, not a slave," Hermione proclaimed passionately, straightening her back. "You should get paid for everything you do!"

"Miss Hermione Granger must excuse Sammy; Sammy is needed in the kitchen now." The house elf looked up to his right and begun fiddling with his fingers. He wasn't telling the truth, only wanted to get himself out of the pep talk; Hermione knew that very well because conversations of such topics were always gravely uncomfortable to all the house elves she'd ever spoken to but she considered it her duty to shake some sense into at least Sammy. Taking a deep breath, she prepared for a long speech but before she could say anything, the house elf hurriedly said his goodbye and disappeared together with the silver trays and a quiet pop.

Her mouth parted, the girl let out a resentful sigh. She had yet another reason to hate on Bellatrix. It was the fault of purebloods, after all—the enslavement of house elves. Thanks to the likes of Bellatrix, those poor creatures were treated like objects incapable of any feelings when it was obviously the other way around. It was the purebloods whose hearts were made of stone. Cold,
ruthless people, trying to inflict their non-existent superiority on every magical creature there was. And what for? Hermione had always thought it was just a matter of fear. It was no secret house elves were truly gifted when it came to magic. And surely, if one wanted to rule, the first thing he thought about was eliminating the potential enemies. In recent times it might sound ridiculous—the suggestion that house elves could overrule the wizardkind; however, if one thought about it, they really manipulated with the magic that wizards could only dream of; besides, who knew what they were like before the enslavement. They could be strong and courageous, full of spirit, maybe confident in themselves—as hard as it was to imagine; perhaps that's why wizards saw them as a threat—such a huge one they had to break them.

Hermione gritted her teeth. Such injustice! House elves definitely were no underlings—actually, they seemed to her more humane than most of the people she knew. She wondered how noble Madame Lestrange would react if Hermione told her she knew a house elf who was twice the human Bellatrix was. She'd probably keep slapping and cursing her until the killing point. But hey, at least Hermione would have a chance to do what she should have done a couple of minutes ago—slap her senseless.

Hermione laid back onto the sheets, reconstructing the whole scene inside her mind.

"But I must dare! Otherwise I'll end up a coward just like your husband."

Smack! Bellatrix striked her but this time instead of running away, Hermione straightened her back, lifted her chin and with a look full of resentment raised her hand and—

The real-life Hermione, lying on the comfortable bed inside the Room of Requirement, furrowed her brows. Who was she trying to fool? She could never hit Bellatrix. Hermione hated the witch for sure but not enough to be capable of treating her like garbage, even though Bellatrix probably deserved no less as such.

God, and when she imagined she had been dreaming of doing such things with her! Hermione felt sick in her stomach. And that insensitive venor floccus! He had told Bellatrix about them—not specifically but the witch wasn't as stupid as to not put one and one together. It was actually a miracle she hadn't figured it all out by now.

"She went for you straight away even after waking up."

That bloody 'even'!

How on earth could Hermione explain that to her? 'Oh, I was just caught up in the heat of the moment. It was a matter of proximity, really; had there been anyone else in your place, I would've gone for them in the same way. No, it definitely isn't like I'd find you attractive, I mean, that's absurd! I'm straight...Who was I dreaming about then? Well, Ron, of course, and when I woke up I realised too late it wasn't his wrist I was holding but yours. Total misunderstanding.'

Hermione let out a weird chuckle. She couldn't decide what could potentially infuriate Bellatrix more: confessing she, Hermione, had dreamt of a steamy moment with her or that she'd mistaken her for Ronald Weasley.

A second later she shook her head, snorting scornfully.

Whatever. Bellatrix could think whatever the hell she wanted. Besides, why should she even have to explain herself to her? Hermione didn't owe Bellatrix anything, let alone the courtesy of the truth or worse—an apology.
Alright, Hermione had probably gone a bit overboard with insulting Rodolphus Lestrange but it was still no reason for Bellatrix to go all nuts! It wasn't like she cared for him enough to defend his honour, was it?! Perhaps she took it so personally because a filthy half-blood decided to give her a taste of her own medicine—rudeness; people generally hated the very traits in others they themselves possessed.

Hermione sat up on the bed, the blue blanket curling around her waist, keeping her warm. Her eyes strayed to the burning fireplace next to the massive oriel window behind which the snowflakes as large as galleons were falling slowly.

What was she to do? Hermione pulled her knees toward her chin, her gaze jumping to the reddened cut on her skin. She was definitely set on never speaking with Bellatrix again, that was without a question. She must drop the duelling lessons, too, which were a waste of time anyway given Lockhart was a hopeless narcissist without any real talent. She must avoid the less-frequented areas of the castle and would always have to keep close to someone—at least until the lessons were over for good and Bellatrix was gone from Hogwarts.

Yeah, Hermione nodded mechanically, that should eliminate the majority of possibilities of bumping into the witch. From now on she must ignore her at all cost. She would not let herself be threatened or blackmailed. Not anymore. And she would never let herself be manipulated into astral projecting ever again. She had had enough experiences for a lifetime, thank you very much.

Incubus; that bloody Incubus! Posing first as Blair, then this wayward woman…

Hermione remembered reading about them while still in Greece. She had found a book on astral beings in the 'Anagnosi' bookshop which was kind of peculiar, considering it was a muggle place but she didn't really look too much into it. Hermione had bought a copy, and while reading its pages in the shadow of a pomegranate tree, it seemed obvious to her that if she ever encountered one of the mentioned beings, she would have no trouble identifying them and knowing exactly how to handle them. Clearly she had overestimated herself.

An incubus was a demon, an evil entity, taking the form of an extremely attractive male—somebody his victims fancied a lot in real life. It was known he targeted women, mainly nuns or celibate Christian girls, whom he visited in their sleep in order to have sex with them. According to old Chinese scriptures, sex wasn't namely just about physical pleasure. It was more about aural energy, and it was exactly what the Incubus desired. Being intimate with someone meant an exchange of energies was happening between the pair. The more intimate they became, the more their aural energies intertwined. However, being with an incubus was a whole other story. It didn't matter if he had to steal the energy by rape or get it with consent in exchange for an otherworldly pleasure. In both cases he was just taking without giving back which left spiritual debris within the attacked women, leading into depression and anxiety. There were a couple of cases where targeted women even died of exhaustion after having been visited for a prolonged period of time by him.

Hermione was finding it hard to believe she could have been as impaired as to never even consider she was being seduced by such entity; perhaps it was the circumstances that had misled her. The incubus was believed to come in sleep, waking women to the point of sleep paralysis, wasting no time to create all the little details Hermione had experienced herself. The only explanation that came to her mind was that she must have gotten stuck somewhere between the lucid dream and the astral projection. That way she might have involuntarily led him into her own head, which meant free access to her memories, deepest dreams, and desires.

It couldn't have been hard for him then to construct any kind of scene so that he could get under her skin...
How strange though, that he had appeared to her in the form of a woman. Hermione had never heard of such case—but then, there were no references on how the Incubus approached gay people. There was actually a female equivalent of him called Succubus, who haunted dreams of men and which, Hermione thought, would fit the label of her attacker better, however she decided to go with what the venor floccus had said. Considering the man knew all about her preferences and that he had most likely seen everything that was happening inside her head or whatever that place was, Hermione didn't think she should doubt his judgement.

Standing up from the bed, Hermione walked over to the only window in the room, her steps slightly clacking against the wooden floor.

Maybe exchange of aural energy was possible only in between a female and a male, Hermione mused. But… wouldn't that suggest that being gay wasn't actually right? That the opposite was needed in real life too? Hermione wondered what happened when the energies of the same sex tried to intertwine with each other… Maybe it clashed—or perhaps, and Hermione almost chuckled at that—it made the people involved even gayer.

Jokes aside, it was a curious thing to think about.

Sitting on the window sill, Hermione let her eyes roam over the falling snow for a few moments, replaying her astral experience over and over again. There were so many questions running through her head. Like why had the Incubus changed from Blair to Bellatrix? And how exactly did Bellatrix end up in the room again when the peculiar man had ordered her to leave? Perhaps, after Hermione had drifted off, flying over time and space, he'd called her back in; and Bellatrix, seeing Hermione all sweaty and most likely (the girl felt herself blush) moaning must have come over to her to take a closer look at her and that's when Hermione had woken up.

That would be the preferable scenario.

If only Hermione could ask—no, she scolded herself subsequently—screw it! She didn't need to ask anything—because it didn't matter! Bellatrix was ancient history. Hermione had put this experience behind her as though it had never happened. Period! No more venor floccus crap! Last night she didn't even dream; maybe it was all over. God, she hoped it was over!

Taking a deep breath, she looked away from the window, her eyes stumbling over the analogue clocks sitting on top of the vintage nightstand beside the bed. She froze. It was noon—she'd been out for almost four hours! Hermione narrowed her eyes anxiously. She'd missed History of Magic and Muggle studies, which wasn't that bad, since she'd already gone through all the recommended books and had the required essays pre-written but she'd also skipped Arithmancy, which was unacceptable since she was supposed to have had a consultation with Professor Vector precisely an hour ago. Oh no! She must go see her and apologise!

Hermione's slowly easing anger directed at Bellatrix Lestrange burst anew. This was all her fault! The humiliation she had to face, the missed lessons and skipped meals which made her feel like crap. It was her fault she'd broken her knee and it was her fault she had almost had sex with Blair who wasn't even Blair, just an imposter who had bloody stolen half of her aural energy! It—

Hermione realised how childish she sounded even in her own head.

Damn that woman! Damn her!

Hermione grabbed onto her robe, squeezing it at her stomach. Her eyes dropped, her forehead frowning. Through the fabric, she could feel a piece of paper. It must have been the letter she'd received this morning. Hermione pulled it out of her pocket. Unfolding the yellow parchment and
spotting a familiar italic handwriting, she thought immediately of her mom's loving face.

*My dearest 'Mione,*

*I haven't heard from you in a while. I hope everything's going well and that you're not buried in books all day long! Sweetie, you have to take a break from time to time!*

*All is relatively well over here. Dad as usual doesn't have a day off but at least they're letting him spend the Christmas holiday with us.*

*I went to see Blair perform in the American theatre last week. She was outstanding! I wish you could see her. I've got some big news, which I'm actually not meant to share—Blair had me swear on my life I wouldn't, I guess she wanted to tell you herself, but I don't see any harm in at least hinting, she might have found herself quite a handsome fellow. ABOUT THREE MONTHS AGO! Could you believe she hasn't said a word about him until now—not even to me? But I can't hold it against her. I don't have a heart to stay mad when she looks so happy. I haven't seen her smile like that since forever. Well you'll see for yourself because (here comes another surprise I wasn't supposed to tell, but you know how bad I'm at keeping secrets) dad and I decided to spend New Year's Eve with them! Tell me it didn't just make your entire day!*

*Anyway, we cannot wait to see you! Just a few more weeks and you'll be here with us! Until then, take a good care!*

*Love you the most, mom.*

Hermione didn't know for how long had she stood there, staring at the letter loosely settled in her flaccid hands when it began: the feeling of a lump in her throat, spreading into her chest, then down to her tightening stomach, where it landed like a well-aimed punch; her teeth gritted, her tongue pressing against her palate.

'*...found herself quite a handsome fellow.'*

Hermione looked up from the letter. She felt as though her lungs could not draw another breath. Her feet moved on their own toward the messy bed on which she sank slowly, the sides of the parchment scrunched under the pressure of the sudden iron grip of her fingers.

Nevermind.

Sucking her cheeks in, she bit hard, nodding to herself.

Nevermind.

Blair had a boyfriend.

She had had a boyfriend for over three months now… which meant… they must have gotten together right at the end of the summer… right after Hermione had left.

Right.

*Cool.*

It wasn't like Blair had to stay alone just because Hermione had told her she loved her… her feelings did not bind them together in any way; Blair had been single… she was allowed…

Hermione's lower lip wobbled.
Blair seeing someone was hardly any crime, Hermione tried to reason, going against every feeling beating her chest sore; hardly any sin against her.

Then why did Hermione feel cheated on, a voice inside her head pointed, why did she feel as though Blair had betrayed her?

Hermione's back hit the sheets, her eyes filling with the tears she refused to shed.

Maybe it was because she had still hoped. A part of her must have still hoped Blair might love her too. But she didn't. She had feelings for someone else.

An image of a tall dark stranger with his arms around Blair entered her mind; looking at her, kissing her temple, her forehead, her smile...

Hermione didn't even know the bastard's name but she already knew she hated him with all her heart.

Why did it have to be some man and not her who got to love Blair? Why?! What did he have she didn't?

A penis, an intrusive voice inside Hermione's head noted casually, making her face scrunch which pushed the first drops of tears out of her eyes.

Beside being handsome, as her mom had described him, who was this man? How strongly did he feel about Blair, really? Did he, too, see her as this enamoring being, graceful and intelligent or just a hot woman to have fun with until he got bored.

Could he care about her more than Hermione did? Would he notice all those weird, all those cute little things there were about her? Would he find it amusing she peeled the little juice bubbles on oranges and ate them one by one which took her forever but did it anyway? Would he care that she found the word 'flibbertigibbet' funny? Would he love her staccato laugh which made her twist and lean back? Would he adore her crazy dancing, the extremely sensitive palms and ellipsed-shaped scar on her left arm? Would he take the time to count all the freckles on her body and love each and every one of them?

Of course he would; he had been doing it for months now; knew Blair better than Hermione ever would.

They might marry at some point, Hermione continued torturing herself; maybe have kids. Blair was still young enough to have them. Would she want that? Would she actually love him that much to give him something as extraordinary as a child?

Hermione couldn't bear the thought of this little baby growing inside Blair. What if they were together right now; being together like that.

God, did it hurt.

If only Hermione didn't dream about her—if only the stupid astral projection wouldn't have showed her what it was like to hold her so close. Hermione half-sobbed, half-snorted. What was she on about? She'd never held her. It wasn't her mouth she'd kissed, her skin she'd touched...

Hermione would never know the feeling. He would. He did.
The sharp pain in her throat intensified until insufferable and she let it all out. She cried and cried, thinking the tears would never stop but then, weary and defeated, she descended into a dreamless sleep, losing herself to painless indifference.

The lightly gray sky outside the window seemed to have not changed one shade darker when Hermione woke up curled in those warm, soft blankets, her nose stuffy, the bushy strands of her hair stuck in tendrils to her forehead. She felt strangely mellow as she was still yet to shed the sleep off her mind but it took her just a single glance to her left for her stomach to twist under the weight of the recollection.

Hermione let her eyes linger over the letter covered in blotchy ink infused with her tears before averting them to the soothing fireplace opposite her and observing the tiny bluish flames with a not-really-there gaze. Thought after thought started popping inside her head as though during her sleep a lot had been sorting out within her.

Hermione was absolutely certain she could not go on like this anymore.

She must try more than her hardest to forget about Blair.

Once and for all.

She'd better thought of a good plan as to how to avoid going to America for New Year then. It would hurt more than anything seeing that stranger man kiss Blair at midnight absolutely sure of himself, without any fear of rejection but surely feeling not even half of the emotions Hermione would have if she had that privilege. He would most likely forget about that one kiss mere seconds after, too, because for him, there were plenty of those before and plenty more to come... Hermione didn't want to be forced to sit there with them, smiling at both, Blair and that lad as though she was happy for them. She wasn't that good of an actress—or masochist for that matter.

Sighing, Hermione rolled onto her back, lifting her gaze from the dying fire to the moorish-styled ceiling above her head.

Why did she have to fall for a straight woman? Would this unrequited love always hurt so much—would it always stay rooted within her or would Hermione actually forget about Blair someday? And if she, by any means, would, what were the odds she'd actually meet somebody who would want her back?

What did she have to offer?

Not much, really. She was just a kid, after all; an insufferable know-it-all as Professor Snape liked to call her, average-looking as the girls liked to whisper since the Yule Ball in fourth grade, too pathetic as Bellatrix just loved to point out whenever she had a chance.

Wait…

Hermione pushed her back off the mattress, sitting down. Why was she entertaining these self-pitying thoughts like a complete idiot? She wasn't that bad; she was smart and friendly—sometimes even funny. Perhaps she was a bit more sensitive than other people but since when was that a crime?! The only one who bashed her for it was Bellatrix Lestrange who didn't even know what the word sensitive meant so…

Hermione reached out for the tissue sticking out from the carved box set beside the bed on the wooden nightstand and blew her nose.

She shouldn't have put herself down. Nobody's perfect. Besides, she had managed just fine all by
herself until now and she could surely do it for a little longer! Maybe, when she's older… maybe then Blair would…

No, enough of Blair!

Hermione put the blankets aside and stood up.

Screw it! Screw *them*—all the intelligent, charming, straight, middle-aged women, bound to suck the love out of gay girls with a single look only to leave them yearning for something they could never ever get.

Taking the letter from the sheets, Hermione walked over to the fireplace and placed it onto the glowing embers, watching it burn, feeling the warmth of the freshly burst flames on her skin. When the last bits of the ink disappeared in ash, Hermione cast around, reasoning it was probably time to pull herself together and go.

She couldn't stay hiding here and shying away from her responsibilities forever.

Hermione cleaned herself up, rubbing her eyes and the cut on her knee with a murtlap's essence that she'd found in a spruce-coloured bowl right next to the bed and that surely must have gotten there through Sammy's endeavor. He must have come back to check on her while she was still asleep, Hermione thought. She must go see him later today to bring him the money he deserved or at least thank him if he refused to take them.

When Hermione concluded she looked relatively normal, robe clean, eyes no longer red, hair still bushy, she gave herself one last look in the ornate mirror hanging over the fireplace and walked out of the room into the still empty corridor. She wondered where to direct her steps first. Whether to go visit all the professors whose lessons she'd skipped or—

"Granger!"

Startled, Hermione turned around seeing Draco striding toward her from the North Wing, the study room he'd never gone alone to, except for with Hermione.

"Where have you been all day," he half-groaned as he came close enough for her to hear without him shouting. "I was looking for you everywhere and then out of nowhere there comes Loony Lovegood and tells me you left in..." he paused, scrutinising her face. "What happened? Why do you look as though someone has just died?"

"Because they did."

Draco's frowning face smoothed out, his lips parting. "What? What are you talking about? Who died?"

"My hopes."

They looked silently at each other for a couple of seconds before Draco's eyebrows lifted. "Could you be any more tragic?" He smirked. "Come on, you'll tell me all about it over lunch."

"Not hungry."

"Then let's go outside."

"Okay."
"Oh well, that sucks," said Draco as Hermione had finished telling him all about the letter. They were wading through the mud beside the Great lake, keeping their shawls close to their necks as the wind whipped at their exposed faces. "Though you can't say you had not expected it to happen at some point, right?" Shrugging, he looked at her briefly.

"Actually… I had not," Hermione confessed, surprised at how true that statement was. She had been afraid, it might happen, yes, but hadn't really thought it would; Blair had been too preoccupied with Bill at the time so it had seemed unlikely to Hermione she'd forget about him in a matter of a few months.

Draco let out a surprised chuckle. "What, you thought she wouldn't get into a relationship because of you? Wow… if that doesn't scream narcissist, I don't know what else does."

"That was so uncalled for, Draco," Hermione frowned. "I feel bad enough even without your taunting."

"Well, I hope you do. And I certainly hope it's not that much because of the letter but because of how, forgive me, stupid you've been acting since that trip to Greece."

Hermione stopped walking.

"Excuse me?"

Draco paused too and, turning to her, shook his head. "I mean… you seem like a completely different person. You hardly smile or joke anymore—even your interest in bloody books had somehow gone out of the window. And I don't know what you're trying to achieve by eating hardly anything but if—"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione interrupted him, staggered.

"That Blair woman, what else?" he said. "You're losing yourself over her!"

"Don't be ridiculous! Loving someone doesn't—" Hermione objected but this time it was Draco who cut off her.

"I am being ridiculous? What about you then, walking around with this look of despair as though you've never known happiness? Do you have any idea how many times I've caught you all spaced out? You probably think about her day and night. Granger, that's not okay, you have to let it go and move on! I get that it's not easy to picture her with someone else but come on, you have never even been together! And it's not like you've broken up either. You cannot be that upset!" Draco paused, letting his words sink in before continuing. "You're talking here about love but tell me, have you and Blair ever even rowed; has she managed to infuriate you so much you wanted to kill her? Or have you ever, I don't know... just... felt a need to share things with her? To tell her about your passions and dreams? I highly doubt that you thought about yourself just for a second when with her. You've put her on this pedestal as though she was some glorious angel... Trust me on this, you'd tear yourself to bits for her had she said yes to that ridiculous idea of getting together with you! You'd lose your identity, putting her before everything and everyone else! She'd become the only reason you'd want to wake up in the morning... I hate to break it to you but that's no love—that's obsession."

Draco finished breathless, glaring at the astounded Hermione who had to take a moment before replying.

"I'm not obsessed with her," she stated quietly, trying to react without getting all defensive and
mean, even though she felt like screaming.

"Oh yeah? So you think you're in love? Then how come you got upset over her being happy?" Draco asked, rising his eyebrows.

"I'm not upset over her being happy!" Hermione's voice arose slightly. "You talk about my feelings as though you've experienced them through yourself but you didn't, Draco; you don't know what it's like for me, so please, drop it."

She could not get mad. She could not get mad!

"Oh come on, don't give me this nonsense! You're not the first nor the last person to have their heart broken! Get over your ego and look at things as they really are," Draco went on mercilessly.

"How dare you—!"

"You're starting to sound like my aunt, Granger. Get over your damned ego I say, and tell me I'm wrong!"

"Yeah, you are!" said Hermione childishly, tearing her gaze from his face and letting it roam over the heaving trees in the distance before returning her attention back to him. Draco's words were hurtful but what was worse was that they were also true. "Listen, I know I have to forget about her okay? I know! But it's just not that easy… I feel like she…" Hermione paused, not even knowing how to explain herself. "Nevermind. I just… it feels bloody impossible, you know?"

"Yeah, I do, actually," said Draco, making Hermione bow her head. "But you've got the perfect conditions," he went on. "You're in no contact with her, right?"

No, she was not, except for the hot dreams… but Draco didn't need to know that.

Hermione nodded awkwardly.

"It would be for the best if it stayed that way until you're over her completely. I don't think that going to America would do you any good at this point."

Shrugging, Hermione turned to the icy surface of the Great lake. "I know, but what will I say to my parents?"

"What about the truth?"

"You're kidding!" Hermione turned to him in disbelief. "You think it's a good idea to go to my parents and say: Hey, I cannot go to America with you because I'm obsessed with your best friend who, don't worry mom, doesn't want me back so I'm trying to forget about her. It would slow down the process so please, respect that. But anyway, say hi for me."

Draco smirked. "In a nutshell."

"Yeah, right…"

"Well, then don't go home at all," he suggested slowly but Hermione shook her head.

"No, I've spent hardly any time with my dad during the summer; you know he's always working. This is the first time in years he got a couple days off."

"Okay, then go but come back right after the Christmas," said Draco, watching Hermione tug her flying curls behind her ears. "Here's an idea: tell them you and I have made plans to spend the New
Year together. Tell them I'd be really upset if you cancelled on me cause I'm going through a horrible heartbreak."

Hermione felt her cheeks heat up. "Stop it, Draco!"

"What—it's true."

Shaking her head, Hermione pulled her coat tighter to herself. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go on."

"Have you been reading those self-help magazines from the library basket by the shelf with Russian literature? Because all of a sudden you seem more knowledgeable about relationships than the Patil-Brown gang."

"Shut up, Granger."

---

Draco agreed to accompany Hermione back to the castle to see professor Vector so that she could apologise and reschedule her missed consultation. The talk went relatively well even though the professor wasn't particularly thrilled about 'having wasted a full hour waiting for the student who did not bother showing up until late afternoon'. However, given Hermione was her favourite student, she closed her eye to the first and, as Hermione promised, the last trespass she had made on her lesson.

"Unbelievable! If I said I was feeling queer, I'd lose fifty points and get a telling-off for not going to Madame Pomfrey," Draco grumbled as they headed down to the Great Hall in the hope there was still some food left from the lunch.

"That's because you're untrustworthy," nagged Hermione, casting around.

"That's rich, coming from a liar."

She turned to Draco with a scowl but didn't say anything; he got a fair point after all.

"No, but seriously, Granger, why'd you miss your classes? You promised to tell me later!" Draco demanded but Hermione looked away, pretending to be interested in the way her shoes moved in and out of her sight as they scurried down the stairs. Draco kept pestering her about whether it had anything to do with Bellatrix and the venor floccus business until Hermione confirmed it had but apart from that refused to tell him any more. She needed the time to assess how much she could afford to reveal so that she wouldn't get caught up in more lies and then admit to something she'd rather keep to herself—like dreaming inappropriate dreams about his aunt. So instead, she shifted the topic to his parents and Draco filled her in on how they were finally on speaking terms; though only because they heard from Nott's parents he and Hermione were no longer talking.

"...so then my mother sends me a letter, urging me to invite Astoria for a cup of tea during the Christmas break. I think she's deadly serious about—Granger?" Draco paused, nudging Hermione with his elbow.

"What?" She turned to him. "I'm listening. Your mom wanted you to invite Astoria for a cup of tea and?"

Draco shook his head, his eyes pointing somewhere in front of them. "There's some weird man over there who's been staring at us for quite a while now."
Hermione followed Draco's gaze. Just a couple steps ahead of them, right at the end of the stairs stood the silver-haired man dressed in a long dark robe, the venor floccus Hermione'd had a privilege to meet this morning. She quickly cast about, trying to spot a mane of jet black curls, but Bellatrix was nowhere in sight.

"I've never seen him in Hogwarts before," whispered Draco. "I wonder who that might—"

"Doesn't matter," said Hermione, trying her best to ignore the man's presence as she hopped the last few steps down, passing him by. "Would you come with me to see Sammy?"

"Sammy? Who's Sammy?"

"Hermione Granger!" The tranquil voice behind her back made her pause, her eyes closing momentarily. "Can we talk?"

Hermione glanced at the man who came standing in front of her, her gaze darting to Draco next second. Had the situation been less serious, she would have laughed at his weirded out expression, probably caused by the man's empty eyes.

"I'm afraid we can't," replied Hermione, already skirting around him.

"I'm here of my own will," he called after her, attracting the attention of a bunch of Hufflepuffs leaving the Great Hall and forcing Hermione to come back to him. "This doesn't have to do anything with Madame Lestrange," he added.

"Excuse me but who are you?" Draco asked inquisitively but the man ignored him, having his attention solely on Hermione.

"I have nothing to gain from lying," he replied to the question she was just about to ask.

Hermione took a step closer. "What do you want from me?"

"I'd like to explain what really happened with the—" he started but then Hermione remembered the man had no problem saying the most intimate details of her mind out loud.

"All right, I think we should talk privately, I'm sorry Draco, we'll see each other later," she blurted quickly.

"What…?!"

"See you," she repeated, leaving the scowling Draco behind her as she hurried away, boldly pulling the venor floccus with her by his forearm. She knew she was screwed; next time they saw each other, Draco would surely demand an explanation.

"He'll understand," said the man and Hermione had a lot to do not to flip out on him for reading her bloody mind—but then, he probably heard that anyway.

Hermione ushered them into the first empty classroom she could find, locking the door behind them. She turned to the man with an expectant look, his face, just like before, showing no emotion.

"First, I'd like to say I'm sorry," he started calmly. "I shouldn't have made you hop on an astral plane when I knew you weren't ready; and secondly, I shouldn't have let Madame Lestrange get violent. My apologies."

Hermione took a moment before curling her lips down. "So you're here to balance your karma?"
she joked.

"Exactly."

Oh, okay, he really was.

"I suppose you're familiar with Saint Germain and the violet flame, the seventh rate of Holy Spirit," he said.

"You already know I am."

"No, I don't, you wished I'd stop reading your mind."

Hermione's cheeks heated up. "The violent flame changes negative energy into positive energy," she said, ignoring his comment. "The key is forgiving the ones who did you wrong but also yourself for being angry with them; feeling sorry for the mistakes you have done and being of help to someone without expecting anything in return—that one actually increases the vibration of the positive energy."

"Correct."

"All right, I forgive you," Hermione said a bit too sardonically. "Is there anything else I could do to even out your karma?"

Hermione felt she should be more polite, however she was still mad about the slap.

"You could allow me to take you back into your past," he suggested. "You've said you'd like to know why you have this gift," he added. "The answers are up here, all you have to do is unlock them." He touched his temple with his index finger. "I can help you with that."

Hermione's stomach turned around. "How?"

"Astral projecting."

"Absolutely not!" She shook her head. "There is no way I'm doing that ever again. Besides, not to be mean or anything, but you must know this method isn't accurate. It's labeled as traveling through the different timelines but everyone knows it's just your mind constructing the scenes however it pleases. I wouldn't see the truth, just some modified version of it—something similar to a dream."

"Ordinary people would see, as you say, only a modified version, but your brain works differently; that sixth area you got up there is extremely powerful; it allows you to see the real happenings you could never recall in a conscious state—everything from the past lives to growing inside your mother's womb," he explained.

"Don't be afraid of doing things twice," he added when he noticed Hermione's eyebrows remained knitted together. "Just because it didn't work on your first try, doesn't mean it can't on your second. You know better now."

Biting her lip, Hermione folded her arms, still unconvinced. "How can I be sure Madame Lestrange isn't involved? How can I be sure she won't barge in on me just so she could slap my other cheek for no apparent reason?"

"Would you like to read my mind so you'd know I'm here for a good cause and not because she made me do it?" the venor floccus asked, the offer making Hermione's spine break out in goosebumps—the things she could see; it was no secret she was practically obsessed with learning
everything she could, however this man in front of her was someone who possessed the knowledge of the degree just a tiny piece of which could make an average man go insane.

"Besides, I only called her in because it was impossible to wake you up," he said. "I presumed the voice of someone familiar, someone who made you so nervous, could penetrate into your unconsciousness; stir something in you and bring you back but all it has done was help the Incubus; I should have known it was a bad idea, especially because he sensed she was someone you fancy."

"I don't fancy Bellatrix Lestrange!" Hermione gritted resentfully, folding her arms. "I would never! She's the most vicious human I've ever met!"

The venor floccus took his time before saying: "Have you ever thought there might be a good reason behind her being 'so vicious'?"

"Yeah—she enjoys it!" Hermione blurted hotly.

"Or maybe it's something else," he suggested, making the young witch frown.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, only that even the whitest marble blackens at twilight," he said. "You shouldn't hold so much anger toward her. She's got already enough of it for herself."

Hermione stared at him wide-eyed. Bellatrix being angry with herself?!! What for?

"Now," the man raised his voice slightly. "Do you want your answers?"

Hermione licked her lips, pushing Bellatrix's anger issues out of her mind. Just a couple of months ago, she'd do anything to know all about her dreams but now it all seemed too scary to her. Did she truly want to find out? Did she have what it took to bear the truth? And last night, there had been no dream, anyway—however, to miss such an opportunity would be unbelievably stupid...

"Yes," she let out finally. "Yes, I do."

Nodding, the man neared in. "Alright, but be prepared. You may gain more than just the knowledge of your venor floccus abilities."

Hermione parted her lips, her whole body tingling with expectation but she didn't say a word.

"If you're really sure then let's not waste any more time."

The process went similarly to the first astral trip: Hermione lay down onto the familiar wood, her breath sucked out of her lungs just as abruptly as before—only this time she did not slip away so easily. She remained half-conscious with the venor floccus' voice inside her head, calm and clear, guiding her through the light tunnels and sealed doors of the thick mist. She'd swear she could hear them whisper—hear them cry and laugh in thousands of tones and colours, so familiar and close as though they were a part of her. Hermione wished to enter at least a few but knew she had to keep on walking. And as she did, the voice inside her head began to fade and the lights started shining brighter and brighter until they became blinding and she could not see any longer. Hermione advanced up front with her hands outstretched, until they brushed against a solid surface and she pushed at it.

Then her eyes opened.
Nonplussed, Hermione found herself standing in the middle of Hagrid's pumpkin patch, his giant gray hippogriff Buckbeak tied with a thick chain to the wooden pillar right next to her. She began backing away immediately, her legs gliding through the colossal pumpkins without the slightest touch. It scared her just for a split second before she remembered her body wasn't solid and that Buckbeak couldn't get mad at her for approaching him without bowing first because he could not see her.

She took a hesitant step forward, observing him lying among the colourful squash, unable to recall any memory that would connect her to Buckbeak other than seeing him once in her third year in one of Hagrid's lessons. What on Earth did he have to do with her venor floccus abilities?

Hermione sensed a movement behind her back but before she could even turn around, someone—a girl—ran through her body and rushed away, jumping behind one of the orange pumpkins in front of her. Trying to see who it was, Hermione strode after the figure when the same thing happened again. She watched the back of a black-haired boy sprint after the girl and disappear on the same spot. Hermione crept after them, reeling as her eyes fell over their features—it was unmistakably Harry Potter and… her; it was her a couple of years younger self, dressed in a dirty pink jumper and denims, her hair bushier than usual. She and Harry were gazing at Hagrid's hut from which, through the opened window, his hoarse voice was proclaiming: "Great man, Dumbledore, great man!"

Wait… was this…?!

"Here they come," said Harry to the crouching Hermione, his eyes darting toward the stone path leading from the Hogwarts castle to Hagrid's hut where a trio of people was approaching. "I'd better hurry."

As he was trying to stand up, the other Hermione's hand closed over his upper arm, pulling him back. "Fudge has to see Buckbeak before we steal him," she said urgently. "Otherwise, he'll think Hagrid set him free!"

They both turned back towards the window, hearing Ronald Weasley's relieved voice: "Scabbers, you're alive!"

"That's Pettigrew!" whispered Harry, his voice seeping with anger.

"Harry, you can't!"

"He betrayed my parents," he tried to stand up again but Hermione wouldn't let him. "You don't expect me to sit here."

"Yes and you must!" she emphasised, pulling him behind another enormous pumpkin. She turned to him and, taking a deep breath, got to explaining: "Harry, you're in Hagrid's hut now. If you go bursting in, you'll think you've gone mad. Awful things happen to the wizards that meddle with time. We can't be seen!"

The astral Hermione could not believe her senses. She was witnessing one of her venor floccus dreams from years ago! Could something have happened at this very moment? Something that had triggered the dreams in her?

She watched the other Hermione throw a tiny stone straight through the open window, which, judging by a sudden hiss, clearly hit someone.

"We're coming out of the back door," she whispered hurriedly. "Go!" The young witch leaped from
their hiding spot and ran into the forest, which was just a couple steps away from the patch, Harry and the astral Hermione following.

They managed to jump behind the thick trunks of spruces just in time when the backs of Ronald, another Harry, and the third Hermione appeared bending behind the pumpkins. They were clearly surveilling the incomers who, as Hermione remembered from the dream was Dumbledore, Fudge and the executioner, Macnair.

"Is this really what my hair looks like from the back?" The astral Hermione heard behind her.

She turned but then quite an extraordinary thing happened. For a short span, she could see herself through all the three Hermiones. She saw her own face quickly disappear behind a tree in the forest through the eyes of the Hermione hiding behind the pumpkins; she saw herself crouching behind the pumpkins through the eyes of the Hermione in the forest. But she also saw her true self, in her own timeline, hurrying to the DADA lesson in her Third Year, which she would've missed completely had it not been for a bit of magic in the form of a time turner…

She saw herself turning the tiny hourglass necklace at the exact same time the two Hermiones spotted each other.

She had no time to process anything before the scenery darkened and altered completely.

Now, Hermione appeared in the living room of her parents' house from, she dared to guess, at least seven years ago. The threadbare couch on her left was the same as the one in her baby photographs and was yet to be replaced by their beige chesterfield sofa; the dining table seemed much smaller than the one they used now and the viennese piano she loved to play from time to time was missing too.

Hermione looked around, curious like Alice Kingsleigh and twice as confused. What was this about? What so impactful could have happened in her childhood that she was reliving this memory now? How exactly was it connected to her dreams? Had someone tried to kill her just like Lord Voldemort had little Harry Potter? And had she too survived but instead of a scar got away with the dreams?

No, that didn't make any sense.

"You may gain more than just the knowledge of your venor floccus abilities."

With an uneasy feeling, Hermione strode out of the living room and, crossing the spacious foyer, entered the kitchen but didn't find anything unusual, save for the unwashed dishes. She backed away and checked the entire floor before climbing the stairs. The first door was the one leading into her parents' room. Hermione walked right through it and froze.

On the hickory flooring beside the painted crib in the corner of the poorly furnished bedroom was sitting a much younger version of Jean Granger. She was gazing unseeingly in front of her, her eyes absent and unblinking. She was dressed in a simple white chemise, even though it seemed to be a perfectly bright afternoon outside. There was an odd energy encompassing the entire room and Hermione could sense something wicked was due to happen. She willed herself to come forward and leaning over her mother peered into the crib. On the snowy sheets, a toddler Hermione was sleeping peacefully.

For a moment, her mind had wandered off because what a curious thing it was to be looking at this little girl of tiny hands, curly hair, and rosy cheeks that would grow into the sixteen-year-old Hermione one day. Gosh, if only this small human could comprehend that she would become a
woman. That she would do things, feel—

Hermione heard a pained intake of breath and rounded back to her mom. She took a closer look at her young features, which suddenly seemed so broken Hermione felt the heart in her own chest somewhere out there clench.

Bending down to her, she whispered: "Mom," but Jean could not hear her and kept sitting, legs outstretched without a single shift. It was the shadows on the walls and her face that began to move though—as rapidly as if someone was urging the sun to fast forward and set right now because Hermione had already seen enough of this particular moment and needed to move on to the very core of the memory.

The room turned dark in a matter of seconds and only when the sky behind the windows settled with ink-black did Jean move. Hermione watched her stand up and, turning the lights on, scuff towards the small wardrobe beside the door where she changed into a pair of jeans and a chunky sweater. She seemed to have forgotten all about her daughter for she didn't look at her once as she left the bedroom. Worried, Hermione followed her out and into the foyer, watching her put on her black oxfords, curious to see what was going to happen next, but Jean only grabbed her purse and stepped into the night, shutting the door behind her and looking as though she was never coming back. Hermione thought of going after her, but something was telling her she needed to stay in the house, for what was important to the memory would be happening right here.

She went back upstairs, beating her brains out with the possible reasons for her mother's bizarre departure. Why had she left Hermione all alone? Had she and dad been arguing? She had looked upset, after all; but then, if they had rowed, she wouldn't have just left without her (possibly) two-year-old child, Hermione tried to reason; and she surely wouldn't have sat like a statue for half a day.

Something wasn't right.

A soft exhale escaped the lips of the little girl as she began to shift inside the crib. Hermione leaned over her, seeing her huge cinnamon eyes blink rapidly a couple of times before they closed and opened again, and continued doing so until fully awake.

"Mommy?" called out her sleepy voice.

Hermione anxiously looked around. Her baby self was up and her mom was only God knew where and it seemed unlikely she'd get back anytime soon even if she just quickly stepped out to buy something—which surely wasn't the case anyway.

"Mommy?"

Hermione strode to the window. Where was her dad? Working probably. But why did her mom—

"Mommy!" The girl cried out more earnestly. Hermione watched her toddler self sit up, her chin wavering. She kept calling her mom again and again but every time got the same eerie silence as a response. Getting to her tiny feet, she tried peering over the rail that went barely to her belly and clumsily started climbing out. Hermione jumped to her, anticipating the nasty fall and really, the little girl fell over almost immediately straight through Hermione's outstretched arms onto the hard floor.

She began crying grievously but there was no one to hear her. Hermione kneeled beside her, observing her own scrunched face damp with the waterfall of tears.
When was anyone coming home?!

After a moment or two, the still weeping girl commenced staggering towards the door and calling her mother again, left to check all the other rooms upstairs only to find them dark and empty. The small Hermione wept harder. She advanced towards the staircase and scuffed down them in a way that suggested a very high risk of breaking her neck but Hermione couldn't do anything to help her.

She watched her miniature self totter through the bottom part of the house, knocking with her tiny fists on the doors, which were locked, and crying harder and harder as she continued to meet nothing but silence.

Straying to the living room, the only place that was left to check, Hermione was a bit surprised the little girl wasn't afraid to step into the unlit room. Quite the opposite, she saw her, shoulders heaving with crying and groping around, head for the half-opened French doors.

"No no no, where are you going!" said Hermione out loud. The toddler Hermione was suddenly out in their garden illuminated by nothing but street lamps, sobbing and calling for her mother over and over again.

Hermione ran after her into the soft rain that was just beginning to fall, seeing the little figure stagger barefoot through the darkness and freshly wet grass, stuttering. "Mo-mo-mmy!" She watched her fall to her knees and continue climbing and trying to get through the thick leylandii hedge that surrounded the entire garden but without any success. The crying turned into squealing as the neighbours' cat ran across the lawn, scaring her. Trembling and sobbing, the girl ran back towards the house but the wind shut the doors right in front of her nose. She was trying to open them, breathing and crying so hard Hermione thought she was choking.

After a couple of failed attempts, defeat settled onto the infant's face. She regarded the house with one last longing look before stumbling toward the wooden den that her grandpa had built for her as a birthday present when she turned one. She climbed inside, from where Hermione could hear her bawl her eyes out.

Why didn't she use magic to get back into the house, she wondered. It was natural for magical children to use it unconsciously when scared or angry as a form of self-defence… Could it be her shock was too overpowering?

Hermione gazed at the den, the sound of sobbing so morose and broken she could not help feeling the same, however bizarre that might be. Her little self must have been so scared and cold; it would be no surprise if she caught pneumonia in such weather.

When the hell was anyone coming home?

It seemed like an eternity had elapsed when the crying sounds faded into the now heavy rain and the lights in the house gradually lit up, followed by the sound of a doorbell ringing.

The little Hermione peeked out of the soaked den, supporting herself on her trembling arms, her damp hair sticking to her reddened cheeks and forehead.

About the bloody time, Hermione thought bitterly. She watched the other Hermione hesitate before slowly clambering out of the den, pausing in the middle of the lawn, getting even wetter, eyes swollen from crying.

Eventually, the living room behind the marigold curtains sparked to life, too, and within seconds someone pushed the French doors open and, stepping onto the brick patio, froze.
Hermione surmised that the tall, slim frame that appeared in front of them must belong to a woman but due to the late hour could not make anything out of her face—still though, she could say with certainty it could be anyone but her own mother.

"Oh my God!"

Her eyes followed the figure as she hastened through the outpouring of rain to the broken child. A sudden thought sprung inside her head. Could it be…?

"Love!" She heard the woman say before she bent down and scooped the little Hermione up into her arms. The girl began sobbing anew, her arms wrapping tightly over her rescuer's neck as she let herself be carried inside.

"I found her, John! I've got her!"

Hermione followed them in, her inkling turning out true as soon as the light from the scavo glass chandelier hit the woman's face; it was Blair—no more than five years older than Hermione and with golden chestnut hair and no bangs at the time. Had Hermione's astral body been solid, her stomach would have definitely turned upside down and filled with mad butterflies flying through her like a hurricane. Goodness, how lovely Blair looked even windswept and with her hair damp and her black mascara smeared underneath her widened eyes—and it was she who had saved her!

Hermione had no more time to enjoy looking at her, though. There, into the room burst her dad, panic written all over his face, adding him the extra couple of years he surely did not have.

"Hermione!" He reached his arms and, touching Hermione's shaking back, tried to take her from Blair but the girl began sobbing harder, tightening her grip around Blair's neck, a couple of raindrops falling from her eyelashes.

"I'll take care of her," said Blair in a sweet voice that was still yet to deepen.

John's eyes glistened with tears, his outstretched arms falling to his body. "I…"

"It's all right!"

"Thank you," he whispered, looking completely lost. "I…"

"Look," said Blair firmly, adjusting the girl in her arms. "Make yourself a cup of strong tea and try to calm down. Jean will eventually come to her senses."

"Right… sure… I'll do just that." He formed a small smile but as soon as Blair left the room with the crying girl attached to her like a hot melt, he sagged onto the carpet, hiding his face in his palms.

Hermione was in a complete shock. She had never seen her dad cry. What was going on? Had her mother left them? Why would she do that? And how come Blair was in London at the exact same time such a thing happened?

A part of her wanted to stay with her dad to console him but her palm went straight through his shoulder as she tried doing so. Hermione remained looking at him for a while, feeling so unbelievably upset but she knew there was nothing she could do for him. Backing away, she went after Blair, finding her in her parent's bedroom. She was standing in front of the opened drawer with the colourful clothes folded neatly inside it. The Hermione in Blair's arms had her head snuggled in the crook of her neck and was playing with the golden tips of her hair, twirling them around her tiny fingers as her sobbing slowly faltered.
Blair pulled out a pair of tiny pyjamas from the first drawer box and a sage-green towel from the third. The ease with which she found the items suggested this wasn't her first time doing so. Hermione only hoped it was because she'd been coming over often 'cause she loved spending time with Hermione and her family and not because her mother used to run away from home from time to time and it was on Blair to take care of Hermione.

That would be just unimaginable. She had always considered her mother the prototype of reliability and Blair... well, Blair had always been this carefree spirit who, even though loved children, wouldn't really know what to do with them. At least that's how Hermione perceived her—Blair herself kept saying she wasn't responsible enough to become a mother. Hermione had heard her state once that she'd be that kind of parent who would give her children the drug and sex talk on the note of—"Hey kids, here's some drugs, don't do sex."

Hermione was looking at that young woman with the toddler-herself huddled to her, feeling an unbelievable rush of warmth buzz through her.

"Alright, sprinkle," said Blair lovingly, closing the drawer with her right hip since the other was occupied by the little Hermione. "What would you say if we run a hot bath and—" she started but Hermione shook her head vigorously, panic hitting her anew.

Blair put the arm in which she held the towel and the soft pink pyjamas over Hermione, pressing her tighter to herself: "Alright, alright, shhhh! We won't, okay? But we need to get these clothes off of you." She pulled away, pretending to be very serious as she tugged onto Hermione's bodysuit with her fingers. "I don't want you getting ill! Who would I play with if you—my bestest friend in the world—ended up lying in bed with a terrible fever, hm?" Blair was looking at the little girl with a raised eyebrow and such a sweet innocent expression that Hermione wasn't surprised in the least that her smaller version surrendered—she would have, too.

"O-okay."

"Okay? 'Kay!" Blair smiled at her before getting them past the hinged bathroom door right next to the unmade bed. She turned the lights on, exposing the bathroom of the still navy blue which would become entirely white in a couple of years. She knelt down onto the small bath mat in front of the acrylic tub and Hermione unhooked her legs from her waist. Her dirty bare feetsies thudded against the floor but she still let her hands rest on Blair's blouse which was now, thanks to the rain and Hermione's own wet self, dark instead of light green.

Casting a scrutinising look over the tub, Blair narrowed her eyes. "Are you really really sure you don't want to have a bath? Because I'd let you put in as much foam as you'd like! We could even have a bubble fight!"

The warm sensation inside Hermione intensified.

"A bubble—bubble fight?" Her younger self repeated, her eyes suddenly brighter.

"Sure! Don't tell me you've never had one!" Blair parted her lips, pretending to be shocked. The little Hermione shook her head.

"Well then, we must certainly fix that!" said Blair and, leaning over the tub, let the water run, occasionally checking its temperature.

Despite having no tear ducts, Hermione felt like crying. She had never met a manipulator kinder and sweeter than Blair Alderidge.
She watched her take the wet clothes off of the little Hermione and laugh as they got stuck and couldn't get over her head. It managed to make the girl chuckle a bit, too. Eventually, the white bodysuit slackened and Blair could finally take it off and put aside; then she gently picked Hermione up and put her into the steamy bath. Soon a third of the tub was filled with warm water and another third with thick foam that went all the way up to Hermione's shoulders.

Blair seemed to be doing everything she could to erase the sadness from Hermione's eyes and it was working miraculously. She was blowing the foam into Hermione's face and tried to look super indignant as Hermione did the same, which made the little girl giggle. She made spiky hairstyles out of Hermione's curls and told her she should do her hair like that every day.

"Nooo!" laughed Hermione, destroying Blair's masterpiece. Then she looked at her with sparkling eyes, saying: "Come on in, too!"

Smooth little doodle! Despite the innocent nature of the statement, the teen Hermione couldn't help the burning rush of heat spilling over her like fire.

Was this happening?

"Maybe another time," Blair smiled at her, trying to wipe the foam off of her now even wetter hair. "It's time to go out now."

Oh… right. Was there another time?

Nevermind!

Little Hermione tried protesting, but Blair seemed to have a knack for making her do exactly as she wanted.

She wrapped the girl into a thick towel and hoisted her over her shoulder, head hanging down, making Hermione squeal as she spun around. Chuckling, Blair put her back onto the floor. She lay the towel aside and gently rubbed the baby skin with lavender oil before dressing Hermione in her fluffy pyjamas. Then she took her into her arms again and went back to the bedroom.

Hermione's dad was just coming in with a baby bottle full of warm milk in his hand. He didn't look any better but as soon as he spotted Hermione all calm and clean, he put on a small smile.

"Hey, captain," he spoke softly as he came to them, his eyes red. "Are you all right?"

Hermione almost forgot he used to call her that!

The little girl in Blair's arms nodded, pressing her right cheek against Blair's left while playing with the collar of her chiffon blouse.

"I… I thought you might be hungry." He held out the bottle and Hermione took it from him without a word, drinking its content immediately. She must have been famished.

Blair seated her onto the bed, looking as though she wanted to take John aside and talk to him privately but the girl grabbed her hand.

"Don't go," she cried out.

Blair's eyes seemed somehow watery as she sat beside her. "I'm not, I'll stay with you, alright?"

Hermione nodded before returning to her milk but still leant against Blair's arm.
John kneeled down, eyeing his daughter. "I've already called my colleagues five times," he told Blair. "But they keep saying the same thing over and over again. 'You have to wait twenty-four hours before making a report, John. She's an adult, John. There's no record on her being unstable, John…' blah blah blah! Like I didn't know! But it's my wife, damn it! One would have thought they actually cared…"

"Don't ever rely on the police to help you—no offence," said Blair, drawing a genuine quick smirk from him. "But if you like, I could drive around the area and check some places. Perhaps I—"

"No, no, no! That's very kind but I could never ask anything like that of you." He shook his head. "Besides I don't think Hermione would be willing to let you go." He smiled at the girl who already had half of the milk inside her tiny belly. "But I'll go. You stay here, make yourself at home, get something to eat—oh, what am I talking?! I should have made you something, I'll be right—"

"No, I'm fine, John. I'm not hungry and if I was I know where the kitchen is, alright?"

He gave her a grateful look. "Right… but you surely must be very tired. I'll put Hermione to sleep and you can—"

"Go find your wife," Blair cut him off. "I'll take care of the little thing."

"You'd do that for us?" asked John but Blair only rolled her eyes. "I don't know how to thank you!"

He stood up from the floor, taking her hand in his. "Please, take our bed and sleep here with Hermione. I'll take the couch if I come home, though I don't suppose I'll be back before the morning…" He leant to his daughter. "Be good, Hermione!" He gave her a quick kiss and dashed off.

Hermione could not believe what she'd just witnessed. This was a nightmare. What in the world could have possessed her mother to make her do such a thing?! To disappear without telling anyone where she was going? Moreover, the police was involved?!

Her eyes strayed to Blair and her mini-self. The little girl had already finished her milk and was climbing back onto Blair's lap. She put her tiny arms around her neck and her legs around her hips and gazed into those big dark blue eyes. Hermione noticed Blair's wet clothes and hair had started to dry and clean themselves up.

So now, her magic decided to demonstrate…

Blair looked down at her blouse before glancing back at the child. She put on a sad smile and took Hermione's face into her hands, kissing her cheek three times in a row without actually moving her lips away in between each peck. Then she hugged her close.

Oh, how Hermione wished to be viewing this memory through the little girl's eyes! She'd even be willing to endure the rain and the certain headache little Hermione must have had after so much crying.

"My beautiful girl," Blair whispered, her voice seeping with compassion. She put her hands, one over the girl's arm and the other into her hair, stroking them. She moved closer to the wooden headboard so that she could lean her back against it and provide more comfort for the child.

'My beautiful girl'— It echoed in Hermione's head. It was the same thing the Incubus had said to her when he… Oh God…

Was that what this was all about? Flabbergasted, Hermione asked herself, suddenly thinking she might have solved the meaning of the memory. Was this the reason she was reliving it? To find out
why she wanted to be close to Blair all the time and in any way possible? Was this why she found it arousing being treated as though she was a small girl? Was it all because of a traumatic experience—because it had broken her and had taken its toll on her sexuality? Blair had given her so much attention, so much care… and Hermione was in such a tender age when all these patterns were forming in her...

She watched her little self lay her head against Blair's collarbone. "Will mommy come back?" she asked, playing with the buttons on her blouse.

Blair's eyes closed momentarily before answering. "Of course she'll come back!"

"She left because she doesn't love me very much."

Blair made the little girl look at her. "Listen to me, Hermione, your mommy does love you very much—more than anything in the world! She's just not really herself right now… but that doesn't mean she—" The words got stuck in her throat.

"I love mommy, anyway," proclaimed the girl. "I wish she'd come back."

"And she will!"

"I love daddy, too—and I love you!" said Hermione to Blair.

"I love you, too, sweetypie." Blair's stiff expression melted and the little girl leant in and kissed her fully on the lips. It was the most innocent gesture and yet the teen Hermione couldn't help feeling absolutely shocked—shocked and jealous, and all the while disappointed that she could not recall anything. She would give away her soul to remember what her lips felt like.

She saw the small Hermione lie back down on Blair who wrapped a blanket over her tiny back before hugging her to her. The position seemed extremely uncomfortable, but she did not move an inch. None of them did.

Hermione was looking at Blair, noticing hundreds of emotions passing through her beautiful, still a little child-like features.

Was what Hermione felt for her truly just an outcome of trauma and not a real emotion? Had she mistaken love for craving for the affection she did not get from her own mother when she was little? And was Draco actually right about her being obsessed?

The room got suddenly very dark and time sped up again. There were no more prolonged memories. Only fractions.

She saw her mother, crying and asking her to forgive her. She saw her pack her case and leave again but this time she'd said her goodbye, explaining she needed to see a doctor to get better.

She saw the days spent with Blair while her mom was away. She saw her building puzzles with her, taking her to the park and singing silly songs to her before bed. She saw Blair making her raspberry crepes for breakfast and herself giving Blair raspberry kisses on both of her cheeks in return.

She saw her dad being too close to Blair and Blair pulling away just in time before their faces could touch. She saw him apologise and say he was being stupid and that this was a huge mistake, that he didn't mean it and was just confused because Blair was there for them through all this.

She saw herself cry her heart out when Blair was leaving. And she saw her mom coming back and
promising her she would never abandon her ever again.

Then Hermione woke up. She was crying.

She heard a conciliatory male voice somewhere close by, instructing her not to move and elucidating that all was just a memory and that she was safely back at Hogwarts now with nothing to worry about.

Her eyes fluttered. She pressed her fingertips to them, wiping off the tears pouring into her sticky hair and trying to bring her ragged breathing under control. Her head felt like exploding. She'd seen far too much all at once and had no idea how to deal with any of it.

"How are you feeling?"

Hermione zoomed in on the figure that was leaning over her, recognising the hollow face of the venor floccus.

"I… just give me a moment." Disoriented, she let her eyes roam over the ceiling, recollecting—she was back now, it was—

A soft sigh escaped her lips as the cool skin of the man's palm met her burning forehead, making the brain fog clouding her head leave within seconds.

"Try to sit down," he said, retreating and waiting until Hermione did so before offering her a glass of water which she took from him with quiet words of gratitude.

"Better now?"

Gulping down the last of the liquid, Hermione nodded. She placed the empty glass onto the floor right next to her where it disappeared into thin air.

"I've seen everything you have," the man started flat-out. "I've been there with you through all the memories and I understand this is a lot to process. But for now I suggest putting those childhood memories aside. You should talk about them directly with your family. I think it would be only fair to give them the opportunity to tell their side of the story before you misconstrue their actions."

Hermione remained silent.

"What is really important here," continued the man, "is that first memory. Do you understand what happened?"

"I," started Hermione hesitantly, pulling her knees toward her chin, "I saw myself." She glanced at him, licking her lips and trying her best not to think about Blair, her mom, and dad.

"Yes, you saw yourself; in other words, you interfered with time and got caught. Do you know what that means?"

Hermione could feel her stomach turning around.

"A fracture in time was created," he explained, kneeling beside her. "A loop through which you're able to see to the other side."

"I created a fracture in time?" asked Hermione, bewildered.

The man took a moment before shaking his head. "No, not you. It was someone else who opened the loop precisely when you spotted yourself—someone compelling—someone who made sure
you would see yourself in the first place."

"But who would…?"

"I don't know their name, neither their face. All I can tell you is that it wasn't anyone from this world," he revealed, making a rush of goosebumps travel down Hermione's spine.

"Why would anyone from the other side," she started slowly. "Wh—why would they care about me having an insight into their world?"

"Maybe they thought you could help."

"Help?" She leaned in. "Help with what?"

"With preventing the war."

Hermione was gazing at him with her eyes wide as plates for a good ten seconds before she recovered. "What do you mean, war?"

"Our world is in danger," he let out, standing up. "And Madame Lestrange is walking straight forward with open arms ready to embrace it." He glanced at her with those eerie empty eyes. "It's either you stop her or else our society will fall."

Hermione got to her feet, too. "What danger are you talking about? And how could I take any part in preventing it? I'm sixteen! How could I possibly—"

He took a deep breath. "You need to gain her trust. Talk to her!"

Hermione let out a forceful laugh. "Never! I will never talk to her ever—"

"This is not about you or her or your feud anymore. It's the future of our world that is at stake! Go and ask her about Corpus Deus, go and tell her you'll keep her informed about the dreams. You must convince her you are on her side. But," he took a few steps to Hermione, pausing just as they were eye to eye. "Under no circumstances you're to actually take her side. You must stay mindful and watch your back and hers too. She doesn't understand what it is she's unleashing."

"Wh—no! I don't want to have anything to do with this—or her!" objected Hermione. "I'm not—"

"You have no choice," he leaned in, making her take a step back. "It's your duty and that's settled whether you like it or not. It's not as if you could run away from your dreams, they are here for a reason."

"If they're here for a reason, why didn't I dream any relevant dream last night, then?" she challenged, raising her eyebrow. "What if they've stopped?"

"They did not stop—they've lost the trigger—the corpus deus," he said silkily. "Think! This is not the first time the dreams ceased for a night or two, is it? Tell me, didn't you give up something yesterday? Something you keep near your pillow at all times otherwise?"

Hermione's mouth opened agape.

How she could have been so stupid!

—

It was getting late when she and the venor floccus finally left the classroom.
"I understand it is a particularly bitter pill to swallow," he muttered to her as she conducted him to the entrance hall that was full of jubilantly-looking students leaving the Great Hall from dinner. "But I'm positive you'll find a way."

Hermione's blood boiled. "Yeah I'll find a way to magically save the entire world, right? A teenager without a complete education. I'm sorry, that is just ridiculous," she gnashed, folding her arms across her chest.

"If it was ridiculous, I wouldn't be here," he said. "I don't have time for nonsense."

"But this is nonsense," Hermione retorted quietly so no one but him would hear her. "It's absurd to ask of me things that are beyond my power! It's absurd to force me into sucking up to Bellatrix Lestrange! I don't want to be friends with her! I don't want her in my life and I certainly don't intend to go after her and pretend to be interested in her wellbeing so that I could—" she paused when a couple of passing Gryffindors gave her curious looks. "I'm just not doing that," she sibilated finally.

"Think about it carefully," the man stopped as they reached the exit. "We're talking about one of the most violent bloodshed that could go down in the history of not only the magical world but the entire world, was the war to happen. As I've said before, I've seen Madame Lestrange's mind; she's driven by the ideology of clearing the world of non-magical people. She wants superiority. You do realise muggles and muggle-borns would be the first on the list, don't you? Just think of your family, your friend Blair. Isn't their life being at risk enough to persuade you?"

"People would never allow anything like that to happen," Hermione objected but could still feel her stomach tightening.

"With Corpus Deus," he said. "People's opinions wouldn't matter anymore."

She gave him a long searing look as his words slowly sank in. "But how do you expect me to stop Bellatrix from finding those Corpus Deus items?" Whatever they were.

"Oh no, you're not to stop her from finding the items. Quite the opposite. You do your best to help her with locating them."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Hermione suppressed the urge to stomp her foot. "How—"

"You'll figure it all out soon enough. Good luck, Hermione Granger." And just like that, cutting her off in the middle of the sentence, he was gone.

—

With the chaos of inexplicable half-answers, Hermione ambled outside, oblivious to the curfew that was to start in thirty minutes and headed towards the greenhouse at the back of the castle. She felt as though today had lasted a whole week, that the morning was as far from her as the pale moon up above her feverish head.

She hardly knew what to contemplate first—the possible war she was expected to stave off (at the age of sixteen, which was absolutely ludicrous) or some items called Corpus Deus that Bellatrix was after and that the venor floccus refused to shed any light on? Or maybe her mom suffering from some form of delayed postpartum depression and Blair taking her place which resulted in Hermione's weird infatuation with her? Or that her dad had tried to kiss Blair because he had felt lonely?

This was too much to cope with in one day.
Hermione buried her face in her palms before running them through her hair, desperately pulling at a few strands. Why did all these things have to keep happening to her?

She stumbled through the entry into the greenhouse, the wet air so hot in contrast to the cool night outside, and meandered straight for the corner with eucalyptus plants, inhaling the minty fragrance in the hope it could calm her growing anxiety at least comparatively.

But it didn't. There was a faint sound of fabric swooshing somewhere close by, making Hermione's heart skip a beat. She knew she had no business being here and that she'd be in so much trouble if she got caught but there was no going back from now. Trying her best to stay still, she tried listening for any more sounds. Maybe it had been just mandragoras moving their leaves, she tried to reason after a while of silence, it was known they used to stir like crazy in their sleep.

"Well, well, well, isn't someone asking for detention?" she heard a tired yet somehow silky and arrogant voice as the pale face of Bellatrix Lestrange came into the moonlit view.

Suppressing a yelp, Hermione placed her left palm over her stomach as though to stop it from turning around. She could not believe her misfortune. Why did it have to be Bellatrix of all people she had to bump into?! Hermione had no strength or desire to deal with her right now. Turning on her heel, she headed for the entry.

"Fifteen points off, muddy."

Hermione paused. "You cannot do that."

"Another fifteen off for questioning my authority."

Gritting her teeth, the girl tried her very best to stay calm.

"I'd like to take off more." She heard Bellatrix smirk. "The points I mean—don't get your hopes up—but I'm afraid your house doesn't have enough to cover you being a sick-minded twist."

A sudden coldness hit Hermione at the core; her body stiffened, her muscles turning rigid. Was Bellatrix implying what she thought she was implying?

Bellatrix's heels began clicking against the ground while Hermione stood there, unmoving with her heart beating madly. "I must admit, I didn't want to believe it when the thought first occurred to me," she proclaimed slowly. "I said to myself: don't be stupid, Bellatrix, no one could be that sick in the head, but dear, dear..."

Hermione gulped, her eyes blinking rapidly.

"Tell me." The clicking moved closer. "How hard is it to live with yourself, knowing what a distorted little fiend you are?" she merely whispered.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione dug her nails into the flesh of her palms. She would not cry! She would not cry!

"I'm surprised you're still here instead of St Mungo," the witch went on placidly. "I'd personally pay for your treatment, were they to try to Crucio that disease out of you."

Hermione scooped up the last bits of her courage and turned around to face the woman. Her stomach clenched the second her eyes locked with Bellatrix's cruel ones, that were looking at her as though she was the most revolting thing they had ever seen.
"What is wrong with you?" asked Hermione in a weak voice.

"Me?" Bellatrix snorted. "I'm not the one forcing myself on women!"

"I did not force myself on anyone," objected Hermione angrily, taking a step closer.

"Don't even think about it," Bellatrix actually stepped back. "I don't want you anywhere near me! God, you make me sick," she barked. "I've always thought mating with muggles should be outlawed. Just look at how you've turned out! Sick little pe—"

"You listen to me!" Hermione walked up to her in three long strides, making Bellatrix back away, her back hitting the shelves with plangentines. "I'm sick and tired of your pathetic insults! You're the only one who's twisted here!" Bellatrix's eyes fluttered, her forehead glistening with tiny beads of sweat, but Hermione didn't pay attention. She was set on getting everything off of her chest. "And it is your erroneous views that are disgusting! You have no right to treat me like—"

Bellatrix sank to her knees. Hermione stopped in the middle of the sentence, her eyes widening. Without thinking, she lunged for the woman, making her head land on her lap instead of the hard floor. The waterfall of the softest curls spilled over her forearms and hands. Thunderstruck, Hermione was holding the unconscious witch in her arms, helplessly staring at her unmoving body.

"B—" Her trembling hand reached to Bellatrix's face, carefully brushing the heavy curls out of her eyes, their rich scent diffusing quickly all around her. She was terrified to touch her any further but what else could she do?

"Bellatrix," Hermione whispered, her fingertips lingering above her cheek. She didn't want to experiment with magic to awaken her. She'd never used a healing charm on humans and she didn't want to cause more harm than good.

"Come on, wake up," she whispered desperately but only after a half of a minute did Bellatrix begin to stir. Hermione let out a sign of relief but then her stomach tightened.

The witch was going to kill her after finding herself in such position!

Bellatrix's eyes blinked; and truly, it took her just a second to realise whose lap it was she was huddled to before leaping to her feet, the abrupt movement making her stagger.

"You…! What have you done!" she fumed at Hermione, who quickly stood up as well.

"Nothing, I swear! You fainted! I couldn't do anything…"

"Get out of my way!" Bellatrix roared and clutching her forehead marched out of the greenhouse.

Hermione was staring after her, her anger long since gone.

What was going on?!

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Hello, I'm actually crazy so here's a 16k+ chapter. I love you all so so much! Thank you for being so patient! Thank you for the beautiful reviews that made my heart melt! Thank you for still being interested in reading this story! And a huuuuge huge thank you to my beta reader Irymia who's just the best! (Now I feel like I've won an award for thanking so much, but I'm just that grateful, haha)

Anyway, hope you liked the new chapter! I cannot wait (literally jumping here) for your thoughts!

All my love, AP!
"Mom, I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you but school's been keeping me busy. It's almost the end of the first term and I wanted to get everything in order before I leave for home. Speaking of, I cannot wait to see you and dad. What a shame though, you hadn't told me about America earlier! I've already promised Draco we would spend New Year's Eve together here at Hogwarts. He and his parents haven't been getting along too well lately so he decided to stay here during the holidays. And as much as I'd like to see Blair again, I don't want to let Draco down. We'll talk about it in more detail once I'm home. I just wanted to let you know beforehand so you could cancel my plane ticket if you bought it already. I miss you and dad terribly! Love, Hermione."

Leaning against the wall in the Owlery, Draco finished reading out loud from the daffodil-yellow parchment in his hands and began nodding approvingly. "Cunning, deceitful, persuasive. My compliments, Granger! I particularly enjoy the part where you bullshit your way around the truth. Tell me, when did you become such a pro at lying?"

Hermione, who was shifting on her feet beside him, snatched the letter out of Draco's hands. "I'm not lying," she said, rolling the parchment up. "I'm only adjusting the details. Besides, time's pretty relative so technically, I'm telling the truth that is applied to a slightly different period than the one in which the things had originally happened."

Draco gave her an ironic glance. "You're delusional."

Looking for an owl to deliver her letter, Hermione's eyes paused on a screech owl that was observing them with squinted eyes from the perch above the glassless window. "Well, if you come up with a better idea as to how I can avoid going to America," challenged Hermione as she signalled for the bird to fly down to her, "let me know."

"I already have."

"That is not a better plan."

"It is."

"Is not."

"It is."

Hermione faced him, clipping her hands to her hips as the owl fluttered down on the window sill next to them. "No, it is not! Draco, for the last time, I can't tell my parents I want nothing more in my life than to ask a straight woman twice my age to marry me!"

There was a dull sound of something hitting the floor and both, Hermione and Draco, jerked their heads toward the entry, their eyes landing on a wide-eyed and obviously gobsmacked Lavender Brown with her hands empty and outstretched in front of her. The neatly packaged box that must have fallen from her grip was lying among the dust and mice skeletons at her feet.

In that instant, a revelation washed over Hermione, that life had just taken her virginity. Because she hadn't been just screwed—she'd been positively and undoubtedly fucked.
She heard Draco clearing his throat and utter a bunch of words but her ears were too deafened to
detect their meaning. She was staring at Lavender who was staring right back at her, both of them
speechless.

This couldn't be happening; it had been barely two weeks since her ordeal with Bellatrix and
fortune had decided to turn its back on her again?! Who up there had had it with her that they'd
conducted for her biggest secret to fall straight into Lavender Brown's lap?

Hermione watched the blonde girl recover and hurriedly pick up the box from the floor and,
apologising, clear off faster than she'd come. Turning to Draco, whose face couldn't have depicted
her trepidation more, Hermione whispered a word that had probably never left her mouth before.

"So... " Draco opened slowly. "Should I go and kill her before she tells everyone? No? In that case,
I think there's only one thing we can do."

Hermione raised her brows in desperation.

"And that's visiting Sammy for some leftover chocolate cake."

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Two hours later, Hermione was sitting in a deserted library with an unseeing gaze, the quantity of
heavy books on Transfiguration lying open on the rickety table in front of her. She and Madam
Pince were the only ones present in the room. The majority of the students had given up on
studying altogether and had chosen to spend the remaining days outside, indulging in a growing
Christmas spirit. Needless to say, the overall joy of having too much free time had ended up
causing more harm than good. It wasn't actually that many days ago when Gryffindors had decided
to have a contest on who'd build the most ridiculously-looking Snape-snowman. The fun didn't last
long since the furious professor had found out about the competition and had given almost the
entire dorm detention. So now, the students were either enjoying the snow outside or
disemboweling all kinds of reptiles down in the dungeons with Snape harassing the hell out of
them.

And as odd as it might sound, Hermione would swap without blinking twice. She'd much rather
torture herself with thoughts on how cruel the exploitation of sentient beings for human profit was,
than sit here reflecting on the things that had gone wrong in her life.

She wondered how many people in the castle had already heard the news about her sexuality by
now. Knowing Lavender, she presumed at least one third of the students with Professor Trelawney
on top (who had, of course, known all along).

Shifting on her chair, Hermione idly flicked the page of the book nearest to her.

Her well-kept secret was just being broadcasted and there was nothing that could be done about it.
Honestly, did it even matter at this point? Ever since last summer, she'd done nothing but lied to
everyone, herself included, about her growing attraction to Blair and to, damn her but, Bellatrix,
too; she'd tried to convince herself it was just a matter of admiration and when that didn't work,
she'd tried to scotch it altogether which had only resulted in tears and hurt.

So maybe it was a good thing Lavender had found out. Hermione was slowly becoming sick of
veiling her emotions anyway; and the longer she sat here, the more she felt like she didn't actually
care that much about people knowing about Blair. Draco's willingness to talk everything through
with her and show his support had done wonders to her self-acceptance. Besides, Blair alone had
assured her she didn't mind her feelings and that from a higher perspective being gay wasn't any
different than being a heterosexual; unlike Bellatrix, who had basically advised her to reserve a room at St Mungo but Hermione wasn't as stupid as to take her comment too personally.

If Hermione was to take advice from anyone on the matter; it would be Blair. She'd always choose Blair. And she might as well choose to face reality. Why deny anything? For the fear of rejection? She'd already been there and survived.

It took her quite a long time but she'd eventually come to understand that this life she was living, belonged to no one but her; that it was too ephemeral to be wasted on pretending to be someone she wasn't just to avoid being judged. She could never please everyone, anyway; Hermione might be the juiciest of apples and still, there'd be someone who'd say they were allergic. She was finally starting to grasp that this wasn't about pleasing others but living up to her own values. She was finally starting to be happy? Of course she did but it was impossible to achieve sincere happiness through lies and deceit, no matter just how much those fitted into the frames the society had set up.

If she wanted to get by contentedly, she needed to start being so much more tolerant toward herself. It was just recently that the thought had dawned on her; no matter how much she bashed Bellatrix for being a bully, in reality Hermione wasn't any different—regardless of how nicely she treated other people, to herself she was just as mean as Bellatrix was to her. It was so messed up. After all, Hermione was the only one who had stood and would continue to stand by herself through the ups and downs until her last day. So why did she proceed beating herself up like a crazy person? There would always be someone to do that for her so why not become a friend to herself and just laugh everything off? Because no matter how many bad things would happen, no matter how many people would let her down—if she had her own back, she'd always have someone to rely on.

So how about she started treating herself with kindness, respect, and honesty? And while at it, why not be honest with everyone else, too?

Who knew; there might be more girls or boys at Hogwarts who were, just like Hermione, scared of their feelings. Rarely, people were lucky enough to have someone like Draco or Blair by their side to encourage them and tell them that they weren't broken at all; that it didn't matter who they loved as long as they loved.

Moreover, if coming out and being true to herself meant the end of McLaggen winking at her in the corridors, and that Lavender and the Patil twins would steer clear as soon as they saw her, then let the bloody rainbow loose.

Hermione blew out her cheeks.

This was going to be huge. She wasn't being as optimistic as to believe everyone would get it and go on with their lives just like that. She anticipated loads of nasty bullying and weirded out looks, especially from the Slytherins; however, when she thought back to Bellatrix's sledging, she figured that what she was about to face would be just mild teasing in comparison to that.

Flicking another page of her book, Hermione straightened her back, a soft adrenaline rush running through her body.

She was rather proud of herself for standing up to the witch that night in the greenhouse, even though her exaltation had been slightly marred by the entire passing out scene which kind of scared Hermione out of her wits.

Since then, she hadn't seen Bellatrix or heard from her. It was as though she had never even been in Hogwarts in the first place. Hermione wondered where she could have gone and whether she was
better off now. She'd noticed already back in Malfoy Manor that the witch didn't lead the healthiest of lifestyles—Hermione had never seen her eat except for drinking coffee or water; also, given Bellatrix seemed to be constantly tired and that the times they saw each other face to face were mainly during the late hours, Hermione presumed she didn't get much sleep either. It shouldn't be that big of a surprise that her body gave out. But then, what if it was something serious? The options were countless; it could be anything from simple dehydration to some, God forbid, neurological condition or heart problems.

However awful Bellatrix might be, however awfully she might have treated Hermione, the girl didn't have it in her to wish bad upon her and hoped that Bellatrix was doing okay—all for Draco, of course; he would be crushed if anything happened to his aunt and Hermione would hate to see him suffer.

Snorting, she looked out of the window.

Six years ago, had anyone told her she would ever care for that obnoxious boy from Slytherin, she would have laughed in their faces. Draco used to be such a spoiled little prat. It was unbelievable how much he'd matured over the years. Where Hermione remembered him being malicious and sneering, he was now emotionally-grown, perceptive and kind and just… the best friend she could ever even ask for.

He, more than anyone, deserved her trust, and so the day after Bellatrix's fainting spell Hermione had decided to tell him the truth. She'd told him about her astral experiences, though still kept the details of Incubus turning into Blair and Bellatrix to herself. She also hadn't said anything about the slap and Bellatrix's passing out, but she'd filled him in on the time turner and her childhood memories; about the venor floccus and the possibility of war and Draco's reaction couldn't have been any more priceless.

He'd forbidden her to talk to Bellatrix ever again, most of all to share the dreams with her because, as he reasoned, one could never know what to expect from her. Draco had also stated that he thought the whole concept of the war was bullshit; that the venor floccus and Bellatrix had concocted the story together and had just played it out on Hermione, trying to arouse some kind of heroic urges in her. He thought the man had figured how much Hermione cared for her family and Blair and used it against her, anticipating she wouldn't say no if she thought their life was in danger.

'It's pretty sneaky, if you ask me; you know how my aunt is. Besides, if there truly was something going on, don't you think there are enough aurors in the Ministry to handle a situation like that accordingly?'

Draco's point of view sounded reasonable and alluring to fall for and Hermione would much rather things were that simple but there were still gaps that not even Draco's clever brain could reason out.

If only Hermione had more information.

The venor floccus hadn't contacted her once since their last meeting. Hermione grasped he must have been serious when he said she would decipher things on her own.

Well, wasn't he mistaken?

Hermione had spent hours perusing books in the library but she hadn't found a word about the mysterious objects called corpus deus he'd mentioned to her that day. Her diary, the only thing that could elucidate her on the matter, was gone together with Bellatrix, and therefore Hermione had no connection to her dreams which were, according to the venor floccus, triggered by this seemingly unimportant item.
Looking back, Hermione felt like an idiot that she hadn't deduced it for herself. Honestly, how come she'd never noticed that whenever she didn't dream about being Harry Potter's sidekick, the diary wasn't anywhere near her? She'd left it on her bed at home when she'd traveled to Greece and she hadn't had a single dream during her sojourn there. The last night at Malfoy Manor when she'd dreamt about Bellatrix, she had accidentally fallen asleep in their library while the diary had stayed upstairs in the bedroom. And that steamy dream about Blair—that day Hermione had given the diary to Bellatrix!

And there she thought she was smart… Snorting, Hermione shook her head.

She wondered whether Bellatrix knew. She must have; otherwise, she wouldn't have kept the diary. The venor floccus had told Hermione that Bellatrix was after the corpus deus; he'd told her right before they'd left the classroom. What he hadn't told her though, was how many of those existed, how many were already in Bellatrix's possession but mainly—what the hell they were.

All Hermione gathered was that one of them happened to be her vintage-looking diary which she'd bought in a paper shop in London three years ago and which had the ability to beget the dreams. How strange, though; Hermione could not understand what such a magical object had been doing, laying around in a muggle shop like that? Had someone planted it there? The same someone who was responsible for the time loop? And if they had, how come Hermione had gravitated right towards it? Surely, she could tell if she had been subjected to the Imperius Curse—Hermione recalled feeling no different than her usual self while purchasing the diary.

And what about those other items? Could they too invoke the dreams, or did each have a different aptitude? Moreover, why did Bellatrix care for them so much? Could it be they were as powerful as to help her carry out her vision—to exterminate anyone whose veins didn't run with royal blood?

The dread crept over Hermione whenever the thought swooped into her mind. She'd already known Bellatrix was wicked but she'd never guessed her to be as deranged as to be capable of killing. And she, Hermione, was supposed to give her a helping hand?! Absolutely not! Often she thought about alarming the Ministry but then… what would she say? She had no evidence except for her word; besides, the Lestranges were one of the most respectable families in the wizarding world; nobody would dare drag their name, moreover without a good reason.

If only Hermione could go to Dumbledore; after all, he was the one who'd told her about venor floccus. He surely must have known about the corpus deus, too, and would listen to what she had to say in spite of her age or her blood status.

The thing was, the headmaster had disappeared in the same way Bellatrix had and Hermione couldn't help thinking that was somehow linked.

The possibility actually provided her with some degree of comfort. If a wizard as powerful as Dumbledore had taken any part in this, what was there to fear? For a split second Hermione thought that perhaps it was him who'd given her the dreams but she quickly shook the thought off. If Dumbledore wanted, he'd sort Bellatrix out in a matter of seconds; he wouldn't need a teenager to do the work he was more than capable of doing instead of him.

"Miss Granger!" Jerking her head up, Hermione's eyes focused on the tense face of Madam Pince that appeared in front of her out of the blue. "It's late."

Hermione drew back in her chair. Right, the closing hours! She leaped to her feet. "Of course! I'm sorry, I'll just put the books back on the shelves and I'm gone."

Madam Pince frowned before nodding shortly and returning to her desk.
Hermione packed her quill, ink-bottle and the bits of parchment with half-scribbled notations into her bag. She stacked the books on her desk and carried them to the correct aisles where they flew out of her arms and placed themselves on the shelves where they belonged; then, with a tightened stomach and a beating heart, Hermione set off through the silent castle toward the Ravenclaw Tower.

She didn't know what to expect; her former confidence started to slacken and she wanted nothing more than to hide away from everyone and everything but she knew she couldn't.

She climbed the spiral stairs and came to a halt in front of the entrance of the common room. She solved the eagle knocker's riddle (tear one off and scratch its head, what was once red is now black instead) and stepped inside. Her eyes scanned the wide, circular room carefully; chatting on the velvet blue sofa across the burning fireplace were Cho Chang, Terry Boot, and Sue Li, and by the window, leaning over a book, Hermione recognised Michael Corner and Lisa Turpin.

None of them gave her any particular attention.

Was that a good thing? Could it mean Lavender's big mouth hadn't reached them yet? Sue had even waved at her.

Legs like jelly, Hermione waved back, heading towards their dorm. Most of the girls seemed to be already fast asleep in their beds when she arrived. Hermione quickly brushed her teeth, changed into her pyjamas and got into hers, grateful for the overall relaxed mood reigning in the bedroom and for the hot water bottle one of the house elves had put under her duvet. Disregarding the girls' chatting, she flopped onto her pillow, her eyes closing; a moment later, they snapped open, a hot flash washing over her. She would have sworn she'd heard Padma's voice murmuring something that very much resembled the word 'wicked'. She listened tentatively but Padma, sleeping three beds away from her, was quiet; and she stayed quiet for the rest of the night.

With only three hours of sleep, Hermione was the first to leave her bed in the morning. She took a quick shower and went down for breakfast to find both Dumbledore's and Bellatrix's seats empty—even Lavender was nowhere in sight. Only ten minutes later, just as Hermione was about to pour herself a cup of fresh coffee, did the girl enter the Great Hall and sit down at the Gryffindor table next to Neville Longbottom.

Stealing a sideways glance at her, Hermione tightened her grip on the percolator before placing it back onto the table.

Should she go and talk to Lavender or better leave her be? Probably the latter. Hermione wouldn't know what to say, anyway. 'Hey, Lavender! Can we talk? Eh… about yesterday…' That was as far as the conversation inside her mind went. Biting her lip, Hermione pointed her eyes on the untouched piece of buttered toast on her plate.

"Morning!"

Draco, who had been flatly refusing to sit at the Slytherin table since he and Hermione had made up, plopped down beside her. "Did you finish the essay for McGonagall yesterday?" he asked in a raspy voice, reaching for a jug with pumpkin juice. "I haven't even started; thought I'd see what you—are you alright?" His scrutinising eyes paused on Hermione's before following their course to the Gryffindor table. A quiet swear word left his mouth. "Has—has Brown ratted you out?"

"No one's said anything, yet," shrugged Hermione. "I'm waiting for Parvati to come down to see whether or not they'd start giving me looks. I'm rather surprised Lavender didn't wait for her in the first place."
"Maybe she was too disturbed to tell anyone," said Draco, pouring himself a glass of juice. "The whole deal is pretty odd, you know."

"Yeah, I'm aware," said Hermione coldly.

Draco looked at her. "I didn't mean it like that," he muttered after a while, apparently realising how offensive his words must have sounded.

"Sure," said Hermione.

"I really didn't!"

"Just forget it."

An uncomfortable silence settled in between them. From the corner of her eye Hermione watched Draco help himself to a honey butter roll and stuff his mouth with it—he hated honey butter rolls.

Hermione slumped her shoulders, her gaze dropping to her lap—she shouldn't have lashed out on Draco; of course he didn't mean for his statement to come out as insulting; Hermione was just too stressed about Lavender's gossiping and had taken all that frustration out on Draco.

Eager to make her amends, Hermione opened her mouth but then she noticed Parvati arriving into the Great Hall. She saw the girl head for the Gryffindor table and fling herself in between Lavender and their quidditch chaser Alicia Spinnet. Hermione grabbed onto Draco's forearm as he was just reaching for something. They both froze, surveilling the girls; they saw Parvati squint her eyes while saying something to Lavender. It made Hermione tighten her grip but Lavender only shook her head before getting to her feet and uttering something back. Her narrowed eyes locked with Hermione's momentarily and Hermione could swear her blood had just stopped running but then Lavender looked away and made her way out of the Great Hall. Hermione's gaze jumped back to the visibly puzzled Parvati. She was staring after Lavender, as if deciding whether or not to follow her but then she turned back to the table and, reaching over, scooped a spoonful of scrambled eggs on her plate.

Releasing a sigh, Hermione removed her hand from Draco's.

"Seems like somebody's been keeping their mouth shut, after all," he noted, taking a sip from his glass.

Hermione regarded him with a baffled look. Lavender Brown and being capable of keeping somebody's secret? Without being asked to? It must have been just as he had implied before—Lavender must have been truly shaken if she hadn't shared such a juicy tidbit even with her best friend.

Hermione's eyes dropped to her toast. "Yes," she rasped. "It certainly seems like it."

—

A couple of moments later in Charms, the sixth-years began sweating tears and blood over their failed attempts to turn the vinegar in the glass flasks in front of them into wine. Professor Flitwick, the head of Ravenclaw's House, was demonstrating over and over the correct wand movements, yet Hermione remained, even after half an hour later, the only one who had managed to perform the spell successfully.

She was shifting at her desk restlessly as she strained to keep the smugness off her face. She looked to her right at Draco and caught him showing his glass an obscene gesture. With both hands.
"Charming," Hermione elevated her eyebrows. "Here, let me help you," she extended her arm with her wand in it, aiming at Draco's cup. "You must keep your arm straight and parallel to the—"

"Straight?" came the whispering voice of Pansy Parkinson. "I'm rather surprised it worked for you at all, Granger."

Hermione stiffened.

"EH…” she cleared her throat, trying to continue as though she hadn't heard anything. "Parallel to the—"

"Freak!"

Faltering, Hermione felt a cold sweat break out all over her back. She'd noticed Draco slide on his chair to Pansy, who was sitting behind them, but she couldn't understand a word they were saying. But that didn't matter; the only thing that mattered was that Pansy had found out.

As though in slow motion, Hermione turned to see Blaise, who was sitting beside Pansy and, sneering, flouted something on his own.

"Piss off!" barked Draco. The sound came back to Hermione and she realised that as Draco stood up. Willing herself to move, she touched his wrist, noticing a few people had stopped casting spells and were watching the scene.

"What is going on here?" Professor Flitwick came hurrying up to them, his perplexed eyes darting between Draco, Blaise, Pansy, and Hermione.

Zabini ignored him. "Or what," he challenged, standing up as well, facing Draco. By now, everyone was looking.

"Boys—" Flitwick warned them but got thrust aside for the second time.

"Why do you still bother? She won't go out with you, anyway," smirked Blaise. "Haven't you heard?" The tips of his fingers touched his desk lightly, propping him as he inclined forward. "Or perhaps you have." The dark eyes skimmed Draco up and down. "Perhaps you're the same kind of freak as—"

"One more word—!" Flitwick tried to stop the coming disaster but it was already too late. For in that instant, Draco's wand was in his hand, a flash of purple light striking Zabini square in the chest.

Stumbling backwards, Blaise's eyes widened in panic as his cheeks began inflating like two weather balloons. His throat released a nasty gagging sound before belching, making his hands spring up to cover his mouth. It appeared as though he was going to throw up, though when his mouth opened, instead of sick, an enormously long tongue rolled out of his mouth, swinging before continuing to grow rapidly past his stomach. Pansy leapt to her feet, screeching and backing away. The majority of the girls did the same.

"What do you think you're doing?!” shouted Flitwick in the middle of all that chaos. "Put your wand away, Malfoy! Such behaviour! Twenty points from Slytherin and a week of detention!" Pointing his wand at Blaise, he halted the spell just in time before his pink tongue reached the floor.

Hermione glanced at Draco; he looked livid.
Professor Flitwick released a deep breath, smoothing down his robe. "Hospital wing Zabini and another five points from Slytherin for provoking, Malfoy! Off you go!"

Blaise tried protesting but all that came out of his mouth was just a parade of unidentifiable noises. Eyes seething with hatred, he had taken his tongue into his hands, pulling it up so that he wouldn't stumble over it and strode off the classroom. A few students scrunched their faces and turned away as he walked past them.

Professor Flitwick came back in front of the class and climbed onto his stack of books so that everyone could see him. "Unless anyone else feels like earning themselves a detention, I'd advise you to go back to your practice! Thank you!"

Nobody spoke for the rest of the lesson, although Hermione could sense dozens of eyes sticking to her back. She was sitting like a statue with her head bowed and her hands in her lap, while Draco was slumped over his chair, bouncing his legs.

"You shouldn't have," she whispered.

The bell rang at that moment. Draco grabbed his bag and, heaving it over his shoulders, rushed towards the exit.

"I'd like to have a word, Mr. Malfoy." Professor Flitwick's voice halted his steps.

Draco glanced at Hermione first before turning to Flitwick. He strode off to the professor while Hermione, feeling guilty as hell, joined the line of the students gathered in front of the door. She was looking at her shoes the entire time, trying to ignore the whispering which was slowly beginning to wheedle its way into her head.

'It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.'

Drawing out of the classroom, she set off up the third-floor corridor but had taken barely a couple of steps when Pansy and Millicent Bustoed cut off her way. Hermione paused. She went to sidestep them but Pansy blocked her again. Out of the corner of her eye she'd noticed students around her slowing down.

"Excuse me, can I come through?" Hermione's voice sounded shaky in her own ears. It made Millicent and a few other Slytherins laugh.

"Nah, I don't think so," snickered Pansy. "We need to discuss something, Granger. How come you've never told us you were mentaly ill?"

Hermione was looking into Pansy's eyes without blinking.

"Leave her be!" called out a female voice from behind Hermione.

"Why," Pansy's eyes jumped to the shouting girl. "Are you a dyke too, Bones? I mean, aren't you afraid to sleep with her in the same room? I wouldn't take the risk, wouldn't want to wake up to her groping me or whatever."

More and more voices started to come to Hermione's rescue though they did not discourage Pansy in the least.

"So tell us!" she said, lifting her chin. "Do you fancy girls?"

Hermione noticed a buzz of a word being repeated over and over again among the Slytherins
standing behind Pansy's back, though only when their voices amplified did she recognize they were chanting the word 'dyke'.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears; she wanted to make a run for it but as soon as she moved, Millicent grabbed her by her shoulders and shoved her backwards roughly. Hermione didn't fall only because someone behind her had managed to catch her. She was watching the Slytherins in front of her, pointing at her and laughing. And in that very moment, something had changed within her.

"DYKE! DYKE! DYKE!"

"Ewww, now you have to take a cleansing potion so you wouldn't catch the dykeness, too," cackled Pansy with her face scrunched.

"DYKE! DYKE! DYKE!"

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat. She looked up, taking a couple of deep breaths before moving from the person holding her and coming face to face with Pansy's vicious sneer.

"DYKE! DYKE! DYKE!"

"Fuck you, Parkinson," barked Hermione and then turned to Millicent. "And you too, Bulstrode!"

The chanting faltered as the entire corridor broke out in surprised gasps, laughter, and cheering. Even the Slytherins seemed taken aback by her choice of words, although Pansy was the only one who wouldn't let it show.

"That's what you'd like, isn't it?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Don't flatter yourself! I'd rather get eaten by a Giant Squid than consider touching you!" snapped Hermione. There was no more whispering or chuckling; everyone was listening with their mouths agape.

"And even though it's none of your business, I'll do you a favour and tell you, since you're so bloody invested in my life—no, I don't fancy girls; I don't fancy you or any other walking ovary in this school!" Pausing, Hermione's mind strayed to Blair. "But damn it, I do like someone a lot; and yeah, that someone happens to be a female! Big deal! Who are you to judge me on that?!—oh, very original!" She rolled her eyes at Crabbe and Goyle who had started to chant 'Dyke' again. "She's got bigger balls then both of you, prats, combined!" She regarded them with a contemptuous look and they fell silent, staring at her stupidly.

"Besides." Her eyes jumped back to Pansy's ashen face. "I'd rather be a dyke than a soulsucking cow like yourself. At least I'm capable of love; you, on the other hand, do nothing but spread hate everywhere you move! You bully and talk about everyone else's lives because your own is empty and miserable! Do everyone a favour and grow up, Pansy!" With those words, Hermione pushed her way through the Slytherins and this time, there was nobody to stop her. Hermione wouldn't care even if they tried—she'd fight right back had she needed to! It didn't matter to her whether or not people understood now. Because finally, she had the validation she was looking for this entire time—the validation from herself.

"Hermione, hey Hermione! Wait up!" She heard an urging voice calling after her but before she had a chance to turn, a girl of long rose-gold curls jumped in front of her face.

Halting, Hermione folded her arms. "Proud of yourself, Lavender?"
"Wh—no, no! Of course, not!" The girl shook her head vigorously, playing with the cuffs of her sleeves. "I want to explain! You must think I've told everyone but I haven't, I swear! Can we talk somewhere in private?"

Hermione considered her for a moment before shrugging. Lavender led her back through the mass of the Slytherins who were whistling and laughing at them; Pansy didn't look at Hermione once as she passed her by.

"Here," Lavender showed her to a small deserted classroom three doors away from professor Flitwick's office, which consisted of nothing but a chalkboard and a couple of desks. Hermione walked over to the closest one, leaning her back on it and waiting.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione" Lavender started lowly and really looked it as she sauntered forward and sat on a neighbouring desk. "I didn't mean to tell anyone, trust me! I was bent on keeping it to myself but Parvati—she started asking me all these questions; she said I was acting weird and kept on pestering me about what was going on," pausing, Lavender bowed her head, pointing her eyes on the ragged flooring below her swaying shoes.

"She cornered me in the girls' bathroom today. I told her I couldn't say anything 'cause it was none of my business!" Her eyes flashed Hermione's direction. "I really did want you to have the freedom of sharing it with whoever you want and whenever you want—but Parvati was so persistent and I swear, Hermione, I checked the stalls in that bathroom, I kneeled down to see if we were alone before I told her that—that I'd heard you say you're in love with a girl. I told her I didn't know who and asked her to keep it to herself but then—" Lavender actually sobbed and the bewildered Hermione reached her hand to pat her arm.

"It's okay, you don't have to apologise!" she said and meant it but Lavender went on as though she didn't hear her.

"Then Pansy came out of one of the stalls and there was nothing I could do!" she whispered. "I'm so so sorry!"

"Lavender, don't cry." Leaning towards her, Hermione tried for a soothing tone, perplexed at Lavender acting so upset. "It's not that big of a deal."

"It is to me!" she cried, locking their eyes, hers full of tears. A single hiccup drew out of her throat before she fell completely silent; it seemed as though the whole eternity had passed and that the shadows on the walls had moved more to the west when she spoke again.

"I had an older brother… Nux was his name, you know after Nux Myristica, the magical plant. My parents are potion brewers, hence both of our names. Anyway, Nux was...well, he wasn't able to do magic and so he used to go to this muggle school in town."

As quiet as a mouse, Hermione was listening to her, her stomach tightening.

"He got bullied really bad because he...liked a boy. Somebody nicked his diary and outed him," pausing, Lavender had taken a moment before moving on. "He passed away when he was sixteen; I was eight at the time. He did it himself... because... because he just couldn't bear the hate. It was already too late when I wanted to tell him I accepted him the way he was..." rasped Lavender, more tears escaping her eyes before they darted to Hermione. "Oh, you must think I'm a mess..."

"No..." whispered Hermione.

"I don't even know why I'm telling you all this... perhaps... perhaps, I was just hoping that I could
let him know by telling you that I get it—because I really do; I wanted to tell you so earlier but I was just too... It all came crashing down on me and I..." Lavender cleared her throat, wiping her eyes—at that point, Hermione's very own became watery. "I just don't want anyone going through the same pain he had to, you know?" There was a long pause. "I really didn't mean for it to happen... but I want you to know, Hermione, that I've got your back, I promise I do—even if nobody else does."

"Oh, Lavender..." Hermione shifted and they both hugged each other at the same time.

"Your brother would be so proud of you," she whispered into her shoulder. "And I'm sure that he knows, whenever he is, he knows that you'd be there for him!" Hermione let go, wiping her tears into the sleeve of her robe. "And when it comes to me, don't worry about it! If anything, I'm grateful!" Hermione put on a small smile. "It nudged me to finally tell the truth and I... I feel great about it; so stop apologising, Lavender, it's not your fault that Pansy is a hopeless case with zero tolerance."

"You've really put her in her place, you know," Lavender smiled through the tears.

"Well, I wouldn't be able to do that if it wasn't for you finding out," said Hermione. "Thank you," she added, bringing Lavender to tears again.

—

A couple of days later, the term had officially ended. For the first time since the grand exposé, the occupants of the castle had found something else to talk about other than 'Granger is gay' and 'Granger called Parkinson a bitch'. Slumped lazily over the comfy chairs in their common rooms, they'd been drinking steamy hot butterbeer and chatting about their plans for Christmas. Some of them like the Weasley Twins had been trying out Professor McGonagall's patience by rehearsing a strange ballet routine on the frozen Great Lake and had lost their house twenty points, both. Meanwhile, Hermione and Draco spent the remaining days before their departure for home huddled in the library, trying to dig up some information about corpus deus but without any success.

"If by any chance my aunt decides to stop by and drop some Christmas presents, I'll ask her," sputtered Draco one evening at dinner while stuffing his mouth with pieces of chocolate muffin.

Hermione, sitting beside him, tightened her grip on her fork. "You're joking! She'd be capable of hunting me down and murdering me for telling you; heck, even I'm not supposed to know! I wouldn't want to die in front of my parents at the Christmas table."

"Fair enough," shrugged Draco. "I wouldn't want to do that to your family either—your mom is an angel! I still think it was really nice of her to invite me over for Christmas to join the family trip to America as well," he said, referring to the letter Hermione's mom had sent by return owl, urging her to 'bring the poor boy along so he wouldn't have to spend Christmas alone. "I'm seriously considering changing my opinion and starting persuading you to go, after all. You know, we could get Blair a little jealous and stuff... I'm quite curious to see what's all the fuss about, anyway."

"No you're not; I'll bring you a picture of her after Christmas." Hermione raised her brows, straining not to smile—it felt so good to talk about Blair openly without hiding or whispering, moreover as though she, Hermione, had any chance at making her jealous. It was at least a small comfort after learning about her new relationship. "Besides," she went on, "you'd change your mind the moment my mom asked you to beat the batter for her special Christmas cake."

Smirking, Draco reached for the last chocolate muffin nested in the bamboo basketry in front of
them, nicking it from under Ernie Macmillan's outstretched hand.

"Aren't you supposed to sit somewhere else?" grumbled the frowning Ernie as he waited for the basketry to fill up anew.

Saying a blatant no, Draco turned back to Hermione. "So what's the plan again? I'm supposed to be a mess and you're supposed to come back so that I'd have a shoulder to lean on?"

"Pretty much," said Hermione. "My mom will chide me for not bringing you along but—"

"Hey Hermione." It was Luna halting at her side and saying: "Professor Dumbledore asked me to give you this." She handed Hermione a piece of rolled up parchment. Hermione's eyes darted to Dumbledore's seat at the teacher's table but found it still empty.

"When did he give you this?" she asked hastily.

"Just a couple of minutes ago; met him on the corridor on my way here," explained Luna, sitting down between Draco and Ernie.

"Did he say anything?"

Shaking her head, Luna brought a solid slice of the custard pudding onto her plate. "Nothing beside asking me, very politely, to hand it to you."

"Right, thank you Luna!" said Hermione and turned to Draco with a significant look. Rolling out the parchment, she moved closer to him so they both could read its content.

Miss Granger,

I'd like to ask you to come to my office as soon as you finish your dinner.

Yours sincerely

A. Dumbledore

P.S. Tooth-Splintering Strongmints are my favourite at the moment.

"Why is he telling you about his favourite candy?" whispered Draco. "He truly is going senile."

"No, he's not! That's the password," said Hermione, sparing him a quick look before getting to her feet and, leaving her dinner half-eaten, setting off out of the Great Hall.

Five minutes later, she was being carried by a moving spiral staircase up to the poplar door leading into Dumbledore's office. She took a couple of deep breaths before willing herself to knock and had counted two seconds before Dumbledore's calm deep voice called her in.

Heart beating wildly, Hermione turned the doorknob and stepped inside. She'd never been to the headmaster's office before and it was certainly everything she'd ever imagined it to be: a magnificent circular room with a plethora of silver instruments perched on top of tiny octagonal tables situated all over the room. The portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses were hanging side by side on the walls, leaving but just a tiny space in between them from which Hermione could tell that the walls were painted alabaster-white. On top of a small staircase right across the door reigned Dumbledore's desk which was, just like those countless tables, covered with instruments of which Hermione recognised barely two and that was a rotating tower and a magnification device. But what made Hermione's breath hitch the most were hundreds and
hundreds of books in shiny bindings embedded in builtin wall shelves all the way from the floor up to the ceiling. She almost moaned in frustration as the revelation dawned on her that she'd never be able to read any of those.

Tearing her eyes from the books, she searched the area before her some more, hoping to spot Dumbledore, but the headmaster wasn't anywhere to be seen. She turned and let out a small gasp. Behind the door, from a golden perch, a divine phoenix was watching her every move. Hermione had never seen an animal more glorious than this mythical creature of crimson feathers and intelligent eyes. She knew from her dreams the other Dumbledore had him too, and wondered whether the name of this one was—

"Fawkes." Hermione heard from behind her. Giving a start, her eyes landed on Dumbledore, dressed in a dark blue attire with golden stars sewn along the rims and sitting behind his desk as though he had been there all along. "Hello, Hermione."

"Good evening, professor Dumbledore," she said, a bit surprised at him addressing her by her first name. Taking an unsure step forward, she added: "You wished to see me?"

"Yes. Please, take a seat." He gestured to the chair opposite him. Hermione climbed the little staircase and, sitting down, cleared her throat.

"How have you been?" asked Dumbledore, smiling.

"I've been fine, thank you, sir," she replied, hesitant as to ask him the same.

"Very good! I've met professor Flitwick today and he seemed to be very impressed by your recent display of magic, to say the least. Very impressed!"

Looking at her knees, Hermione couldn't help the blush from creeping into her cheeks.

"However." Dumbledore's tone changed a bit. "I can't say the same about professor Lockhart."

Caught off guard, Hermione parted her lips—was this the reason why she was here? Not because of the venor floccus or the corpus deus but because she had stopped attending the advanced DADA lessons that were useless, anyway? She inhaled hastily, ready to explain as to why she'd quit but Dumbledore went on.

"I've heard you had an accident during the first lesson."

Pressing her lips together, Hermione took a moment before replying. "Yes, sir, I did."

"I've also heard that Madame Lestrange took an exceptionally large amount of effort to help you. I suppose she walked you to the hospital wing to Madame Pomfrey?"

Hermione's eyes strayed to the window on her left.

"Is that right?" asked Dumbledore calmly and as Hermione willed herself to look at him, she saw him peering over his half-moon glasses at her in a way that suggested he knew exactly what was going through her head but out of respect wanted to leave the decision of telling the truth up to her.

"Not quite, she took me aside and healed me herself," said Hermione quietly.

Dumbledore leaned in. "What a selfless act of her. Not many are as fortunate as to say Bellatrix Lestrange volunteered to give them a helping hand."
"I've known her since she was an eleven-year-old girl." He drew back into his chair. "She has always been a handful; never done anything without getting a huge benefit from the situation. And I don't think I'm mistaken when I say there was something bigger behind this act of kindness as well."

"She needs the dreams," admitted Hermione, inwardly deciding to fully cooperate. She felt like there was no point in beating around the bush when clearly, Dumbledore already knew everything about the matter and was just polite enough to let her tell him her side of the story. "I've spent a couple of weeks of the summer holiday at Malfoy Manor. That's when I met Madame Lestrange for the first time. She came around the same time I did and we didn't really... well, she didn't seem to be particularly fond of me and made sure to let me know about her feelings very openly. After a couple of days, she claimed to have reconsidered her views and as compensation for her behaviour, she offered to teach us—me, Draco Malfoy, and Blaise—Occlumency. That's when she found out about my dreams although at the time, didn't really express any interest in them and quickly returned to her old ways. I had some run-in with her in autumn at Three Broomsticks but I refused to talk to her for obvious reasons; I think that's why she signed up to be professor Lockhart's right hand in the first place—to gain access to me and my dreams," finished Hermione, feeling the heat in her cheeks intensify as she mentioned Bellatrix's interest in her.

"Sir, can I ask you something?" she added after a while and without waiting for his answer went on. "How come you know about this? How come you knew about venor floccus and—"

"I'll explain later, Hermione, I promise, but for now we need to focus on questions that are far more important in the grand scheme of things," Dumbledore said kindly before moving on. "What happened when Bellatrix took you aside?"

A bit disappointed, Hermione shrugged. "She told me about the multiverse and clarified what my dreams actually mean—that they allow me to see the events that are happening in the alternate universe," she explicated, flattening her lips. "But she didn't say anything about how I got them or the reason why they're here."

"But now you're aware of their purpose, I presume," said Dumbledore.

"Well... I have a general idea." Hermione frowned her eyes. She couldn't understand how come this man knew about everything, yet still acted as though he had no clue by asking her all these questions. Still, she decided to play along. "After I agreed to tell her about my dreams, she arranged —"

Dumbledore raised his index finger. "I'm awfully sorry, but I need to interrupt you here," he said. "What did Bellatrix say why she needed to know about your dreams?"

Hermione felt her stomach sink. "She didn't say."

"I see."

"What did Bellatrix say why she needed to know about your dreams?"

Hermione felt her stomach sink. "She didn't say."

"I see." Dumbledore's quiet voice pierced through her stomach. "But she had to tell you something that convinced you to tell her about the dreams. What was it?"

The blush that had evaporated from Hermione's cheeks bounced back in a matter of milliseconds. She felt unbelievably stupid. How could she even admit that she had agreed to help with something she had absolutely no clue about and which had later turned out to be a carnage of innocent beings and all for distorted views? Until now Hermione hadn't even thought of that. It might have even started—maybe that's why Bellatrix disappeared. What if someone had been murdered already? Hermione would be an accomplice then, she would be responsible for someone's death! She—
"Hermione?" Dumbledore's voice brought her back to reality.

Eyes widened in despair, she shook her head. "She didn't say anything; I don't know—I don't understand why I..." She looked at the headmaster and to her enormous surprise saw his lips curling into a proud smile and he no longer prodded her about her reasons.

"What happened then?"

"I..."

"You were saying Bellatrix had arranged something."

"Oh, right," Hermione cleared her throat, deciding to leave the getting drown in her guilt and the analysis of Dumbledore's strange reactions for later. "She arranged a meeting with a real venor floccus and I—" She blushed again, recalling her Incubus encounter and hoped for dear God that Dumbledore didn't know about any of that already. "And he showed me through hypnosis how it happened."

If Dumbledore knew she skipped a detail, he didn't let it show. "So what did you ascertain?"

"While using a time turner in a parallel universe, the past and the present version of myself saw each other while at the same time I used the time turner professor Flitwick had lent me here in our universe. From what I understood of the venor floccus' explanation, someone, he guessed someone from the other side, had arranged this to happen to disrupt time. It made it modifiable and a time loop could be created, which planted the sixth area into my mind."

"Interesting," Dumbledore's fingers began drumming against the only free space on the table in between them which happened to be a tiny square before his chest. "I won't torment you anymore—after that, I suppose he regaled you on corpus deus. Am I right?"

Hermione brought her head back and only after the passing of the initial wave of her shock, replied. "Not quite."

Dumbledore's fingers stopped drumming. "Well, if you're not against me giving you a clue, I—"

"Of course not!" Hermione cut him off and immediately placed a palm over her mouth, but the headmaster dismissed her embarrassment by smiling.

"Alright but before I start, Hermione, I'd like to ask you a favour, and that is to allow me to tell you the full story without any interruptions. I'm an old man and I might forget about the important parts when I get distracted. You'll have enough time to ask all the questions you want after I finish," he tipped his chin down, his eyes sparkling with wit.

Nodding, Hermione knew damn well the headmaster wouldn't forget about anything, only wanted to let her know politely to keep her mouth shut and not to ask questions because sooner or later he'd get to answering them all nevertheless.

"Well, if that's settled," he straightened up, moving closer to his table. "Let's start from the beginning."

Hermione let her perspiring hands rest in her lap, her eyes focused solely on the blue ones.

"Bellatrix wasn't mistaken in her guesses, we truly do live in a multiverse—each possibility that wouldn't work out here would always work out somewhere out there; the Infinity," opened Dumbledore. "Its cornerstone is a concept of yin and yang—there can't be evil without any good
but also the other way around; no good without evil. There's an equal ratio of universes with a fortunate or less fortunate fate that mustn't be altered. Some things are bound to happen, no matter their nature, and no human should interfere with the laws of the universe he or she doesn't belong to.

"However, some of us are too blinded by power or the rest of the shallow temptations to know where the boundaries lie.

"The universe you have the privilege to visit in your dreams is the one with a fortunate fate—which happens to be quite inconvenient for a few individuals—which is the reason the time loops, not one but two, were created in the first place," said Dumbledore before pausing as though to test Hermione's ability to hold her tongue, that was practically itching from not being able to ask the dozens of questions that had begun springing inside her mind since the headmaster had started talking, but she kept biting her inner cheek as to prevent herself from asking.

"But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself with this one," Dumbledore went on. "I assume it would be wisest to go all the way back to the Gaunts, first."

Hermione's head nodded mechanically. She recalled reading about the Gaunts in the Pureblood Directory in her first year. The family belonged to the sacred twenty-eight and its members were direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin. It was known they prioritised marrying within their family to 'keep the blood pure' and retain their ability to speak Parseltongue.

"I suppose you know all about their history," said Dumbledore. "From the famous Salazar Slytherin to Gormlaith Gaunt and Isolt Sayre, one of the founders of Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The ones I suppose you don't know that much about are their last descendants, Marvolo and his children Merope and Morfin."

Except for seeing their names written on a family tree in the book, Hermione truly didn't.

"Allow me to shed some light onto them for you, then." Dumbledore nudged his glasses further up his nose. "The versions of the last three members of the Gaunt family that existed in our dimension did not differ in the least from the versions of the other. In spite of living in squalor, in a small dirty cottage that carried nothing of the Gaunts' former glory, both families remained proud, arrogant, and prejudiced, assuming their blood made them superior to everyone else. Marvolo and Morfin were violent in nature. Both were rarely, if ever, seen leaving the house except for daring to take several steps outside their garden. Merope, she was different. Being a woman, she had no equal place in the house and was treated like a mere slave. And while both versions of Merope never cared for the splendor of their name or their status, the Merope from another side made a decision thanks to which our own universe was created. The universe, where she never acted on her disastrous idea."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Merope fell madly in love with the squire's son, Tom Riddle."

Hermione's stomach turned and she had to use all her willpower not to gasp. The headmaster had tipped his chin down knowingly before continuing.

"The dear girl, however, due to the years and years of inbreeding, didn't have the looks to catch the attention of the charming Tom. It was a sad unrequited love until… until a series of accidents happened and Merope, free from the watchful eyes of Marvolo and Morfin who had to serve some time in Azkaban for attacking a Ministry worker one summer afternoon, could work her magic."

Taking out his wand, Dumbledore charmed two china teacups full of steaming amber liquid, one in front of Hermione and the other in front of himself.
Murmuring a quiet thank you, Hermione glanced back at him.

"She applied for a job as a maid at their mansion," Dumbledore went on after he'd taken a sip from his tea. "I'd bet my year's salary her hand slipped over his cup the first day and the poor man drank up a love potion instead of his morning coffee. They eloped the same day. Soon after, with Tom still under the influence of the potion, they conceived a child. I must assume now but I don't think I'm that far from the truth when I say the enamoured Marope, wishing for a true love without the use of magic, while hoping that Tom would never leave a woman who was carrying his baby, stopped feeding him the potion. Unluckily for her, as soon as Tom sobered up, he left the pregnant Merope and returned back to his fiancée and his family to Little Hangleton.

Straining not to cry, Hermione quickly took a swig from her tea, barely tasting its chamomile flavour. The whole situation of unrequited love was all too familiar to her and despite the morals of the situation, she could feel a certain amount of sympathy towards the woman.

Dumbledore was tactful enough to glance out of the window while she hastily wiped her eyes. Then he went on. "In a desperate need of gold, the abandoned Merope sold a family heirloom, the Slytherin's locket, and got just enough galleons to get her through the pregnancy. When she was due, she staggered across a Muggle orphanage where she gave birth to a healthy baby boy who she wished to be named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Within several hours she was dead."

Gulping the lump in her throat, Hermione's first thoughts were that Merope's death could be easily prevented with a bit of magic but then thought of the possibility that the grief from being left behind might have been as grand as to block her abilities—given Merope had used magic her entire life, its lack must have made her struggle to survive twice as difficult.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Neither the Gaunts or the Riddles went to search for their heir and the boy was left to be brought up in the orphanage, knowing absolutely nothing about his origins beside an unusual middle name he was given at birth."

Hermione wondered whether Marvolo had ever learnt about being a grandfather to a half-blood but she didn't ask, thinking Dumbledore would get to that part later on, anyway.

"Since a very young age it was clear Tom inherited the best from each of his parents," he continued. "The good looks of his father and the magical abilities of his mother. When he reached a proper age, the other Albus Dumbledore personally visited the orphanage where Tom lived to deliver him a letter of his acceptance to Hogwarts. He learnt from his guardians that Tom was a very troubled child without any friends, for the other children feared him."

Losing himself in his inner thoughts, Dumbledore fell silent. Hermione didn't dare say anything and waited quietly until he began talking again.

"When Tom enrolled in Hogwarts, he quickly gained popularity and got surrounded by students admiring him for his charms and grand magical abilities. Classmates, professors, they all loved him. It seemed that he finally found a place where he belonged and halted his love for bullying the weaker."

"But he didn't," the words slipped from Hermione's mouth.

Nodding, Dumbledore set his teacup aside, closer to the unidentifiable hexagonal item on his left. "He only took extra care not to get caught but I—the other version of me, was keeping a close eye on him during all the seven years," he framed. "Just before his graduation, Tom asked Professor Dippet, who was the headmaster of Hogwarts at that time and held a deep sympathy towards the boy, for a teaching job, but Armando refused on account of Tom's lack of experience and suggested
that he reapply after a couple of years. Taking the advice, the graduate Tom left the country and no one heard of him until several years later.

"Meanwhile Armando retired and the other Dumbledore took on the post of the headmaster. Tom came to visit him and asked again for a position of a teacher—DADA teacher, to be specific—but he too turned him down, although for a completely different reason." Dumbledore's wrinkled forehead narrowed ever so slightly. "You see, the other Albus Dumbledore, just like the one you see sitting in front of yourself, share a mutual talent, I dare to say, to perceive the true nature of people no matter how hard they try to hide it. And he noticed—had already seen it in that small boy sitting in a shabby orphanage bedroom all those years prior—that he had a love, so passionate and so dangerous, for dark arts, which he wished for no teacher at Hogwarts to hold onto and impart into the young, easily misled minds of children." Dumbledore's tone grew cold and he took a small pause before continuing. "Needless to say, Tom wasn't pleased with the decision and didn't part ways with Dumbledore on good terms. In a matter of days, he received countless, much more lucrative job offers from the Ministry, but he, shockingly, took on the post of sales manager at Borgin and Burkes."

Hermione almost snorted. She wasn't surprised in the least; of course, Riddle had taken a job that could bring him closer to dark magic.

"A year passed and just like after his graduation, Tom left the job and disappeared, although for a much bigger period than the last time. And that is, dear Hermione, where the story truly begins."

Heart skipping a beat, Hermione shifted in her seat.

"But again, the old fool is rushing too forward—forgive me," Dumbledore said softly. "I consider it necessary to take you back one more time to the year 1942 so you can get a better understanding of what I'm about to share with you," explained Dumbledore. "As I've already mentioned, Tom was loved by many but professor Horace Slughorn, the head of the Slytherin faculty and the Potions teacher, had taken a particular interest in him. He was someone who had a nose for people with a grand future waiting ahead of them and he liked to keep them close for personal benefits. Within the four walls, he used to say Tom was a son he had never had and the young man didn't claim any different, although his feelings, I don't doubt, were never sincere. Being conceived under the influence of a love potion, I think you have already guessed, Tom wasn't capable of any deeper feelings," said Dumbledore and Hermione nodded.

"However, he knew it was beneficial to get on Horace's good side and truly, he made some use of it during the mentioned year 1942. Knowing he could confide in Horace, knowing he would never betray him and go on rambling about their private conversation to anyone, he used all his flattery and charm to extort a piece of information from the naive professor that changed the fate of the entire wizarding world for good."

"What did he want to know about?" blurted Hermione in spite of her promise to keep quiet. Dumbledore bore his eyes into hers.

"Horcruxes," he replied slowly.

Frowning, Hermione tipped her head to the side. Never in her life had she heard about anything called Horcruxes and it oddly bothered her, for she'd had a look at almost every single book in the Hogwarts library.

"Never you mind about having no idea what they are," said Dumbledore, as though reading her thoughts. "There aren't many who know about them. Horcruxes aren't something that should be brought to attention or be known about at all. They're the nastiest, the most obscure items of black
magic any human, insane enough, could ever create," he added slowly, making the hair on Hermione's arms stand up. "In order to make a Horcrux, a murder must be committed, followed by a repulsive act which, forgive me, I'd prefer not to share with you to spare you the nightmares." Dumbledore stood up from his desk and ambled to the window, channeling nothing but sheer darkness. Hermione turned on her chair to face him.

"Sir?"

Dumbledore gave her a sad look before continuing: "Murder is the ultimate act of evil, that's what tears the soul apart... Horcruxes are the objects the pieces of a split soul are embedded into in order to achieve immortality. Tom Riddle marred his spirit countless times, however, he chose seven, the most significant murders to create seven Horcruxes—" he said flatly and Hermione's stomach turned upside down. "He chose his victims carefully... Along the way of trying to find objects worthy of carrying the pieces of his soul."

Taking a deep breath, the headmaster turned to her fully. "Tom had always feared death and would do anything, no matter how dark the act necessary, to attain immortality. I guess surviving was his primal goal; however, by mutilating his soul so many times he became even more prone to dark thoughts and became obsessed with overruling the world just because of his passion for causing pain, the only feeling he'd ever known. There was no conscious in his mind, and he committed an incredible amount of crimes on his way to power—alone or with the help of, at first, a small circle of followers—the followers Bellatrix Lestrange belonged to as well ever since she was only seventeen years old.

Hermione felt sick as she started to put one and one together.

"She was his most loyal servant," Dumbledore went on. "Like many others, she fell for his agenda—the promises of the world where wizards came out of hiding and purebloods became superior again. He promised to put muggles and half-bloods in their rightful place and make them inferior to the 'dirty house-elves'. Of course, never once, did he mention his own blood status; even if he had, I don't think Bellatrix would have cared," Dumbledore paused before regarding Hermione with a look that seemed almost sympathetical.

"She fell in love with him."

Hermione's stomach twitched with sudden pain.

"Her love, however, wasn't organic," Dumbledore went on. "It was obsessive and unhealthy; she did terrible, terrible things for him even though he could never return her feelings. However, in spite of being incapable of any emotions close to love or friendship, Tom valued Bellatrix's loyalty very much. He taught her magic so dark even I can't bear thinking of," said Dumbledore as he slowly returned to his desk and sat back onto his wooden chair.

"I assume you're familiar with the rest—the first wizarding war and the story around little Harry Potter; you must have learnt about it through the other Hermione," the wizard gave out a weak exhale before moving into further explanation. "During his attempt to kill the baby Harry, Lord Voldemort, as he began to call himself, underestimated the power of motherly love and, hit by his own backfired killing spell, disappeared and was considered dead by the entire wizarding society. That marked the end of the war. The majority of Voldemort's followers, including Bellatrix, got arrested. While many of them blamed their crimes on the influence of the Imperius curse, Bellatrix stood proudly behind her actions and never denied her loyalty to Voldemort even in front of the authorities. She was sentenced for life imprisonment in Azkaban together with her husband Rodolphus. The immurement weakened her sanity, which made her lose all of her boundaries and by many, she became as feared as Voldemort himself once—" Dumbledore suddenly halted his
monologue. "Oh, but I don't suppose you've already seen that far."

"Once—," rasped Hermione before clearing her throat. "Once what? What happened to her?"

But Dumbledore shook his head. "You'll see for yourself, in due course. It's time for us to move on to the part where both of our worlds clashed together."

Hermione considered arguing, but eventually dropped the idea and leaned into her chair, straining not to frown or fold her arms; it was stupid to care about Bellatrix, anyway. What did it matter whether or not she died in Azkaban, right? Alone, surrounded by dementors…

She deserved it.

No, nobody deserved such treatment.

She did.

No—

"After Voldemort's defeat," Dumbledore's voice interrupted the argument happening inside Hermione's head, "what remained of him was but a mere shell of a ghost, kept alive through his Horcruxes. Later, when he regained his body through darker magic, he no longer wanted to rely solely on Horcruxes for the fear of getting back to the miserable life he had had to experience once before. He dug deeper into black magic and found out about our famous corpus deus."

Moving on the edge of her seat, Hermione could feel her heart pounding madly inside her chest.

"Corpus deus, Hermione, are the equivalents of Horcruxes," explained Dumbledore. "The exact copies of objects existing in a parallel dimension, still free from the magic. They were created at the same time as their twins and only those could serve as a potential portal for the pieces of one's soul."

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat. "Are you trying to say that… Voldemort, that he's trying to get into our dimension?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "He'd spent many years searching for the right universe using dark magic so foul that it marred the remnants of his soul even harder and I'm afraid he had managed to find the perfect one. He needed the universe where he had never existed. Where his mother, Merope, never gave Tom Riddle senior the love potion and where she'd died of a broken heart alone in her old shack."

Hermione needed a moment to absorb the terrifying news. "So then… Bellatrix… is she helping him?"

"In a way," Dumbledore tipped his head to the side. "Though not directly—I can only guess, but I think she's getting the orders from a third party—it's unlikely she has any idea who's truly behind the agenda; regardless, she's dedicated her life to finding all the corpus deus in belief she'd help build a new world—the exact same world Voldemort promised in his own universe."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand before blurring: "But we must report it! Right this instant, if she—" her words fell silent as soon as she realised how stupid she sounded.

"We could, Hermione," said Dumbledore patiently. "But I presume the Ministry wouldn't think much of our statements. You can't forget Lestrange is one of the most respectable names in the wizarding society. Our word against theirs would never suffice, considering there's no tangible
"But there has to be something that could be done!" demanded Hermione. "What if we found all the corpus deus before her and—oh no!" Both of Hermione's hands raked into her hair, eyes widening in horror.

"What is it?" asked Dumbledore.

"She already has one," blurted Hermione desperately. "I gave it to her! She wanted to know about my venor floccus dreams and so I gave her my diary where I kept writing every related dream down! Only the day after did the venor floccus tell me that the diary was one of the corpus deus!"

The tears began coming into her eyes. "What have I done—now Voldemort—"

"Hermione," Dumbledore held out his hand. "The transition is only possible with all the eight—yes, eight items put together. One, or even seven could never let him pass. You've done nothing wrong, quite the opposite," he smiled and the confused Hermione wanted to ask him how come he knew about the exact number of the items and what it was so great about helping Bellatrix to the manslaughter but didn't get the chance.

"And when it comes to your diary being a corpus deus, it must be the twin of the one Tom Riddle possessed in his universe—the diary which Harry Potter stabbed with a basilisk fang in his second year."

Hermione bit her lip. "But how come I, from all people, stumbled upon it? And why was a diary, manufactured decades ago, offered to buy in a practically modern shop?" Pausing to take a breath, her eyes lingered over Dumbledore's wise face for a second. "This can't be any coincidence."

The headmaster regarded her questions with a mere twitch of his lips. Silence fell over them during which Hermione drank up the cold remainings of her tea and, scrutinising Dumbledore's face, drowned in her own world. Could it be it was the headmaster behind both time loops? Could he—

"Let me ask you something," Dumbledore started anew just as she set the teacup back onto his desk. "After you gave the diary to Bellatrix, did the dreams stop?"

"Yes, sir."

"Naturally." He scratched his head. "I'm sure they would reappear the moment any of the corpus deus got to your close proximity."

Shifting, Hermione asked: "Do all of the objects do the same? Trigger the dreams?"

"I suppose so."

Biting her lip, she fought with herself a bit before asking. "Sir, do you know—do you know who created the time loops?"

Somehow, her question made Dumbledore's face falter. "I do," he replied slowly.

Stomach twirling, Hermione's hands curled into her robe. "Was it you?"

A sorrowful smile settled on his face. "You are a very clever witch."

The indirect confession knocked the breath out of Hermione. "Why? Why did you do it?" she asked after a moment of silence.
"Don't be mad at me, Hermione," said Dumbledore with a voice full of guilt. "I have my reasons."

"I don't doubt that, but why me?" Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "I'm just a kid, I wouldn't stand a chance against Voldemort or Bellatrix!"

"Oh but you stand a big chance!" Dumbledore said firmly.

"How?"

"Do you trust me, Hermione?"

"After learning about this, I'm not so sure," she retorted before she could stop herself. It made Dumbledore laugh.

"Alright, I deserved that." Nodding, he adjusted the glasses on his nose. "But do trust me on this, I knew what I was doing when I chose you."

"You're a venor floccus, too, aren't you?" Hermione more stated than asked. Then her eyes widened as she put another piece of the puzzle together. "And the Albus Dumbledore from the other side in addition."

"I don't think I've ever been that impressed by any other student before."

Hermione wasn't able to remain seated and leapt to her feet. "I better be dreaming," she let out, feverishly running her hands through her hair. "How did you—?"

"That's a very complicated process to explain and we, I'm afraid don't have that much time."

Sighing, Hermione shook her head. "Why do these things keep happening to me? Forgive me if I'm being too bold but I don't think you knew what you were doing at all! I mean, what am I supposed to do?! I can't even perform non-verbal spells while Bellatrix probably knew how to cast Fiendfyre since she was twelve!"

"Fourteen," Dumbledore filled her in. "I personally witnessed that."

"Great." Hermione threw her hand into the air.

"Just hear me out," he said conciliatorily. "I'm only asking for ten more minutes of your time to explain the rest."

Hermione hesitated before sinking back into her chair and hugging herself. She had no idea how this other Dumbledore was going to justify his actions. She'd always thought he was the smartest man alive but what he had done was a huge—huge mess she had no idea how to get out of.

"Thank you," he said, stealing a glance into her frowning eyes. "While you may be right about being a bit less experienced than Bellatrix in terms of magic, remember that war isn't all about power."

"What then?" snorted Hermione. "About being smart? I can assure you, sir, Bellatrix is far cleverer than I am, no matter how much it pains me to say that. Besides, nature as cruel as hers gives her another advantage. She doesn't care about how many people will get hurt along the process—I, on the other hand, do; I'm scared for my family and my friends… There's nothing to me that would make me get ahead of her."

"There are certain attributes that give you the advantage, trust me," noted Dumbledore.
"And that is?"

"That is being good-hearted, trustful, and perceptive—no, don't laugh at me, let me tell you, those will get you further than an ability to cast Fiendfyre since a very young age."

"That's absurd!" Hermione shook her head. "In every war, kindness is the first thing that gets cast aside."

"Maybe that is the reason why wars happen in the first place," remarked Dumbledore.

Burying her face in her hands, she had to take a couple of deep breaths before glancing back at Dumbledore. "So your suggestion is to just stand there smiling and saying I forgive you while Bellatrix tries to hit me with Avada Kedavra after I helped her get all the corpus deus, which is, as the venor floccus told me, my number one priority?"

"Except for the first part, yes."

Hermione was looking at him as though he had lost his mind—at this point, she wouldn't even argue. "You cannot be serious!"

"I am very serious!" Dumbledore reassured her. "I chose you, Hermione, and I'm sorry it happened without your consent but believe me, had it not been for Tom meddling with time, I'd never have purposefully interfered with your destiny, which would have been altered nevertheless since he disrupted time long before I did. And while I may not tell you why and how I know you're the right person for the job just yet, I want you to trust me when I say that you just are."

"As always! Nobody says anything, yet expects me to jump to their tune!" said the voice inside her head.

"I think you're overestimating me, sir. Besides, there are surely hundreds of other witches and wizards with the same kindness issue as me," noted Hermione. "Why not choose them?"

"You will understand one day. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but you will. I'm giving you my word."

Hermione let out a deep exhale. "I'd like to hear, sir, what you propose then—how is my helping Bellatrix going to prevent Voldemort from getting here? It doesn't make any sense. If I truly had to do something, why not search for them on my own or with you? I think you know far more about them than Bellatrix."

"I'm flattered," smiled Dumbledore. "However, this world is not mine to save."

"What about the real professor Dumbledore then, I mean, the professor Dumbledore from my world?"

"His endeavor would complicate things more than you can imagine," he explained, shifting and leaning forward. "Now, I don't think I have much time left so I want you to listen very carefully to everything I'm going to say next. If we want to prevent Lord Voldemort from crossing the worlds, there's no way out of this other than you doing as I say. When you come home tomorrow morning, I want you to start packing. There will come a day, I don't know when, may it be a week from now, a month or perhaps whole years, but Bellatrix will eventually contact you again. You need to hear her out!"

"No! Please sir, don't make me see her again!" begged Hermione but Dumbledore ignored her.
"Pack anything; your savings—both the gold and the muggle money—your ID and passport, potions, books, clothes, tent... things for every occasion, condition, and weather," pausing, Dumbledore leaned in even closer. "It's very important you have this prepared, Hermione!" he emphasised firmly. "And when she actually contacts you, I want you to say precisely what I'll tell you."

—

"Other Dumbledore my ass! He's a crazy gaffer, that's who he is!" snapped Draco. "If he wants to take down some lunatic then why won't he do it himself? He's literally manipulating a teen—his own student, on top of that—into doing the work that should be assigned to the authorities instead. That's a flat-out offense and you know it." Draco raised his brows. "Don't fall for that crap of your family being in danger! You're not obligated to do anything, alright?"

Biting her tongue, Hermione turned to their compartment window, watching the stream of snowflakes pass by quickly as the Hogwarts Express rolled toward London, taking them home for Christmas.

She had spent the last hour of the journey filling Draco in on everything Dumbledore had told her yesterday and his sole response was to attack the headmaster's sanity, while at the same time gloss over the part regarding his auntie Bella as though Hermione hadn't even mentioned her. It wasn't like she would have minded, though; Hermione alone felt uncomfortable having to refer to Bellatrix in front of Draco in any kind of context, anyway. Fortunately, the row about whether Dumbledore was or wasn't unstable had lasted until they reached the station so they had no more time to talk about anything other than the strategy as to how to leave the station.

"Let's go through it one more time," said Hermione, getting to her feet and heaving her ridiculously heavy backpack over her shoulder as the train began slowing down. "I'm going first. You wait three or four minutes and then you go. Meanwhile I'll do my best to get my parents out of the station."

"How exciting," pointed Draco caustically while gathering his own stuff and smirked as Hermione gave him a look.

"My mom cannot see us together!" she tried to emphasise, gesturing with both of her hands. "I know her—she would certainly try dragging you with us home or worse, demand meeting your parents. And that's not happening. Ever!" finished Hermione firmly, balancing as the train came to a stop with a jolt. She took her coat from a hook by the door and, folding it over her left forearm, turned back to the now smiling Draco.

"Merry Christmas, Granger," he said.

Sighing, Hermione slouched her shoulders. "Merry Christmas to you too, Draco," she smiled. Wrapping him in a tight hug, she could feel his hands brush against her waist and she squeezed her eyes shut as she caught herself wishing it was someone else in her arms right now.

*Stupid.*

Pulling away, she gave Draco's bicep an awkward pat before letting her hand slide down and without looking at him further joined the crowd of the merry students oozing out of the train towards their families waiting for them outside the misty station.

Hermione's eyes dropped to her boots as she shuffled forward reluctantly. She felt unbelievably anxious about reuniting with her parents; after learning about her mom abandoning her at some point in life and her dad making a pass on Blair she didn't dare expect her own reaction; moreover,
when she thought of just how many lies she must feed them to ditch the family trip... How on earth was she to look into their eyes?

This was a bad, bad idea! She shouldn't have gone anywhere; she should have stayed at Hogwarts!

But it was too late now. The crispy wind on the rainswept platform had barely had a chance to ruffle Hermione's hair before she wound up in a crushing embrace of a woman smelling familiarly of jasmine.

"Hermione, darling!"

"Mama..."

In that very moment, the untold concerns that were holding onto Hermione during those long weeks dissipated like flimsy clouds. She was home. It didn't matter what had happened in the past, it truly didn't. Her mom loved her now and that was what mattered the most. Hermione's arms moved, curling over her mother's trench coat, returning the hug just as eagerly, the incredible amount of weight lifting off her chest.

"Oh my God, I missed you so much!" heard Hermione and as her cheek flattened under the weight of a kiss, her eyes strayed to her left and tripped over none other than the nearby standing Narcissa Malfoy, watching them with the most invested expression she'd ever granted Hermione with. Of course, the moment was only ephemeral; as soon as Hermione locked their eyes and sent a hesitant smile her way, the witch averted her gaze. Her pale face acquired its usual contemptuous look and, pretending as though she hadn't even seen Hermione, peered over the heads of the people rushing off the train.

Hermione remembered she needed to hurry up.

Widening her smile and feeling oddly glad that Narcissa Malfoy had witnessed the moment of her being loved by someone rather than humiliated, she hooked her arm through her mother's and began dragging her away from the station as quickly as the crowded platform allowed her to.

"Why aren't you wearing your coat, dear? You'll freeze to death!" said her mom with concern, while tugging at the duffel coat draped over Hermione's forearm.

"Well the parking lot is not far from here and since it's gonna be warm in the car anyway, I didn't feel the need; besides, I'm famished, so come on!" said Hermione, pulling her away with more fervour. "I was too excited to eat earlier and now I feel like I haven't eaten in days!"

It was exactly what made Jean Granger fasten her steps.

They made it safely out of the platform to their charcoal-gray Vauxhall Firenza where, dressed in a Chesterfield coat and a Gatsby ivy cap, her father was waiting. Grinning, Hermione ran up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist while he put his around her shoulders, kissing the top of her head.

"Inside; both of you!" Hermione's mom ordered, breaking their hug and ushering them into the car.

They set off through the rainy streets of London, looking for a restaurant along the way so that Hermione could have the meal she didn't actually need and only after a persistent wave of protesting from her side did her mom give up the search, bringing up Draco's situation instead.

"So he's there all alone, poor thing! I still don't understand why he didn't want to come along; there's plenty of space in the house!"
"It's not like Draco wouldn't want to come," clarified Hermione, feeling her face redden. "He thought it was really sweet of you to invite him over but see, he's still underaged. In order to go somewhere other than his own home, he needs signed permission from his parents. And believe me, if he even breathed a word to them about wanting to spend Christmas with us rather than them, they'd probably burn his name off the family tree and forget they've ever had a son.

"That's ridiculous; I seriously doubt they would give up on him like that..." The auburn curls of her mom's hair bounced off her shoulders as she shook her head. "Personally, I think he should have asked. Perhaps his parents would have realised how serious the situation was and would have wanted to make their peace; especially now during Christmas. And poor Draco—"

"Why are you two ladies so invested in that boy, may I ask?" Hermione's dad cut in, giving his daughter a stern look through his front mirror. "He's not your boyfriend, is he?"

Hermione saw her face obtain a warmer shade of red in the same mirror.

"Because if so, then I'm sorry but you'd have to break up with him!" He raised his brows. "First, Blair ditches me for some Puerto Rican and now you?! Not happening, missie!"

Hermione's body went numb. Had her dad truly said what she though he had said? Hearing laughter, her eyes darted to her mom, who had clearly taken the remark as a joke. Hermione, remembering the memory she'd relived a couple of weeks ago, wasn't as quick as to let it slide that easily, though.

"He's not Puerto Rican, John," clarified her mom, sounding amused. "He's from Florida. And he is unbelievably charming!" Winking, she turned to Hermione whose face formed something that, she hoped, at least resembled an honest smile. "Oh, I cannot wait to tell you all about him!"

Hermione let out a fake laugh that eased the tension building up in her stomach at least partially. In no context, other than Blair breaking up with him, did she want to hear about that bloke from Florida but knew there was no avoiding it. She would have to suffer through it while smiling and saying how happy she was for Blair.

"Handsome, huh?" said her dad. "No changing the subject until I hear that that Draco is no boyfriend of yours, Hermione," he demanded as he turned left off the highway and was driving up the Cranbourn street now.

"Draco's my best friend, is all," said Hermione, seeing him squint his eyes playfully in the mirror.

"That's usually how it starts!"

Perhaps for straight people, she wanted to say but bit her tongue. "Don't worry dad, I'm not interested in him like that."

"Brilliant!"

"Oh, please!" Hermione's mom gave him a look, trying not to smirk. "She's not your little girl anymore, John! Sooner or later, she'll find herself a good boy and then—"

"La-la-la..." he started singing loudly, trying to outshout his wife.

Hermione had to laugh. Wasn't it great to be back?
Four hours later, Hermione and her mom were standing at the counter in their cinnamon infused kitchen with tears of laughter in their eyes. They were cutting out gingerbread cookies from the second chunk of dough that they'd had to make from scratch after John Granger, trying out a raw piece of their first attempt, realised they had put in salt instead of sugar.

"So uhm, where was I?" rasped Jean, still smirking as her eyes walked her sour-looking husband, who was singing 'So this is Christmas' in a very disappointed tune, out of the kitchen. "Oh, yeah —" Her face hardened. "This is simply outrageous! You're twice the witch any pureblood could ever hope to be!"

Before Hermione's dad came in for a taste test, Hermione and her mom had been talking about the reason Draco and his parents hadn't been talking to each other lately. Hermione had tried to put it as gently as she could, filling the blanks with as few lies as possible but for her mom, even a hint of hostility towards her only daughter was enough to turn her into a ball of anger.

"It's just the way they were brought up, I guess," shrugged Hermione. "They've been brainwashed like that for generations; it would be foolish and ignorant to expect them to change overnight."

"Stop defending them, Hermione, they're grown people," objected her mom, reaching for a piece of parchment and covering the baking sheet with it. "Now, I really hope you were telling the truth earlier, that Draco's just a friend," she added. "I wouldn't want you to end up with a family like that."

"First of all," began Hermione, raising her brows and fixing the little gingerbread guy's arm that she had cut out a bit clumsily. "I was telling the truth; I don't see him like that and second—the moment Draco would run to his family announcing he was going to marry me, he would wind up disinherited so even if I was to be with him, which I swear has never even occurred to me, I would have nothing to do with his family, whatsoever."

"Good," said her mom as she started putting the little gingerbread blokes onto the parchment. "Although," Hermione looked at her. "Tell me... does Draco see it in the same light as you do?"

To lie or not to lie? That is the question... Shakespear á la Hermione.

Deciding to say nothing, she went to help her lay the cookies onto the parchment.

"He fancies you, doesn't he," her mom went on. "And you fancy someone else."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "Oh yeah?" she said, feigning amusement. "And who that might be?"

"Well," turning to her daughter, Jean leaned against the counter. "I thought you'd met someone special in Greece. You were looking so heartbroken when you came back last summer but you didn't say anything even though I kept asking every single day what had happened. So, forgive me, I had to do what every mother would do and that is to ask the last person you had been with. I asked Blair when I came to visit her last month."

Sweet mother of God!

"At first she didn't want to say anything—"

Hermione felt as though she'd never been closer to a heart attack than right now.

"She said she'd pay me a thousand bucks if I shut up but I didn't so after a little while she admitted that you might have had a tiny crush on someone but it was of no importance and that she was sure
it would pass in a matter of days. Then she said she was done with me and that it wasn't her place to say anything anyway... that I should just wait for you to tell me yourself."

Hermione was standing there, feeling her stomach knot grievously. She couldn't express how hurt she felt after hearing what Blair had said. No importance? Forget about her in a couple of days? Did Blair really think Hermione's feelings were as shallow as that? Her hands trembled.

"Are you alright, sweetie?"

No, of course she wasn't. Hermione really felt like saying that the next time her mom saw Blair, she better tell her that just because Hermione's young, didn't mean her feelings were superficial; that they were still painful and still growing and that if Blair— Hermione fell silent in her own head. She needed to tread carefully now. She couldn't just flip out when her mom's body was possessed by the same spirit of gossip that possessed Lavender Brown, forcing both to share their innermost thoughts with their best friend—meaning, in a couple of days, Blair would hear word by word everything Hermione was to say now. And no matter how much a part of her tried to provoke her into saying that her heart still hurt, that she still yearned for her so-called crush with every fibre of her being, so that Blair would know that Hermione was still there, hoping that someday... someday what? Blair might turn gay for her?

She felt pathetic.

"I'm fine!" Hermione forced out a smile. "And uhm... Blair got it right, I guess; I had feelings for someone but they didn't feel the same way. I admit it was a bit harsh at first but I came to realise how foolish it was—I don't mean my feelings were foolish but hanging onto them was."

Hermione thought it was for the best to put things that way. Blair was the sweetest of the sweethearts and Hermione knew, she'd be upset if she heard that Hermione was still heartbroken over her. And she didn't want that. She wanted Blair to have a lovely time on New Year's Eve even with that boyfriend of hers.

Her mom curled her arm around her shoulders. "My baby; why didn't you tell me earlier? We could have talked about what a nasty piece of work that bloke was to have rejected such an intelligent and gorgeous girl..." Brushing a curl out of Hermione's eyes, she smiled. "Honestly, I don't even understand how it's possible that you get more beautiful every time I see you."

"You're saying that just because you're my mom." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Blair said so too and she's not your mom!"

"What did she say?"

"Same thing—that that someone you fancied was a stupid potato for not reciprocating your feelings and having no taste in women."

"Did she really say that?"

"Yeah! Well, she didn't say exactly 'stupid'," admitted her mom. "She used a word that I have no idea where she got from but I'm sure is not allowed in at least twenty-five states."

Hermione felt her eyes water as a small laugh escaped her mouth. She put the last gingerbread men on the baking sheet and shoved them into the oven to earn some time to suck her tears back. "You know what?" Straightening her back, she rubbed her eyes as though from the heat radiating from the cooker and turned to her mom. "Tell Blair that just because someone doesn't want me back, doesn't mean they're stupid; just extremely unlucky for missing out on a lot."
Smiling proudly, her mom stroke her cheek. "What a smart young woman you are! But do tell finally, who is that someone? I'm dying to know!"

Saying nothing, Hermione went to place the used dishes into the dishwasher but her mom waved her wand and they started to clean them up on their own.

Shrugging, Hermione sighed—she would love to tell her mom about everything but she couldn't—not because she'd be embarrassed; no, she was just afraid of her getting the wrong idea. What if she didn't understand and blamed Blair for everything, thinking it was all her fault, thinking that when they had stayed alone in Greece, she might have been acting inappropriately which was the complete opposite of what she'd done. Besides, Hermione couldn't tell her right before their vacation. It would spoil everything.

"Does it matter?" she said as casually as she only could. "I mean, it's ancient history and I'd rather focus on the present rather than the past."

"You talked about it with Blair, so why not me?" objected her mom. "Come on, it's your first love! I want to hear all about it!"

"What would you want to know? Tall, blue eyes, smart and funny, easy to talk to..."

"You're describing one half of the population; I want details!"

"What's the point? It's not relevant anymore," lied Hermione. "Seriously mom, I can hardly remember what those feelings were like... I promise you, once I fall in love for real, you'll be the first to know!"

Her mom looked like she wanted to protest, but ultimately she resigned. "Promise?"

"You have my word," nodded Hermione, inwardly dancing with relief.

"I'll hear about it before Blair, mind you!"

"Sure," she nodded. "I'm not even in touch with her, so..."

Jean gave her a searing look. "You miss her," she stated more than asked. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"I am," said Hermione firmly. "I mean, I'd love to see her, but as I've already said, I want to be there for Draco."

Taking a quick glance at the cookies baking in the oven, her mom took her time before saying: "I love you Mione and everything but be careful with that boy."

Hermione looked up, perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it would be unbelievably hard to fall out of love with you."

—

It was nine in the evening when Hermione crawled into her bed. Two hours later she was lying on her stomach with her legs kicked up. Her face hurt from the fake smile that she had to maintain as she listened to her mom, who was sitting beside her and going on and on about Blair's boyfriend, Maxim.

Hermione had learnt that he was originally from France and that he was a new choreographer in the
theatre Blair had a contract with.

"Maxim says, it was love at first sight. It was his first day and he accidentally walked into her dressing room while she was changing and saw her half-naked."

"So he likes her just because of her body?" asked Hermione without joining her mom in laughing and trying her best not to raise her brows.

"No, of course not!"

"How can you know?" she demanded, forgetting all about being careful.

"Because he's got that look on his face—it's obvious that he sees her as more than just a pretty face."

Hermione said nothing. She ran her nails along the printed sheets she was lying on. "Don't you think it's a bit odd that Blair has started seeing someone?" she asked after a while. "As far as I know, after divorcing Bill, she wasn't interested in dating at all."

"Well yeah, ever since that happened, Blair hadn't dated anyone properly but still... she'd had a couple of flings. I think she'd always been open to a new relationship but there just wasn't anyone that she'd really want to see for more than just a few nights, I mean..."

Hermione swallowed painfully, trying to suppress the mad jealousy forming in her stomach. She knew exactly what her mom meant.

"But then she met Maxim and he's been so considerate and respectful toward her the whole time. I feel like he's exactly what she needed to regain the happiness she'd lost to Bill."

"I don't think I can agree with that," said Hermione coolly before she could stop herself. "I don't think that a woman's happiness should be dependant on a man. And the other way," she added quickly. "Neither does a man need a woman to become happy. Just think about it, if we as people stop relying on everyone else to make us content, and if we find balance within ourselves, we wouldn't feel lost once the relationship's over. I mean, people put their whole identities into their significant others and when they break up, they suddenly no longer know who they are..."

Pausing, Hermione bit her lip. "It's foolish to look for happiness in others or get into a romantic relationship just for the sake of feeling less lonely. What's going to happen if Blair and that Maxim break up? She'll get back to being hurt and upset all over again!"

"Sweetie, that's not how it works," said her mom, a bit surprised. "Relationships are risky, yes, but good or bad, they make us grow. People we meet bring something into our lives and clearly, he has something to offer and the other way around. And if they break up, they break up. She's not a little girl, she knows how to handle it. Although, I don't think this would be the case, Maxim seems like a really nice guy with pure intentions."

"That's it—seems!" Hermione sat up. "What if he breaks her heart?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," smiled her mom. "Dear, Max is set on marrying her."

Hermione raised her brows. "After only four months?"

"He's been asking her every single day since their first date."

Shifting, Hermione ran her hand through her hair. "What does Blair think of that?" she asked.
"She tells him to dream on." said her mom, chuckling. "You know, after that fiasco with Bill, she'd sobered up pretty quickly. She thinks a marriage without a child is just pointless."

"Does Blair want a child?" asked Hermione.

"I don't think so. Perhaps later if the relationship lasts," shrugged her mom. "Maxim, on the other hand, would like to have one right now, followed by four other later."

"You're joking, right?"

"Not at all."

"Can you imagine Blair with five kids running around her?"

She laughed, but Hermione stayed straightfaced.

"Do you really think that he loves her?" she asked softly. "I mean, truly loves her? That he's not with her just because he's infatuated with her beauty now and later, when she gets older and he notices her first wrinkles, he'll leave her for someone younger? I mean, look at what Bill's done... I'd hate to see that happen to her again."

The chocolate eyes of her mom softened. "Darling, you're sweet to worry but trust me, Maxim is ten times the man Bill could ever be and he cares for Blair deeply," she gave her a scrutinising look before continuing. "Look, they are both grown people looking for something perspective; and Blair's not twenty-five anymore, it's about time for her to start a family. Don't tell me you wouldn't be happy to have a little 'cousin'!"

What was Hermione supposed to say to that? The corners of her lips lifted. "Yeah... so happy."

—

The next morning after Jean Granger had left for work, it was just Hermione and her dad, eating chocolate pretzels and playing Monopoly in the warmth of their living room. They were having a lovely time which Hermione hated to ruin but she knew that this was her one and only chance at bringing up the memory that had been lingering in the back of her mind for weeks now.

"Dad, can I ask you something?" she said after collecting one hundred fake pounds from him for landing on her property.

"Sure, go ahead."

"You know back at Hogwarts," started Hermione hesitantly, rolling the dice. "I had an opportunity to try out hypnosis."

He drew his head back. "Oh... okay; was it a part of any of your classes or something like an after-school activity?"

"The latter," she replied, moving her token forward one space and landing on her own Euston Road. "I thought it would be a great experience so I signed up and uhm—during my hypnosis... I saw something peculiar and I—I'd like to ask you about it."

Reaching for another chocolate pretzel, her dad froze with his hand half-way to the bowl placed on the sofa, next to his knee. He gave her a perplexed look. "What did you see?"

There was something in his expression which made Hermione panic.
"Mione, what did you see?" he repeated.

"I..." she began desperately, knowing there was no way out. "I saw my mom leaving me when I was little," she said finally, watching his eyes change as he realised what she was talking about. "I didn't want to ask her directly about it, I mean... clearly it wasn't her fault but I don't feel—"

"We really shouldn't be talking about this," he said quietly.

But Hermione couldn't stop herself. "It was postpartum depression, wasn't it?

He gave her another surprised look.

"It's okay, you can talk to me about it."

Hermione's dad stayed silent for a long period of time before confessing. "Yes, it was postpartum depression. Your great grandmother had had it too but not as severe as your mom as I learnt later on. I don't want to go into detail as to what had been happening but those times were one of, if not the hardest moments of my life."

Hermione pulled her knees to her chin, hugging them with both of her arms.

"I was trying to tell Jean that she needed help but she didn't listen; kept saying that she had everything under control. The moment she left you, however, changed everything. She finally realised how serious her condition was and agreed to get admitted to St Mungo the very same day."

"Then Blair took care of me..."

Nodding, her dad rubbed the nape of his neck. "She was an intern back then and was going to stay in London for a couple of months, coincidentally exactly when we needed her. She was brilliant." His eyes unfocused into the distance. "Looking after you the entire time Jean was away. I needed to maintain a job to pay the mortgage so I couldn't really afford to stay home with you," he said apologetically and Hermione nodded—she could never blame her dad for anything like that.

"But she took care of you as though you were her own, even though she was so young and had a lot going on in her own life... She was there for Jean and us in spite of everything anytime we asked her. And you really got attached. You even started to call her mom at some point. I remember you wouldn't leave her side for a second. She was so understanding and once Jean was back, she helped her through everything."

Hermione's chest and stomach were immediately burning with emotions. The way her dad was describing the things Blair had done for her made her want to pack her bags immediately and go to the bloody America with them to see her and hold her and tell her how grateful she was.

'Snap out of it Hermione! Did you forget? There's much more to the narrative.'

"So you got on well with her, I see," she said.

"Oh yes, she was funny and kind and when I was losing hope, she quickly made me sober up and stop feeling sorry for myself."

He rolled the dice, moving five spaces ahead on the board.

Nodding, Hermione went on: "And have you ever thought of her..." she paused in the middle of the sentence, realising too late how blunt her question was.
"Thought of her what?"

"Uhm..."

It took him a while. "Oh goodness, Hermione, no!"

She felt her cheeks heat up. "But I saw... Nevermind."

"Saw what?" asked her dad, looking bewildered.

"Nothing."

"You want to know if I ever felt something for Blair other than friendliness, am I right?"

Hermione's eyes locked with his, her cheeks burning twice as much.

He drew a deep sigh. "Listen Mione, I've never felt for her what I feel for your mom," he said slowly, making her stomach twist in unease. "There was a time though when I thought I was starting to see her differently, I admit that, but it went away immediately... I was just a confused mess with confusing feelings. I certainly hold a great deal of respect for Blair and I'm certainly breaking that Maxim's bones if he breaks her heart but other than that..." Pausing, he closed his eyes momentarily. "I'd never do that to you and your mom; I love you both too much, Hermione."

"So nothing ever happened between you and Blair?"

"Nothing!"

Hermione wanted to believe him so much; she had to believe him. Her eyes strayed to the Monopoly board. "Alright... Now pay up, you're on my property again." Holding her palm up, a small smile spread across her face.

—

Around lunchtime, Hermione muttered she was going to read something, to which her dad replied that she should have a look at the attic, that he'd brought a lot of books from his parents' house he thought Hermione would fancy reading.

All too happy, she rushed upstairs and up the iron ladder to the attic where she found them stacked next to huge cardboard boxes marked with numbers from one to eleven. Curious as to see what was hiding inside, she dusted off a big black trunk hiding behind the box marked as one and sitting down, carefully removed the tape.

Her lips curled into a smile. She'd found mostly baby clothes in white and pink that were so small Hermione couldn't believe they could have ever fitted her. The second box contained more of the toys—a shape sorter house and a couple of plush animals, also the first picture books! Hermione went from box to box, grinning at her first drawings and coloured-pencil creations but it was the box from when she was six that made her truly emotional.

On top, she found the usual—books, toys—but at the bottom, there rested her very first diary.

Hermione picked it up and abandoning her trunk, she sat onto the dirty floor beside the box. The very first page read: The diary of Hermione Jean Granger. The words were written in blue ink and looked pretty neat considering they had been written by a six-year-old. Hermione turned the page.

'Dear diary it was my first day at school. I made one friend. Her name is Mina. I liked the class
very much.'

Hermione's eyes slid to the line below.

'Dear diary, Mina said she would like to come over tomorrow but she has to ask her parents first.'

Upon turning another page, the glossy paper slipped through her fingertips and the diary opened right in the middle where a preserved headband made of daisies rested on the double-page spread. At the bottom of the page, it read: Blair made this for me.

She rummaged through the diary back and forth but found nothing written about Blair other than that single sentence.

Hermione's heart clenched and she tried her best not to cry. She ran her fingers over the dead flowers gently, trying to recall the moment but couldn't. She stayed staring at the headband for a couple of moments before putting the boxes to their place and, taking the diary with her, ambled to her room.

She sat at her desk, placing the diary on top and drawing a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen from the cabinet. Her eyes lingered over the blankness before letting her hand sink to the paper.

\textit{Dearest Blair,}

I'd hate to be a cliché and begin this letter by saying how much I miss you but I guess there's no hope for me. I miss you. I miss you more than I can comprehend. You've promised me that time would help me forget. It's been a hundred and twenty-seven days and none would have gone by without me thinking about you.

If I wasn't sure before, I certainly am now. I love you. I love you and I still don't know how to stop. Perhaps it's the little girl in me that cannot let go of you. The one that remembers how much you loved her when she needed to be loved the most.

Being around you was the happiest I've ever been even if it was just me making you laugh at two a.m. when drunk, I tried to eat the tassels off your jacket thinking it's spaghetti all the while you were driving us home. I remember looking at you, thinking your smile was the most magical thing my eyes had ever seen. And I wish, my God, how I wish I could tell you so every single day. I wish you could feel how much love I carry underneath my skin and that it is you I want to take all of it for. I know I'd love you like no one ever has before. I know I could. All I'd need would be a chance.

But that's something I could never ask of you. Because even though I long for your presence just as much as my lungs yearn for air, there's one thing that I want more than anything in the world. And that is your happiness. I could offer you my all yet I know that for you, it would never be enough.

Love takes two. And I'm the only one in mine.

You share that special feeling with someone else. And even though it hurts like dying, all it takes to ease the pain is the simple thought of you being loved and happy. So as long as you are, I have no reason not to be happy myself.

I'm grateful even for that little taste of heaven of you smiling at me. For the butterflies in my belly and the tingles all over my skin.

\textit{I have loved you my entire life, Blair. I}

Hermione had barely had a chance to finish the letter 'I' when she heard knocking and upon
turning, she saw her mom entering the room.

"You're home soon," she blurted, snatching the letter from her desk and folding it in half. Her pen fell onto the floor but she didn't bother picking it up.

"Soon? I stayed for two extra hours!" Chuckling, her mom sauntered forward, eyeing the paper in Hermione's hands. "Who are you writing to? Draco?" she asked. "We could send him some of the gingerbread cookies we made yesterday if you like. I'll go pack them. Then we can go to the wizarding postal service; I was planning on driving to town anyway. We've run out of milk."

"Sure but... the letter's not for Draco."

"Oh, who then? Grandma Eleanor?"

"Actually," began Hermione slowly. "It's a letter to myself." Folding it two more times, she slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans. "I needed to sort some things out so I tried writing them down..."

Her mom's lips curled into a small smile. "Did that help?"

"Yeah," said Hermione, sitting back down and smiling herself. "I think it did."

—

From then on the days went by as quickly as though somebody was purposefully spinning Earth faster. The Christmas morning dawned and Hermione woke up to her bed full of presents and a thin layer of snow outside her bedroom window. Yawning, she sat up, pushing the mess of her hair out of her eyes. It was starting to become inconveniently long.

Eyeing the tower of presents scrutinisingly, she reached for the thick red parcel nearest to her, carefully unwrapping the gift wrap. It was a very old, although very well-preserved first volume of Oscar Wilde's work with a Santa card inserted in between the first pages. Touched, Hermione picked up the card. In shaky handwriting, it was written: Merry Christmas from grandfather & grandmother Watson.

Hermione put the card to her chest, smiling. Her grandparents lived in Northern England so they rarely saw each other but anytime they did, Hermione loved the time spent with them. Both of them were in their late seventies and Hermione would really like to visit them while she still could. Maybe she could go during her Easter Break...

Mechanically, she unwrapped the next present, addressed from Draco. Hermione drew her head back in surprise, looking at it with raised eyebrows and smirking. It was a photograph of him looking profoundly serious. She burst out laughing as soon as she turned it around and read: I didn't know what to get you so since I'm already a gift to the world I knew I couldn't go wrong with this. *Just joking (not really). I got you another present—two actually. The first one is of course a book. I know you'll be getting tons of them but I hope this one specifically will help you with that suicidal mess you're getting yourself into. I know I've said screw it but I've been thinking about it and I respect your decision to kill yourself. I mean, I know you're not changing your mind so this is the best I can do.*

*And to the second gift—since it's our family that's actually got you into this situation. I wanted to redeem us a bit and so I freed Ailey from her servitude. I gave her my shirt and a couple of Galleons to start a new life wherever she chooses. Honestly I thought she would feel lost having the job taken away from her but she seemed genuinely happy. Not my dad, though. When he found out I*
thought he'd have a stroke. He's well now; told me I'm grounded until I'm dead; was worth it though because of all that Astoria business. Anyway, Merry Christmas Granger.

**Draco.**

The photograph dissolved in thin air and Hermione, trying her best to stop the threatening tears in her eyes, felt a sudden weight of something on the top of her knees. Looking down, she saw a book "Improving your dueling skills. Exercises, spells & tips.'

Hermione couldn't help letting out an 'awwww' and thinking Draco Malfoy must be the most considerate boy that had ever walked this Earth. That gesture with Ailey had left her feeling overwhelmed. If he was here, she'd probably kiss him out of the pure gratitude and happiness. Now more than anytime she wished she could love him back...

Flipping through the book briefly, Hermione saw that it was going to come in really handy. Her stomach clenched as the idea of her eerie future started to dawn on her. She tried her best to ignore it; needed to enjoy the peace while she still had a chance. Placing the book on top of Oscar Wilde's, Hermione began opening the rest of the presents. Most of them contained books, but she also found a pair of ice skates, new quills, hair cosmetics, and winter clothes.

Throwing her blanket aside, Hermione heard something fall from her bed. She crawled through the gift wraps and peering over the footboard, saw a small emerald-green parcel lying by the front leg of her bed. Hermione picked it up and, staring at it, sank back onto her bed. She knew it was from Blair. She just knew. And she knew she couldn't open it.

For about fifteen minutes she remained sitting on her bed and gripping the unwrapped present before leaning over and opening her nightstand. She hesitated but then placed the parcel to the very back of the drawer and closed it. She stood up from her bed and with a heavy heart headed for her bathroom.

It was only a gift, of course, Hermione thought while brushing her teeth, but she knew, just as she knew that the snow outside would melt, that if she opened it, for some reason it would be like taking a step back.

Hermione had promised herself to move on and she would move on. For the next couple of months, she needed to erase Blair from her mind and rather focus on the task Dumbledore had given her. She really needed to start gathering all the things she would need. Bellatrix might contact her any day from now on...

After she had a shower, Hermione went down for breakfast, finding out from her mom that her dad had left for work but as he promised, it was only for thirty minutes.

"I knew this was too good to be true," said her mom angrily as she paced around the room, bringing this and that onto the table. "Thirty minutes, of course. If he comes back before noon, I'm going to eat my arm. Honestly, I'm curious to see what they're going to do when he's in America!" she seethed. "Speaking of!" Her tone softened a bit. "I just came off the phone with Blair. I wanted to wish her Merry Christmas and tell her that you weren't coming with us."

Why why did her mom have to bring up Blair anytime she and Hermione were alone and cause the entire storm to sweep through her belly. How wonderful, she was going back to Hogwarts in a couple of hours.

Pouring herself a cup of green tea, Hermione acknowledged the information by bare nodding.
"She said she completely understands and that if she were you she'd choose a handsome stunner over her mother's best friend, too."

"Oh really," said Hermione probably a bit too harshly, but she couldn't help herself. Joke or not, this cut deeply. She'd never choose anyone over Blair and she—damn it! She needed to stop thinking about her!

Seeming not to notice, her mom went on. "She also said that I should stop trying to change your mind because you knew what you were doing. So... I'm gonna stop," she added before falling silent.

Hermione began counting in her mind. One... Two... Three...

"I'm just going to ask you one last time and I'm done, I promise!"

"Mom..." Hermione shook her head, smiling. "I'm not going."

"We spend hardly any time together," she objected. "Most of the time you're at Hogwarts!"

No, this emotional blackmailing was not going to work! At all.

"Look, you spend hardly any time with dad, too!" presented Hermione, taking her hand. "Just go and have a great time! It's going to be an amazing vacation even without me there, I know it is! And when you're there, tell Blair that..." Pausing, Hermione drew a deep breath before continuing. "Tell her that I miss her and that I'm very happy for her."

"Oh sweetie, of course I'll tell her," said her mom lovingly.

"And seriously, keep an eye on that Maxim!"

"You and your dad are cut from the same cloth! He told me the same thing yesterday."

"Well." Hermione blushed, remembering their previous conversation. "He cares about her."

"Oh I know, sweetie. He has been platonically in love with her since I can remember."

Hermione couldn't have heard that right. Did her mom just say that her dad—?!

"He cares about her very much," she went on, catching Hermione off guard. "And that is not a bad thing; is fascinating really—that border—not entirely love, but neither friendship," she paused to stir her coffee. "You know, loving without needing anything in return. I don't even think that he fully understands that..."

"Mom, don't say that... I know that dad loves you more than anything," whispered Hermione.

"You can love two people at the same time," said her mom. "But regardless—which he feels for Blair is very innocent."

"And... you're alright with that?" asked Hermione in disbelief. "Aren't you jealous?"

"No. And you know why? Because I trust him."

—

Ever since that conversation happened, many days and many months had passed. Hermione had returned back to Hogwarts and begun preparing for the task Dumbledore had put on her shoulders.
He had entrusted professor Prewett, their DADA teacher and Ronald's uncle, to give Hermione private lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts and he had agreed under the impression that Hermione was signing up for some trainee program (that he had never heard of before but apparently Dumbledore had explained everything) for future Aurors in America and needed to work on her technique. Hermione felt awful, having to lie to professor Prewett, who had been nothing but kind to her during all the six years, but she had no choice.

On top of that she had to keep up with school and train for the Apparition exam which due to her age, she was to take in summer instead of May, like the majority of her classmates. She had tried asking professor Dumbledore if there really was no way to pass the test together with them in spite of being sixteen still; given the circumstances, she presumed it was necessary she had a licence but Dumbledore said it would be much better if she didn't. Strange answer but when it came to Dumbledore, she had learnt not to ask.

And so time went by, month after month until it was summer again. By now Hermione hadn't heard a word from Bellatrix and naturally, neither had she had any dream linked to corpus deus. Slowly she began loosening up and expecting the witch to turn at her door at any time of the day was no longer a frightening possibility overtaking her mind but something she had learnt to wait for with composure.

Since Dumbledore had asked her not to travel anywhere abroad, Hermione had to give up the family trip to France and stay home alone, keeping herself busy with reading, walking around London, and exchanging letters with Draco who was, according to him, having his worst summer ever. He had been forced to spend a couple of weeks at Astoria's to 'get to know her' since his parents were still pissed about him freeing their house elf. Draco said he regretted nothing even though he had sent Hermione a fake twenty thousand galleons and a letter asking her to kill him so he wouldn't have to go through this experience.

Hermione sent him a reply, saying that unfortunately she couldn't do anything for him since she was still underage and wasn't allowed to do magic outside the school and added that she felt like by the time she was seventeen, the killing wish would be no longer relevant but just so in any case she was keeping the money.

She received no reply.

And so without the joy of Draco's sarcastic letters, the hot summer days had become ever duller and tedious. Hermione had nothing to do beside listening to the annoying sounds of London traffic as she strolled along the scrawny willows in the streets or wandered through the shops, buying anything she thought may come in useful later on.

The monotony of those days felt maddening and Hermione was positive she'd lose her mind altogether if she had to sit through one more afternoon doing nothing remotely productive. She also knew that she was the only one that could do something about it.

Hence Hermione scooped what little was left of her verve and got off her ass.

She took on a part-time job in a local bookshop and spent the time researching the new materials for the store, helping customers pick out books and reading during her breaks. After a discussion with her parents, she also signed up for driving lessons and during the evenings took muggle self-defence classes.

And while it seemed like just the right amount of fresh thrill in her life, Hermione went just a little bit further. She changed her wardrobe for something less prim and had her hair cut; it wasn't anything that radical but Hermione considered it a welcoming change since her hair had reached
the small of her back and she'd been slowly mistaking herself for Hagrid anytime she had passed the mirror. It went something below her collarbones now and was much more manageable too.

Hermione thought that the overall transformation grazed with her confidence boost was a positive one because never before had she felt as content as she did now. Besides, she'd got eight men asking her out in the period of two weeks. Obviously, she'd turned all of them down—she still hadn't figured how to erase Blair from her mind, however ridiculous it was at this point.

It wasn't actually that long ago when her mom brought up going to Greece again, saying Blair would get a couple of days off and that it would be a perfect opportunity for Hermione to finally meet Maxim, who, as Hermione concluded, must have been a really nice man since even her dad had grown to love him.

'Honestly, he is alright; I think you'd really like him.'

But she didn't feel like liking or meeting him just yet. Hermione knew she wouldn't look at him objectively, and so she'd argued her way out, saying she couldn't go because she was needed at work and that also she couldn't skip any of her driving lessons. Besides, she had promised Dumbledore she wouldn't go anywhere abroad so even if she wanted to, she couldn't just disappear for a week.

But it was only yesterday when her mom had come to her with the news Blair would be coming over and of course, Hermione reacted with 'what a great surprise' but internally panicked and on her way to her work paused at the magical postal service to send a letter to Draco, asking him what to do. He replied to her by return owl telling her to come and stay at Astoria's and hang out with them.

Oddly enough, it seemed that those two had somehow really hit it off. The time they had spent together paid off, which literally nobody had seen coming. From the letters he had sent to Hermione, she concluded that he might have changed his views on the girl quite a lot.

Hermione presented the idea to her mom, saying that she'd just received an owl from Astoria inviting her to come over to Ireland but unfortunately the days she was to spend there clashed with those Blair was supposed to be here. The conversation didn't go smoothly—no, she really couldn't go another time, because shortly after, Draco was to return home and there really might be no other opportunity to spend some time with them both; no, of course she wasn't angry with Blair, how could it even cross her mom's mind? That she seemed to be avoiding her? Rubbish! It was just a stupid coincidence. She loved her for God's sake and next time there was some getting together happening, Hermione was definitely going to be there!

Finally, the interrogation was over with a simple 'fine, go if it's so important to you' and Hermione rushed to her bedroom and with her heart threatening to tear her skin, collapsed onto her bed, torn between feeling both heartbroken and relieved that she wouldn't be seeing Blair once again.

"Mom, dad! I did it! I've passed my driving test!" cried Hermione as she belted into the living room one July afternoon and practically collapsed onto both of her parents who were sitting in their living room watching the news on television.

Laughing, they squeezed her in a bone-crushing embrace. "Congratulations, sweetie!"

Hermione pulled away and sat beside her mom, smiling so wide her cheeks began to hurt. "Thank you! I can't believe it! I thought I'd done at least five mistakes but Mr Harrington said there were none!"
"I knew you'd do just alright!" said her dad proudly.

"Thank you," Hermione hunched her shoulders up happily and, leaping to her feet, added: "Alright, I better go pack now, I don't wanna forget anything tomorrow!"

"You've been packing the entire week!" called her mom after her but Hermione wasn't listening and she rushed to her room.

Tomorrow, she was leaving for Ireland and she really needed to make sure not to forget anything—books, sweaters, long-sleeved t-shirts, jeans, wooly socks, wellingtons and her thick jacket—Astoria advised her to bring something warm to wear, for it was getting windy over there in Carlingford.

After going through her bag and finding she truly hadn't forgotten to pack anything, Hermione zipped the flap shut and remained sitting on the floor, smiling. It was going to be great to be with Draco and Astoria again and to see what their friendship had blossomed into.

It had actually been a year since the ball now. Smirking, Hermione recalled Draco's face when he'd had to waltz with Astoria for about four minutes—she bet he wouldn't protest as much now.

Her eyes stumbled over the alarm clock on her nightstand. It was half past four and she had her self-defence class in an hour. Standing up, Hermione had barely had a chance to take a few steps to the bathroom when she heard a soft thumping sound coming from her window. Upon turning around, she saw a spectacled owl with black and white feathers waiting outside the glass with a small scroll of parchment attached to its leg.

Hermione drew her head back. She'd received a similar owl from Astoria a week ago. What did she forget to tell her? God, Hermione hoped she wasn't cancelling—she'd be forced to stay here and meet with Blair and she couldn't do that; she just couldn't.

Already thinking about the worst case scenario, Hermione dashed to the window and opened it to let the owl inside, but it stayed on the window sill, only lifting its right leg. Hermione quickly untied the scroll and the owl instantly took off.

"Hey! I might need you!" called Hermione after the bird but to no avail. Frowning, she let the window open, welcoming the soft evening breeze and, leaning against her desk, unscrolled the parchment which contained just a single line scribbled in slanted letters.

It's been a while muddy; tomorrow, 10 p.m., Knockturn Alley.

Hermione's stomach turned around and her heart seemed to be having a temporary seizure as it stopped beating for a couple of moments before getting back on track and galloping three times as fast as if trying to make up for the lost time.

Petrified, she kept staring at the little piece of parchment, reading it again and again. Then she kneeled down and, opening her drawer, took out a piece of parchment and wasting no time with quill and ink, grabbed a disposable ballpoint pen; with a cup in between her teeth, she wrote a quick note addressed to professor Dumbledore asking him what to do. She snatched her purse from the padded armchair in the corner and practically sprinted out of her room and out of the house, ignoring whatever it was her parents were calling after her.

She dashed to the nearest bus stop and found that she had missed her bus by two minutes and that another one would be leaving in about fifteen minutes. Frustrated, she really felt like kicking the bulletin board filled with flimsy posters behind her but thought better of it and rather flopped onto
the bench, flattening her back against the dirty glass of the bus shelter.

Breathing hard, Hermione crossed her arms, digging her nails into her elbow. She could do nothing but wait. The centre was about thirty minutes by bus and the wizarding postal service around ten on foot so she had no chance to be there sooner if she walked all the way. Hermione really needed to get herself an owl.

Why from all the days did Bellatrix have to choose tomorrow, she thought desperately. Why? Now Hermione was totally missing her self-defence class and she could even forget about seeing Draco and Astoria; and what about her Apparition exam? and her birthday? She had a strong feeling these wouldn't be her happiest.

If only she had a choice...

Hermione's eyes unfocused. She went back seven months ago to the circular office where it all started:

"Why would you think that, sir? Bellatrix doesn't care about my family," said Hermione.

"She cares about revenge," explained Dumbledore cautiously. "After your friendship with young Draco came to light, you cannot imagine what the Malfoy family had to go through. Public humiliation of such proportion—that's one of those things Bellatrix will neither forget nor forgive," pausing, Dumbledore gave her a long, searing look. "I don't mean to scare you in any way, Hermione, but I must speak the truth as it is. Plain and horrible. If Bellatrix completes her task, she'll be unstoppable and she will have her revenge. As it happens, she believes you tore her family apart and..."

"...and she aims to do the same to mine," whispered Hermione.

"It was bound to happen," said Dumbledore apologetically. "Even without my endeavour at making you the venor floccus... Now we've got at least a slight advantage."

"What advantage?" asked Hermione. "Forgive me, sir but I can't see it. Bellatrix is looking for corpus deus to bring a dark wizard into our world. By enabling me to see those objects in my dreams and therefore knowing where to look for them and passing that information onto Bellatrix—aren't you actually helping Bellatrix achieve her goal?"

Dumbledore let a small smile form on his face before replying: "You don't understand, yet, Hermione... but you will. In time."

"And if I don't?" she blurted desperately. She felt like the headmaster was being profusely careless about the whole situation considering how serious it was. "What will I have to do after she gets all the corpus deus?"

"Don't let that bother you. By the time she comes for the last one, you'll have everything figured out."

The bus pulled up, bringing Hermione back to reality. She quickly got on and sat in the back, with her knees against the seat in front of her. She spent the entire way going back and forth between everything Dumbledore had said to her that day, fearing that his plan was based solely on the hope that while helping Bellatrix, Hermione would somehow manage to befriend her and that the witch would miraculously stop feeling like helping Voldemort from then on.

As soon as the bus pulled over, Hermione got off and sprinted to the postal service. After quickly scribbling another note for Draco, explaining she wasn't coming tomorrow, she dispatched both
notes. With a sharp pain in her ribs, she rushed back to the bus stop and caught the bus that took her back by a hair’s breadth.

She wasn't expecting to get a reply from the professor the very same day and so when the majestic Hogwarts owl tapped on her glass at eleven p.m., she almost dropped the teacup with steaming chamomile tea she was squeezing in her hands, onto the floor.

Immediately, she let the bird in and untied the scroll of parchment from its leg. The owl, just like Bellatrix’s, didn't wait for her response letter and took off into the night.

Closing the window, Hermione plopped onto her chair, reading:

_Hermione,_

_I hope you have everything ready just as I asked you to. If not, get it in order by the time of your meeting and be there! This is what we have been waiting for! You cannot leave Bellatrix's side from now on. Tell her what I've told you to and in no scenario let her negotiate!_

_You don't have to inform me about anything that will be going on from now on. Just be present, mindful and most importantly careful._

_P.S. The second letter attached, is for your parents. It's the acceptance letter for an exchange program at one of the smaller universities in Ireland that we discussed in spring and which, I presume, you've already mentioned to them._

_P.S. Good luck, Hermione, I'm relying on you!_

_Sincerely, Albus Dumbledore_

Hermione unscrolled the other parchment. During the spring, she and Dumbledore had had another conversation debating what would happen if Bellatrix contacted her during her remaining school years. Dumbledore told her that in that case, she was to leave Hogwarts and pretend she was joining an exchange program at a small but prestigious university in Ireland. Dumbledore had said he had already arranged everything with their headmaster and all Hermione had to do was to mention it to her parents—that the university was thinking of opening a class that specialised in politics in terms of magic and that if there were enough applicants they would include a whole course into their learning program.

Hermione couldn't believe Dumbledore had asked her to lie but also understood she couldn't tell her parents the truth. When she actually had gone to them with the news, they had seemed a bit skeptical, saying that they hadn't had the slightest clue Hermione was so into politics but if she was serious about it, she should definitely apply.

Tearing her eyes from the acceptance letter, Hermione placed it onto her desk. She was too stressed to deal with it now. She'd talk to her parents tomorrow.

Body pumping with adrenaline, she walked to her wardrobe and fished out the purple beaded purse that she’d placed an undetectable extension charm on when she was still at Hogwarts. She tried to think of all the things that were already inside and what else she should add but didn't come up with anything that she could get her hands on this late at night.

There was actually nothing that she could do beside waiting. And so she waited, terrified and anxious, curled under her blanket until the dawn, crying in between the morning hours, thinking of how nothing was going to be the same from now on.
And it wasn't fair! It wasn't how her life was supposed to be...

At around seven a.m. Hermione slowly stood up and went down to the kitchen, showing the letter to her mom, who she found standing in front of the stove and frying eggs.

"Hermione, sweetie, but that's brilliant! Congratulations! When do you have to enroll?" she asked, dropping the spachelor and giving her a big hug.

Hermione hugged her too. Tightly and needily, knowing she wouldn't be getting these hugs from her anytime soon. "Well... today," she said slowly.

Her mom frowned, drawing her head back in surprise. "Today? They sent you a letter the very same day you're required to enroll without any prior notification? What kind of school is that again? Besides, it's summer holiday—put this onto the table, will you darling—" she handed Hermione a plate full of toast. "And what about Astoria—honey, don't cry!"

"I'm just feeling overwhelmed is all." Hermione placed the plate onto the table and wiped away her tears. "I know it's still summer holiday but it's actually a really good thing: I'll have a whole month to adapt. Anyway, they don't follow the common school system rules... I've already told you all about them in spring. You surely must remember!"

Her mom shrugged guiltily.

"And when it comes to Astoria, I've already sent her an owl."

"Right... so today..." her mom murmured to herself before turning to Hermione again. "How exactly are you supposed to get there? By train? We could drop you off on the way to the airport."

Crap! Hermione had almost forgotten that Blair was coming today! She couldn't see her! She couldn't have a single memory of her in her mind! If Bellatrix found out what she meant to Hermione, at the end she'd be the first Bellatrix would go after!

"Floo powder," replied Hermione promptly. "I'm supposed to get to Diagon Alley and meet up with professor Dumbledore. I'm traveling with him," she lied, pretending to be scrubbing the nonexistent spot on the shirt she had been wearing since yesterday.

"So you've already talked to Dumbledore?"

"Well," she played for time, scrubbing the spot even harder. "He knew before I did. They must have sent him a copy of the letter. So right after this letter, I received another one from him, congratulating me and explaining the next steps."

Nodding, her mom turned back to the eggs that seemed to be half-way done. "I'm so happy for you," she said, smiling. "But also sad we won't be spending more time together."

"So am I mom..." said Hermione, looking at her back, the sadness in her chest overpowering. "So am I."

After drinking a glass of orange juice that her mom had insisted on, for Hermione wasn't leaving without getting something into her system first thing in the morning, Hermione went straight to her work, announcing to her boss she needed to quit right this instant. It earned her an uncomfortable chiding from her, but there was nothing Hermione could say to properly explain her reasons and so her boss let her go with a cold 'you'll receive your salary by the end of the month' and an even more dishonest 'Have a nice day!'.
Hermione returned home around lunchtime. Knowing Blair was supposed to get there in about two hours, she gathered her beaded purse and decided it was for the best to say goodbye now. She tried fighting the tears but they let loose as soon as her parents pulled her into their joined embrace.

She remained holding them for a good two minutes and they laughed with love in their throats as she still wouldn't let go.

Finally, she pulled away and grabbing a handful of Floo Powder, she stepped inside the empty fireplace. Taking one last look at her parents—at the smiling faces of her mom and dad, at the pride in their eyes, she was doing this for them.

With voicing the name of her destination and letting go of the powder they were gone and Hermione knew that from now on, she was on her own.

Spinning, she landed in one of the many fireplaces in Diagon Alley which was packed with mainly older wizards, going on their daily routine. Hermione's eyes ran through them. Having had to spend the entire night awake, she had had just enough time to figure out what to do. She rented a small room in Leaky Cauldron which cost her twelve galleons and ninety-five sickles; and while she didn't want to spend her money recklessly, she needed a safe place to stay until the meeting.

In the quiet of the shabby bedroom, Hermione then killed some time by pacing back and forth, talking to herself and rehearsing how she might react to different turns of the conversation but it hadn't lasted her long and she found herself seated on the bed, hugging herself and bouncing her legs.

She felt like exploding from all the anxiety building up inside her. There was nothing to do. Being sixteen still, she couldn't even practice any of the charms and spells Professor Prewett had taught her; and reading was too calm an activity at the moment.

How she wished she had squeezed a boxing bag into her little purse: at least she would've been able to get the frustration out of her by beating the hell out of it—the instructor in her self-defence class had said that, despite being just a beginner, she was getting the real hang of it.

Finally, the sky outside her window turned coral, followed by deep purple until it became ebony-black. By now Hermione had bitten her lips into bleeding and marked her arms with little crescents from digging her nails into her skin every other second. Meeting up with someone this sinister, planning to do so much evil... seemed somehow unimaginable now—Hermione should leave and move with her family somewhere to Africa and live among Maasais in a pretty little village and never come back. But then her mind strayed to Blair. Blair and all the innocent people she had a chance, at least Dumbledore believed that she had a chance, to save if she 'sacrificed' herself for the greater good.

She had to try, no matter how much it terrified her and how much she thought she had no chance at succeeding.

It was ten to ten when Hermione with her legs like jelly returned the key of her bedroom at the reception desk and slowly made her way from the inn into Diagon Alley and to the Knockturn Alley, the place that was bloody dangerous even in daylight, let alone at this hour. With slow, deliberate steps she moved further into the dark alley, turning to all sides and pushing the hair out of her eyes as to not to miss any movement. She tried ignoring all the weird sounds and noises, telling herself she had nothing to worry about for she was capable of defending herself in case of need even without magic.

A cold wind swept through her hair. Hermione paused, looking to her left and then right. Bellatrix
didn't say where exactly she wanted to meet with her so Hermione had no other choice but to keep ambling back and forth until the witch decided to make an appearance. Putting her arms around her body, she took a careful step ahead. She heard the rustle of clothes as if coming from between the two shops in front of her but upon listening more closely concluded it must have been just her mind playing tricks on her. Hermione glanced behind her but instantly jerked her head back.

She saw a silhouette walking toward her and there was no doubt in her that it was exactly who she was waiting for. Striving to appear braver than she felt, Hermione herself moved ahead and stopped only when she was face to face with the dark witch.

Bellatrix didn't seem to have changed. She looked just as sick as Hermione remembered; with dark circles under her eyes and hollow cheekbones she appeared almost deathly in the lamplight shadows, which even added more character to her frightening aura.

"I knew you'd come," she said in a taunting voice and smirking, came to a halt in front of Hermione.

Blinking rapidly, Hermione cleared her throat. "You wanted to see me, madame Lestrange?"

Bellatrix pouted, her dark eyes gleaming with mischief. "How formal, Muddy, what is it with you? Seems like your love for me has run cold!"

Wasting no time, Hermione decided for a counterattack. "Were you meaning to give me my diary back?" She noticed that now, she was taller than Bellatrix. It gave her a false sense of confidence to say the following: "Or are you running low on ideas where the next corpus deus could be?"

Bellatrix's face faltered. "Where did you learn about those?" she asked slowly after a moment of silence.

"I'm not stupid," replied Hermione, glad that her voice wasn't shaking.

"Yes you are, if you think I'd believe that!" barked Bellatrix, inching closer. Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "Tell me now, mudblood! How come you know about them?"

"I've already—"

"Don't lie to me! I'm not here to play games!" Bellatrix's wand was suddenly pointing at her chest.

"It was the venor floccus," said Hermione quickly, eyeing the tip of the wand. "Right after that session. He told me everything and I... I want to help you."

Bellatrix drew her head back, looking astonished.

"I know you contacted me because you want my help," Hermione went on quickly. "I don't have any idea why you're looking for them," she lied. "But honestly, I don't care; I'm willing to cooperate no matter the circumstances." Hermione couldn't believe she was saying this. "But only —only if you let me search for them with you."

Bellatrix's arm fell back to her side. "Are you mad? Why would you want that?" she asked, tilting her head. "You want to go on the romantic treasure hunt with me, hoping we'd become friends? Oh —" She raised her eyebrows. "I almost forgot who I was speaking to—hoping we'd become more than friends?" Snorting, she shook her head. "Get help, filth!"

"That's not the reason why I'm here," said Hermione coldly, feeling herself blush. "For the record, I'm not into this whole worn-out look," she clapped back, her eyes running up and down Bellatrix's
body with distaste. Her heart was galloping like crazy, especially after Bellatrix's expression hardened. Hermione knew she was digging herself a grave but she had to keep going. "Anyway, that's not the point... Since we didn't get a deal, good luck with finding another venor floccus to help you."

Hermione turned her back to Bellatrix and began walking away but had taken barely a couple of steps when she got shoved into the wall. Bellatrix's face came inches from hers.

"You can't walk away from me like that, you insolent little brat!" she hissed.

"I just did," said Hermione bravely, despite feeling mortified. She inched forward to Bellatrix's ashen face herself. "You need me!"

"Fuck you, mudblood!" yelled Bellatrix, backing away from her. "I don't need—"

"Yes you do! That's why you're here—that's why you always come to me!" Hermione let out passionately.

Bellatrix scrunched her face in disgust before barking. "Shut your mouth, mudblood, shut your mouth!"

But Hermione raised her voice too. "I want to go with you because I want to learn! I'm applying for a trainee program in a year and I need to gain some experience. You... you were the best teacher I've ever had. I thought we could help each other out. It's your call now—either I'm going with you or you can forget about the dreams."

Bellatrix's jaw flexed and Hermione could practically see her brain working and reviewing and coming to the conclusion that she had no choice, other than to kidnap her and forcibly get her to talk, but she hoped Bellatrix wasn't past the stage of this level of psycho yet.

"Fine; have it your way," the dark witch gritted through her teeth finally. "But I'm warning you mudblood! You breathe a word about this to anyone and I'll crucio you into insanity!"

Gulping, Hermione nodded, noticing the muscles in Bellatrix's jaw were twitching.

"Right," she said finally. "I'll send you a letter next time I—"

"No, no! I think I didn't make myself clear enough," Hermione cut her off, shaking her head. "I'm going now. I'll be there every step of the journey."

"That's absurd!" seethed Bellatrix.

"No it's not! I want to learn as much as I can!"

Bellatrix ran her hands through the wild locks of her hair.

"Now do we have a deal or not?" Adding, Hermione lifted her chin, unbelievably impressed with herself. Usually she was the one in a tight corner here.

Bellatrix grabbed a hold of her shirt at her chest and pulled her forward a bit. Hermione's stomach turned as her eyes dropped to her dry, plump lips. "You have no idea what you've got yourself into," she whispered and before Hermione could say or do anything, she spun, knocking the breath out of Hermione's lungs as she apparated only Merlin knew where. In a split second they were standing again but then Bellatrix pushed her away from her, making her hit the gravel path beneath their feet hard. Hissing, Hermione tried to ignore her scratched arms and feelings and swiftly stood
up. She looked around, taking in a tremendous manor she could not see properly due to the depth of the night.

"Now, this is where you sleep," said Bellatrix sweetly, nodding at the spot where Hermione had fallen.

"But—"

"Ts ts ts; It was your smart idea to be near me, wasn't it? Well, get used to it! Because this is as close as you're ever going to get," she added before disappearing soundlessly into the entrails of the house.

Dumbstruck, Hermione didn't know whether this was a joke or not but after waiting for about fifteen minutes, realised that there was nobody coming for her. She sat down onto the lawn that was already wet with the droplets of the evening dew and leant against the outer wall of the mansion. She fell asleep with tears pouring out of her eyes and squeezing the blanket that she'd packed months ago and that still smelled of her lavender-infused home. Her mind strayed to Blair and her parents, imagining them laughing in the comfort of their garden and wishing for nothing else but to be able to leave and laugh with them too.

A/N: So uhm... Merry Christmas?

I know that this was a lot to read and take in but I really hope you enjoyed it nevertheless! I promise you that from now on, I'll try to make the chapters shorter!

As always, thank you for being patient, kind and so so sweet to me! You have no idea how much I appreciate every single one of you!

All my love to you!

AP
The cold solid ground beneath Hermione's stiffing body wasn't the easiest to doze off on. The sleeping bags that she'd bought two weeks ago at Cotswold Outdoor were yet to be cast a feather bed spell on so not even those could spare her shifting and waking every other minute from discomfort.

After tossing for half the night, Hermione resigned and with a frustrated sigh flattened herself on her back against the nylon inside of the bag. Pointing her eyes at the moon coated in melanite clouds above her, she zoomed in on the crickets chirping in the bushes, hoping they'd bring a bit of solace into her restless mind; exhaustion, panic and remorse had teamed up all against her now and the questioning of the aptness of her decision dawned on her like a particularly heavy outcrop.

Had her joining Bellatrix been a right thing to do? Aside from Dumbledore reassuring her that she was the one for the job, Hermione had no other source to turn to. She felt utterly incompetent, as though she had no particular skill or talent that would make her eligible for her task. The only thing she'd ever been good at was getting decent grades at school and recently, with Blair overtaking her mind, even that bit of dexterity had been taken away from her; till this day Hermione hadn't apparated once or managed to learn how to cast non-verbal spells properly. It was a miracle she'd passed the final DADA exam at all. She was sure the pitiful look professor Prewett had given her after her poor attempt to block the stunning spell silently would haunt her until her death.

Shifting, she turned to the side, her eyes lingering over the whips of mist from the fountain twixt the dark abelia bushes in front of her. It was so careless of her to have gotten involved in something so dangerous; she was too young, too inexperienced. In spite of all the extra lessons she'd received this year, she wasn't half the match for Bellatrix. The woman was a damn criminal while she was just a kid playing an auror in hiding.

Raw panic washed over Hermione.

Oh Merlin, she needed to go; needed to leave and find Dumbledore and tell him that this whole idea was entirely mad. Pretending to be a hero wasn't in her blood and she couldn't believe she had been as reckless as to think she could survive the entire journey of hunting down the corpus deus without a hitch when she couldn't even handle sleeping without a roof over her head; and her parents—despite the fact it had been just a couple of hours, Hermione missed them terribly.

God, she was such a child!

The first outpour of tears fell from her eyes. Why did she have to be so hasty when leaving yesterday? Hermione regretted bitterly having taken away those hours she could have spent with them instead of pacing around a moldy hotel room doing nothing—those hours she could have spent with Blair. If only Hermione had waited; she had wasted all the opportunities to see her lovely face by being stupid and trying to distance herself from her as though it would help her heal. And now, despite her being so close, Hermione had no idea when she would see her again—if she would see her again.

And as that frightening possibility dawned on her fully, Hermione bethought herself of the reason why she had decided to do this in the first place. If there was just a tiny risk of her losing everyone she loved to the delusional agenda of supremacy, there was no going back from this. Hermione couldn't run home and pretend there was nothing going on just for the fear of not being good
enough. She needed to get past the point of self-doubt; needed to pull herself together and stop whining and fueling the feelings of diffidence before she believed them completely. Perhaps she wasn't as powerful as Bellatrix but she was driven by the same desire as her as to do anything in her willpower to fight for the cause she believed in and was, too, willing to rather die trying than not try at all.

Sucking back her tears, Hermione nodded to herself. If putting up with Bellatrix meant seeing her family again one day, unharmed and without their life being at stake, she had no other choice but to stick with Bellatrix until the very end, until she got her old life back—and that she would get it back!

Closing her eyes, she imagined what it would be like years after everything was over. She could see herself sitting with her parents and Blair, all of them a little older, in their garden during one of the long summer evenings. They could be laughing and sharing a piece of an apricot cheesecake which would be too large and too sweet to be eaten just by one person. Blair might be telling them about her childhood antics, just like the last time she had told them about the sleazy business partner of her father he had invited over for dinner one evening. Blair had been three at the time, bouncing around with a lollipop in her mouth, which the man had snatched from her and, waving it in front of her face, said: "I'm not giving it back until I get a kiss," to which the little Blair had only replied: "Keep it then, dickface," before walking with her head held high out of the room.

Hermione could imagine all of them laughing until late and only a sudden downpour of rain would force them to leave the garden and get back to the house, where they'd call it a night anyway because it'd be long past midnight. For some strange reason both guest rooms might not be available—perhaps due to renovation work; and the white sofa in their living room might be too uncomfortable to sleep on, and so Hermione's mom might suggest that Blair sleep with Hermione in her room instead, for the bed was large enough for two, and of course, Hermione would have nothing against the idea. She would run upstairs to remove all the heavy books from her sheets and get ready for bed and then wait—with a galloping heart and twitching stomach, with her hair dried too hastily and still a bit damp from the bath—for Blair while the latter would be taking a shower just a thin wall away from her. And Hermione would have to use all of her willpower so as not to fling herself at her as she, skin glossed by Norell NY lotion which Hermione remembered all too well, would lie down agonising inches away from her touch. They could talk for hours and Blair would turn her head to her occasionally with that ethereal smile of hers and as she'd laugh, Hermione'd feel the coolness of her minty toothpaste against her face; Blair's eyes might flicker between Hermione's eyes and lips as though drawn to them and Hermione would forget for a while that Blair regarded everyone with the same intrigued gaze, and pretend that just for that night it might mean something more; something so intimate that only an unspoken look could imply it.

And despite it all happening in the summer, with the approaching morning hours the room might get a few degrees colder; the first peal of thunder from the outside might roar, and Blair—even though she wasn't scared of storms—might feel slightly alarmed when the droning sounds would intensify and become too loud and scary for her not to give a start. Hermione would hesitate for eternity before working up the nerve to move closer until her chest would nestle against the warmth of Blair's back. She might hear her let out a sigh of surprise but she wouldn't let it deflate her. She would cross her arm over hers, placing her trembling palm along her collarbone, and snuggle Blair to her as closely as it would be physically possible. A shiver might wash over her as their naked legs would meet and her face would taste the softness of Blair's hair. And Blair would do absolutely nothing to stop this. At the sound of one particularly wild thunderbolt, she might even turn to Hermione and bury her face in her neck while their thighs would trace each other and Hermione would savour the proximity of her body and go mad from the overwhelming sensation. She would open her legs and curl the upper one over Blair's hip bone, bringing them even closer and cradling her like a fragile lilly. And they would stay tied together, silent and still, letting the
Hermione put her arms around herself, grasping at the fabric of her t-shirt. She was so desperate for Blair that even these innocent reveries, the only thing she had left of her, made her feel as though she was burning inside out. The false taste of her touch was but a mere ghost of relief yet the only comfort she knew; and she blamed nothing but her own senses for bringing such misery upon her, for how on Earth could they forget? The memories of her sun-kissed skin had faded from her mind like the life from a wilting flower, therefore nothing but scraps of guesses were what remained.

And so as to spare herself insanity, Hermione guessed; diving back into the stormy scene and daring to wonder if—perhaps for the closeness of another person or for plain curiosity of seeing what it would feel like to be with a woman—if in such moment Blair might feel as much need for Hermione as Hermione felt for her; or just enough for them as to not tear each other apart.

Maybe, if Blair would suppress her morals for just a moment—oh, she would never—but if she did, if her breath would become too heated and irregular against Hermione's neck as it would be punctuated by the soft kisses falling on Hermione's skin—

Hermione couldn't go on. Her entire body felt like it was set on fire. She needed to stop this and not only along of her throbbing loins and twisting stomach—she couldn't risk any ideas like this with Bellatrix around.

Still, her mind wouldn't listen and presented her with yet another concept.

Hermione pictured returning home accompanied by Bellatrix now—which was quixotic in itself, for Hermione would never willingly lead her to the knowledge of Blair's existence, but also because Bellatrix would never accede to being her escort and taking her anywhere Hermione pleased. However, to even imagine herself walking into her living room tomorrow morning with Bellatrix by her side who'd have been forced to watch Hermione's parents being affectionate toward her—or Blair approaching Hermione and hugging her so ardently Hermione would have to take several steps back while holding onto her just as tightly—felt weirdly satisfying; she'd want Bellatrix to witness such moment and to realise that she was never going to get that privilege—not that Bellatrix exactly longed for it but—but what?

Hermione frowned over the absurdity of that logic. Why would she even want Bellatrix to see that she liked someone better than her? To make her jealous? Scowling, she rolled back onto her back. What nonsense! Hermione had no reason to want to get Bellatrix jealous; it was probably just a need to make her aware that there were people who actually thought Hermione wasn't insufferable and that it was possible for someone to like her. If there was someone she wanted to be jealous, it was Blair. Nobody else.

An owl hooted in the distance, bringing Hermione's attention back to reality: to the now a little bit damp t-shirt sticking to her back and the big pointy rock under her left shoulder-blade. She had but a vague idea as to where she was, yet none at all as to what was going to happen next. She had been left behind like a puppy waiting for its owner to return, although without a fear of being bailed on: given her abilities were essential to Bellatrix, it was only a matter of time when she'd show up.

Night after night Hermione had tried to picture what travelling with her and spending so much time together would be like but found that even in her imagination there was no place for a scenario that wouldn't have a dark undercurrent to it; insults and humiliation—she just knew that it was exactly what her life was going to be from now on. Oh, but if Bellatrix thought Hermione would become accustomed to those ways and say nothing in her defence, she was bloody mistaken. Bellatrix needed her, therefore it wasn't Hermione who had to submit to her but the other way around. There would be no more dragging her through the mud.
Yawning, she squeezed her eyes shut. It must have been pretty late already. Having no idea when she would be required to wake up, Hermione thought it would be best if she tried to fall asleep again. After several more minutes of tossing and turning, she settled lying on her stomach with her forearms under her head and finally drifted off.

It seemed to her as though she had just closed her eyes when they flung open to the moonlit night and she jolted in alarm, her heart racing painfully; she could feel something cold streaming down her face and into her ears and hair like melting ice.

"Rise and shine, muddy girl!" a bright cheerful voice sang out.

Wiping her face, Hermione turned to the side and as she propped herself on her elbows, felt a thin rivulet of water stream beneath her t-shirt. She pressed her palm against it hurriedly. Her eyes were taking turns fluttering and closing as to shake off the exhaustion weighing them down. Where was she? Focus, she needed to focus! With her lungs drawing a deep breath she peered up and zoomed in on the smirking Bellatrix standing above her half-veiled in shadows and with her wand loosely in her right hand. Hermione's stomach gave a little flop and she instinctively grabbed onto the draft collar, pulling it closer to her chest, remembering everything at once.

"Why?" she asked in a raspy voice, shivering as the cool breeze hit her drenched face. "Was this necessary?"

A caustic smile twitched on Bellatrix's lips. "You know the old saying: setting the mood first thing in the morning is what makes your day. I just wanted to see if it's true." Her eyes skimmed Hermione's pained expression. "Turns out it is; I feel much better already."

Frowning, Hermione rubbed her eyes with the heels of her thumbs before unzipping the sleeping bag and rolling to her knees first, then to her feet. Hugging herself, she scowled at Bellatrix, whose expression turned from satisfied to sickened within a second.

"You should thank me for not crucioing you for sleeping on my property like some dirty animal," she hissed.

Raising her brows, Hermione said drolly, "You left me here—what was I supposed to do? Wait till you decide to grace me with your—ouch!" she yelped, feeling as though someone had just ripped a bandaid off her mouth in a particularly harsh manner. She brought her hand to her lip, keeping it there for a moment before glancing at it and spotting a smudge of blood on her fingers. Her eyes shot back to Bellatrix.

"Watch it; next time it might be your tongue," she purred, sotto voice.

Unnerved, Hermione didn't dare retort, only pressed her fingers back to her swelling lip. She hadn't even said anything remotely rude and Bellatrix was already abusing her; there was no way this conversation would end up well.

Bellatrix's dark gaze lingered over her for a painful moment before sliding down. "And this muggle garbage?" she went on, nodding at the sleeping bag at their feet. "What is it still doing here? Get it out of my sight!"

Hermione wasted no time as she kneeled down and picking it up by the middle, tried dusting it off as quickly and advertently as possible. By the corner of her eye she could see Bellatrix watching her, which didn't exactly help her getting it in its initial shape. She heard the witch release a frustrated sigh and shift on the gravel beside her.
"For God's sake, just use your wand, girl! I don't have the entire day!"

"I can't," Hermione protested tensely, giving up on the sleeping bag and letting it unroll. "I'm not allowed to use magic just yet."

Bellatrix took a moment before stepping closer and saying in a low clear voice: "You what?"

Hermione didn't have the guts to look at her and rather returned to her struggle. Immediately, the mass of dark blue slipped from her clammy hands and folded into a tight roll in front of her eyes before plopping onto the ground to her feet. Hermione was left standing there stupidly and staring at it with a tightening stomach and a damp t-shirt clinging to her front. She did not expect a sudden explosion that dawned on her ears like firecrackers and so, yelping, she jumped aside, away from the flying smithereens of her expensive sleeping bag.

"Are you trying to say," Bellatrix spoke over the dying echo in a dangerous tone, "that you beseeched me to take you with me in spite of knowing you still got a Trace on you?"

Hermione's mouth went dry. "I'll be seventeen in less than two weeks."

"Well, congratulations!" barked Bellatrix, making her flinch. "What do you want to do until then? Have me mother you around?"

"There's no need; I take care of myself just fine," Hermione spared her a look.

"Do you?" asked Bellatrix. "You've told me you wanted to be there every step of the journey; well, the first one is apparition. How are you going to do it without my help?"

"Apparition is hardly a problem here," Hermione couldn't help the sapient tone. "Even with a licence, I'd still have to rely solely on you, given you'd be the one choosing the destination—logically, it must be you then who'd be apparating and I'd have to hold onto you—" she faltered, feeling her cheeks flush. "I—I mean, hold your hand, or a part of your dress to—"

"Of course you meant just that, you sick twerp," said Bellatrix derisively. "Don't assume I'd let you touch more than the lint of my robe—even that would have to be burnt afterwards."

Drawing her head back, Hermione squinted at her. "I really think we should get some things straight," she started, taking a tiny step toward Bellatrix. "I think we should get some things straight," she started, taking a tiny step toward Bellatrix. "I really think we should get some things straight," she started, taking a tiny step toward Bellatrix. "I know I've said that I'm willing to help in spite of anything, but if you're going to continue treating me this way, I'll pack my 'filthy' things and believe me," Hermione lowered her voice, "this will be the last time you see me."

"Tragic!" Bellatrix pressed her palm to her heart.

"You know what I meant," hissed Hermione, furrowing her brows. God, talking to Bellatrix was like talking to a cocky teenager. "The deal's off until you show some tolerance toward me."

"Muddy, let me explain something," smirked Bellatrix in a suspiciously patient tone, as she, looking to the ground, stepped closer to her, too, although still kept her distance. "Tolerance by definition means accepting the existence of someone else's beliefs, behaviour, opinions—et cetera." Glancing at Hermione in expectation, she paused for several moments before raising her brows. "Got it? Someone's, not something's—it is bound to people, not animals." Her voice reduced to whispering. "You don't make the cut."

Hermione felt as though a sharp needle had been thrust into her stomach. She was staring at Bellatrix with widened eyes and parted lips, unable to believe she was capable of saying something so foul while looking so content about it.
"All I'm asking for is some decency," she said coldly after a few moments' pause. "It's not the first time I'm doing so, but it's definitely the last."

"Oh, I see; but do tell me," Bellatrix feigned immense intrigue. "What happens if you have to ask one more time after all?" she japed, smirking. "Are you going to leave? How, you poor thing?"

"I can think of a way," implied Hermione.

Bellatrix flung her head back, cracking up.

"Why can't you take this seriously?!" snapped Hermione, losing her patience. "If we're going to work together—"

"You're comical when you're angry, muddybun," Bellatrix cut her off, sporting an amused smirk and twisting a curl of her hair around her wand. "That's your why," she went, now pointing it at Hermione with each word said, like a conductor. "That's why I can't take you or anything you say seriously. You're a joke!"

Hermione was glaring into Bellatrix's smug punchable face with pure resentfulness. "Oh yeah? Fine then! Fine! If I'm a bloody joke to you, then suit yourself!"

"Suit myself," repeated Bellatrix, her smirk widening.

"Yeah, suit yourself! Sammy!" Hermione called out in a voice full of frustrated anger, hoping wholeheartedly that this would work, and released a sigh of relief upon hearing a small pop echo through the air. A tiny house elf, draped in a cotton cloth, appeared standing and casting around in confusion between Bellatrix and Hermione. Regarding the woman with a fuming gaze, Hermione found with great satisfaction that Bellatrix looked staggered.

"Hermione Granger!" exclaimed Sammy, recognising her and bowing so low that the top of his head touched the white gravel beneath his bare feet. "Madame," he turned to Bellatrix, repeating the courtesy.

"Is this your ace of trumps?" fleered Bellatrix, bursting out anew but Hermione paid no attention to her.

She knelt down to the tiny creature, composing her face into an ephemeral smile. "Sammy, I'm terribly sorry for interrupting you this early in the morning but I really need you to help me with something."

The elf’s bulging eyes jumped from the laughing Bellatrix to her. "Anything, miss!" he said, nodding his enormous head eagerly. "It would be Sammy's greatest honour to help Hermione Granger!"

The gravel beneath Bellatrix's heels crunched. "Do you realise how embarrassing this is?" she chimed in, her laughter subsiding into chuckles.

"Could you take me to London, please?" Hermione asked Sammy, continuing to ignore Bellatrix.

"Aw, don't tell me you're no longer interested in participating in our little exploration program!"

"No, I really am not," she dismissed, her eyes never leaving the elf's. "Would you be so kind as to do this for me, Sammy?"

"Come now," Bellatrix accosted them. "You don't really want to leave, do you? All those
opportunities you would miss," she implied smoothly, leaving her words dangling in the air. "Do send the poor elf back; I'm sure we can—"

"No," said Hermione defiantly, giving her a look of disdain. She was no longer so naïve as to buy into her manipulation or get scared every time Bellatrix regarded her with a murderous countenance, like she did now.

"What do you mean no?" she half-whispered, obviously far past the point of pretending that she didn't care. "Just do as I say, stupid girl, before my patience runs out!"

"Too bad mine already has," retaliated Hermione, taking Sammy by his hand and seeing that the gesture made Bellatrix scrunch her face in revulsion. Good.

"Don't you dare leave!"

"Why? As far as I remember, you didn't want me here in the first place." Standing up, Hermione looked back at the little house elf, ready to apparate, but in that moment saw his knees buckle and he sank onto the rough gravel, squealing and writhing in pain.

Hermione widened her eyes in horror and plopped down to him, grabbing at his twitching arms. "Wh—Sammy! No!" She jerked her head to Bellatrix. "Stop! Stop it!"

"I told you not to try me," replied Bellatrix, eyeing the suffering elf on the ground with less than insouciance.

"If you don't stop this, I won't help you, I swear, I won't!" gabbled Hermione. "You can curse me, kill me but I swear on my life, you're never getting my help!"

Bellatrix remained still. In panic, Hermione proceeded to throw herself at her, trying to knock the wand out of her hand but as she did so, Bellatrix evaded her and Hermione ended up kissing the Earth, landing on her chin and sinking her teeth into her tongue so hard that she could feel the salty taste of the blood flooding her mouth.

Then Sammy's screams faltered.

Ignoring the stinging sensation in her mouth, Hermione crawled back to the trembling elf, whispering in a weeping voice: "Sammy! Sammy, can you hear me?"

She caught Bellatrix utter something very close to 'disgraceful' but at this point couldn't care less. Relieved, she let out a deep sigh upon noticing that Sammy's eyes had fluttered. Touching his upper arm, Hermione turned to Bellatrix, whispering: "How could you do this?!!"

"Honestly, it was as easy as blinking."

"Miss," whispered Sammy.

Hermione managed to give Bellatrix a hateful look before turning back to him. "Sammy, are you alright? Can you move?"

"Sammy thinks so, miss," whimpered the house elf weakly as Hermione helped him to his feet. Looking at his trembling form, her lips wobbled open; this was her fault, all her fault. If she hadn't let her emotions overtake her—if she had kept her cool and hadn't acted like a child, none of this would have happened; and damned Bellatrix had the audacity to just stand there feeling nothing; damn her, damn her damn her! She must have known that despite the fact she had just used a Crucius Curse on a sentient being, there were going to be no consequences of her actions
whatever thanks to the oppressive laws of the wizarding society; given how house elves had no rights, Bellatrix wouldn't even be summoned to court if Hermione reported her to the authorities.

What was she thinking, wanting to leave. If Bellatrix was to meet her goal, the inferiority situation would get so much worse than this… Stupid, stupid, Hermione. She couldn't go anywhere.

"Right… listen to me, Sammy," she started, swallowing the small pool of blood in her mouth along with her guilt. "I'm so so sorry! You must know that I didn't mean for this to happen to you in any way! And I'm equally sorry for calling you here in vain but… you need to go now."

An enormous wave of hatred whipped up inside her as she heard Bellatrix chuckle at her words.

"Don't ask, just go," she added quietly, noticing Sammy opening his mouth. Closing it, he gave Bellatrix a quick frightened look, which broke Hermione's heart a little, and, nodding, he disappeared into thin air without another word.

"Aren't you going to thank me for letting it live?" asked Bellatrix self-complacently.

Gritting her teeth, Hermione had to take a couple of deep breaths before standing up and turning to her. "How could you do this?"

"How could you do this," parroted Bellatrix.

"You—you're!" Hermione struggled to get the words out of her mouth. "Do you have any idea as to what you've done?" she spat finally, receiving a dramatic yawn for an answer. Her fingers raked through her hair just so that they wouldn't seize Bellatrix's arms and shake her. "I swear… you are the most vicious, the most ruthless human I've ever met!"

"Oh my, now you really hurt my feelings," cried Bellatrix falsely.

Hermione almost screamed from frustration, Bellatrix's tranquility driving her senseless. "There's no way to talk to you," she hollered, voice trembling. "You're acting like a twelve-year-old! Why can't we discuss things like adults?"

"Well, maybe because you're not an adult, are you," said Bellatrix caustically. "And if you want another reason, let's say that making you angry is thoroughly entertaining."

"You just used an unforgivable curse on a living being!" seethed Hermione, pointing at the place where Sammy had disappeared just a moment ago. "Don't you feel anything?"

"What would you want me to feel? Remorse?" Bellatrix snickered. "Don't be stupid, if I had to fill my mind with such nonsense, I'd have no time to think about you at all." She flicked her eyebrow and Hermione hated herself immensely for blushing. Luckily for her, the morning was still dark enough so as to hide her crimson cheeks.

"Using an unforgivable curse on a—" she started rebukingly, trying to mask her shame but Bellatrix cut her off.

"Oh, zip it, muddy!" She rolled her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose, her voice no longer mocking. "I'll be a dear and let you speak your angry little mind but for God's sake, don't start with the definitions—you're not at school anymore; and while your moralising's usually amusing, it's too repetitive now and more obnoxious than you, and believe me, that's saying something." Bellatrix moved into the patch of light that made her sharp features less distinct and pointed her glowing eyes on Hermione receptively. "Go ahead then; spit it out, whatever it was you wanted to talk about before the filthy elf showed up."
Biting her tongue so as not to retort anything salty, Hermione considered whether she should seize this opportunity while she still had it or risk standing her ground and possibly never get it again. Instinctively, she was pulled toward the second option; as to make Bellatrix listen, and impress on her that what she had done was unacceptable and couldn't be glossed over as though it was a mistake everyone did once in a while; however, numerous experiences had taught her that when it came down to confronting Bellatrix, logic over emotion was the best approach to—first, surviving without bruises and second, to finally making some progress and getting at least one of her points across instead of getting stuck in the endless bickering.

Hermione's teeth gritted with the effort of repressing her fury. "All I wanted," she began, considering every word, "was to ask you for the courtesy of not treating me like an adversary; I came here with the intention of helping you so why do you always have to go against me, ridiculing and criticizing me?" she asked, watching Bellatrix tilt her head. "I don't expect us to become friends or anything like that but we'll be working together side by side, so please, could you consider dialing the hostility back a bit? I've always tried my best to be nothing short of respectful toward you, even though it hasn't been easy, and I'd really like some of that respect in return," Hermione faltered under the pressure of Bellatrix's intense gaze but went on bravely. "I've always tried my best to be nothing short of respectful toward you, even though it hasn't been easy, and I'd really like some of that respect in return," Hermione faltered under the pressure of Bellatrix's intense gaze but went on bravely. "I'd like you to stop with the degrading nicknames. You promised you would when we were still at Hogwarts but I see you've already forgotten all about that so let me introduce myself again. My name is Hermione Granger. I don't wish to be called mudblood, muddy or anything else except for my name."

"I have a question." Bellatrix raised her hand as though at school, obviously poking more fun at Hermione. "How about a reprobate? Can I call you that?" she asked, smirking. "Technically, it's not an insult, considering that sickness you've got going on." She gestured with the same hand vaguely.

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "Must you always bring that up? It is completely irrelevant to this case! Or are you that worried about yourself?" Snorting, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Because in such case, don't bother; I don't fancy every single person I see, alright? In fact, I don't fancy random people at all—least of all you; I just—"

Pausing, Hermione withstood the urge to tell Bellatrix that there was only one woman stealing her sanity but that it wasn't her so she could mellow out and stop double-locking her chastity belt now.

"My point is," she went on quickly, "my personal life has got nothing to do with you or our deal so please, could you give it a rest? All I want from you is to teach me, nothing more, nothing less. So if we're clear on that, I'll be more than happy to help you."

Bellatrix, who was watching her with a knowing smirk on her lips the entire time, flung her curls back over her left shoulder. "Very convincing, Granger," she purred, the surname falling from her lips like rose petals, making shivers roll down Hermione's spine.

"Just ignore it! Ignore it!"

"And about that respect," Bellatrix went on. "Just to put it simply—you're not getting it; for even if you had had any chance at earning it, you certainly lost it by wailing over that dirty creature; only a pathetic or equally as worthless excuse for a human could ask a damned house elf for help. I would never, and I will never respect anyone of such customs," said Bellatrix in disdain, her words hitting the same painful spot in Hermione's stomach over and over again. "Second thing, how can you expect me to believe that you're not wicked when I clearly remember you putting your muddy hands on me after your astral pilgrimage?"

"That is not what happened!" snapped Hermione. "You know very well that I had encountered an
entity which made me feel things I normally wouldn't! It was just a misfortune that you happened to be there when I woke up and while I was still—" Hermione faltered, looking away, her face on fire.

"On the pull," finished Bellatrix in a low voice. "My, my, so you decided to violate me and it didn't even bother you that I'm a woman."

"I stopped the moment I realised it was you," gritted Hermione, forcing a snort. "Trust me, I'm not interested in you like that!"

'Liar.'

"I see," nodded the witch, doubt radiating from every inch of her face. "Well, regardless of the truth, do be careful," she advised, her voice pure silk. "Because once I notice your eyes going where they shouldn't, I'll personally scratch them out of your skull. Do you understand me?"

Hermione gulped. "As I've said before, I just want to learn, nothing else."

The corners of Bellatrix's lips lifted in a short-lived smile. "Good; so now if this is established," she cooed, digressing. "How about you fill me in on everything the big old man told you about the corpus deus all those months ago?"

Hermione shrugged off her unease. "Fine, but I'm not doing it here," she said, casting around. "And where would you want to go, love?"

God, could Bellatrix stop with the nicknames? Hermione hated what it was doing to her.

"Well?"

"I…" Blinking, Hermione tried to focus. "I don't know; somewhere warm and inside would be great."

"Choose another place, I already told you my underwear is out of the question," said Bellatrix flatly.

Eyes like saucers, Hermione almost choked on her own shock. "Wh—I—that's not wh—!" she stammered, unable to form a fluent sentence, while Bellatrix stood there bursting, clearly enjoying the petrifying effect her words had on Hermione.

Teeth grinding, she needed a moment to regain her composure. "You know, I'm getting sick and tired of your innuendos!" she spoke over Bellatrix's laughter. "Can't we just go somewhere and talk seriously? Thought you wanted to hear about the corpus deus."

Bellatrix did not rush her laughter into subsiding. "Oh, you're no fun; no fun at all," she said in between, glancing down and stepping to Hermione, who instinctively backed away. Smirking, Bellatrix pulled the fabric of her skirt up a bit, holding it up for Hermione to take. Hermione looked at it, an asinine thought springing inside her mind: if Bellatrix enjoyed making her uncomfortable so much, why not repay the favour? Without hesitating, she reached out but instead of Bellatrix's skirt, her fingers closed over the slender wrist covered by black lace, harshly and carelessly, not at all worried whether her grip hurt or not, the silk wrinkling under her touch.

Bellatrix's eyes snapped to hers, brimming with an ominous gleam upon which Hermione's heart almost broke through her ribs and her stomach probably exploded and her skin was suddenly burning inside out, but she managed to maintain just about enough clarity in her mind as to not let
herself bale out. As though on autopilot, she felt her eyebrows shoot up and her hand tug at Bellatrix's with more fervour as the witch tried to free herself. They were glaring at each other, Hermione physically sick from the tension, her own boldness or the proximity of Bellatrix's exhausted yet strangely magnetic face, unable to get a word out. Oddly enough, so seemed Bellatrix. Hermione noticed there was something unidentifiable about her dark, gleaming eyes; something… what were those emotions? She had no more time to inspect them as there was a sudden pull at her body and she and Bellatrix were sucked into a whirlpool of tightness, white noise and colours.

Not expecting to land so soon, Hermione almost lost her balance as they drew into some obscure place but saved herself, gripping Bellatrix even tighter, her fingers slipping over a small area of cool exposed skin. Hissing at the contact, Bellatrix yanked her wrist from Hermione's grasp and strode away from her, saying nothing.

Hermione gulped in a breath, all the reasons why she shouldn't have done that flooding in just now. Bellatrix was going to kill her; she was going to tear her open and have her for breakfast; but what was worse was the tingling sensation lingering along Hermione's palm and the intrusive excitement in her belly, which seemed more alarming to her than the possibility of being killed. What was it with her? She could not afford to lose her head like this—not with Bellatrix!

Hermione winced as the dim place around her flared with a deep-orange glow. It took her eyes only a moment to adjust to the light emanating from the golden candlesticks on the desk under the elaborate windows before stumbling over Bellatrix, standing silently just a couple of steps ahead, facing away from her. Hermione fixed her gaze on the midnight-black mess of locks, trying not to breathe too loud; considering Bellatrix's instability, she'd be a fool not to be wary. At any moment she could turn around and slice her in two.

She really could.

But she stood still, the rapid rise and fall of her shoulders suggesting she might not be entirely alright. Could it be that the apparition made her queasy and she wasn't feeling well? Just like months ago at Hogwarts when she had passed out? Or was it actually anger she was trying to get under control?

"You are somewhere warm and inside now." Bellatrix's deep controlled voice startled her, putting an end to her musings. "Let's hear what you have to say!"

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but couldn't; wasn't Bellatrix going to address her demeanor? Not at all? Not that Hermione would have minded, but she could not fathom a single reason why she would let it slide—Bellatrix wasn't afraid of confrontation; on the contrary, she seemed to enjoy fighting with Hermione on a whole different level so why was there no cussing, no curses, nothing to retaliate against her for being so bold and flippant? Was this the approach that actually worked on her? Hermione let herself think for a while before shaking her head inwardly. She remembered numerous occasions when she had shown disrespect to Bellatrix and the outcomes of those situations had never been as regardless as this.

"Why is it that you are quiet?" Bellatrix almost whispered. "Are you waiting for an invitation to sit down first?"

Hermione shook her head but the witch was still facing away from her. "No," she murmured.

"What is it then?" asked Bellatrix, irritated, sauntering closer to the desk and leaning her right hip against it, her arms crossed, the cascading curls hiding the majority of her face.
Blinking, Hermione cast a quick look around. "Where exactly are we?" she asked, daring just now to take in the square, glamorous room they had appeared in.

It was panelled with shiny ebony wood from floor to ceiling and had a very distinct smell to it; raw but very light with sweet and spicy undertones, perhaps agarwood and something orangey and incense-like. The large cobblestone fireplace below a carved mantelpiece on the left wasn't lit and stood right beside the renaissance sofa and along the wall crafted with venetian wallpaper. There was nothing on display: no flowers in the vases, no literature on the shelves, or papers on the desk. It was almost as if the room, despite being maintained in excellent condition, wasn't being used at all.

"Does it matter?" Snorting, Bellatrix turned to her fully. "I asked you something, so I expect an answer! What do you know about the corpus deus?" she queried, punctuating every word.

Okay, nevermind where they were.

"I haven't been told much, except that they're incredibly valuable," began Hermione, trying to appear as informed as Dumbledore asked her to—not too much, but not too little either. "I've learnt that each object—each corpus deus—has a twin in a parallel universe that was created at the same time and from the same matter as this version." Hermione let her eyes linger over the right sleeve of Bellatrix's dress before continuing. "The venor floccus talked in riddles and there's literally nothing about them in books; I couldn't find anything about their purpose but from what I've gathered so far, I think they may serve as some form of interdimensional travelling—I'm not entirely sure how it works or why you are invested in something like that, but that's no concern of mine, anyway," said Hermione, hating to come across as ignorant, but she had no choice but to stick up to her role. "I don't care about your reasons as long as they don't do damage to others."

Bellatrix tilted her head so that the strands of her curls fell away from her eyes. "You were doing great up until the 'I don't care' part," she said softly. "You should have thought of a more believable line."

"But I really don't care," protested Hermione, glad her face didn't betray her with a blush. "I mean, I'd like to learn more but I'm not as stupid as to expect you to share something so personal with me. Why bother trying, you've told me three times already you're not telling me anything."

"And you're going to settle with that and do exactly as I say just for the sake of learning a couple of bitsy spells, right?" asked Bellatrix before snickering and shaking her head. "You're so bad at this game, Granger."

The surname again! Why did it sound different from her lips? It was making things twice as difficult.

Uncrossing her arms, Bellatrix ambled forward and stopped at the divan, her eyes boring into Hermione. "Why don't you put your cards on the table? Tell me, what did the venor floccus tell you about my intentions?"

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly, bunching her arms. "I tried to ask him but he refused to give away any information; he said that revealing someone else's secret would deepen his karmic debt... I tried figuring it out myself but everything I came up with sounded ludicrous."

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "Ludicrous like your storytelling?" she asked calmly. "Come on, you've known me for quite a while now to think of at least two sensible reasons."

"Right, because you're that easy to read," pointed Hermione sarcastically. "I mean, sure, we've
talked on numerous occasions but that was hardly enough time for me to get to know you—truly
know you; I have no idea what you're trying to accomplish in your life or why you do certain things
the way you do them. I can't decipher your aims based on knowing so little about you," shrugged
Hermione. "I'm not omniscient, although you obviously think otherwise."

"I was thinking more of prying than omniscient," remarked Bellatrix, winking. Hermione looked
away, shaking her head.

"Did the old trout tell you anything else?"

"Well," commenced Hermione coldly, eyeing the impeccable ebony flooring before glancing back
at her. "Rather than tell, he showed me; put me into hypnosis and I learnt how everything happened
—the dreams, I mean," she specified, trying to block any memory of Blair from flooding her mind.
"I was shown how exactly and when I had acquired the sixth area: I was in my third year, had
taken on so many classes it had become physically impossible to attend them all since some of
them overlapped; Professor Flitwick came up with the idea to lend me a time turner so I could take
all the classes I wanted despite the time overlap. In the parallel universe, the same thing happened
to the other version of me, too—"

"Of course; the two Grangers saw each other, right?" amended Bellatrix. "I've read it in your
diary."

"Yes," nodded Hermione, surprised at how fast Bellatrix put one and one together. "But not only
that; the moment they spotted each other, I wound the time turner to catch one more lesson here, in
our dimension, which contributed to the disruption of time and resulted in my mind somehow
becoming affixed to their universe," she finished, quite proud of herself for leaving out the most
important details and still making it seem as though she hadn't.

"That doesn't make any sense."

Hermione's pride shattered like a house of cards. "Sorry?"

"Were you told the time loop happened naturally, without anyone else's effort?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't make any sense," repeated Bellatrix. "The other Granger should have had the same
privilege of having an insight into our world then too, it doesn't work only one way. Besides, the
loops don't just happen—they are created with magic."

"You think so?" asked Hermione in a voice which sounded fake even to her own ears.

"We both do," Bellatrix raised her brows. "You're a terrible liar, Granger. Half of the things that
came out of your mouth today were a giant fib and I'm seriously considering doing something quite
unforgettable to that deceitful tongue of yours to teach you a lesson on how wrong telling lies is."

Hermione felt a huge knot tighten in her stomach. "That's absurd," she protested. "Why would I
lie?"

"Because," started Bellatrix, looking her dead in the eyes. "There's someone smarter than you who
might have instructed you to."

"Why, who—?"

"Do you take me for a fool?"
"No, of course not!"

"Then tell me the truth! Why are you here?"

"Why—I've already told you," protested Hermione, blinking as Bellatrix ambled forward. "All I want is to learn something valuable and—and—" she faltered, her feet automatically carrying her backwards as Bellatrix continued advancing on her and came to a halt only when her back collided with one of the cabinets. She pressed herself against it as though magnetised, helplessly watching Bellatrix come within a few feet away from her.

Breath hitching, she fixed her gaze on her ghostly face. Her eyes darted to the cracked lips, trapped in between the milk-white teeth and up to the deep onyx eyes, a sick pain dancing inside her stomach.

"Do you really want to do this against all odds?" Bellatrix whispered, her breath brushing against Hermione's skin, making it so bloody difficult to focus on her words. "Even if it means going against yourself—against your own blood?" she let a short-lived smile gloss her lips before licking them.

The pain in Hermione's stomach intensified.

"What would you do," Bellatrix continued silkily, running her eyes over Hermione's face, "if I told you I'm doing this to get rid of you, hm? All of you?"

Hermione's mouth went numb. She knew precisely what Bellatrix was trying to do with all these voluptuous theatrics and put a grand effort to fight them; she knew she couldn't let herself be distracted; she knew she needed to speak up and unfreeze and get away from Bellatrix; had to snap out of this before she did something stupid.

Unaware of how or where she'd gathered so much resilience and clarity, Hermione placed her hands onto Bellatrix's arms and pressed on them with just enough force to make her move. Lightheaded, just like that one time she got drunk with Blair, she let go and quickly stumbled a great deal away from Bellatrix. Stopping at the window, she crossed her arms, trying to ignore her heart pounding inside her chest as though it was trying to test just how fast it could beat and her trembling hands, which still held the coldness of Bellatrix's silky sleeves.

"I wouldn't believe that," she blurted in a strangely unfamiliar voice. "I don't see a single reason why you would waste your time to get rid of someone when there are much nobler causes to fight for in life. The time we have here is so limited, it's not worth it wasting it on anyone—and you know it, so forgive me for thinking that you're only trying to mislead me with such talk." Hermione worked up the nerve to look at Bellatrix finally. "You're too smart for entertaining ridiculous ideas like these."

Sucking in her cheeks so as to give nothing away in her expression, Hermione lowered her gaze. Rarely in her life did she have an opportunity to insult someone by complimenting them.

"I'll find it out, Granger," said Bellatrix after a short pause. "Be sure I will, and then may God be with you!"

"There's nothing to find out but sure, enjoy yourself frittering away the time you could invest in something real," said Hermione in an unbothered tone, although what she was feeling was anything but that. "Meanwhile, you could brief me on our plan," she asked perhaps too confidently, aiming to lead the conversation elsewhere.
Bellatrix snorted before snapping. "*Our*? There's no such thing as our plan! If anything, it's *my* plan and there's no need for you to know a fracture of it!"

"Of course there is!" objected Hermione. "I have a life to come back to! I'd like to know how many corpus deus there are left to search for and how many you already have—I know of one and that's my diary, which I'm afraid I'm going to need back if you want me to have those dreams again."

Bellatrix's eyes were angry and unblinking as though counting the many ways in which she could murder Hermione if she didn't need her. "Four. There are four more to look for," she said finally.

"That means we're half-way," flashed out Hermione, realising her mistake when it was too late.

Bellatrix's eyebrows shot up, surprise and satisfaction evincing in her blossoming smile. "Oh, so you know how many we're looking for then?"

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

"You'll go down, Granger and all thanks to your own stupidity," noted Bellatrix gaily. "I'm giving you a week!"

Hermione parted her lips but closed them again. There was no point in entangling herself in more lies; the harm had already been done. "There's the diary and—what else?" she asked instead.

"You've got some nerve," Bellatrix snorted. "You know very well what else there is so spare me these preposterous questions!"

"Honestly, I don't; I admit that I knew of the number but I have no idea as to what they are," said Hermione truthfully but Bellatrix ignored her.

"Here's your diary." She reached inside her robe, pulling out a leather-bound book, her long fingernails clicking against the binding. "Since time's so important to you, let's not waste any of it. We may start the experiment right now."

Hermione stepped back. "What experiment?"

"Shh, little one, don't be scared," sing-songed Bellatrix, prowling closer.

Fear crept through Hermione's chest, snatching away her breath. She pressed herself against the glossy glass of the window, the writing desk the only thing dividing her from Bellatrix.

"What experiment," she repeated in a trembling voice.

Bellatrix took out her wand, paying no attention to her question. "You seem tired," she said, giving Hermione's features a concerned look. "Didn't get enough sleep last night, did you?"

Gulping, Hermione held her breath. "I—I'm alright."

"No you're not." Bellatrix shook her head slightly. "I think you should get just a little bit more of it."

"No I—" Hermione tried to protest but her eyelids fell shut like stage curtains; the last thing she remembered seeing was a crooked wand pointing at her chest, followed by a dispersion of aegean-blue smoke. When she came to herself, she was looking at the coffered ceiling, a sharp throbbing pain exploding in the back of her head.

"Well?" Bellatrix's eager voice sounded at her feet and when Hermione raised her head from the
floor, saw the witch kneel and observe her face with diligence. "What did you see?" she asked.

Hermione sat up, wincing as the pain in her head doubled. Her eyes stumbled over a toppled chair on the floor to her left, the potential cause of her injury; Bellatrix must have let her hit herself—of course, in no universe would she care to spare her the pain.

"I was talking to you! What did you see?" demanded Bellatrix.

"Nothing." Hermione grimaced as she rubbed the swelling lump on her nape before bringing her hand to her eyes to see if she was bleeding. She wasn't. "I didn't see anything... Why did you do this?"

Bellatrix cursed under her breath, the floor creaking as she, propping her palm on her thigh, stood up, her pensive eyes boring into Hermione. "Let's try this then," she commanded, dropping a spherical bottle onto Hermione's lap; a sleeping draught. Hermione could recognise the colour anywhere. Her mom supplied to the entire family, even had dispatched a huge box to America for Blair.

"Drink it," Bellatrix ordered.

Taking the bottle into her hand, Hermione clambered to her feet. "How about an explanation first? You can't just hex me! What did you expect to happen?"

"That is none of your concern," retaliated Bellatrix harshly.

Hermione sighed, shaking her head. "We need to communicate. There's no point in working together if you don't tell me what you actually want from me! I said I would help you and I meant it—but not under such conditions! You needn't have forced me into doing things; if you had just explained..." she paused, trying not to mind Bellatrix's condescending expression. Eyes dropping to the bottle in her hands, Hermione rolled it in her palm. "You tried to invoke the dreams, am I right? The sleeping draught doesn't help. I took it last summer when I came home from Malfoy Manor and although I had the diary on my night stand, I did not dream," she explained, glancing at Bellatrix, who was squinting at her with distaste.

"Maybe the potion wasn't strong enough," the witch floated. "Or perhaps," she shifted on her feet, a smirk forming on her lips. "It didn't work because a mudblood had brewed it."

Hermione set her jaw. "That's a funny thing to say considering some of the best potion-makers were half-bloods; namely, the Sleeping Draught was invented by one—Penny Haywood; I'm actually surprised you don't have a problem with using it..."

Bellatrix's face turned a soft shade of pink. "Futile piece of trash I wouldn't even think of if you weren't such a hopeless case!"

Sure you wouldn't, thought Hermione but refrained from saying it out loud. Biting the inside of her lower lip so as not to look smug over having embarrassed Bellatrix, she glanced down and said, "Regardless, it's not going to work."

"Well, I'd rather find out for myself," insisted Bellatrix. "See the sofa over here? I'll be generous and even let you lie down while you sleep."

Hermione glanced at her before letting her eyes drop to the deep purple potion. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of Bellatrix watching her in her most vulnerable state; she had learnt it the hard way that it wasn't safe to even stand with her back turned to her, let alone lie unconscious in her presence.
Still, Hermione needed to earn her trust somehow.

Reluctantly, she footed it toward the sofa but came to a halt after several steps. "Promise," she began slowly. "Promise me, you won't harm me when I'm asleep."

"Awww," pouted Bellatrix. "Pathetic little thing, you know I need those dreams so of course, I'll spare you for now."

Was that even worth thanking? Probably not.

"Thank you," she said anyway.

"Well, you better—it's not easy to resist all those ideas I'd put to use," lamented Bellatrix. "I was thinking that perhaps I could fill your lungs with water and watch you wake up struggling to breathe—oh, what a shame I need you alive."

Hermione looked askance at her. "You know, I'd really appreciate if you kept those concepts to yourself. I don't particularly like you either but I don't feel obliged to tell you that every second of my life and in every way possible."

Bellatrix snickered.

Despite being minded to do the exact opposite of what the witch had asked of her, Hermione took the last few steps separating her from the sofa and sat down onto the silver velvet. She uncorked the bottle, giving Bellatrix one last firm look before downing the potion, the taste of lavender reminding her of her mom painfully. In an instant, her eyelids grew heavy and Hermione found herself falling into darkness once again.

When she roused, instead of the quivering candlelight, the dark room dazzled with thick yellow sun rays, filling the place with a wave of calming warmth. Hermione remained lying twisted in a bit of an uncomfortable position with her legs hanging down the sofa, her eyes roaming over the ceiling with a grid of bold beams. Turning her head toward the window, she gasped and recoiled into the backrest of the sofa, riveling to the spot. Bellatrix was inches from where Hermione was lying just a second ago, swamped over the seat, the side of her face resting against her left forearm, her shoulders heaving steadily.

A flutter rushed through Hermione's stomach, her breath shortening. Did they sleep here like this side by side?

Her eyes slid over the archly curled lashes and over the ashen skin partly obscured by the thick raven curls. Resisting the urge to brush them aside so as to take a closer look at this Bellatrix—calm and peaceful—Hermione curled her hand into her t-shirt, feeling the wild thumping against her fingers.

Should she wake her up? Bellatrix would certainly want that; but then the redness all over her heavy eyelids suggested this might be the first time in a long period that Bellatrix got some rest. Letting herself relax a bit, Hermione moved just an inch closer, leaning on her elbow and surveying the sleeping woman beside her. Bellatrix looked positively raddled. Her skin was paper thin and although its texture seemed smooth, it lacked the healthy glow of its previous vitality. Her exposed cheek seemed much more hollow too, likely due to the excessive weight loss, and her parted lips were marred by a lot of thin painfully-looking cracks. Hermione felt a compelling need to soothe them with the petroleum jelly she had in her bag, which was secured under her t-shirt, but dismissed the crazy idea immediately.
Bellatrix let out a soft prolonged exhale as she adjusted her cheek firmer against her forearm. Startled at the sight, Hermione blenched but the witch remained undisturbed and so, slowly, she reclined back, turning to the side to create more distance between them, still unable to will her eyes away from her. Deceitful innocence settled on the unusually tranquil face, possessing her in the same way it possessed a child: naturally and gracefully, giving off the impression she couldn't possibly harbour a breath of evil inside her; and upon sighting her pouting in her sleep, there would be no one in the world who wouldn't fall for that deception.

Hermione swallowed hard. Despite the apparent sickness, despite her cruel nature, Bellatrix was still one of the most attractive human beings she had ever seen. She'd bet ten galleons that if measured, her face would fit the golden ratio perfectly; she would also bet that thanks to that, Bellatrix had no trouble getting away with literally anything she had done in her life; beauty had always been the universal key to every door, and Hermione couldn't feel more shallow, knowing it worked for hers, too. She could no longer deny how affected she was by Bellatrix's appearance.

Anytime the witch got close to her, her heart didn't know which way to escape. It was incredibly frustrating, for Hermione hated the idea of liking someone solely for their looks: there was so much more to a person than their body, and to Bellatrix that 'more' wasn't much if anything at all; imagine away her beauty, and what was left beside the rotten interior?

Still, as Hermione's eyes slid down Bellatrix's face, a small voice inside her brain wondered what kissing those callous lips would feel like.

Repulsed by her own thoughts, Hermione startled back, screwing up her face in a scowl. She was a certifiable loony Sigmund Freud would have taken a lively interest in. He'd surely have a lot to say about her attraction to someone who was planning on putting away her entire family; most likely something along the lines of: your issues result from the deep deprivation of motherly love at such a young age.

Hermione had done her research; she'd read that the reason people tended to feel attracted to the wrong ones stemmed from their subconscious need to heal themselves. People traumatized in their early childhood kept attracting those whose behaviour was similar to their parents'—those who could hurt them in the same way their parents had in their childhood—while hoping that through their 'abusive' partners, they could get the change or the closure they hadn't gotten when they were little.

Bellatrix didn't care for Hermione—just like Hermione's mom had not cared for her when she had been a child, and therefore her dumb psyche must have hoped she could try with Bellatrix this time; try and get that affection from her. Hermione almost burst out laughing. How could she even explain to her brain that she was barking up the completely wrong tree?

And what about Blair? What made Hermione so besotted with her? Perhaps the fact that in the past, Blair had given her the care she needed; she was like the strange water in a leaking well that needed to be refilled over and over again because it kept sluicing out through the cracks no one could mend. Blair had tried giving her the love, filled up the void temporarily before taking it away from her day after day when she had left, wounding Hermione deeper and leaving her aching for more.

Oh, sometimes, she wondered what it would be like if her mom hadn't gone through the depression. Maybe in that case, she would have seen Blair as a godmother rather than someone she wanted to love like God intended a man to love a woman—or perhaps she wouldn't have. Blair was the most lovable being—who would be so blind as to not fall for her?

Bellatrix shifted again, Hermione's gaze tracing down the length of her jawline, pausing at a partly
faded thin scratch. She knew she could not allow her feelings to escalate past the point they already had. She'd be in serious trouble if she got attached—first of all, it would mean she had gone completely mad and second, just like Blair, Bellatrix would never look at her the way she wished...

Frowning, she parted her lips. Did she want Bellatrix to see her in that light? Pride and ignorance aside, did she actually want Bellatrix to like her?

Curls slipping across the silky dress, Bellatrix shifted first before heaving up her head. Afraid of being caught staring, Hermione quickly sat up, dropping her gaze along with her hands into her lap.

"Oh sh—" Bellatrix suppressed the profanity. "How long have you been up?" she asked instead, her voice raspy, deeper and it even cut deeper than usually.

"Barely a couple of seconds," lied Hermione, stretching her arms even though she had no need to. "I was about to wake you up."

She more heard than saw Bellatrix stand up and rub her face. "So, muddy," she said sternly after a while. "Did you have any dreams?"

"It's Hermione," she corrected. "And no; I did not—just like I said I wouldn't," she couldn't help adding quietly.

Bellatrix cursed, trampling away and kicking something along the way. Hermione guessed it must have been a leg of the table. The witch was back to her usual frightening self which was much less likeable than the calm one and which worked in Hermione's favour perfectly for easing some of the sentiments she had allowed herself earlier.

Bouncing her foot against the floor, Bellatrix ran her hand through her hair. "Well, I guess we should try the last option then," she murmured more to herself than Hermione.

"The last option?"

Bellatrix reached into her dress, taking out a mamluk tinned circular copper box, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She minced toward Hermione, stopping mere inches from her knees and towering above her like a high wave threatening to snatch her right in. Breath hitching, Hermione could do nothing but press her back firmer against the sofa.

"This, deary, is an extraordinary substance, highly unobtainable on the wizarding market; I had to do something bloody impossible to get it, so you better not disappoint me."

With her eyes glued to her knees, Hermione cleared her throat and asked, "Why is it rare?"

"Because of one of its ingredients."

"What is it?"

"The cry violet."

Hermione's eyes shot up. "But that's impossible; cry violets have been extinct since 1930!"

"Apparently they have not," chirped Bellatrix, nodding slightly at the box.

"What's the name of the substance?" asked Hermione again.

"Well, the inventor likes to call it Lune de Voile."
Lune de Voile? Hermione had never heard of it before. "What does it do?" she asked keenly.

"It's a unique hallucinogen used in African wizarding colonies, this one specifically in Mauritania, to simulate reality; it creates a hypothetical situation in your mind based on your subconscious blockages," explained Bellatrix softly as she unscrewed the cover and lowered herself a bit, making Hermione shrink back even more. "It allows them to come out and gives you the platform to try and solve them in a hallucination without screwing anything up in reality," she paused, eyeing the inside of the box. "The blend of these plants connects to your mind and creates the situation which your subconsciousness considers the most essential to figure out," Bellatrix tore her eyes from the box before locking them with Hermione. "It's a very powerful drug—without any side effects, don't be afraid—you won't have any idea that you're hallucinating, which in a way isn't actually that false. The objects you may see, the people you may meet, even their reactions—there's an eighty percent chance that what you experience there, you'd experience in reality, too, should you choose to do the same things you did in the hallucination."

"How can the blend know what the reactions of certain people might be?" asked Hermione, frowning.

"Nature is smart, the Earth is old," said Bellatrix. "It carries the DNA of each and every person that has ever lived; knows us like a mother knows her children. Hasn't Sprout taught you this? Whenever you touch nature, be it soil, trees, or flowers, the Earth collects information about your body and sends all the vitamins and minerals you are missing into the growing seeds for you to consume. There's a similar process with cry violets except that they intercept the vibration of our energy."

Hermione was looking at Bellatrix with her lips parted, taken aback by her knowledge of Herbology; she'd never guessed her to be the type to be interested in plants. "Alright, but...it's going to help with my dreams, how?" she asked slowly. "I can assure you it's not my number one priority to figure them out."

Bellatrix snorted. "I guessed that but you'll have to trick your mind into thinking they are."

Frowning, Hermione shifted in her seat, unable to press herself any tighter against the sofa. "But how? I have no control over my subconsciousness."

"With a little bit of concentration, you will."

How for Merlin's sake was Hermione supposed to concentrate with Bellatrix leaning over her?

"I don't know about this," she demurred, worrying more about the subject of her subconscious blockages than the fact that she was about to use an actual drug.

"It's completely harmless," Bellatrix went on reassuringly, misinterpreting her hesitation. "There are no consequences for your health, no nausea, stomachache or anything; you'll slip into a trance-like state and that's it; evaporates from your body within one hour and you'll be as fresh as a daisy."

_Daisy_. Why did Bellatrix have to mention daisies...

Blushing, Hermione glanced at the box reluctantly. She could say even now, even before trying it out, that there was no way her mind would believe some dreams were more important to her than her _la belle marguerite._

"You must think of the corpus deus and desire them with all your heart," whispered Bellatrix, making Hermione's heart rate quicken. "To discover their location; combined with your sixth area,
it should take you past our dimension into the other Granger's timeline and fast-forward to the future."

"But she doesn't know anything about the corpus deus," objected Hermione.

"But you do, so better remember everything you'll see."

Bellatrix leaned in closer, bringing the little box to her lips. For a split second, Hermione caught a glimpse of persian-blue powder before yelping and squeezing her eyes shut as Bellatrix blew at it, the blue immediately dispersing onto her cornea and past her parted lips straight into her windpipe. Coughing, Hermione grasped at her throat, willing herself to breathe but to no avail.

"Corpus deus!" She heard a distant order and, choking, tried to obey it. She tried to think about them, tried to etch the diary into her mind before the obscurity yanked her away for the third time today.

"You can't expect me to encourage this behaviour!"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione giggled. "I have to finish it before the school starts."

"You're not going to study during your summer break," said Blair with an attitude and her left hand resting on her hip. "Not under my roof!"

They were alone on the marble balcony. Blair, pretty as a peach blossom, was standing next to the chaise lounge chair where Hermione was reading 'A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration' shielded by a large umbrella and a straw beach hat. The hot salty breeze was blowing through their hair delicately as the afternoon sun was catching their colour, the white foamy waves beating in the distance.

"I only got a hundred and twenty-five pages left," said Hermione, side glancing at her and showing her the thinner part of the textbook.

Blair blinked before leaning over. "That's it! I'm taking away your privileges." She snatched the book from Hermione's hands and strode off into the bedroom. Leaping from the chair, Hermione hurried through the open balcony door right after her. "You can't forbid me to study!" she said, laughing.

"Wrong; I can do whatever I want." Blair turned to her with a challenging look, visibly suppressing a smile and holding the book behind her back. Hermione felt the tips of her lips curling up before slackening and shooting up again. The thrill rising inside her belly was wild like the vast sea outside the windows, breaking on the shore beneath them. A single glance cast upon Blair's permitting eyes, her mischievous eyes, bright and alive and so mesmeric, letting her know that right now, she was allowed to touch her and justify and dismiss every little brush of their hands as though it never even happened was...

Rushing forward, she set her eyes on the floral sleeve of Blair's viscose dress which ended just below the barely noticeable mark on her left elbow and stopped only when facing its rose-gold pallor. Her heart beat like a drum as she reached behind her, trying to get hold of the stolen book while 'accidentally' brushing the sun-kissed arm, but failed miserably as her reflexes were distracted by her ulterior motives far too much. Hearing a soft chuckle above her, she attacked with more ardor, this time strategically aiming at Blair's stomach as though meaning to tickle her, which was a brilliant trick, for it made the blonde slouch her willowy shoulders and bend forward.

"Don't even try it!" she warned with a throaty laugh, her free hand darting in front of her abdomen
protectively all the while giving Hermione a chance to sidestep her. With a swift nimbleness, she moved the book to her front and away from the young girl's reach. But gracious heaven, what did it matter when Hermione had already gotten what she wanted? Heart leaping higher than where the stars resided, she fought demons to suppress a gasp of pained delight as her arms slid across the loose fabric of Blair's sleeves and her chin came resting upon her shoulder. And then—then when her nostrils inhaled her lethal scent, it was as though she had turned into a melting sea of swallowtails emerging from their chrysalis to fly for the first time in their lives.

So as not to raise any suspicion, she willed herself to fight for the book again, peering over Blair's shoulder to at least see what she was doing. The hat fell from her head and their hands met finally; their hands and their forearms, and although Blair's were colder to the touch, they still burned like hot coals against Hermione's ravenous skin. Clumsily, she grabbed the spine of the book, too aware of her palm sliding across Blair's tensed knuckles, and yanked at the cover slightly, meaning to eventually let go and feign the effort again.

Too wrapped up in plotting how to keep Blair in her arms, she did not expect the wooden frame of the bed to be so close when she, backing away, bumped into it and, balancing and gasping, fell backwards, toppling the defenceless Blair with her. They landed in a heap against the satin linens, both yelping out of surprise.

Hermione's stomach quivered with the earthquake velocity; a dormant volcano came alive and hot lava spilled over her bones as luscious flowers grew upside down beneath her skin.

She had her belle rose lying on top of her: had her golden hair pressed against her flushed cheeks, her shoulder blades against her chest—against her inexorably beating heart—and her bottom firmly in between the live loins of her opened legs. Never before had they been so close physically and never before had Hermione been physically closer to death. It was as though her innate need to breathe had been erased for she no longer knew how to inhale.

Blair let out a gale of pained laughter, her stomach flexing and shaking under Hermione's self-compelling hands which, as Hermione realised only now, weren't clutching the book anymore but had glided like two lamprophises to each side of the pliant waist before daring further boldness. Eyes closing, lashes trembling, her fingers dived along the curled hollow of the prominent hip, gently and slowly like a blind man fumbling his way around unfamiliar faces. And then the soft puffs of Blair's exhale brushed her cheek as she spoke.

"Are you alright?" she asked, in between the giggles.

Hermione's eyes quivered open, the delicious pain pulsating. She wanted to reply but at that moment Blair moved, ever so slightly in between her legs and against her palpitating groin and Hermione couldn't stop the whimper from drawing past her lips, utterly oblivious in the instant of ephemeral bliss.

They froze, Blair's laughter gone, the silence deafening; she made to pull away but Hermione held her tight.

"Stay," she sighed desperately, pressing her burning cheek to hers and reaching over and tangling all of her fingers in Blair's hair. "Stay here with me," she whispered again, barely breathing.

She didn't know what she expected Blair to do other than pull away yet the rejection still hurt as though unanticipated.

"Hermione..." she let out ruefully.
Suppressing the tears, Hermione tried to ignore the insufferable disappointment. Her hand fell back to rest against her other hand, still wrapped over Blair's waist. "This must be what being close to the sun feels like," she let out quietly.

"Sorry?"

"I... I just," she began. "I can't stay close to you without burning myself—and yet all I do is think about coming back to you every instant of my life."

Blair released a soft sign, turning her head away from hers. "You shouldn't be saying this to me."

"I just," she began. "I can't stay close to you without burning myself—and yet all I do is think about coming back to you every instant of my life."

"Why not?" Hermione held her in place. "I need to say it. I need you to know how much I—"

"Let's just sit down first and talk then, alright?"

"I can't," protested Hermione. "I'll die if I let go."

Blair let out the most adorable chuckle. "Oh, surely you won't." She placed her warm graceful palms over Hermione's, unfreezing them from her waist and rolled over and away, making Hermione miss her instantly.

Unwilling to give up that easily, Hermione leapt upright, pulling her legs onto the bed and turning and facing the other way. She shifted close enough to Blair to stop her from moving any further by placing her hands on each side of her body, coming so close to her face it made Blair lean back on her elbows.

All Hermione asked of herself in that moment was to not descend into utter madness.

Blair—she was pulchritudinous; the rarest in the field of incandescent flowers and it was so easy to love her with her lips apple-red and her eyes big like a child's, but Hermione knew she would have the same striking passion for her if she were plain-looking; would have fallen for her even if her face was marred; with a male or female body, young, old, or sick—she knew she would have grown to adore any face, any body Blair possessed just as much as she adored this one. She loved her being with an unruly force and unbearable ardour Blair knew nothing of.

Supported by her elbows, she was just looking at Hermione with a cruel blend of amusement and pity, trying to put up with her insatiable teenage boldness—Hermione herself knew she had gone too far and a part of her hated herself for acting so unabashedly, yet the other part, that part travelling through the maze of possibilities, did not raise any objections.

"I meant it when I said I'd die if I let go; couldn't risk it," uttered Hermione, seeing the corners of Blair's lips twitching. She fought the urge to press her mouth to them, knowing damn well Blair wouldn't let her.

"I know I shouldn't be doing this," she added slowly.

"You really shouldn't."

"But I need to tell you... I need you to..." sighing, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut before looking down, for Blair's gaze had become too piercing, too reproving for her to bear. "I know that you don't take my feelings seriously," she started again, this time thinking before speaking. "And I completely understand; so far I've known nothing about love; and of course you would think that I'm just confused, that I don't understand it myself because I am so young and feeling this way is all very new to me and—and therefore I can't tell the difference between love and infatuation, but
believe me... I've never been more sure about anything in my life than the depth of the feelings I have for you." Hermione was talking quieter and quieter, addressing all those words to Blair's thighs. "Call them whatever you want but please, don't think of them as shallow— because because they're not and they won't go away just because I order them to. I've had them since I was little, back then when we were sitting among the daisies in our garden, playing together, I just hadn't realised..."

"Mione—" warned Blair.

"I fell for you long before I could understand," Hermione spoke over her. "And I haven't stopped falling ever since."

Blair was silent for a while, as though considering the right words to get her point across clearly.

"I've never said your feelings were shallow," she spoke finally. "The first love is always the most intense, most heartfelt and the hardest to forget—but trust me, not impossible to get over."

The sharp pain hit Hermione's stomach at yet another of the implied rejections. "What if I don't want to get over them?"

"Yes you do; perhaps you just haven't realised it yet."

Hermione's eyes flicked up, trying not to well up upon sighting the look of pity and a deeper understanding displayed on Blair's smiling face; something along the lines of—you poor young soul, you haven't even grasped the essence of love yet.

"I want to be there for you," said Hermione determinedly. "I want to laugh with you, cry with you—even argue with you! I want—I want you." She was blushing, Hermione knew she was but still kept her eyes on Blair's, watching the emotions pass over them like seasons.

"Sweetie, all those things you can have even now," she replied. "Trust me, what you want from me is nothing but friendship."

"I doubt that many people think of doing to their friends all those things I think of doing to you," she blurted before she could stop herself. She felt her cheeks flush even more, knowing she couldn't take her words back but she didn't want to take them back. She wanted Blair in more ways than just platonic and she wanted Blair to know that; wanted her to know how much she wished to come closer and get the dress off of her; how she wanted her own tongue in her mouth, on her mouth and teeth, the scent of her hair in her nostrils, her fluttering eyelashes on her skin; wanted her moaning and panting against her lips; wanted to know what it felt like to be a man and be inside her.

"I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear that."

Chagrined, Hermione took a shaky breath, which made her incline closer, and Blair, probably thinking she was going to kiss her, put her hands on her shoulders, keeping her in place for a moment before letting go and moving to the side to sit upright. Closing her eyes, Blair hid her face in her hands. For the first time she seemed truly unsettled.

"You know I'm the least likely person to go 'what would your mother say if she knew' but can you imagine what she would say?" She looked back at Hermione, all serious now. But Hermione did not care. The implication, the possibility that... Was this all just a moral conflict? Was all this rejection and resistance because of her mom? And was there actually a beam of hope? Without thinking twice, she reached over and closed her fingers over Blair's hand before bringing it up and
placing it over her chest against her madly beating heart which regarded the sudden heat with two painful leaps.

"No matter," she merely whispered, putting her other hand over Blair's too, for it started shifting. "No matter the name I carry; just be here with me; this," she added, pressing their hands firmer against her thumping heart. "This is all because of you."

"No, stop it," said Blair sternly, tearing her hand away.

"I'm not just my mother's child," said Hermione puerilely. "I'm my own person and I'm here and I'm offering my entire heart; I have nothing more valuable to give."

"There's no need for you to give me anything," snapped Blair coldly. "God dammit! You're like a daughter to me!"

"But I'm not your daughter!" cried Hermione passionately. "And this, this doesn't feel uncomfortable, does it?" She shifted closer, moving her thighs to Blair's while reaching out and pushing her velvet hair back gently. God, she could drown in her eyes. "You don't mind me being so close; I...you," she whispered in a shaky voice, dying a little with each word.

"Stop," Blair leapt from the bed. "I've tried to be understanding but that doesn't seem to work with you, so let me try something else. There is no you and I. You're sixteen! I'm more than twice your age! End of story! Besides, I'm not—"

"I know, I know you're not," Gulping, Hermione stood up as well, embarrassed, for Blair had never been stern with her before. "And neither am I. You're the only one and I... I love you for you, not because you're a woman!"

"Stop saying that you love me! You can't possibly know what love is; it's not all about feelings—those come and go and are never enough to make anything work!"

"Would you like for this to—?"

"Hermione!" cried Blair in frustration. "No, I wouldn't! That's what I've been trying to say all this time!" Her austere eyes melted. "I don't see you that way!" she whispered apologetically.

"Then don't look," wept Hermione. "Just close your eyes and let me make you feel me first." The tears were burning her as she took Blair by her arms. Surprisingly, she let her.

"Sweetie..." Blair brought her hand to Hermione's cheek but retrieved it immediately as Hermione leant into it, brushing her lips against the soft skin.

"Don't let this love die within me," whispered Hermione. "Please, don't let it die."

Blair drew a deep, shaky breath before locking their eyes. And it was what made Hermione's raging blood senseless; never before had anything sent her over the edge, mentally and physically, like her eyes did. She felt their depth blossom in her heart and she broke into heavy tears, hoping Blair would get their meaning:

Cut me to the bone and bleed with me until I'm no longer; get underneath my skin—do it now; turn the sweltering desert into a luscious field and taste the growing roses, taste my love pouring out of them, thick and hot.

Her trembling hands slipped to Blair's hands and she saw her hesitant lips parting and talking.
"You twisted little harlot! Do you actually think about anything but sex?"

Hermione gasped for breath as she awoke on the sofa with Bellatrix standing above her and yelling her vocal chords out, looking utterly demented.

"I cannot believe this is still going on! And there you were swearing on your pathetic miserable life that you didn't think about me in any perverted way! You make me sick—so fucking sick! Why don't you go out and get down with some desperate slut—I'll give you one of my old dresses so you could pretend it is me you're shagging since you're so bloody obsessed. Perhaps then you'll stop thinking like a man and we could actually move forward!"

Disoriented, Hermione sat upright with her hands full of Blair's skin and bitter disappointment, ignoring the screaming witch and caring only about getting back to Blair and finding out what it was that she had been about to say; she needed to know—

"I'm talking to you!" bellowed Bellatrix, demanding her attention.

"What?" Hermione looked at her reluctantly. "What do you want?" she asked in a nasal voice, her nose clogged.

"What do I want? What do I—? I'll tell you what I want, you priss!" barked Bellatrix madly. "You wasted one last opportunity to get the corpus deus because you just hallucinated about having sex with me!" she yelled, spitting the last words with an unbelievable feeling of revulsion.

Hermione widened her teary eyes, shocked.

"I've heard you!" seethed Bellatrix. "I've heard all those disgusting sounds you were making while trying to say my name!"

"Oh my God! Oh my GOD!" Hermione raised her voice as she quickly caught on. "It wasn't—my hallucination wasn't about you! It was about—"

No, no no! Stop talking; she mustn't know!

Biting her tongue, Hermione watched Bellatrix's angry eyes narrow.

"About? About who?"

"Nobody."

"Of course!" the older witch blurted hotly. "Because there's no one but me!"

Hermione laughed in disbelief, her eyebrows shooting up. "Wow... you're so full of yourself! There's literally anyone but you!"

"Stop lying to me; you were about to moan my name!"

"It wasn't your name!" Hermione yelled in exasperation, leaning in.

"Whose then?" hissed Bellatrix. "Whose, mudblood?"

"Go to hell! I don't need to explain myself to you!"

Immediately after the words left Hermione's mouth, Bellatrix lunged forward, bestriding her legs and closing her freezing palm over Hermione's neck. "What did you say to me?" she hissed, the heavy curls spilling over her arms.
As though by reflex, Hermione's hands shot up. She grabbed Bellatrix's wrist while putting her other hand on her tricep, blocking the choking arm; her left foot stepped over Bellatrix's right calf and she pushed with her hips, flipping them over. The self-defence classes were obviously paying off, for the yelping Bellatrix lost the hold on her completely. Hermione leapt to her feet, trying to ignore all the tingling places that had come in contact with Bellatrix's body.

"Don't do that again!" she warned, looking at the stunned witch, who swiftly jumped to her feet too.

"You insolent little brat!" whispered Bellatrix, drawing her wand. "Don't you ever dare lay your hands on me like that!"

"Excuse me? You were the one choking me!" bawled Hermione, taking out her wand, too. "I was just defending myself!"

A mad smirk flew across Bellatrix's lips. "Somebody wants to fight, I see. Alright then, go on," she whispered. "Give it your best! I'll be more than happy to attend your disciplinary hearing to confirm you were just trying to show off and to see you get expelled."

"Do whatever you want, I'm not returning to Hogwarts anyway!" retorted Hermione carelessly, shifting on her feet, expecting the attack any second.

Bellatrix widened her eyes momentarily. "Oh right, I've almost forgotten that you gave up everything just for the sake of being with me," she said, prowling to the side.

Hermione snorted. "Yes, that's precisely that; I've bailed on my life because I enjoy getting abused every second of my existence."

"Why else would you do it then?" asked Bellatrix, obviously trying to provoke the real reason out of her.

"I've told you; I signed up for an auror programme in—" began Hermione but had no chance to finish, for at that moment she felt a sensation, as though a thousand pencils pricked her chest all at once. Gasping, she grabbed onto her shirt, looking at Bellatrix in shock.

"I'm going to do that every single time you lie," Bellatrix let out placidly, taking a moment before continuing. "Let me ask you again: what exactly is your intention?"

Hermione raised her wand but before she had a chance to point it at Bellatrix's chest, it flew out of her grasp and landed at the witch's feet. Gulping, she tore her eyes from her only weapon, locking them with Bellatrix's smug ones.

"I signed—" Another jolt, twice as strong as before, hit her stomach, making her squirm.

"Go on, lie to me as much as you like," added Bellatrix, smiling. "So what was it you were saying...?"

"I—" Hermione doubled over as two more jolts pierced her body. "Would you at least let me finish?!"

Bellatrix didn't. She kept asking and asking, firing spells at her for what felt like an eternity, until Hermione, unable to stand any longer, crumpled to her hands and knees in exhaustion. Splinters of pain were tearing up her body at every movement that she made. She heard Bellatrix's slow, deliberate steps coming closer and closer.
"Don't tell me after all this fun you've still got nothing to say," she whispered in her ear, sounding out of breath. Hermione's limbs gave up on her and she collapsed onto her stomach. Trying to gaze up, a hot flash washed over her and with a soft exhale, she surrendered to sleep once again.

She dreamt about lying in a gloomy forest. A snarling fox was perched on top of her chest, biting her neck until it tore her head off. She was looking at the lurid clouds above her when she felt herself sinking through the cold soil as though through quicksand and landed floating in the groundwater. She began swimming up toward the air she did not need and upon parting the surface, opened her eyes to the dusky twilight that was painting the walls coral pink. Her stomach was growling from hunger and perhaps the disturbing dream, too.

Tangled in a warm comforter on a small double bed in unfamiliar surroundings, Hermione tried moving but hissed, feeling every muscle in her body complain. A quiet pop sounded at her feet as though somebody had disapparated and, flinching, she propped herself on her elbows, probing the dim space to see whether there was someone else in the room. Hermione found that she was alone. After several moments of wariness, she lay back onto the bed. At that moment, the door on the other side of the room creaked, letting in a small patch of light which was immediately hampered by a woman's figure. Bellatrix sauntered in.

Hermione sat bolt upright in her bed, pulling the comforter closer to her body.

"Somebody's finally up, I see," chirped Bellatrix with an all too happy smile. "I hope you didn't sleep much though, you have to save some of that for tonight." She held out her left hand. "I brought your diary."

Hermione's eyes narrowed in aversion. "Do you know that what you've done to me might cost you a couple of years in Azkaban?" she said, pulling her knees up to her chin defensively.

Bellatrix let out a surprised laugh, slowly ambling toward the bed; she came all the way up to Hermione, placing her hands on the mattress, bending down to her. "You'd tell on me?" she asked sweetly before sitting down beside her. Hermione shrank back instantly. "And here I was hoping we might actually start to get along." The bed creaked as she moved closer. "I must admit I was quite impressed with your persistence earlier."

Gulping, Hermione tried to ignore the compliment that was causing her stomach to jump perilously. She chose to remain silent.

"What, you don't believe me?" Bellatrix added softly.

Of course she didn't believe her.

Bellatrix presented her with a dazzling smile, moving closer; unfortunately, Hermione had no more space to shift to. Bellatrix reached over to Hermione's nape, leaning in. "How would I persuade you?" She whispered against her ear, caressing her neck.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. She was lying on the ground, with Bellatrix kicking her left thigh repeatedly.

"Get up; I've been thinking and I figured out what we're going to do."

Like a beaten up animal, Hermione heaved herself up, wincing in pain. She glanced at Bellatrix, who was, how else, blind and deaf to any signs of her being injured. Hermione was more than aware she needed to confront her about her abusive behaviour, for if she wanted any change to happen in their relationship, she needed to fight for herself every time Bellatrix crossed the line;
otherwise Bellatrix might get the wrong impression that she was free to continue treating Hermione like garbage over and over again.

The thing, however, was that the unnerving dream left Hermione somehow speechless.

"I'm not even going to make you try to astral project," presented Bellatrix thoughtfully. "I've learnt that it won't work if the sleep doesn't come naturally and during the night. I'll just have to give you the diary before bed and then, in the morning, collect it back from you. Then it's all up to you to—"

She paused, running her dark eyes over Hermione's guilty and flushed face before adding, "To Carpe Noctem—to seize the night."

Bellatrix expressed no remorse whatsoever about having been beating Hermione up for several hours when she showed her to one of the bedrooms in the sophisticated dark mansion that evening.

"I'll be back in the morning to hear about the dream," she said, unbothered, and Hermione remained silent; Bellatrix seemed relatively calm, the calmest Hermione had seen her except for when asleep and she had no desire to ruin that and entangle herself in more arguments. All she wanted at this point was to be left alone to reflect on everything undisturbed and with a clear mind. However, there was still one thing that needed to be addressed, after all.

Hermione cleared her throat.

"Fine," she replied casually, scratching a pretended itch on her left shoulder. "Then we can start with the lessons."

"What do you mean?" asked Bellatrix, knitting her eyebrows.

"I," Hermione chose her words carefully. "I'd like you to help me with apparating."

"Apparting?" repeated Bellatrix.

"My exams are in three weeks," explained Hermione quickly. "You got the permission for Draco and me to use magic during the summer holiday last year. Can't be that hard to do it again, right?"

"Do you think that I have any time at all to teach untalented little girls how to use magic?" smirked Bellatrix.

"Fine, I'll be too busy myself then, I guess," uttered Hermione. "Look at it this way," she added quickly upon seeing Bellatrix's smirk slacken. "If anything happens, I'll be able to appaerate, too."

"You say that as if there was a chance that if anything happened, I'd get knocked out first!"

"I just think it could benefit you as well," shrugged Hermione. "Besides, it was one of my conditions, remember?"

Bellatrix's eyes pierced her very core and suddenly, it was so hard to keep looking at her.

"Tomorrow," she said sharply. "One lesson and we're even."

Two hours later, Hermione was standing in front of a large vanity mirror in the bathroom made out of black marble. Wrapped in the flickering candlelight and a thick woolly bathrobe, she had just finished a bath and was now rubbing a small amount of macadamia oil into the tips of her wet hair.
Her stomach was finally full, although a bit queasy—Bellatrix wasn't the best of hosts, for she clearly had forgotten that Hermione was a human being and couldn't live off of plain air. Being one step ahead, Hermione had fortunately thought of packing some French toasts and redlove apples from their garden yesterday; and even though the toasts had been thoroughly dry now and too hard to eat, after spending almost two days without any food, they had tasted like heaven to her nonetheless; she had drunk some water from the bathroom tap, too, just before eating to get the digestion going but had not waited long enough for the water to absorb and ended up feeling full and heavy after consuming only half of the toast. And even though Hermione knew it wasn't a sufficient amount of food for her to function properly, she had not eaten any more so as not to overwhelm her stomach all at once.

Overall, Hermione felt much better than she had in the morning. A little bit of clean hot water and a modest meal had done wonders to her mood. She'd promised herself that from now on she would start eating more regularly; she needed to maintain her health in the best state possible, physical and mental. Hermione even felt forgiving toward herself about not fighting Bellatrix earlier when she kept hitting her with all those spells —regardless, she had stood up to her all the other times. One step backwards wasn't a disaster. She knew that tomorrow might be a better day.

Dressing in her grey pyjamas, she quickly ran her hands through her hair, dreading the state they would be in tomorrow morning since there were no sockets for a hair dryer. One second later she laughed at herself. With everything going on, her hair should be the least of her worries.

After brushing her teeth, she footed it to the large four-poster bed, almost identical to the one she had slept in at Malfoy Manor, and crawled under the cold blankets.

As she was lying in the dark, eyeing the malignant clouds in the darkening sky outside, her thoughts were straying between Blair and Bellatrix mainly, but also to her parents and Draco.

The sensible, rational side of her felt a bit silly about finding out that the thing she wanted to figure out the most wasn't the meaning of life as such but rather Blair's actual feelings toward her. She couldn't help thinking if perhaps Draco wasn't right about her all those months ago; thinking if perhaps she truly wasn't obsessed with Blair and had stopped caring about anything real and important altogether. It was true, she had often found herself daydreaming and reflecting back to that night in Greece when she had confessed her feelings to Blair while beating herself over being too embarrassed and scared to ask if Blair felt the same way.

Perhaps now, when she finally had her answer, she might accept the truth and move on.

Although... would she be actually able to do that? Even after seeing that barely noticeable change in Blair's eyes—would she be able not to look into it too much?

It might have been all just wishful thinking...

If only she could find out—Bellatrix wasn't lying when she had said that Lune de Voile would evaporate from Hermione's system within an hour; although what she had not warned her about was that it would take away the memory of the hallucination too. Hermione could no longer recall the bedroom or feel the mad happiness over seeing Blair's lovely face again after what felt like an eternity; or what it felt like to have her pressed so tightly against her for that matter; the only thing that remained was a fading ghost of her saddened voice.

No matter the misfortune though, Hermione was sure that she had seen something shift in her eyes. When they were gazing at each other, Blair had looked a bit unsure, hadn't she? After Hermione had said all those things she would never have the courage to say to Blair's face in reality, Blair did look uncertain—as though for a split second she was seeing things differently...
Hermione's stomach leapt. She would cry hot tears if she knew for sure Blair was capable of developing some sort of, even slight feelings for her. And she was in London now, what if Hermione...? Oh but she couldn't; by the time she'd be able to apparate, Blair would be back to America, and asking Bellatrix to take her home because she 'had forgotten' something wasn't an option in the least. So despite being mad with the desire to run after Blair right now just as she was, she knew she couldn't; Blair's safety would always come first.

God, when Hermione imagined she had almost told Bellatrix about her today; all because Bellatrix had accused her of such nonsense as hallucinating about sleeping with her.

Unthinkable!

Or was it?

Hermione felt her face flush against the soft pillow. She might not remember having Blair in her arms but she remembered very clearly the weirdly sensual dream she had had about Bellatrix right after; the possibility of the witch actually getting under her skin—all despite her messed-up personality—made her stomach knot. Hermione could not allow that to happen!

Yawning, she let her eyes linger over the diary perched on top of the nightstand beside her bed before closing her eyes. She drifted off to her silent voice, counting all of the reasons why falling for Bellatrix was a horribly bad idea.

That night was the first night in months that Hermione dreamt about the other Hermione again. However, the dream had nothing to do with the corpus deus whatsoever which, when presented to Bellatrix, enraged her to the point of refusing to teach Hermione anything as a punishment for not putting up enough effort. She left her locked in the bedroom the entire day while she went only God knew where.

The days went by. Bellatrix came in each night and each morning and upon learning Hermione still had nothing valuable to share with her, she left her locked away in the bedroom again, saying that once Hermione felt like dreaming about something interesting, she might earn all of her privileges—meaning being able to leave the room—back. Hermione tried arguing but her frustration fell on deaf ears and so just to not get utterly mad, she devoted herself to reading.

Daily, Bellatrix sent her a house elf with a small meal, usually consisting of buttered toast and a cup of black tea; Hermione had tried to talk to him on every one of those rare occasions, but he kept his mouth pressed tightly together—Bellatrix probably forbade him to fraternize with her. Still, after two days, although he still remained stubbornly silent, he began coming more regularly, bringing a lot more nutrient dense food to her than before. Now Hermione at least wasn't hungry anymore.

It'd been a week and she was slowly descending into madness; she was positive that if she didn't have any dream regarding the corpus deus soon enough, she'd certainly lose it. She set her mind on putting as much effort as possible into using the technique the venor floccus had taught her back at Hogwarts that night.

In the morning Bellatrix opened the door without any enthusiasm, obviously not expecting much from her, but Hermione was standing beside the window, shifting on her feet, awaiting her impatiently.

"I did it," she couldn't help a small smile. "I dreamt! Managed to speed up the time and I found it."

Bellatrix's face lit up. "What did you find?" she asked.

I really really hope you enjoyed the new chapter! We're slowly getting to the real deal. ;)

As always, I'd like to thank you (so so so so so much) for reading and reviewing! I feel so grateful and so touched by all your support! Thank you!

With all my love, AP
Bellatrix shook her head, indulging in a perplexed frown. "Who is Hepzibah Smith?"

"According to Harry," said Hermione, "she was an old wealthy widow, a passionate collector of magical antiquities and from everything I've seen so far, I have a good reason to believe she could have had not one but two of the corpus deus in her possession!"

Bellatrix seemed momentarily paralysed. "Two?"

Nodding, Hermione wet her lips. "Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's cup. Albeit—" she hesitated, uncertain exactly how to put it. "Harry did not refer to them as corpus deus, he called them by a very peculiar name—horcruxes, I think."

"The founder's relics, of course!" Bellatrix's dark eyes widened in revelation. She took a few steps toward Hermione. "What else do you know about that woman; where is she now?"

"I—I don't know; I mean, she died from poisoning in her early seventies; Harry said that her old house elf was convicted of adding arsenic into her drink," enunciated Hermione colorlessly, trying not to show how frustrated she felt about passing on that misconception despite knowing it was completely fabricated—the disgusting yet clever sophistry Tom Riddle had orchestrated to wash Hepzibah's blood off his own hands. It was Dumbledore who had found out about it when searching for horcruxes decades later; he had sought out Hokey, the house elf, and discovered that her memory about adding something unusual to the milk the night of her mistress' death was false and planted into her mind by magic. Unfortunately, when he had presented the new evidence to Wizengamot, none of the members had shown any interest in pursuing further investigation into Hepzibah's death, especially when Hokey died two days later.

Hermione hated besmirching the elf's name any further just to save her own skin but knew she was obliged to keep the truth to herself—Dumbledore had warned her on numerous occasions about bringing the name Tom Riddle up in conversations with Bellatrix.

"That's all I know, I'm afraid," she framed, folding and subsequently unfolding her arms before tucking her hands in the front pockets of her jeans, feeling the rounded edges of a couple of coins there.

"How long has it been since her death?" asked Bellatrix interrogatively.

"Forty-fifty years ago, more or less."

The witch stepped closer. "I need to see the dream!"

"But I told you everything Harry told me!" blurted Hermione, a tingle of panic reverberating in her voice. She was fully aware that if Bellatrix saw the dream and found that she was lying to her, everything she'd been trying to build up until this moment would crumble in an instant.

"Everything Harry told you," repeated Bellatrix, locking their eyes. "I think you're forgetting one simple detail, deary. How come Harry knew about the corpus deus? And," she paused, tilting her head. "How come he was discussing them with the two of his little friends?"

Hermione had the answer prepared. "How shall I know? The dreams always come in chronological
order. This is the first time I pushed forward into the future which resulted in me missing all the
events in between—logically, I must have skipped the backstory to this particular conversation,
too." Pinching the cotton cardigan hugging her ribs, she shrugged. "The memory began with Harry
briefing me and Ron on Madame Smith and ended with him saying 'Those must be the horcruxes.
The cup and the locket.' I figured it must be what we're looking for. Nothing happened after that.
Well," she faltered, creating a dramatic pause. "Nothing except for Ron and I; we—um—but I
guess you're not interested in seeing that." She dropped her gaze to the floor as though embarrassed.

As expected, Bellatrix let out a disgusted grunt and Hermione couldn't help mentally
congratulating herself for having thought of spicing up her narrative with Ronald Weasley.

"Did she have any children?" asked Bellatrix coldly, attracting Hermione's eyes again.

"Harry did not say."

"What do you mean he did not say? How could he not say?!” she snapped, glaring at her as though
it was Hermione's fault her other self hadn't thought of asking Harry this question. "I need to know!
How else am I supposed to find the relics? The old hag must be dead by now—the heirlooms either
inherited or sold," fumed Bellatrix as she began pacing back and forth, her high heels clicking
against the floor angrily. "If she had been a pureblood, it would make everything so much easier; I
could trace her family in a matter of seconds!"

"But she could be," objected Hermione, following Bellatrix with her eyes. "She could be a
pureblood, Harry, he—"

"Don't you think I would know?" Bellatrix gave her a severe look. "She'd be in The Sacred Twenty-
Eight; no surname of Smith had ever been on the list; she must have been a mudblood."

"She was a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff!"

Bellatrix seemed unimpressed. "A mudblood indeed. Hufflepuff's unconventional methods of
upbringing are infamous; she taught her only son there is nothing wrong with mating with
mudbloods and as a result, he ended up marrying one. Their blood was desecrated!"

Hermione couldn't help saying: "But there is nothing wrong with marrying out of pureblood
circles. I'd say it is practically imperative these days—there are just so few of you. I can't
understand why you think so low of—"

"Why?" Bellatrix paused her steps, interrupting her: "Because that beastly breed of yours is good
for nothing but serving as an example of how dreadful mixing wizarding and muggle blood is! Just
look at yourself; surely, I needn't remind you of your abnormalities," she said flatly and raised her
brows upon seeing Hermione's expression. "You asked so don't even think of crying!"

Hermione didn't want to cry, she wanted to slap Bellatrix but managed to control the urge, knowing
she'd probably ended up losing both of her arms for such daring; she contented herself with shaking
her head and rather circled back to their main problem. "What are we going to do about Hepzibah?"

Bellatrix let out a surprised chuckle. "We—" She motioned to herself and then to Hermione.
"Aren't doing anything together! You're here to give me information, that's where your job ends!"

"But we had a deal!" protested Hermione. "I told you I want to participate in searching for the
corpus deus actively; I laid out my conditions at the very beginning and you agreed to them!"

Bellatrix smirked. "I say a lot of things which I don't necessarily mean."
Hermione glared at her in flat disbelief. Bellatrix couldn't be serious, she couldn't renege on their deal just because she had already gotten what she wanted, big hypocrite! But if she wanted to play, fine, they would play. Hermione was done compromising and while she knew it might cost her dearly, she wasn't as gutless as to bow her head and nod to everything like a bobblehead doll.

Tearing her eyes from the smug witch, she walked over to the bed and grabbed Riddle's diary from her nightstand. She strode back to Bellatrix, shoving it into her hands, snapping: "Fine! Take it then! Take it and don't bring it back! I'm not putting it anywhere near me and neither am I trying any more tricks to find you another corpus deus; you can't make me dream without me wanting to and I can guarantee you that from now on I'm not lifting a finger to help you! And while you might think you don't need me anymore, there will come a time when you—"

Bellatrix drew out her wand, making Hermione falter. "Don't you ever ever raise your voice at me again!" she said quietly.

"Medicine doesn't taste the same when served on a different spoon, does it?"

Bellatrix looked as though she had just been slapped. "You insolent brat!" she said after a while, her voice resembling that of a provoked animal. "You remember once and for all that you and I, we are no equals! You aren't fit to breathe the same air as me so where is that audacity of yours coming from? One more time and I swear I—"

"You'll do what?" Hermione cut in fearlessly. "You'll curse me? Make me regret that I was born? Fine, go ahead! But you know very well that in the end—"

"Shut your mouth!" hurled Bellatrix at her. "Shut it! Be a damned burden then, for all I care!"

Staggered, Hermione pressed her lips together, her shoulders slackening. Had Bellatrix just capitulated? Without much fighting, without barely any resistance? Nevermind the couple of insults, if she was truly giving Hermione a chance to work on this with her, Hermione had better suck it up and compose herself; she mustn't let her know how astonished she felt at having won the round, for showing too little confidence might cause her to lose face. Hermione needed a different tactic, needed to remain calm as though nothing that extra had even happened.

Having given Bellatrix a moment to cool down, she cleared her throat, testing the waters. "So what do you think, what should we do?"

"Find her relatives, obviously," she reposted while putting her wand into her sleeve and the diary inside her robe.

"We could go to the library," suggested Hermione, seizing her chance. "The one in Greenwich, and have a look at the old copies of Daily Prophet. I believe it is possible that Hepzibah from our dimension died much later; perhaps we could find an obituary or something about the people who inherited her wealth! For a start, we could search within the copies from 1960 and continue up until 1970. Suppose there's—" Hermione looked up, counting silently. "Suppose there were 3652 copies in ten years; if it takes us two minutes to go through one copy, we could be done in three days at the most—that is, if we split the work. It might seem like a lot, I know," admitted Hermione, "but it's most likely the safest way to figure something out—I reckon going to the registry office would be far easier but you yourself know that only a court order can open those records; the identities of the founders' descendants are protected, and while you could use your connections, dragging more people into it would only draw unnecessary attention. We'd have to bribe the registrar and not even that could guarantee their silence if something unexpected happens; we need to be very careful about this and have as few witnesses as possible," finished Hermione breathlessly, glancing at Bellatrix who looked utterly baffled.
She opened her mouth but then closed it again as though she thought better of whatever she meant to say and frowned instead.

"I... it was just a suggestion," said Hermione quickly. "I had a lot of time to think about it but of course, I don't wish to dictate you what to do."

"You'd try that once!" snorted Bellatrix arrogantly.

Hermione bowed her head, inwardly cursing her lack of judgement. She had had one good chance to persuade Bellatrix to do this and she had to ruin it with her uncontrollable need to talk like a chatterbox! How she could have been so stupid!

"But... I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a look at some of the old Prophets, would it?"

Hermione's eyes snapped to Bellatrix; she couldn't have heard her right. Bellatrix would never take her words into consideration, let alone act on them, out of pride alone; she would simply make fun of her, wouldn't she? But, bloody hell, her eyes—they did seem serious. Very serious! Could it mean what Hermione hardly dared to assume? A little, just a tiny little step forward? Her stomach lurched.

"Yes, I think we should do just that, muddy girl." Bellatrix bit her lip. "And we'll do it right now."

After the uncomfortable choking sensation, instead of the sumptuous chamber, Hermione found herself standing at the Greenwich wizarding library entrance on the first floor. Inhaling deeply, her heart leaped at the familiar woody smell. She knew the appointed building back to front—the lancet windows and tall Jacobean style bookcases; the infinite spiral staircase leading to the upper floors and small tables along each section equipped with two chairs. The Greenwich library was like her second home. During her school breaks, Hermione had come here every other day if her schedule allowed her to and, snuggled in the comfortable antique bergére in the attic, read the withdrawn books she'd found packed in cardboard boxes all over the floor. Everything about this place would have been ideal, hadn't it been for the hour-long drive which gave her mom nightmares, considering Hermione often came home after ten p.m.

It had been two weeks since Hermione had last visited the library; it had been a week since she'd caught a glimpse of any other human being beside Bellatrix, and it felt very surreal for her to see witches and wizards at the far end of the vast room, browsing through the volumes stacked in bookcases and talking to their companions as though it was the most natural thing in the world, not quite aware of how lucky they were to have their life firmly in their hands, not quite grateful for that privilege for that matter.

Wait... Wizards... they were all around them.

Hermione gave Bellatrix a stealthy glance, realising only now that she hadn't tried feeding her the polyjuice potion or altering her appearance in any way in order not to be seen with a 'mudblood'. How strange. Perhaps her feverish desire to get to the corpus deus had erased that tiny detail from her mind.

Casting around, Bellatrix wasted no time. She rushed past the librarian's desk without any sort of greeting to the old Mrs Benson who smiled at them before her emerald green eyes behind her panto glasses doubled in size upon recognising Hermione.

"My dear!" she exclaimed. "I haven't seen you for yonks, where have you been hiding? I missed
you here!"

Her warmth almost made Hermione tearful: despite the fact it had only been a week, she longed for a kind word like never before. "Hello, Mrs Benson!" she beamed brightly. Her eyes darted to the elusive Bellatrix and back to the librarian, her joy faltering as quickly as it had come. "I'm so very sorry but you'll have to excuse me," she apologised softly. "I am in a bit of a hurry now, but I promise you that the next time I'm here, we'll talk!" Giving the good old witch one last reassuring smile, she jogged after Bellatrix who had vanished behind the Alchemy section.

Hermione caught up with her just as she was about to turn another corner. "This way!" She gestured to the opposite aisle from the one where Bellatrix was heading, pointing her in the right direction. Except for the faint growl, Bellatrix followed without raising any objections. Having taken the turn, they bumped into a young wizard dressed in an eggplant-coloured robe who presented Hermione with a sultry wink. Embarrassed, she instantly averted her eyes to the shelf markers pinned to the bookshelves, hoping Bellatrix hadn't seen the exchange; nothing nice would have come out of her mouth about it.

They had been striding along the bountiful bookshelves for a few moments when Hermione came to a halt, holding out her hand. "Here!" she breathed, pausing at the periodicals section in the middle of the seemingly endless aisle. Standing on her tiptoes, she threaded back and forth, running her fingers along the titles of the thick newspapers, searching for the letter D; she wandered down the row and ended up kneeling when she finally found the old copies of the Daily Prophet, her head almost spinning upon sighting the thousands and thousands of gazettes waiting to be devoured.

Drawing a deep breath, she looked around before casting a glance over her shoulder at Bellatrix who was watching her closely with her arms folded. Hermione motioned toward the table with two chairs about five feet ahead of them, saying: "I'll bring these over," and trying to pick up an armful of newspapers but Bellatrix was already waving her wand. The first mountains of copies, including the ones Hermione was holding, rose into the air and headed toward the table where they landed in two perfectly neat stacks.

Hermione and Bellatrix exchanged looks full of determination and for the first time, Hermione felt that there was a vague sense of unity between them, a feeling that now they were in the same boat which, for a change, wasn't sinking but floating toward the destination they had both chosen and would do the impossible to reach.

Both women moved at the same time. They walked to the table together and sat facing each other, peering through the thin crack dividing the two tall heaps. Blinking rapidly, Hermione dropped her eyes to the stack. She grabbed the first copy and heard Bellatrix do the same. They didn't utter a word as they flickered through page after page, trying to find at least a small clue that would lead them to Hepzibah or better, the two of the founder's relics.

Hermione would also welcome conspiracy theories about the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw but was well aware she needed to work systematically and focus on one thing first before jumping onto another; chaotic thinking would only slow her down. She was also trying not to worry too much about Gryffindor's sword for she knew exactly where that one resided. Perhaps this was what Dumbledore had in mind when he had said: 'By the time she comes for the last one, you'll have everything figured out.' So far Hermione had nothing figured out and so she could only hope Dumbledore's office would be the final stop they would have to take. Deep down she hoped the headmaster might be there to salvage the wizarding world if—when she failed.

Hermione cast the first copy aside, seizing another one. Due to the years and years of practice, the
skimming bounced along nicely even despite her attention splitting between the quest and her bafflement at Bellatrix not protesting to having to flip so many pages and waste time with the old Daily Prophet; she actually didn't seem to mind at all—her face had acquired a focused expression which Hermione dared to survey discreetly for several seconds before fully realising what she was doing and rather diving back to work.

She flipped to the next page, almost huffing in despair. Even though Hermione had had a chance to read old Prophets before, she'd never gotten her hands on these particular copies and having so many interesting articles in front of her without being able to read them properly was unbelievably frustrating. 'Gringott's riot', 'MACUSA relocates to New York', 'Witches' suffrage'; Hermione had read about all of those events but never in so much detail; none of the books she had studied had recorded the events day by day, none of them had all the names, all the interesting, even the most casual events that had happened in between and weren't worth documenting in historical literature. It was hard to not lose oneself in just a few of them.

"You're too slow!" snapped Bellatrix, snatching the Prophet from Hermione's hands and flicking through the pages herself. Giving her a secret frown, Hermione grabbed another copy from the pile. Then another one, and another one but there just wasn't any trace of Hepzibah Smith's name in the least. It felt as though they'd been slogging through the pages for days now and Hermione's stomach seemed to agree more angrily with each passing moment.

"For God's sake, do something about that awful noise!" sibilated Bellatrix after the third loud growl had announced the state of Hermione's stomach to the sheer public.

"I'm sorry but I can't switch it off like a light," she whispered back, placing a palm over her belly as though that would mute the rumbling. Checking her wristwatch, she added: "Besides, it's three p.m; we've been here for hours! I'm hungry and surely you must be too. We should have a little break and get something to eat."

"Does it seem to you we have any time for that?" asked Bellatrix, nodding at the stack of unread Prophets impatiently. "But you go ahead, I can't stand listening to those sounds any longer. I'll continue looking for that old woman myself!"

Hermione bit her lip, knowing she was treading a thin line. "I—I think you should come with me... and have some water at least. I haven't seen you eat or drink anything since we arrived... Perhaps I..."

Bellatrix closed her eyes before looking up from the page, her murderous expression of 'get out of my sight' silencing Hermione quite efficiently.

Gosh, she was only trying to be nice...

Standing up from their table, Hermione reached for her beaded purse, usually fastened under her shirt, and realised she had left it in the bedroom. Luckily, she had found a couple of galleons in the pockets of her jeans so, relieved, she set off, leaving Bellatrix alone.

She jogged to the half-empty Café on the other side of the library, buying a plain croissant and a glass of pumpkin juice, eating in a hurry. After she finished eating, she thought twice before buying a short black coffee and asking for a big glass of water. With a beating heart, she returned back to Bellatrix who by this time must have gotten through at least seven more Prophets. Clearing her throat, Hermione put the coffee and the glass of water on the table next to Bellatrix's resting hand. "I—I thought just in case."

Bellatrix didn't seem to have heard her and so Hermione, partly relieved, partly disappointed, took
her place at the table and went on searching, all the while conducting an internal monologue. She
didn't like that Bellatrix was so careless about her health; her body couldn't just go all day without
any food or water! God, if she had been doing this to herself all this time, no wonder she looked
like a mess. She must be so dehydrated and—

Hermione jumped in her seat as Bellatrix kicked her leg under the table. "Concentrate!"

A couple more hours had passed. Hermione's eyes started to get itchy and her neck hurt from
having been slouching over the Prophets for so long. She rolled her head from side to side,
massaging her nape. Mechanically, she seized the untouched glass of water and took a sip before
placing it back and, stretching, gave Bellatrix a fleeting look—she was completely lost in the
process and hadn't complained once since they arrived; she was determined and composed—it was
actually quite impressive.

Don't think about her!

Blinking, Hermione pointed her gaze toward the window. The sky outside was slowly turning
coelalt blue and they'd barely made any progress; the closest thing they had found was the article
about the supposed magical properties of Ravenclaw's diadem, but that didn't help at all.

Closing the last page of the Prophet she was currently checking, Hermione quickly skimmed the
final article devoted to the thief by the name Mundungus Fletcher who had been caught selling
heirlooms of the Peverells, and placed it onto the pile of the Prophets they had gone through.
Noticing there was now a little less free space on the table, she stood up and returned the already
checked Prophets back to their shelves but by the time she got back, Bellatrix had summoned more
copies; in spite of Hermione's love for reading, her heart sank a little upon seeing the new stacks
waiting for her on her side of the table.

Sighing, Hermione sat down and embarked upon another round of searching determinedly. She
was half-way through the Prophets from 1962 when a photograph of a familiar-looking wizard
caught her attention. 'Perseus Black to receive a Medal of Honor' read the title. Hermione had to
think for a second before a lightbulb switched on. But of course, she mused, that's him—Bellatrix's
uncle, the man that had appeared out of nowhere at the ball last summer; the one that had made
Bellatrix so uncomfortable! Surely, he looked much younger in the picture but even there he
exuded the same frightening aura as his older version of skin and bones.

Hermione gave Bellatrix a quick look before daring to peruse the article. She had barely had a
chance to read the first five sentences when—

"Have you found anything?"

"No," Hermione quickly flicked the page. "Nothing that would help."

"Then get a move on, I didn't bring you here to spend some quality time reading!"

"I know, I'm sorry."

Hermione quickly tore through the remaining pages and cast the copy aside, reaching for another
one. However, the images of Bellatrix's and Narcissa's faces upon meeting their uncle all those
months ago had not left her mind in the least. She kept wondering as to why they had looked so
disturbed—he was family after all; perhaps they just didn't like him, thought Hermione but
instantly contradicted herself. No, there must have been something else going on. They had been
both mortified, Bellatrix even more than Narcissa, and that was definitely saying something...
Hermione felt uncomfortable trying to imagine what kind of person he must have been if he
managed to induce fear in such a dauntless woman as Bellatrix Lestrange was... Most likely the kind that was as twice as cruel...

Hermione's eyes brushed the front page fleetingly: Nobby Leach to become first-ever Muggle-born Minister for Magic. Second page: Muggle gets stuck in a magical painting; Third and fourth page: Bewitched teapot responsible for third-degree burns, An orphanage to be built in honour of Madame Smith; fifth page: Ministry imposes restrictions. Hermione's stomach gave a lurch. Her eyes snapped back to the previous article.

"Oh my God!" she rasped, her voice shaking. "Oh my... I found something! I got something!"

Bellatrix leaped from her seat and walked over to Hermione, yanking the newspaper toward her. Hermione stood up next to her, their shoulders touching. Bellatrix didn't seem to mind at all—she even leaned into her. Heart leaping, Hermione gave her a stealthy look and realised Bellatrix's eyes were squeezed shut. She must have stood up too quickly, thought Hermione. She meant to ask her if she was alright but then Bellatrix's eyes opened again, scanning the page.

"Yes... yes, it must be her!" she whispered as she read the title herself. She turned to Hermione, who blinked rapidly; they were really really close. The corners of Bellatrix's lips lifted slightly. "My my, who would have thought you're not as useless as you look!"

Hermione's excitement died the second Bellatrix said that. She leaned away from her so they wouldn't be touching anymore but as Bellatrix reached for the newspapers to take them into her hands, her shoulder bumped into Hermione's once again; retreating, she sat back onto her chair, giving Hermione no chance to read.

Folding her arms, Hermione plopped down onto her chair, drawing angry circles on her skin with her index finger.

And there she thought—

"Listen to this!"

Hermione looked up in confusion. Was Bellatrix going to read the article out loud for her? No way...

"An estimated thousands of orphans..." started the deep raspy voice from behind the newspaper, making Hermione widen her eyes. Bellatrix was reading for her!

"...hang on, this is it—Alice Montgomery, the only twenty-two-year-old niece of deceased Madame Hepzibah Smith has made a selfless gesture of investing her entire wealth in building a home for the hundreds of orphans living on the streets of London. 'I lost both parents at a very young age'—oh poor you," commented Bellatrix. "'Auntie Hepsie had always been like a mother to me and I'd like to reciprocate that blessing by passing it on to as many motherless children as possible,' says Ms Montgomery. The estimated date of the preparation work is set for May this year; that is—" Bellatrix returned to the front page. "1962." She got back to the article. "On Southern Avenue in London."

Hearing the address, Hermione's heart shot upward into her throat.

"That's a couple of streets from the place I live," she blurted recklessly, realising too late that she'd given away the location of her home. But then... didn't Bellatrix already know where she lived? She must have—she had sent her a letter there, after all. Uncrossing her arms, Hermione went on, "It's called The Orphanage of Goodwill but I'm certain it's the one they wrote about!"
Bellatrix looked at her with a feverish glow. "Are you absolutely sure?"


Bellatrix threw the newspapers back onto the desk, almost knocking off her untouched coffee. "It's too late to pay them a visit now," she said contemplatively. "And it would be utterly stupid to arrive there without any sort of a plan. I reckon we should get back and try to come up with something while we still have time."

Hermione was particular not to raise her eyebrows. Since when did Bellatrix count her in without Hermione insisting on it? Since when did she talk to her relatively politely? Wow, she must have been truly preoccupied with Alice Montgomery so as to forget to insult her with every word that existed her mouth.

"Come!" Bellatrix leapt to her feet. She seized the copy with the article about the orphanage and, leaving the rest of the Prophets sprawled all over the table, made to leave. Hermione, however, grabbed as many as she could and carried them back to their place. When she turned to get back for more, she saw all of them rushing toward her like an angry flock of seagulls. Hastily, she pressed herself against the bookcase on her left to avoid the collision and, half-startled half-fascinated, watched them pause in front of the bookshelf before sorting themselves into even piles and hopping right in. She glanced at Bellatrix, noticing she was holding a wand in her right hand.

"Move it," she ordered in a tired voice, waiting until Hermione made her way to her so they could set off together.

As they were walking side by side, Hermione couldn't help thinking of how differently Bellatrix was acting today—honestly, if she imagined away her pretended kindness back in Malfoy Manor and those several insults in the morning, this was the nicest she had been to her so far... But then it was most likely because they had hardly spoken to one another. Hermione wasn't naive; she was almost sure that once the initial wave of Bellatrix's excitement subsided, she would be back to her nasty self and would most likely try to make up for the lost time by being twice as mean to her.

They made it to the librarian desk. Mrs Benson's shift must have already ended because a middle-aged wizard in a scarlet robe had taken her place and so Hermione had no chance at saying goodbye. Perhaps next time, she told herself—if there was going to be a next time.

Expecting Bellatrix to stop at the desk for a check-out, Hermione slowed down but the witch walked past it with the newspapers still in her hand. Hermione jogged after her, whispering, "We need to—" but Bellatrix brushed her off.

"Don't be such a goody-goody!"

Great. They were stealing.

Sending a nervous smile to the librarian who didn't seem to have noticed anything, she was pulled forward by her cardigan by the impatient Bellatrix. They Disapparated second later.

They were back in the chamber in which Hermione had spent the entire week reading books, kicking the bed and cursing the day Dumbledore had thought of his plan. She looked at Bellatrix who distanced herself from her by a few steps and was currently unrolling the Daily Prophet, eyeing the front page.

"I'll send them an owl tomorrow morning," she said.

"With the letter saying what?"
Bellatrix looked at her as though Hermione had insulted her in some way, daring to ask questions, and Hermione anticipated a nasty telling off but to her great surprise, Bellatrix answered.

"That I'd like to arrange a meeting with the owner?" she quipped coldly, walking over to the armchair by the window. She picked up Hermione's 'History of Magic' from the seat and recklessly threw it on the floor before sitting down and crossing her legs. Had anyone else done this, Hermione would not control herself the way she did now. Biting her tongue, she merely shook her head, reminding herself she couldn't say a word about it; she'd finally reached a neutral ground with Bellatrix and ruining it in a matter of seconds because of a book would be just stupid.

Better refocus on something much more important—Alice Montgomery, namely.

"I see," she said, watching Bellatrix's dark eyes move from the article to her. "And... are you going to ask Mrs Montgomery about the relics directly?"

"Why, sure! Because I am that thick, Granger." Bellatrix tipped her head to the side. "I won't even shake her hand but ask her straightforwardly to tell me where she keeps the heirlooms of her long since buried auntie Hepsie." Bellatrix rolled her eyes, getting back to the article. "Of course I'm not going to ask her directly, stupid girl!"

"I didn't mean it like that," objected Hermione, feeling her cheeks flush. "I was thinking more of whether you're planning on going there as yourself or someone else—let's say, a journalist interested in the history of the orphanage."

"Are you trying to push your ideas on me again?"

"Of course not! I'm just thinking out loud."

"Good, because you're not in charge here, Granger, remember that!" said Bellatrix in a clear quiet voice.

Hermione looked at her shoes. "I do; I was only trying to help, nothing else."

Bellatrix remained quiet for a while, before exhaling loudly. "Fine then. Do tell me what that brilliant mudblood brain of yours has come up with."

Hermione's eyes snapped back to Bellatrix's challenging face, the two feelings battling inside her. Her dignity was urging her to stay quiet but her love for her family screamed louder—swallow the pride, don't mind her; so what that she insults you, so what?! Her words mean nothing!

"I was just thinking that if we went undercover," started Hermione slowly. "We could get the answers from her inconspicuously. See, even if Alice still has the heirlooms in her possession, she may not be very eager to sell them; and since I doubt you'd take no for an answer, it's better if she doesn't see our faces for reasons I'd rather not think of. We could pretend that we're someone else... I don't know... researchers or perhaps a family—"

"A family?" Bellatrix let out an arrogant chuckle. "You want us to take the polyjuice potion and pretend to be a married couple hoping to adopt a child or what?"

Hermione turned a brighter red. That wasn't what she had in mind at all!

"Because if so," Bellatrix went on. "Let me tell you that I'd rather do my own autopsy than agree to that!"

"You could never do your own—" started Hermione but paused. Hang on. "How come you know
that term? It's not a magical procedure and you couldn't possibly—"

Maybe it was a hallucination but Bellatrix all of a sudden seemed to be slightly pink herself. "As I was saying," she ignored the remark, "over my dead body!" She folded the Daily Prophet in half and flipped the curls running down her chest over her shoulder, her leg bouncing.

Hermione gave her an inquiring look before clarifying, "No, when I said family I didn't mean that kind of bond; also, I'd much rather use a Disguising spell than the Polyjuice potion: works just as well and saves us twice as much time."

Bellatrix smirked. "You mean I could use it. If I remember correctly, you've still got a Trace on you and probably don't even know how to cast it."

Drawing her head back, Hermione folded her arms "Excuse me? I was the first one in my class who managed to perform it!"

"Should I congratulate you on not being a complete moron?"

Hermione dug her nails into her cardigan so as not to retaliate. "Anyway, what I was thinking was going as a mother and daughter or—"

"We are not doing that!"

"It was just a suggestion! There's no need to be so," Hermione stopped herself just in time before saying something she might regret. She breathed deeply before starting anew. "How about some non-profit organisation then—we might offer them a donation."

"You mean to offer my gold to support filthy little mudbloods?"

"Children. To support children!" said Hermione hastily. "I may come as your assistant. You could invent a whole new identity and say your great great something was friends with Madame Smith and—"

Sighing, Bellatrix uncrossed her legs and stood up from the chair. "You're overcomplicating things; besides, all of those ideas are lousy."

Hermione gave her a look of disdain. "At least I'm trying; besides, it's really late. We've spent the entire day reading and I'm exhausted. I'm sorry that I'm not throwing perfect ideas at your feet just like that. I think we should go to sleep and try to think of something tomorrow with a clear mind. And..." she paused, gulping. "While at it... I think we should start with Apparition lessons. I did my part. I've found you a corpus deus. Two—perhaps four of them, actually."

Bellatrix's jaw tensed up visibly. She presented Hermione with a furious look before turning on her heel and storming away, saying nothing to that.

Hermione could only hope that it was a sign of her resignation.

—

The next morning Hermione woke up to the unceasing knocking sound wafting from her bedroom window. She jolted upright, rubbing her eyes at the sudden daylight before peering toward the noise. Two barn owls were waiting outside, taking turns at pecking the glass. Hermione threw the covers aside and rushed to the window, jerking it open. The owls soared through, letting in the chilly morning air, making Hermione's arms prickle with goosebumps under her pyjamas. They both landed on the frame of her bed, the one on the left carrying a golden envelope while the other,
a little larger owl—two modest-sized parcels.

A surge of exaltation entered Hermione. Perhaps it was mail from Draco! It was about time, after all—she had been waiting for his reply for seven days straight already; he must have remembered that her birthday was in two days, that stinkpot; oh how Hermione missed him!

Unburdening the two owls, she gave them an apologetical look for having no treats to offer to them; the best she could do was to fill the bathroom sink with water to at least let them freshen up. She only hoped Bellatrix would not pay her a visit now because she was certain the witch would kill her for establishing owl wellness in her house.

Leaving the bathroom door open, Hermione returned to the bedroom, closing the window half-way to reduce the cold. She sat on her bed and seized the golden envelope first. As soon as she took out the letter and unfolded it, she felt someone kiss her left cheek, then right and then her forehead—that last one scratched a little. Parting her lips, Hermione recognised her mom's handwriting and her eyes immediately filled with tears. Unable to read, she was holding the letter in her hands as though it was something sacred. Her mom, her lovely mom, she was writing to her...

Swallowing a lump in her throat, it had taken Hermione a while to get a grip and bring herself to look at the words.

_Dear Hermione,_

_We have no idea how long it will take for the owl to reach you so we're sending it a couple days earlier to get to you in time. Perhaps it's not your birthday yet but we'd rather be early than too late. We were planning a huge birthday party for you, meaning to invite all of your friends over, but then the letter of your acceptance arrived. We didn't have the heart to spoil it for you so we didn't say anything and rather cancelled the preparations, thinking we'd celebrate once you get back. And you bet we will!_

_Now there's nothing we can do but to send you a letter and a few kisses—one from mom, one from dad and one from Blair._

Hermione's stomach leaped as though she'd just taken off on the rollercoaster. She let go of the letter, reaching her hands to her cheeks, but didn't get to touch them.

She heard the flapping of wings and looking up, realised that the owls had already returned from the bathroom and were ready to set off. Wiping her eyes, she dashed to the half-open window and let them out; she needed some time to process everything before writing a well-composed reply instead of an emotion-soaked mess anyway.

Closing the window and settling back onto the warm bed, Hermione seized the letter again, smiling through the tears.

_So our dearest, sweetest girl, let us wish you the happiest birthday! You are the loveliest person we've had the privilege to know and we can be nothing but proud of you for growing into such a wise and beautiful young woman! We love you so much and we wish you nothing but sheer happiness and success beyond your wildest dreams; Ever since you blessed our lives, we've known that you were born to do great things! We're sending you a part of something we thought might help you get to them a little faster. Another part of it is going to wait for you here, until you come back to us._

_Love, mom and dad._
P.S. We really hope you like it in your new school; Professor Dumbledore sent us a letter as soon as you had arrived reassuring us you're safe and liking everything so far. Hope you still feel the same way. We can't wait for Christmas to hear you tell us all about it!

P.P.S. Open the white parcel first.

The tears were rolling down Hermione's cheeks, big as glass marbles. For the first time in forever, she felt loved and cared for again and tried hard not to think about the fact there would be no Christmas with them this year.

Her hands reached for the parcel, already grateful for whatever was inside. She unwrapped a small white box in which she found a set of shiny car keys.

Jesus, had her parents got her a car? No! No, no! No! Hermione closed her eyes in despair.

Despite the fact that the Grangers weren't poor in the least, she couldn't help feeling guilty about them having spent so much money on her. They shouldn't have given her something so expensive, she would get a car herself once she saved enough money rather than just taking it as a gift from someone who had no idea who she even was! Hermione couldn't be further from the person they had raised her to be and reading all those praises made her unbelievably ashamed of the fact. She was a liar; such a filthy little liar, and the worst part was that she couldn't change a thing about it...

She wondered whether there was hope for her one day, hope that she could be sincere again, that she could sit down and talk to her parents, to Draco, to everyone and tell them about everything without pretenses.

Sucking back her tears, Hermione looked down. At her knees there lay unopened the second parcel. There on the list was Blair's name; Hermione had her kiss imprinted on one of her tingling cheeks... Could it be that this present was from her? Hermione still remembered the one she had received for Christmas from her; till this day it remained untouched inside the nightstand in her bedroom back home. Should she open this one? After all, it might not even be from her...

Hermione held her breath as she carefully unwrapped the parcel, not knowing what to expect.

A small piece of paper fell out. Did she want to read it? Hesitant, she took it into her hands, flipping it over.

Hermione let go of the note as though burnt and leapt from her bed. It was from Blair.

She could not read it, she couldn't! Pacing back and forth with her heart racing, she kept biting her nails, indecisive of what to do.

She glanced at it nervously. What might be the harm of just having a look... Besides, it was most likely a simple birthday wish...

She extended her arm but paused mid-air.

What if...

Oh, she was being ridiculous!

Reaching for the note again, Hermione brought it up to her eyes, trying not to mind her thumping heart and the fact that just a couple days ago, Blair's hands had held it too.

_The necklace was a gift for my eighteenth birthday from my godmother who wished for me to pass_
it on to my own goddaughter once she comes of age; I know that technically you're not my
godchild, but you're my precious English puff pastry and there's no one I'd rather give it to than
you. Happy Birthday, love!

Blair

Unable to draw a breath, Hermione was staring at the note, reading it over and over until her eyes
were filled with such heavy tears she could not see anything anymore. Lowering herself onto the
sheets, she buried her face in the pillow. Again and again, she was falling down the rabbit hole—
that is, if she'd ever stopped falling. Her heart was bleeding the way it had never bled. Why would
Blair write her something like that when she knew how Hermione felt about her? Why? Was she
trying to break her completely?

My precious English puff pastry... Hermione had to chuckle even through the tears as an enormous
wave of warmth and tenderness was buzzing through her body.

And... she had written my. My as though…

No, stop!

Hermione had to try hard to not twist her words around and see in them what she wished to see
instead of what Blair actually meant.

Breathe...

After Hermione had managed to control the tears, she sat back with a heavy sigh, looking at the
small rose gold gift box that went along with the note. Necklace... Blair shouldn't have worried
about giving her anything; not after Hermione's silent treatment that had lasted for twelve months
straight so far. Besides, the note itself was worth thousands of gifts to her; she would have been all
over the moon even if she had received just that small piece of paper. But no, Blair must be her
extra self and give her a gift of such sentimental value that Hermione felt undeserving of accepting.

Having stared at the box for several moments, she finally took it into her perspiring hands, tracing
it with her index finger. Hermione surveyed it up close before burying it in her palms, the
suppressed love burning in her blood hotly.

What was she to do?

Slowly, she placed the box onto her knees before finally bringing herself to open it.

Her breath hitched in her throat.

"No... Blair..."

There, on a small soft pillow, lay Blair's necklace, her necklace—not just some jewellery that she'd
kept locked away in a box for years but her very own silver necklace with a tiny crystal on the side
that as far as Hermione knew, Blair had not taken off her neck once. She remembered tracing it
with her hands when she was just a little child and she also remembered the hot Greek sun
reflecting from it last summer.

It was far too much to take in for Hermione. How could Blair have given her something so
personal? Just... how?

Tentatively, she lifted the necklace from the box, letting it rest in her palm as though it was the
most fragile thing she'd ever held—not because it might have been very expensive, not because it
was a piece of jewellery but because it was somehow a piece of a living, breathing Blair; a small part of her that she had given to Hermione to have.

If it was possible to die from feeling too much love, Hermione would not live for another second. Every atom of her body was filled with melancholic affection.

Letting the chain slide through her fingers, she brought the tiny crystal closer to her eyes, a faint hint of gardenia scent filling her nostrils. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, her stomach clenching. It was Blair's perfume... gracious heavens, how was Hermione to survive now—

No, no, no! This wasn't the right time or place to lose her head.

She took in a sharp gulp of breath, trying to regain her control. She wiped her eyes hastily, forbidding her mind to think of any sort of plans on how to run after Blair.

Faced with the conundrum of whether or not she deserved to wear the necklace, she considered a lot of arguments before finally coming to a decision. If Blair wanted her to have it, who was she to fight her?

Hermione placed it around her neck carefully, clipping it at the back, and pressed the cold silver, fresh from Blair's skin, against her skin. An incredible wave of warmth flooded her abdomen. After all those months spent without her, Hermione felt that finally, she had Blair near and her heart itself could not calm down at the thought. Her eyes, too, were dripping with tears like two rivers and yet she couldn't stop herself from smiling.

She was happy. Insanely happy. And—

The bedroom door flung open, making Hermione flinch in alarm. She quickly turned her back on the intruder and pulled her pyjama top closer to her neck.

"What is this?" said Bellatrix Lestrange's voice gruffly from behind her back. "If I remember correctly, you wanted to train, so what are you still doing dressed in that ridiculous attire, may I ask?"

Wiping her tears, Hermione jumped to her feet. She grabbed the silk bathrobe from the nearby chair and wrapped it over her shoulders; fastening the sash, she replied with a clogged nose: "Well, it's still quite early, isn't it?"

"Wh.. have you been crying again?" snorted Bellatrix in disdain. "Don't you ever get tired of it?"

Biting her tongue, Hermione turned around to face her and almost gasped in shock—if she had thought Bellatrix's appearance couldn't get any worse, she had been mistaken. The witch couldn't have slept one hour straight last night: her skin was even more ghastly, her lips pale violet and her eyes so bloodshot Hermione's very own began to sting.

"What is it?" asked Bellatrix. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You didn't sleep last night, did you..." stated Hermione, feeling the warmth drain from within her. Bellatrix snorted a chuckle of surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Did you?"

"Not that it is any of your business, muddy..." she raised her eyebrows.
Hermione bit her tongue, knowing she had no right to confront Bellatrix about her life choices, and yet—

"You look incapacitated."

Bellatrix considered her for a while before licking her lips and smirking. "Oh...Do I no longer meet your expectations—is that what you meant? Am I not attractive enough for you now?"

Hermione furrowed her brows. "My expectations? I couldn't care less about the way you look if it weren't for your health," she blurted coldly. "I care about the fact that you're going to make yourself very ill if you don't stop being so reckless with yourself. You can't just go without sleep, without food, without drinking!"

"What the hell has gotten into you?" asked Bellatrix, her amusement wavering, turning into sheer bewilderment.

"I just," started Hermione but paused, unable to explain—she herself had no idea why she was reacting the way she was. "Look... you need to take care of yourself; we won't go far if you end up in St Mungo's due to sleep deprivation or something as equally serious!"

"Alright." Bellatrix glanced to the floor, letting out a small conceited titter. "I'm not going to let some punk lecture me about what I should or shouldn't do!" she said, voice rising; she took a few steps forward, coming to a halt alongside the opposite side of the bed. Hermione noticed that up close she looked like a hospice patient, which pained her even more than Bellatrix's unceasing insults as she went on. "You're far too young and far too daft to have any idea what you're talking about! Don't trouble your head with my health if you don't want to worry about yours." Bellatrix lifted her eyebrows, her gaze flicking toward the bed, then back at Hermione and again to the bed. The barely visible lines on her forehead deepened. "What's that?"

Hermione followed the direction of her gaze, seeing that Bellatrix was looking at the small piece of paper lying across the messy sheets. Her stomach turned over in sheer dread.

"Ah, this?" she shrugged impassively, thinking on her feet. "It's just a letter my parents sent me—no, no, don't worry," she added upon registering a fresh new display of fury stealing over Bellatrix's face. "I didn't contact them; they wrote to me first and the owl found me without the address; nobody knows where I am... including me."

She grabbed Blair's note along with the real letter from her parents, folding it hastily before shoving it into the pocket of her bathrobe.

"Read it for me."

Hermione looked at Bellatrix's uncompromising face, her insides plummeting.

"Didn't you hear me? I asked you to read the letter for me!"

Hermione reached into her pocket, feeling for the letters. Strategically, she drew out the note from Blair first, hoping that perhaps Bellatrix might take it as a sign of Hermione purposefully trying to hide the second letter from her.

"The other one."

Almost gasping from relief, Hermione put Blair's note back and pulled out the letter from her parents instead. Unfolding it, she cleared her throat; there were no kisses on her face this time.
"Dear Hermione," she started hesitantly. "We have no idea how long it will take for the owl to reach you so we're sending it a couple days earlier to get to you in time. Perhaps it's not your birthday yet but we'd rather be early than too late. We were planning a huge birthday party for you, meaning to invite all of your friends over, but then the letter of your acceptance arrived. We didn't have the heart to spoil it for you so we didn't say anything and rather cancelled the preparations, thinking we'd celebrate once you get back. And you bet we will! Now there's nothing we can do but to send you a letter full of kisses from both of us," read Hermione, changing that part a bit. "So our dearest—"

"Alright, that's enough," said Bellatrix quietly. "Now, what is this letter of acceptance your dear parents wrote about?"

Heart skipping a beat, Hermione folded the parchment and tucked it back into her pocket, saying: "I told them I was transferring schools; sent them a fake letter of acceptance to this smaller university in Ireland which focuses on special studies... Special studies that will help me prepare better for the auror program in America I told you about earlier."

Bellatrix curled her lip up at that.

"And your parents, they went along with it," said Bellatrix incredulously. "Allowed you to leave Hogwarts for a school they'd never even heard of, believed you blindly?"

"I'd never lied to them before, they had no reason not to," shrugged Hermione, feeling terribly guilty, for her portrayal of that situation suggested her parents must have been pretty naive and simple-minded people; unfortunately, she hadn't had enough time to think of all the aspects of her lies and so it was only natural it had backfired at one point; she just hated that it had to be her parents. "Besides, it's my life and my future," she went on, trying to redeem them a bit. "My parents can't make decisions for me and would never try to; all they ask of me is to be as happy as I can, whatever it is that I choose to do in life."

Bellatrix seemed to be considering her words carefully; Hermione could only guess but felt like she was inwardly collating the parenting methods of the Grangers and that of her own family which must have been exceedingly divergent. It was no secret that children, especially girls, born into pureblood families, had no say in decisions regarding their lives; from the way they carried themselves to how their thoughts were supposed to flow and up to the partner they were to marry and stay with until 'death did them part', they were ordered around in every way possible.

"And what about Hogwarts?" asked Bellatrix again after a moment's pause.

"I sent Dumbledore a detailed letter explaining that I was taking a year off to go abroad with my parents," replied Hermione promptly. "Sent me papers to sign the very next morning. That was it."

Bellatrix fixed her eyes on her, looking genuinely intrigued. "My, my, there's nothing like a well-thought-out plan, is there? Surely, it must've taken you a lot of time to come up with all of these ideas."

Hermione swallowed, knowing exactly what Bellatrix was trying to achieve here. "I had only a couple of hours, actually; you didn't give me much of a warning, did you?"

"Well, you certainly have a talent for thinking on the spot, then," pointed Bellatrix with a discontented look, which Hermione interpreted as: 'perhaps you've gotten away this time, but I'll be
trying and trying until you're so entangled in your lies you can't find your way out.'

"Probably."

Snorting, Bellatrix said nothing for a couple of seconds before casting about. "Well, get yourself dressed; that is if you still want to learn how to Apparate," she said, raising her eyebrows.

"I do, I'll be right back." Hermione grabbed her beaded purse from under her pillow and strode off to the bathroom where she changed into a pair of skinny jeans and plain black t-shirt. She took a sip of water straight from the tap and brushed her teeth, the necklace on her neck swaying as she bent over the sink. Pressing it into her chest affectionately, she couldn't help thinking of Blair again. *There's no one I'd rather give it to than you.* Smiling and with warmth entering her stomach from deep within her heart, she zipped her jumper all the way up to her neck, hiding that little miracle underneath it. Feeling much more optimistic, she gave it a quick squeeze through two layers of clothes before walking out of the bathroom. She found Bellatrix leaning against the window frame, peering into the morning garden.

She turned to Hermione but before she could say anything, there was a small pop and in the middle of the chamber appeared Bellatrix's house elf with a fully loaded tray in his hands. "Miss Hermione, good—" he started but froze as his eyes landed on his mistress, who was staring at him in sheer astonishment.

Folding her arms, she took a few slow confident steps toward his suddenly shaking form. "Who ordered you to bring the girl breakfast?" she asked quietly.

"N—No—no one mistress; no one," replied the house elf. The empty coffee cup on the tray began clinking as his hands trembled more intensely. Hermione gave the witch an anxious look before her eyes snapped to the house elf. In a heartbeat, he set the tray onto the floor and, kneeling, began banging his head against the floor and yelling, "Billey is so very sorry, mistress! Billey is a disgraceful house elf! Bad Billey! Bad! Bad! Bad!"


"No, you didn't," said Bellatrix, watching the creature on the floor mercilessly.

Hermione ran up to him, crying out, "Please, Billey, don't!" She kneeled down, grabbing his arms and preventing him from injuring himself any further, which was, however, very difficult, for he was struggling and kicking senselessly.

"Don't touch it!" roared Bellatrix but Hermione held onto him stubbornly and so Bellatrix shrieked again, "Get out of my sight, Billey! I'll deal with you later!" The little house elf was immediately gone from Hermione's arms with another small pop.

Breathing hard, Hermione looked up at Bellatrix, repeating firmly, "It's not his fault, I asked him to bring me breakfast."

"Don't lie to me, the filthy must have taken a liking in you," snorted Bellatrix, looking her up and down with disgust. "Well, birds of a feather flock together."

Hermione got to her feet, narrowing her eyes. "You know what? I actually think that rather than being cross, you should be grateful," she said bluntly. "Because if it wasn't for Billey, I wouldn't have eaten once this week and I doubt that I'd be of any help in such condition."

For a second, Bellatrix looked taken aback but then composed her face into her usual arrogant scowl. "Take out your wand," she said abruptly.
Hermione felt her stomach drop to her feet.

"For Apparating," added Bellatrix, rolling her eyes as she surveyed Hermione's expression.

Relieved but at the same time a bit startled at Bellatrix leaving the argument opened, Hermione did as she was told, drawing her wand from the pocket of her jeans. Bellatrix obviously wasn't in the mood for rowing, or perhaps she was too tired—she most definitely looked it.

"So I expect you already have some notion as to how it works," said Bellatrix, turning from her and seating herself in the same armchair as yesterday, the shadows overcasting the red undertones of her under eyes grimly.

"Yes, Mr. Twycross, our instructor, advised us to keep in mind the three D's; that is—"

"Disaster, discomfort, distraction?" interjected Bellatrix, letting out a soft chuckle. "Because that's the precise epitome of his method."

Destination, Determination, Deliberation, was what Hermione meant to say. Did Bellatrix actually have any respect for anyone beside herself?

"Forget about those," snorted the witch, leaning her back against the chair. "All you have to keep in mind is strong confidence in yourself: you must have no doubts, that's it." She looked Hermione up and down. "Try it."

"Here? But at Hogwarts—"

Bellatrix tilted her head. "You don't want to splinch, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Then don't question my decisions," she drawled in an annoyed voice. "Contrary to Twycross, I believe the more familiar the environment is, the better—there are far fewer distractions and you can fully concentrate on your chosen destination. Also, you don't have to worry about bumping into anyone since there's just the two of us. Believe me, I remember how chaotic it was back when I was learning it."

Hermione nodded, a bit surprised that Bellatrix was capable of sympathising with her on some level; moreover, her approach made a lot more sense to her than Mr Twycross' idea of putting all of the sixth years into one vast room and asking them to focus. It wasn't possible, especially when some students, like Neville Longbottom, used the wooden hoop they were supposed to Apparate into as a hula hoop.

"Alright, so if you're done asking questions..." Bellatrix lifted her chin, grazing her lower lip with her teeth.

Blinking, Hermione looked away, giving an awkward half-shrug, her eyes pausing on the tray on the floor. "Sure, I'll just put this aside," she said, striding toward it and setting it on her nightstand while trying to ignore the fresh scent of ground coffee. As she faced Bellatrix again, one more question popped inside her mind, nevertheless. "Ehm and what about the permission from ministry? To use magic?" she asked.

"Don't let that bother you," said Bellatrix with a smile. "You're not going back to Hogwarts anyway, are you?"

A wave of distress washed over Hermione. "Well, for now, but I was hoping to return eventually! I
"If I get expelled, I—my parents..."

"Oh yes, I just can't imagine what they would say!" Bellatrix faked concern but then smirked. "God, don't start whining; of course I got you the permission. I have no desire to deal with bloody Ministry workers now."

Hermione wasn't persuaded. "Promise?"

"Don't be infantile and get on with it, we don't have the entire day!"

Hermione felt her cheeks flush.

"Come stand over here," ordered Bellatrix, motioning to the middle of the room, where Billey had Apparated just minutes ago. "You must believe it's happening; it must be the same sort of certainty as for walking or breathing—the one which you don't even think about for you simply know your body won't fail you."

Nodding, Hermione walked to the place Bellatrix had chosen for her. "Where should I Apparate to?" she asked but waited for the answer in vain; Bellatrix was just staring at her, making her so bloody uncomfortable—Hermione didn't want her to see her fail but knew that it was exactly what was going to happen.

"You seem uncertain," noted Bellatrix, rolling her eyes to the side. "That's not going to help."

Clearing her throat, Hermione turned her back to her, hoping it might be easier if she didn't see her. It turned out it wasn't. As she focused her mind on the spot in front of her nightstand and spun, nothing happened.

Hermione's cheeks flushed harder.

"Try again!"

Hermione tried again; and again, and again, unwilling to give up but all of her attempts had the same result. On her fourth try, she even tripped over her own feet. Surprisingly, Bellatrix did not comment on that or anything—well, except for that time when Hermione cursed under her breath—that's when she let out a soft chuckle.

Vexed, Hermione took a sharp intake of breath, chiding herself inwardly—come on, Hermione; you're a witch, for Merlin's sake, the top of your class, and if Gregory Goyle learnt to Apparate, how come you can't?!}

Concentrating all of her senses, she spun for the fifth time, absolutely sure that now she was going to Apparate. Her entire body was consumed by a terrible choking sensation and she thought for a second that she had done something wrong and was going to die in the process but then the feeling subsided and she crashed into her nightstand, knocking the tray full of food onto the floor, almost scalding herself with the steaming coffee. She watched as the pumpkin juice, porridge, and scrambled eggs all splashed across the floor in one fine mess.

"Now, I'm hesitant whether to congratulate you on having finally Apparated or wonder at what a clumsy piece of work you are," said Bellatrix from the chair.

"I'd prefer congratulating," murmured Hermione, steadying herself. She pointed her wand to the floor, quickly whispering, "Evanesco!" to clean up the spilled food.

"If you manage to Apparate again, perhaps I will."
Hermione felt a jolt of surprise pinch her stomach; she tried again and Apparated to the foot of the bed now, two feet away from the smirking Bellatrix. She tried five more times, of which all were successful.

"Good, Granger, now if anything happens and I can't Apparate," joked Bellatrix, referring to their initial conversation from a week ago, "you could certainly do something."

Hermione smiled at the remark to which Bellatrix responded with a playful smirk herself; however, it disappeared the very next second.

"So, I taught you how to appara..." the witch asked, completely misinterpreting the emotions displayed on Hermione's face—she quickly shook her head.

"I hate the idea of giving the little bastards anything but I guess people are more willing to talk when they feel indebted." Bellatrix curled her lips. "Of course, we'd have to alter our appearance because if this goes public, I'm going to have to kill myself... No one must know!"

"So... have you decided to donate anything?" asked Hermione, trying not to feel too smug about the fact Bellatrix had once again decided to go along with her plan.

"Yes, two thousand galleons," she replied with distaste, Hermione's mouth opening agape at that. Even though for Bellatrix it must have been more like two sickles, still, it was a lot of gold which might help the orphanage immensely.

"Don't look so happy," said Bellatrix. "I might still curse the gold if I feel like it, which I strongly do."

Hermione's unconscious smile faltered. "Why would you do something like that?"

"To feel better."

"To feel better about doing something nice?" she asked in disbelief. "Please... it's bad enough for those children as it is; besides, curses like that can always backfire?"

"Not if you cast them right."

"Please, just don't do it!"

Bellatrix snickered. "Do you realise that your begging me not to do it only makes me want it more?"

"So I guess I'll just keep quiet."

"Smart decision," she remarked as she walked past Hermione. When she reached the door, Hermione cleared her throat.

Pausing, Bellatrix turned.

"I just wanted to say... thank you," said Hermione with a blush. "For teaching me."
Bellatrix considered her for a second before turning back and walking away, closing the door behind her.

—

While Hermione waited for Bellatrix to return, she could feel the thoughts inside her mind swirling as if on a Venetian carousel. They were visiting the Orphanage of Goodwill in about an hour; the place located only four streets away from Hermione's house... from her mom and dad and if... and if Blair hadn't left yet, from her too.

Hermione was almost sick from the pulverised excitement that reverberated through her being and could not let her keep still for one second straight. What if she saw her? What if she didn't? Hermione couldn't tell which case frightened her more.

She was pacing like a caged lion and it was not until she heard a sudden noise coming from the bed that she paused her strolling. Spinning, she caught sight of Billey's slouching form setting the silver tray onto the sheets with his shaky hands.

Before Hermione could say a word, he blurted while keeping his eyes pointed to the ground, "Please, miss Hermione, say nothing to Mistress Bellatrix," and disappeared into thin air quickly; she hadn't even had a chance to thank him. Touched, she walked over to the bed, eyeing the plate of roast pork served with mushroom sauce and boiled potatoes, and a cup of steaming broth with silver cutlery and the snow-white napkin on the side.

Oh Billey, you shouldn't have run the risk for my sake like that, she thought, her heart warming at his gesture. Bellatrix might think of Billey whatever she wanted but to Hermione, he possessed more nobleness than any pureblood out there. She just hoped the witch wasn't anywhere near to witness his hospitality for the second time in a row today.

She was unbelievably grateful for him being so thoughtful in spite of Bellatrix's wrath, but since she felt far too nervous to eat, Hermione ate just a couple of spoonfuls of the broth for the sake of decency before taking the tray to the bathroom and setting it onto the sink. Billey would certainly find it and Bellatrix would certainly not go in there.

Ten minutes later, Bellatrix strode in confidently, dressed in a beautiful and most likely incredibly expensive graphite dress; it looked more like something from Narcissa Malfoy's wardrobe than her own which Hermione had suspected consisted of nothing but black. What a shame, though, for softer colours certainly suited Bellatrix very much too; even her skin looked healthier as compared to how it had looked this morning. The only worrying thing left was her significant weight loss which made the dress hang like a sack on her.

"Here," she threw a green mass of fabric that she was carrying onto the bed on her way to Hermione. "Go get changed and take this." She extended her right arm with her palm open. There on the pale skin rested the same glass ampoule of bright violet liquid as last summer when Bellatrix had demanded Hermione changed her appearance for the ball.

"And what about you?" asked Hermione as she held her palm up, watching Bellatrix reverse hers and drop the ampoule into Hermione's.

"What about me?"

"Aren't you altering your appearance, too?" she asked, eyeing Bellatrix's complexion which looked much better now.
"But I already did, muddypie," she replied and subsequently sighed at Hermione's confused expression. "I used a simple spell that doesn't necessarily change the features but rather makes it impossible to remember them. While people might see me, their memories would display the face of someone completely different. Is that a sufficient enough explanation for you?" she asked smugly.

Even though Hermione nodded, she was unable to remember if she had ever heard of such a spell. Deciding to test it, she looked away and tried recalling Bellatrix's face. She let out a small gasp of surprise. Indeed, when she wasn't looking at her, her mind constructed the image of a pretty woman in her prime with bright red hair and round freckled face.

"That's brilliant," she blurted out. "What kind of spell is that?"

"The 'Hurry up and do as I say' kind," replied Bellatrix, raising her eyebrows, and Hermione got the point immediately. Wasting no time, she placed the cold ampule onto her tongue and sent it down her throat. She'd done this before and chose not to suspect Bellatrix of giving her a potion that would make a chicken head out of her own. Having suffered through the uncomfortable sensation of a hot pancake sliding down her face, Hermione felt normal again. Taking the dress from the bed, she walked to the bathroom, careful to open the door in a way that wouldn't reveal the tray on the sink but as she stepped inside, she realised that it had already vanished.

Closing the door behind her, she peered into the mirror and found that she had become the same girl she had been at the ball one year ago; she had the same big grey eyes, the same pointy nose and plump lips; somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered whether the girl of such appearance existed or it was all just the work of Bellatrix's creativity.

She changed into the plain emerald robe which had a strong camphor smell to it as if it had been hanging in the attic drawer for ages and, coughing, smoothed down the tight front. Hermione was grateful for its modesty since it covered up Blair's necklace quite efficiently but at the same time vexed, for the rough material was scratchy as hell. Hermione could only hope she wouldn't get any sort of allergic reaction to it.

Having taken a quick look into the mirror, she pulled out a pair of bobby pins from the pocket of her jeans and twisted the front strands framing her face, clipping them in the back. Then she pinched her cheeks to cover up the fairness a bit and returned to Bellatrix.

"Good," she said, putting a scrutinising look over her. "You look plain."

Hermione walked past her to her nightstand and, taking the beaded purse into her hand, asked: "So, who am I supposed to be?"

"My timid little niece, Anna."

Oh, so they were pretending to be a family, after all; Hermione could only wonder as to who had kidnapped the real Bellatrix and replaced her with this version who was willing to link herself to Hermione in such a way...

"Obviously, while we are there," Bellatrix went on. "You are not to speak except to say hello, yes, no and goodbye, understood?"

Hermione nodded. Then Bellatrix cast another searing look at her. "So... how about you try apparating this time," she said finally. "The permission from Ministry lasts until eight p.m."

Having heard that, Hermione almost choked on her own saliva. Wait, what?! Was Bellatrix asking
her to apparate? Did she even realise what it was she had said? That she had indirectly hinted that she trusted Hermione with her own life?! Hermione doubted that strongly.

"I'm only asking because you know where that orphanage is," clarified Bellatrix with a look that suggested 'don't misinterpret my words!' "We cannot use any of the fireplaces in this house to avoid being tracked down if anything happens. Instead, I'd have to apparate to Leaky Cauldron and use one of their fireplaces to get into the Orphanage, which I don't feel like doing since I don't intend to smell of ashes. Besides, Apparating to London is nothing that difficult, surely even a mudblood like you can manage."

Oddly enough, even Bellatrix's insult couldn't erase Hermione's still very much ongoing astonishment.

"Well," she started but couldn't finish. She wasn't confident to do this just yet; it was too dangerous to travel over such distance, let alone be responsible for someone else; what if she hurt Bellatrix? She looked too fragile as it was and if she was to make her even sicker—

'How sweet of you to put her well-being above your own,' the voice inside her mind pointed casually, the embodiment of which Hermione pictured as a thirty-year-old gay man filing his nails with a pink nail file.

It's not only that! She objected inwardly. What if she instead of Southern Avenue Apparated into her own house? Such misfortune would mess up their plans significantly; Hermione would have to rely on Bellatrix to explain it to Hermione's parents and perhaps Blair that her niece Anna, who'd be too dumbstruck to speak, was preparing for her Apparating test and accidentally ended up in their house...

"Very well, the Leaky Cauldron it is then!" Bellatrix ended her ordeal. Impatient as always, she stepped closer and took hold of Hermione's skirt but then Hermione blurted, "Wait!"

Her heart jumped into her throat like a puck in a high striker game. She mustn't refuse a chance like this and let Bellatrix think she was a coward; it would be like taking three steps backwards; finally she had her trust like this and her reaction was 'I can't because I'm afraid'? Hell no!

"I'll try, I'll do it."

Bellatrix visibly suppressed a smirk. "Will you?"

"Yes... but it's been a while since I've been on the Southern Avenue; the place might have changed a lot and I wouldn't want to risk ending up somewhere in Bristol; I'd much rather apparate somewhere near my house if it's no trouble...?"

Bellatrix only threw her hand at that, looking at Hermione in expectation.

"Okay..." Hermione moistened her lips, putting the beaded purse into the vast pocket of the dress while taking her wand out of the other. Then her stomach sank. She realised that she was to touch Bellatrix. But how could she? Bellatrix hated physical contact, especially when it came to Hermione! But then, she had asked her to do this, she must expect... must know...

"Before the day is out, Granger..."

Holding her breath, Hermione hesitantly reached toward Bellatrix's hand, her fingertips coming into contact with the cold, satin-soft skin of her palm. Next second she flinched, retrieving as Bellatrix wrenched her hand away.
"What are you doing?" she snapped.

"I—I was just trying to——"

"You don't have to hold my hand! The robe is just as good! I swear if you're trying——"

"No, no, no!" Hermione tried to fix it. "I'm so sorry if I made you uncomfortable but I promise I wasn't trying to take advantage of the situation!" she clarified quickly. While she herself thought it was a harmless touch, something was telling her it wasn't like that for Bellatrix at all and that she needed to explain herself before Bellatrix got the wrong idea. "I just... look, you are obviously very good at this; you're good if you just hold somebody's clothes but this is the first time I'm doing this and I don't trust myself enough to hold just a part of your robe. It's too dangerous and I wouldn't want you to splinch; I need to have a tight grip! Besides, it's only going to be a second..."

Bellatrix was staring at her with distaste while wiping her hand against her robe. "Fine," she said after a while of obvious thinking. "Do it but be quick; I wouldn't want to catch——"

Hermione waited for something painful to come but oddly, Bellatrix halted herself.

Progress...

Gulping, Hermione tried again. Her fingers slipped along Bellatrix's freezing palm and pressed against the back of her hand. Her stomach flipped as though a cluster of butterflies fluttered around in it. Trying to ignore the sensation, she tightened her grip, for Bellatrix's hand remained limp the whole time; imagining the side road beside the houses on her street, Hermione turned on the spot.

Duskiness enveloped them and the horrible strangling sensation squeezed the breath out her body. She squeezed Bellatrix's hand even tighter.

Feet hitting the ground, her first look went straight to Bellatrix, checking whether she was alright. She must have been as she instantly freed herself from Hermione's grip, hissing like a cat, her long nails scratching Hermione's palm carelessly along the way. Next thing, she was wiping her hand with her robe again but more feverishly.

'It doesn't matter; It doesn't! She can't become a whole different person overnight. Small steps, Hermione... Just focus on being proud of yourself for successfully Apparating!'

"Which way?" Bellatrix turned to her, completely ignoring the awkwardness between them.

With her palm still sensitive from Bellatrix's nails, Hermione cast around. At that instant, she would have sworn she'd just been through a mild heart attack. Thanks to that little chaos of a moment, she had completely forgotten where it was they had Appeared.

Hermione swallowed down a profanity. While she had managed to get them to the street where she lived, it wasn't the end of it as she had intended but rather the beginning, damn it, which meant that now they had to go past her house.

Blair... Hermione's already racing heart doubled in speed. Her mom, daddy...

"This way..." she pointed forward but remained still like a statue. She could not believe she was back, looking at the familiar majestic houses with shiny cars parked in front of them. There were Mrs Clarkes's punch-pink geraniums on the window sills on the left and Thompson's badger-dog Zucchini on the right. And there, a couple of houses ahead of them, Hermione's very own!

If only she could just...
"Come on then," said Bellatrix, disrupting her moment and confidently leading the way. Hermione had to jog after her although it took her just a few strides to reverse their roles. As if to deal with her anxiety, her steps became perhaps a bit too fast and long but fortunately, Bellatrix managed to keep up with her just fine.

They were closer and closer. Hermione's heart was beating so hard she could almost hear it and her legs felt as though they were made of rubber. She felt sick. Sick as though she was about to faint any second now.

What were the odds that her family might be outside, right at this moment? It was still August. The weather was a bit cloudy but other than that it wasn't that cold or windy...

If only Hermione could see her... she wouldn't say a word, wouldn't let it show that that blonde woman outside in the garden of that fine house she and Bellatrix were passing was the most important, the innermost happiness of both her soul and mind, the most cherished, the dearest person to her in this wide world. She wouldn't let Bellatrix know; if only she could just see her, hear her...

"Is it far from here?"

Hermione was afraid that if she opened her mouth, she might throw up. She only shook her head.

Each step carried them closer to her house and Hermione thought it was impossible for Bellatrix not to sense how nervous she was. Her hands were clammy and shaking as she cast a fleeting look at the slate tiles of their roof, just two houses away from them. Her heart almost tore itself out of her chest upon imagining how close she might be to Blair; how very close.

Her ears were ringing and she could hear barely anything except for the rush of her blood. They were one house away. And there was no sound of laughter or conversation coming from her house. None. Hermione gulped, holding her breath while straining her ears to hear something. She didn't. They passed Hermione's house without her letting it show. All the feelings of expectation turned into painful disappointment; so painful her hands had to grasp onto her stomach.

Nevermind... It's okay. It's totally fine. Hermione should be glad actually. What if she had given herself away? What if she had given everything away? No, it was a good thing she hadn't seen Blair.

"Just five more minutes," she said dejectedly but Bellatrix didn't reply.

They were walking in silence, occasionally meeting people, Hermione's heart leaping anytime she heard laughter or talking from the next fork but unfortunately, none of those turned out to belong to the one person she was hoping to see.

Sighing, she side-glanced at Bellatrix before turning her head to her fully. She couldn't be serious...?! Bellatrix couldn't look more snobbish even if she tried; she was keeping her hand close to her nose and mouth as though the air around them smelled of thioacetone; Hermione suspected it must have been due to the muggles passing them by who that drama queen was trying to avoid over such a distance as though they had some contagious illness she could catch if they got too close to her; a few of the people gave her frowning looks and Hermione tried to distract them by smiling, although internally agreed—Bellatrix was straightforwardly rude. To some extent, she understood: given the upbringing Bellatrix had had, and presuming she had never seen as many Muggles in one place before, her reaction was only natural... still, she was an adult and should have known how to behave by now.
After about five minutes of these weird encounters, Hermione spotted the entrance of a shabby little building—the Orphanage of Goodwill. "There it is," she said, nodding forward and across the street.

Bellatrix sped up. Hermione was so glad there were no cars driving at the moment for Bellatrix would have most likely gotten run over—or perhaps, knowing her, it would be the car that would get it. Hermione pushed the image of a burning Ford Anglia out of her mind and rushed after her. She could only pray this went well. They stopped at the heavy oak door. Not even bothering to ring the bell or knock, Bellatrix pushed it open and stepped inside first. As Hermione followed her in, she was instantly smacked in the face with the stench of stale urine and boiled cabbage combined with children's yells and laughter. She heard Bellatrix strangle a cough—at least now she had a reason to shield her nose.

"Mrs Morgan, surely it must be you!" said a kind, mellifluous voice on their left. Hermione turned, her eyes landing on a young woman of a small frame and short canary-yellow hair. She had her arm extended, pointing with her wand at the stack of white sheets in front of her. "I'm Sally, Sally Thornfield, the nursemaid," she introduced herself, smiling. "We've been so looking forward to meeting you!"

"Likewise," said Bellatrix in a fruity voice, beaming herself. Hermione tried to follow her example but felt that her cheeks had gone completely numb. Somehow, suddenly, everything became all too real for her. They were here, doing this, pretending to be someone else, deceiving... and if their plan wasn't to work out, they were to be reduced to doing something illegal and then if convicted, end up in Azkaban for the rest of their lives and—damn it, how on Earth could Dumbledore think this was a good idea?!

"Mrs Montgomery is waiting for you in her office. Please, follow me!"

Sally lead them up the wooden stairs that looked as though just a tiny step could send them crumbling in a heap of battens as it was creaking darkly; the entire place seemed to be half-tumbledown and too grim to be occupied by children, and yet there was still laughter coming from upstairs. Through the open door on the first floor, Hermione caught a glimpse of a small group of three boys around five or six, showing each other their milk teeth and the way they wiggled.

"Let me knock it out for you, Tommy," said the smallest boy on the right. "Did it for Jack last week, didn't even feel a thing, did ya?" He nudged the blonde boy in the middle who smirked and opened his mouth, showing his toothless gums. Hermione's lips curled up at that but Sally let out a desperate sigh.

She rushed inside. "Nigel! Not this nonsense again!," she said in a stern voice before sticking her head back from behind the door, looking at Bellatrix and Hermione apologetically. "You'd have to excuse me, madame, the office is right there, please go ahead." She pointed at the massive door ahead of them. "It was nice meeting you," she added hastily before retreating and saying, "If I catch you one more time trying to make money off of the—" The rest of Sally's sentence was smothered as she shut the door behind her.

Bellatrix glanced at Hermione, probably meaning to say something but then a cheerful voice announced: "Hello!" and a warm palm slipped into Hermione's. Perplexed, she looked down to see something standing somewhere just on the same level as her thighs—a girl of golden braids and wide green eyes, peering back at her.

"Oh hello," she replied automatically and smiled before glancing back at Bellatrix who had already set off for the office. Hermione rushed after her, the little girl following them, too.
All the three of them entered after knocking twice and hearing a joyous, "Come in!"

An elderly lady, as if taken right out of a fairytale, with snow-white hair and generous smile jumped to her feet briskly and dashed to Bellatrix, not even waiting to be offered a handshake but seizing Bellatrix's hand in both of hers and cradling them as though they needed protection.

"Mrs Morgan, what a pleasure," she said, emphasising every word. "I cried when I read your letter! No one has been that generous to us in years! Please, please, have a seat. And you? You must be Anna, darling!" Having turned to Hermione, Ms Montgomery squeezed her hand too.

Hermione couldn't feel worse; the woman looked so kindhearted and sincere, and somehow too old for her age, the premature wrinkles suggesting she must have gone through a lot in her life... and here Hermione was to add some more to that...

"Yes, madame," she said rather quietly, unable to face her, and so rather looked down at the little girl, who was still holding her hand.

"Hannah," said Ms Montgomery suddenly. "What did I tell you about bothering our guests?"

"That I shouldn't do it! But I haven't spoken a word! I swear on my mother's—"

"What did I tell you about swearing on your mother's grave?"

Hermione's heart clenched at hearing that.

"That I shouldn't do it! But I haven't—"

"Alright, alright," Ms Montgomery held out her hand. "Off you go now, I need to talk to—"

"Pleaaaase!" The girl named Hannah began jumping. "I want to stay! I'll be as quiet as a mouse!" she pleaded and Hermione had to smile upon seeing her pout and squeeze her hand even tighter.

"Oh alright!" resigned the witch softly. "But don't want to hear a word from you! Deal?"

"You have my word, Ms Monty!"

Shaking her head, 'Ms Monty' laughed. "Oh that child! But where was I? Oh yes, seat yourselves down!" she repeated as she went to sit behind her desk full of unorganised stacks of papers. "May I offer you something? Some tea, biscuits, perhaps?"

"No, no, thank you," said Bellatrix and Mrs Montgomery turned to Hermione, who shook her head, giving her a small smile. They sat down onto the two unsteady chairs. Hannah let go of Hermione and started prowling closer to Bellatrix.

"Let me express my gratitude again, my dear!"

"Oh please, Mrs Montgomery, don't even mention it! I'm just glad that I can be of any help. Seeing smiles on these tiny little faces is a thank you enough for me!" said Bellatrix, her eyes darting to Hannah, beaming at her affectionately.

Hermione almost burst out. God, Bellatrix was such an actress!

"You are very kind!" said Ms Montgomery, looking at her as though she was the most lovable creature on Earth. "If you don't mind me asking, though," she added curiously. "Why did you pick us, namely?"
"I—" started Bellatrix but paused, distracted by the little Hannah who had just started climbing onto her lap. "I..."

Hermione watched in awe as the girl bestrode her legs, wrinkling the silvery dress with her slippers; her eyes jumped to Bellatrix's face, expectant as to see what she was going to do about it, and had to suppress a strong urge to laugh because she could practically see how greatly Bellatrix was struggling as not to curse the little girl to hell and back.

"Hannah!" lamented Ms Montgomery.

"What? I said nothing!"

The matron buried her face in her palms.

Hannah settled confidently on Bellatrix's lap, facing her. "You are very pretty," she whispered with wide bright eyes, grabbing a handful of Bellatrix's lustrous curls into her hand. "And you have very pretty hair! Like a princess!" Bellatrix's jaw was tense, her eyes unblinking as she tried to compose herself—it was a mudblood touching her and giving her ridiculous compliments after all. "Eh... thank you, love," she said, trying to get her hair back but Hannah had won.

"I'll braid this for you, okay? Don't mind me while I'm doing it, you go on, chat!"

Hermione turned her head aside, rubbing her chin against her shoulder as though she had an itch while biting her cheeks hard.

"It's not funny! It's not funny, it's not funny!"

"So as I was saying," Bellatrix started anew, her usually self-assured voice a bit uncertain now that she was helpless against the child. "My grandmother was a friend of your dear aunt way back when she lived in Scotland and which I reckon this orphanage was named after... ?"

Scotland? That information was new to Hermione. Where had Bellatrix gotten it from?

"Yes, indeed! Well, it used to before we had to change it due to some nasty family business but let's not get into that! I'd much rather hear about your grandmother! May I ask, what was her name? Perhaps auntie Hepsie mentioned her at some point; maybe I will remember. She used to talk to me a lot about her youth," said Ms Montgomery.

"Celia Alderidge," replied Bellatrix and Hermione froze like a rabbit, listening. Why did Bellatrix's imaginary grandmother have the same surname as Blair? She could only hope it was a damn coincidence. It better be!

"Alderidge... Oh, I don't remember her mentioning such name," said Mr Montgomery contemplatively but immediately her face brightened. "But what does it matter, surely they must have been great friends!"

"Yes, great great companions," nodded Bellatrix before drawing back as Hannah shifted and clumsily turned from facing Bellatrix to face Ms Monty as she called her. She leaned against Bellatrix's front fully and placed her dark hair over her own tiny shoulder to continue her work.

Bellatrix was smiling the whole time but Hermione knew she was livid; and Hermione enjoyed it immensely.

"They bonded over a mutual passion for collecting precious relics—at least, that's what she told me," suggested Bellatrix, eyeing the woman in front of her. Meanwhile, Hannah had finished the first braid, pulling down the pink scrunchie from her own hair, securing Bellatrix's with it.
"Here, you can keep it!" she said, smiling.

Hermione didn't know how long she could go on without roaring with laughter. Bellatrix had a bloody pink scrunchie in her hair.

"Oh yes, auntie Hepsie loved to collect things," said Ms Montgomery, smiling, too. "But it's been years, her house was always stuffed with various objects that I as a child or even as a teen loved to ask about. Sadly, I moved to Ireland and we fell out of contact for over seven years; it was only when I had moved back that we rebonded..."

"Oh I'm so glad to hear that," pointed Bellatrix. "We should always stay close to our beloved ones, isn't that right?"

"Indeed! Even though she could be a handful sometimes," smiled Ms Montgomery kindly, her eyes lost in memories.

"Well, I remember my grandmother saying that about her too," said Bellatrix, smiling herself, perhaps because that was the kind of turn she wanted the conversation to take. "She said they used to row over the relics a lot. They had the biggest fight over some artefact, I'm not even sure what it was exactly. Your aunt didn't want to sell it to her! Would you believe it? Rowing over such nonsense," Bellatrix laughed with just enough casualty, drawing back even more as Hannah was demanding more and more of her hair.

"I bet it was either Slytherin's locket or Hufflepuff's cup!—oh yeah, auntie was always protective of those!" said Ms Montgomery. "Well, good thing she isn't alive—she wouldn't like what we've done with them," the woman offered on her own and Hermione didn't know whether to be glad or feel awful about having gained her trust.

Bellatrix, on the other hand, did not seem guilty at all. She seized the arms of the chair and sat up straighter, saying nothing. Hannah stirred in her lap but did not leave.

"Yes," she went on. "I've been running this place for more than four decades now. Auntie was wealthy and she left me the majority of her gold but such place requires a lot of maintenance. We don't make any profit. In order to keep this place running, we needed to sell even her precious relics."

"I'm so sorry to hear that! Pardon me, I'm just curious." God, Bellatrix could be so polite if she wanted to! "Was it of any help? I've heard Mr Borgin isn't generous when it comes to money."

"Oh, thankfully we didn't sell them to Mr Borgin, although he'd been trying to push us to. I only consented about Slytherin's locket. But the cup, it was worth more than he could offer. We sold it to the auctioneer years ago, Mr Huxtable; used to send us checks every year before he passed away.

That was, apparently, all Bellatrix needed to hear. She forced herself to ten more minutes of talking before dramatically turning to Hermione.

"Oh my, what's the time, Anna, we can't miss out our next appointment!" she turned back to Ms Montgomery. "Time flies so fast when you're having a good time, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it's about time we left," nodded Hermione, her voice raspy from keeping silent for so long.

"You'll have to excuse us. Now, as I promised, Ms Montgomery," said Bellatrix, standing up, little Hannah sliding down her legs. Bellatrix took out a small black pouch, holding it out for Ms Montgomery to take. Teary-eyed, Ms Montgomery sprang to her feet, grabbed the hand holding the
pouch and pressed her lips to the skin. Hermione noticed Bellatrix's lips twitching a bit but masking it well.

"My dear, you're so cold," the woman clasped her other hand over Bellatrix's.

"It's nothing," she replied, gently freeing her hand and putting the pouch onto the table.


After the wave of pleasantries, Hermione and Bellatrix closed the door behind their backs, saying they would see themselves to the door.

"Will you come again?" Hannah ran after them but didn't get any answer as Bellatrix pulled Hermione by the sleeve and they rushed downstairs where they Disapparated.

Hermione had never heard someone curse as much as Bellatrix when they landed. She pulled at the pink scrunchie angrily and when she finally got it out of her hair, threw it away as though she had some unfinished business with it.

Hermione tried not to laugh and rather distracted herself by casting around. She realised they were in Knockturn Alley.

"You wait here," said Bellatrix as she unbraided her hair and adjusted it the way she wanted, still positively vexed.

"What? Why? I—"

"I'm going to Borgin and Burkes," she clarified. "They know me there; besides, the spell..."

Hermione parted her lips, nodding as she caught her drift. The spell wouldn't work. First, because Burke knew Bellatrix and second, the safety measures would halt the effect of the potion Hermione had taken.

"Oh okay, I'll be here, then," nodded Hermione.

Bellatrix returned fifteen minutes later. "That filthy traitor!" she seethed. "Said he sold it!" She put her wand into her sleeve and Hermione had a strong urge to go and check on the old Burke to see whether he was still alive. "I've asked him about the name and he had the audacity to lie to me!"

"How do you know?" asked Hermione.

"That he was lying?"

"Yes."

"Because he swore it was me who bought it two years ago."

A/N:

I. Oh dear... your reviews made me so emotional! I can't thank you enough for being so kind to me and I will never stop saying this—but damn, thank you, thank you for keeping up with this story and investing your time into reading it! I appreciate it so so much!

II. All the love to my beta reader, Irymia who is a total half-God for editing my mess of a writing in one day!
III. I love you, I love you and I really hope you enjoyed this chapter, I can't wait to hear what you think!

VI. With all my love, AP
"If I may interfere," enunciated Hermione, "I think that as an auctioneer, Mr Huxtable could hardly afford anything as valuable as Hufflepuff’s cup. It's more likely that he acted as an intermediary to acquire a sufficient amount of gold for the orphanage. Due to the fanaticism revolving around the founder's relics, he might have organised something like a silent auction to protect the identity of the new owner; notified only a few wizards he considered potentially interested in buying, took bids from them and settled with the highest price offered; that could also explain why the public doesn't know anything about the cup, where it is or who actually owns it," said Hermione, eyeing Bellatrix's discontented frown.

They were back at the manor in the affluent room, where Hermione had undergone Bellatrix's sleeping experiments on the day of her arrival—only this time, instead of lying on the floor or having been sprawled on the renaissance divan like a wandering starfish, she was standing with dignity and perfectly conscious at its foot. Across from her, Bellatrix was leaning against the writing desk behind which the elaborated windows were streaming in the soft crepuscular light of the slowly setting sun. Her face still bore the signs of incredulity at Burke's statement and not even Hermione's effort to divert her attention elsewhere had managed to erase it.

"As far as I know," she went on in a more pressing voice, "there are only four wizarding auction houses in London—it'll be no trouble to find the one he worked for, don't you think?"

Bellatrix curled her lip at that, saying, "Well, given Hamilton Huxtable worked for the Arcus Emacity at the Crystal Palace... it certainly won't be any trouble." Having noticed Hermione's open-mouthed stare, she added querulously, "Yes, I had the pleasure. Now, before you start contemplating any more theories, little miss Anne Conway, I'll have you know that this time you don't have to bother because I've already done the work for you." Bellatrix pulled away from the desk, her eyes finally present as they bore into Hermione. "Tonight we break in, go through the auction contracts, find out who has the cup and then puff—" She widened her eyes momentarily. "—we're gone."

A burglary?! Parting her lips, Hermione hesitated a moment and then asked, "Must we do it this way? The place is undoubtedly closely guarded and breaking in would be complete self-sabotage. We have one chance in a million that we get in undetected."

"Tsk tsk tsk, I must say that I'm a little disappointed in your lack of faith in me," said Bellatrix, pouting and resting her hand onto the table behind her back.

"I don't doubt your skills," emphasised Hermione. "I'm just saying that it would be hazardous to go there without a plan. How about we think of something that isn't illegal first?"

Bellatrix snickered at that. "Aren't you a little wimp!" she quipped.

"I am not!" objected Hermione incredulously with her cheeks aflame. "I simply don't want to get caught and end up being interrogated! Merlin, there must be dozens and dozens of charms placed upon those documents to protect them from being accessed—the whole facility, actually, and... and..."

With her eyebrows raised, Bellatrix watched Hermione's hands as she threw them up in despair, trying to finish her sentence but failing to do so; concluding that there was nothing coming out of
her, she said flippantly, "If you're too scared you can stay here; nobody's forcing you to go, anyway."

"I'm not scared!" gritted Hermione. "I'm just being cautious; there's a difference!"

Bellatrix gave a fake sigh of revelation which earned her a scowl from Hermione.

"Look, I suggest we—"

"No, muddy, you don't get to suggest anything," said Bellatrix in a sweet, yet weirdly resolute tone.

"The plan is set and I don't care one bit whether you like it or not. Either you're going along with my idea or you're staying here."

Hermione swallowed, knowing there was no way out of this.

"Fine," she consented and added rather derogatorily, "tell me one more thing, though: what are you going to do if after touching one of the documents, an Anti—Apparition charm goes off? We would be trapped and then arrested and—"

"Stop drawing ridiculous scenarios!" snapped Bellatrix, obviously losing her patience. "We won't get arrested! Now, get back to your room and wait until I come for you; there you can go on with your soliloquy without getting on my nerves!"

Irritated herself, Hermione bit her tongue and turned on her heel to leave but was stopped immediately. "What are you doing?"

Facing her again, Hermione gave her a perplexed look, saying coldly, "you told me to leave?"

"Yes, I did, but you're a witch, not a muggle—Apparate!"

As if it was too degrading to walk there on foot. Hermione swallowed an exasperated sigh as she drew her wand and Apparated from the annoyed witch into her room. A short-lived smile made it to her lips at finding that she was getting more precise with every time she did that; however, not even that was a strong enough consolation to ease her worries.

Casting a look at the darkening sky, Hermione reclined onto the bed with her legs hanging down. There was a fresh scent of orchids emanating from the mussel silk sheets that suggested Billey must have been here to clean up. Slumping her head over, she saw a laden tray on her nightstand. Hermione climbed toward it, realising only now how hungry she was. Already used to eating without a table, she placed the silver tray onto the bed in front of her and dived straight into roasted potatoes and stir-fried yardlong beans.

And while she was eating her dinner that most likely hadn't been approved by Bellatrix again, her brain was whirring like the fan in an overheated computer, trying to come up with a plan as to how to get to the auction contracts without actually breaking the law. Her values were all screaming at her to stay here and let Bellatrix do the work on her own, but damn it, how could she?!

Hermione let go of the silver fork and pressed the white napkin that was resting beside her plate to her lips, thinking.

She didn't have the freedom of choice and felt like Bellatrix must have had it figured out by now and was flat-out using it to her own advantage. It was almost like she was contextualising Hermione's behaviour as though she was a laboratory rat, and by trying to get her to overstep her boundaries, see how far Hermione was willing to go, but also learn about her strengths and
weaknesses just so she could figure her strategies and outsmart her.

Besides that, and it was only now that Hermione had realised it, by getting Hermione to agree to something that might potentially ruin her future, Bellatrix must have acquired one more reason to believe that Hermione wasn't doing this for the sole purpose of experience—no one in their right mind would risk that much if the whole reason for their actions would be at stake.

If there was any truth in that, she had just given herself away...

 Damn it, Hermione, what were you thinking?! You've been told to be careful around Bellatrix! He told you how smart she was and about her imperceptive ways of using it!

Hermione's hands raked through her hair.

Right... let's not panic now. It was just one silly mistake, after all—or perhaps no mistake at all! Perhaps Hermione was reading too much into it. Yes... she was just paranoid as a result of having to hide so much; besides, those were all just the assumptions stemming from her own overburdened mind...

One way or another, Hermione needed to let it go; in a couple of hours, Bellatrix was coming for her and they were bloody breaking into the Arcus Emacity auction house.

Hermione could not believe she was taking part in this.

Glancing toward the half-eaten dinner, she pierced one more potato with her fork, and another one and another until they mashed together and slid off the tines.

What was the worst thing that might happen tonight? First and foremost, if discovered, she and Bellatrix would get arrested and sentenced to Azkaban for breaking and entering for something below a year.

Pondering about it for a second, Hermione furrowed her brows. No, that seemed too far-fetched. Logically, Bellatrix with her connections wouldn't even make it to the trial forasmuch as she could give a generous amount of gold to the competent authorities to erase her name from the report. And Hermione? While she didn't have such resources at hand, she was still a minor; that was an extenuating circumstance, wasn't it? Still, by the time of the trial, she would already be legally an adult which would mean she'd only get away if she paid a fine of about five hundred galleons. Moreover, Hermione would have a record, thanks to which she wouldn't get accepted to any of the universities she would want to apply to later on; but above all, her parents would be notified and Hermione's heart would shatter to pieces over seeing them so disappointed in her because of all the lies she'd told them—and the worst part would be that she wouldn't even be able to explain why she had done such an atrocious thing... And Blair... Hermione couldn't even complete the thought.

The shame was crawling upon her like a vulture. She couldn't let herself be arrested. She must persuade Bellatrix to go along with her plan—but what plan exactly? She better thought of something.

Hermione had spent the entire evening and majority of the night weaving her ideas into something Bellatrix might consider worth utilising, but when the witch came into her room at two a.m., finding Hermione sitting on her hands in the armchair by the window, wide awake and bouncing her legs as though high on caffeine, she didn't want to hear a single word from her.

"No, Granger, I've already told you I'm not changing the plan so don't even start with me! Just tell me one thing—are you coming with me or not?"
Every bit of sanity inside Hermione screamed at her not to do this and she went against everything she believed in as she looked into Bellatrix's uncompromising eyes and nodded reluctantly.

Surveying her for a moment, Bellatrix seemed close to smiling before pursing her lips and saying, "Fine, but I'm warning you—there must be no mistakes on your part! I'm not going to look out for you. If you panic and lose your head, I'll leave you there for the aurors to take you under arrest, understood?"

"You can't be serious!"

"You've got one job," Bellatrix went on, raising her voice. "And that is to look for the contract—nothing else. Don't even think of casting spells or doing any sort of magic: the trace will give us away and we'll be screwed."

Hermione nodded again, her heart hammering. She already regretted her decision; there was too much at stake. Too much. Biting her lip, she gave Bellatrix a pleading look. "You wouldn't leave me there, would you?" she couldn't help saying, noticing too late how pathetic she sounded.

Bellatrix tilted her head, undoubtedly amused but trying to hide it. "Depends," she purred. "If you manage to find it before someone finds us... then as a sign of my gratitude, perhaps I won't."

"Why must you do this?!" cried Hermione. "I am already too anxious as it is! Instead of trying to make me more upset, you should reassure me so that I can focus on finding the document rather than imagining how getting an Azkaban number tattooed on my neck must hurt!"

"Do I look like a therapist to you?"

"Not even close, but you're a human being and surely you're capable of a kind word!" went on Hermione, the bubbling fear pumping her audacity.

"Calm down, you wuss!" snapped Bellatrix harshly. "If you can't handle this, I'll go alone! I don't need a child crying behind my back—"

"Just tell me nothing bad is going to happen!" Hermione interrupted her in a high-pitched voice. "That's all I need to hear!" She knew she was being ridiculous and that her throwing such a tantrum wasn't helping her resolution to gain Bellatrix's respect at all, but she needed to be reassured before throwing herself from such a precipice. And even though Bellatrix's frown was suggesting just as much—that Hermione was exceedingly infantile, the most pathetic creature she'd had the misfortune of knowing, and that she would do better if she went without her, she was still standing here, clearly contemplating.

It didn't take her long to respond, though; with the muscles in her jaw clenched and with her nostrils flaring, she gritted, "Nothing bad is going to happen. I have everything under control and no, I won't leave you there! Satisfied?! God, you're insufferable!" Her hands curled into fists and she was scowling at Hermione as if being kind to her was causing her inexpressible agony.

Having expected anything but a comforting word (sort of), Hermione blinked a few times; coming from Bellatrix, it should be more than enough, and yet—Hermione was pushing it, she knew as much, but she still couldn't help saying, "If anything happens, promise me you won't let the authorities alert my parents!"

Bellatrix looked close to murdering her. "Any more dead wishes?"

Hermione shook her head, hiding her nether lip under the upper one, biting on it. She watched Bellatrix as she, shaking from anger, drew a deep breath and ambled forward, stopping only when
they were eye to eye. Hermione felt her heart rate increase. What was she...?

Bellatrix's unblinking gaze lingered over the frightened Hermione who was glued to those piercing eyes as if hypnotised, unable to look anywhere else.

"Find that contract so we can get out as quickly as possible," said Bellatrix, her voice all of a sudden soothing, as if she'd finally understood that the success of their mission truly was dependant on Hermione too and that however much she wished to be mean to her, right now she needed Hermione calm and focused.

Her eyes slid down toward Hermione's thighs, hesitating, then flicked to Hermione's eyes and back down as if considering something. Slowly, Bellatrix reached out and touched Hermione's forearm with the tips of her fingers before letting them slide to her wrist, which left Hermione completely paralysed.

"Not a word!" whispered Bellatrix, interrupting her silent freak-out. She seized her wrist, just enough for the pressure to be firm yet still gentle, and gave Hermione a reassuring, barely-there smile before she Apparated.

They landed abruptly outside in the cold dark. Gasping for air, Hermione tripped over her own feet and bumped her chest into Bellatrix's arm, bracing her free hand on her elbow, the sudden change of the witch's behaviour leaving her somewhat unbalanced. Bellatrix tried to pull away from her immediately but soon relaxed, letting Hermione steady herself first before releasing her arm and moving away from her.

Hermione's hands fidgeted. She curled them into her jumper, trying to make sense of the chaos happening inside her body—Bellatrix was just playing her act and was being nice only because she needed Hermione at ease. Nothing else! Shortly, she was going to be as nasty as before, she reasoned inwardly but her galloping heart was deaf to all the reasons why it was wrong for it to be reacting like this.

Hermione pinched her arm to make the confusing thoughts disappear and refocus herself on her current surroundings. There around her, in the pale light of the street lamps lay the deserted Crystal Palace Park, coated in a heavy mist, lonesome in the deep dark night. The air was fresh with an earthy scent of petrichor and felt rigorously cold even through her cotton jacket.

"There," whispered Bellatrix and Hermione turned to her, following her eyes that seemed somewhat wider and more alive in the depth of the menacing shadows. She was looking to their left where in the distance the granite sphinxes guarded the half-broken upper and lower Italian terraces, the very last remnants that had survived the fire in 1963 which destroyed the majority of the Crystal Palace.

A flurry of clothes ruffled next to her and Hermione turned back to Bellatrix, seeing her fumbling for something inside her pocket; she pulled out a fluid, silvery substance which Hermione immediately recognised as the invisibility cloak. She thought of Harry Potter and his very own invisibility cloak, recalling the many adventures it had succoured him and his two best friends through.

"We only have to use this until we're past the sphinxes," said Bellatrix quietly again. "We can't be seen."

"But they..."

"Shh!" Bellatrix threw her a warning look, silencing her. She placed the cloak over both of them.
and drew closer to Hermione who felt a sudden urge that had nothing to do with any romantic feelings, to grab her hand and hold it but knew better than that. She got at least a small comfort of their arms touching occasionally as they began threading toward the monumental statues.

*Oh Blairie, if I didn't love you so much—if I wasn't so scared that you could lose your life, I'd have never agreed to this.*

They were still around a good fifty yards away from the sphinxes and the droplets of rain glistening on the lawn had already soaked Hermione's trainers through. Thirty yards, twenty yards. They were advancing forward, quietly, the terrifying heads of the granite creatures appearing closer and closer. Bereft of breath, Hermione tried not to think too much about all the stories she'd read about them but couldn't; she recalled the legend about the sphinx, a monster of destruction and bad luck, sent by the gods to torment the town of Thebes to punish their king for carrying off one of the children of Zeus; it was believed the sphinx posed a riddle to the locals who passed by the rock that she had taken up residence on and devoured anyone who failed to give her the correct answer. The riddle went: 'I have four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening, but I am the weakest when I have the most legs. What am I?' Only Oedipus, king of Thebes, managed to get the answer right as he replied, 'A human being walks on all fours as a baby, on two legs as an adult, and with a crutch when he grows old,' which made the sphinx cast herself from the rock in defeat. To muggles, this had always been nothing but an ancient Greek legend but to wizards, it was a valid historical event; of course, the reality was slightly less fiction-like but the essence remained the same.

And it was actually quite recently that Hermione had read about a case of a sphinx attacking a group of pilgrims who had bumped into her in Kalahari desert and couldn't solve her riddle. The wizards had survived only because one of their members managed to Apparate them all back to Upington where their journey had started.

Hermione's heart thrashed wildly inside her chest, her imagination running wild and constructing one eerie scene after another—sphinxes opening their almond-shaped eyes, sensing their movements, their pulse, coming down from their concrete plinths right in front of them to... An owl hooted in the distance and Hermione couldn't halt a quiet yelp from leaving her mouth. Bellatrix stopped abruptly, grasping her wrist. Petrified, they were standing there, their eyes affixed to the sphinxes' unmoving forms. Hermione felt physically sick from fear, her breath reduced to a mirage of nothing as she dug her nails into the flesh of her palms, inwardly cursing her jitteriness.

She'd certainly woken them up! They must have heard her! Hermione was sure she and Bellatrix were going to die here. Surprising a sphinx, trying to outfox her... it was certain death.

They were glued to the spot for a number of moments, waiting, but when none of the creatures had stirred even a little, Bellatrix pulled Hermione forward—she, however, didn't move an inch. In no way was she planning to go any further.

Tightening her grip, Bellatrix faced her but due to the darkness, Hermione couldn't see her expression. It wasn't hard to imagine it, though: eyes flaring, lips primed or twitching, swallowing every profanity she wanted to spew at her.

Shame-no shame, Hermione was terrified out of her skin.

Having given her a moment to collect her bearings, Bellatrix tried a different strategy. Slowly, she stepped back and moved her arm that was gripping Hermione's wrist over Hermione's and pulled it toward herself with her elbow. Going through such a terror as she was, Hermione immediately responded to the touch and grabbed onto Bellatrix's upper arm with her free hand, while wrenching her wrist out of her grip and rather seizing Bellatrix's hand with her perspiring one. Bellatrix
seemed to tense up at that but didn't risk having the sphinx wake up and went with it silently. Together they stepped forward.

Hermione moulded herself to the witch's side, letting her experience first-hand how frantically her heart beat against her arm; and even though she was still on the brink of passing out, Bellatrix's closeness made her feel somehow much more secure.

Huddled together like that, they came within a few feet of the sphinxes—their paws were gigantic, and so were their claws. They could kill them with just a single strike...

Hermione was barely able to keep it together; she couldn't help sinking her chin into Bellatrix's shoulder, feeling the silken locks bouncing off her skin as they walked. They were right in front of the beasts now, the cold dread circling through Hermione's veins like ice. She closed her eyes, beginning to pray to God that if he let them survive this... Bellatrix tried to free herself from Hermione's vice-like grasp but it took the girl a while to realise that they had already made it past the statues and to let her go. They ended up on the lower terrace, the sphinxes no longer in sight. Turning back, Bellatrix lowered herself and cast a non-verbal spell from under the cloak; there in front of them grew a translucent, fluid wall, moving as if made of tiny sea waves. Then Bellatrix threw the cloak off of them and stuffed it back into her pocket, which surely just like Hermione's beaded purse must have been magically enlarged.

"Proud of yourself?" asked Bellatrix angrily and Hermione flinched, casting around in fear. "They can't hear us now," she added, wiping her hand against her dress and for the first time it didn't bother Hermione. She felt an incredible amount of weight lift off of her shoulders as she breathed out heavily, too glad to have made it alive to care about Bellatrix's conceited act.

She watched her reach into her other pocket and pull out a small stone which, as she held it up to the light, reminded Hermione of a cracked ammonite fossil. Bellatrix's pale hand lingered by the concrete pillar to her right, hesitating before pressing the fossil to the small crack in its structure. It fit perfectly and Hermione gasped as the ground beneath their feet shook and slowly began to open to reveal a long underground staircase.

Bellatrix looked at Hermione, tipping her head toward it. "Go on," she said. "Or would you like me to take your hand first?" Shaking her head, she snorted. "Pull yourself together!"

Hermione felt a slight pinch inside her stomach, a certain sign of her pride being wounded. Bellatrix wasn't being fair. How could she expect Hermione to keep it together when she was completely unarmed? Unlike her, Hermione couldn't use her wand; she had nothing to defend herself with except for a few moves she'd learnt in her self-defence classes which were totally useless against shinxes or any sort of magic, anyway. It was only natural that she felt insecure and scared, especially after Bellatrix's unnecessary remarks about leaving her here.

There was no time to spit it into her face, though.

Bellatrix had her wand pointed toward the descending darkness at the bottom of the stairs, whispering. The twitching puffs of silver jolts flashed from the tip of her wand to meet the depth where they perished like a broken star. Hermione concluded that Bellatrix must have been trying to detect the protective charms cast upon that area.

"Nothing," said the witch after a while, taking the first step. She paused, turning around. Hermione followed her reluctantly.

Congratulations, said the voice inside her head, you've just become a criminal...
Bellatrix was walking two steps ahead of her, looking so self-confident as though she had never known fear. Hermione wanted to hold her hand so badly but rather wrapped her arms around herself—she didn't need to give her any more reasons to think she was using the situation to get close to her; Bellatrix wouldn't understand the science behind a simple touch, that it increased the sense of trust and therefore security and that that was the only thing Hermione wanted out of it—even the other version of herself liked to grab onto Harry's or Ron's hand or arm during their escapades.

Unprepared, Hermione recoiled in surprise as the torches on the walls sparked to life, lifting the ambient darkness from around them; they swished ghostly, their flames separating the walls, revealing an about sixty-feet long arch-roofed passageway ahead. Hermione was casting around, unsure if walking in the light was a good idea. A loud grating sound reverberated from above and as her eyes snapped up, she saw the ground over their heads closing; a terrible claustrophobic feeling entered her stomach. She glanced at Bellatrix but the witch didn't seem concerned at all.

They reached the bottom of the staircase, the unexpected scent of turpentine and linseed oil flooding Hermione's senses. She took a closer look at the stone walls: every inch was carved with what she thought must have been Jiahu symbols which were believed by many to be the oldest written words on Earth; Hermione wondered what they represented and why the architect had chosen to put those symbols specifically on the walls. She only hoped it wasn't some form of ancient magic to protect the place from intruders; she cast around in alarm but detected nothing except for the flaming torches and a large wooden door at the end of the passageway.

As they drew closer, she noticed it hung on iron pintles, reinforced with bands and studs but missing a handle. Having approached it, Bellatrix tapped her wand against its surface three times before drawing invisible lines in the air. Up and down, crosswise, and backward and forward. She repeated the movements three times before the door clicked and opened with a gentle swish. Hermione watched in puzzlement, unable to grasp how on earth Bellatrix had come to know the correct combination for entering—it certainly couldn't be easily available information and Hermione prayed that in order to figure it out she hadn't done anything thoughtless that could come back to bite them in the future.

Bellatrix pushed the door further open. She glanced at the riveted Hermione, pointing with her eyes to the gap of the door. She stepped inside and Hermione entered shortly after. They were in the dark again before the light came alive.

They appeared standing on the balcony of a lush circular foyer in which a number of shiny staircases were twisting down wildly and were flanked by diagonal mirrors, giving the room the impression of a rabbit hole amalgamated with a mirror maze; above their heads an enormous chandelier, made of thousands of cut-glass prisms, cast glitters and hues as the light hit the mirrors.

Hermione could envision one of the auction nights: the guests arriving, the long dresses of the women slipping down the stairs and glistening in the light. It must have been magnificent.

"Alright," enunciated Bellatrix, making Hermione turn toward her. "Seems like we're alone, however, I can't guarantee that it's going to stay that way once we access the file drawer. We don't have much time so you better hurry."

Hermione could practically feel her eyes widen at the pressure but still nodded, determined to appear braver than she felt. Bellatrix tore her gleaming eyes from her and set off to the closest staircase. Coasting down after her, Hermione tried not to panic at the sight of the shining mirrors playing tricks on her and making her paranoia spiral out of control—what if they were being watched, what if the mirrors were somehow recording them, what if up until now nothing had
happened because they were being lulled into a false sense of security and then boom, at the end there would be aurors waiting?

Hermione had to grasp onto the cold baluster as her head spun from panic.

_Breathe, just breathe_, she told herself. _Bellatrix has it under control, and even if she doesn't, she's wealthy and powerful and she bloody needs you; she'll do anything to get you out of trouble so stop freaking out!_

They made it to the bottom of the long staircase. It was eerily quiet down there and the light from the chandelier was slowly resigning, too. Hermione could feel her heartbeat in her throat as her eyes landed on a long, dimly lit corridor in front of them; she gave Bellatrix a desperate look. But the witch wasn't paying attention: she was looking from her right to her left as though at a crossroads and then began walking straight ahead. Hermione jogged after her. Having taken about a dozen steps, Bellatrix stopped, turned and faced the plain wall.

She brought her left hand up and placed it along the stone wall, tapping her fingers slowly like a pianist playing the beginning of Chopin's Nocturne. She pulled back for a second, hesitating. Subsequently, her palm slammed hard against the wall which Hermione didn't expect in the least and she gave an embarrassing start. A lone ornamented door with what seemed to be a numeric keypad instead of a doorknob had formed in front of their eyes. Hermione drew closer and saw that what she expected to be numbers were actually anglo-frisian runes. There was a jolt of excitement in her belly. Perhaps she could help, she had taken Ancient Runes at Hogwarts after all!

She parted her lips to say that she could try and read them but Bellatrix had already extended her arm and began pointing at the runes with her wand even without her help.

The door soon clicked open.

Again, Hermione stared in bewilderment—who the hell had provided Bellatrix with the password? Had she already been here before? She'd obviously attended the auction events, but she couldn't have possibly been told about the protective charms! Damn it, what had she done?

Bellatrix peered beyond the door into the dark room before entering; Hermione stepped in after her. The door closed behind them on its own and they were left standing in the darkness; a second later the lights switched on. They were surrounded by four walls packed from floor to ceiling with what seemed to be hundreds and hundreds of wooden drawer faces with golden knobs on them.

Head spinning, Hermione faced Bellatrix—she had told her they didn't have much time; told her she needed to hurry but there was no way Hermione could hurry and find the contract among millions of them!

Bellatrix, however, didn't seem to have time to share her concern as she was busy casting spells all around them; Hermione's heart beat faster. It was happening. It—was—happening.

When Bellatrix finished, she looked past Hermione and walked forward, bypassing her and stopping in front of the drawer faces. "Now, Granger," she said, turning her head towards her. "When I open this, you'll have about fifteen minutes at most to find the contract. My spells won't last long as there's ancient magic placed upon this room; there will be people coming in and trying to break them so... you better be quick."

"This is insane," said Hermione openly, coming closer to Bellatrix. "Look at these drawers! There are too many of them!"
"You don't have to go through them all!" replied Bellatrix sharply and pointed at the golden knob in front of her. "Just this one."

Hermione drew her head back. How the hell did she know everything about this place?!

"Get on with it," added Bellatrix and before Hermione could protest, she turned the knob and pulled the drawer open; a conflux of silvery mist, about as big as a bludger flew out of it and through the wall, soughing like a wind partridge; a Patronus warning.

It had begun.

Bellatrix stepped aside as Hermione rushed to the opened drawer—having peered inside, she broke out in cold sweat. Where she had expected to see tons of stored files of documents, she found a couple of hundreds of reagent tubes with blue liquid inside lying in parallel rows at its bottom.

But those... those must be memories, she thought. Quickly, she grasped the first tube in the upper row, turning it in her hands and hoping that in order to learn something about it, she wouldn't need to use a Pensieve. To her great relief, she saw a flurry of letters carved along the length of the shiny glass. It wasn't easy to read but after a moment Hermione managed to make out the word 'Excalibur', which as she recalled was the legendary sword of King Arthur. However intriguing, she didn't even think of inspecting it more. It wasn't what she was looking for. She put the tube back, seizing the one beside it, 'Cronus scythe'. A mild brush of hopelessness sunk into her stomach.

Calm down, you've only started!

She was holding the seventh tube when a flutter of voices came from outside the room. Gasping, Hermione dropped the tube which clunked against its twins in the drawer but fortunately didn't break.

"They arrived sooner than I thought," commented Bellatrix phlegmatically which almost made Hermione stop searching and turn to her to give her a look of disbelief—what the hell was wrong with her?! Why wasn't she scared at all while Hermione already felt like throwing up from fright?

Hermione forced her shaking hand to return the tube to its place and seize another one. She'd managed to inspect three more before a series of loud explosions slammed against the outside walls.

Flinching, she let out a sigh of despair; she couldn't think clearly anymore. God, they were going to get caught! The dread was overtaking her senses, making her hands unbelievably clumsy, the tubes slipping from her fingers as though they were made of water.

Pull yourself together, Hermione!

"If I could just Accio it!" she blurted out loud, snatching as many tubes as only could fit into her palm, twisting them in her fingers and reading their names.

"Well, you can't, the protective charms—" started Bellatrix but Hermione cut her off.

"I know!" she snapped rather angrily. "If you JUST helped me—"

This time it was Bellatrix who interrupted. "I have the guards to mind; if anyone comes bursting in, I have to be prepared!"

"How very convenient," riposted Hermione cynically.
Bellatrix exhaled a snort of surprise and said, "If I were you, mudblood, I'd watch my tongue and do as I'm told. If you don't find it in time, I'm leaving without you."

God, she was a bitch! Gritting her teeth, Hermione seized another handful of tubes—Brísingamen, Ariadne's diadem, The Cintamani Stone, Mirror of Erised. Nothing. The minutes were passing and the bangs were intensifying. Hermione felt like crying. She was never going to find that stupid little—her eyes widened.

At that moment, the wall behind her exploded in a shower of debris raining down on her like a hailstorm. Crouching, Hermione gave a startled scream and turning around, threw herself against the drawers, her back hitting all the knobs it possibly could; she faltered and as she slumped down onto the floor, there was another deafening bang and everywhere around her dispersed an influx of dark smoke, hiding a prominent hole in the wall that she'd spotted just for a brief second, out of her sight.

The only thing she could see was Bellatrix's extended hand, holding a wand that was launching the thick smoke.

She didn't leave her; she was still here!

Hermione felt a sudden infusion of fortitude flooding her body. In spite of her dread, she crawled back toward the open drawer, her hands working on their own accord. The sparks of red and blue were flashing behind her back as though a raging storm but she decided to rely on Bellatrix to protect her and fully committed herself to her task.

She only needed five more seconds.

*Finally!*

Hermione quickly stood up and, rushing forward, collided with Bellatrix's back. She grasped both of her arms, whispering in her ear. "I got it! Come on, we need to get out!"

Bellatrix didn't reply. She lifted her right arm, waving her wand high over her head which made Hermione lose her grip; she grabbed a handful of Bellatrix's dress at her hips instead, curling her fingers into it.

Bright purple light flashed from the tip of Bellatrix's wand, rushing through the smoke straight toward the hole where it blew up like a mine. The sound of something heavy falling, shoutings and pained yelps sent shivers down Hermione's spine. In spite of their current situation, she hoped no one had gotten seriously hurt.

Shoving her hand into her pocket, Bellatrix took out the invisibility cloak. She threw it over their heads and sprung forward, the mortified Hermione, who was holding onto her for dear life, jogging at her side.

They climbed through the hole blindly. Bellatrix immediately stuck her hand from under the cloak and cast more spells over her shoulder so as to prevent anyone from following them. Hermione let go of her and, restraining from looking around to see whether the incomers were alright, she synchronized her steps with Bellatrix's. They both began sprinting up the corridor toward the staircase that had been there before but to Hermione's horror wasn't there any longer.

What the hell were they going to do now?! She turned to Bellatrix, seeing her throw one more spell behind them where it blasted against the stone floor. Then she pointed her wand in front of herself, saying, "bellum omnium contra omnes!"
The staircase materialised in front of their eyes.

Hermione could feel a raw mixture of gratitude and relief cheering inside her. They ran up, taking the stairs two at a time. Her lungs were already hurting and her pulse was throbbing in her throat, but they were so close to the exit! As they neared the door at the top of the stairs, Bellatrix shot one more spell behind them before rushing to unlock the door with the same combination she had used when they entered. The door clicked.

It worked, damn it, perhaps there was hope!

They had barely taken two strides out of the foyer when a chilling, eerie voice sliced the air ahead of them.

"Did you really thought you could deceive me?"

Hermione froze in dread. The sphinx—she was slowly prowling down the last stairs, the only barrier dividing them from freedom. She was whisking her tail angrily and glaring at where she and Bellatrix were standing at.

Hermione felt so close to fainting that her knees buckled and tears of fright formed in her eyes. Again, a forceful urge to cling to Bellatrix nuded her but she didn't dare blink, let alone move her body.

"I know you're here..."

She wasn't breathing any longer. The sphinx was ten feet away from them and Hermione knew that this was their end.

Then Bellatrix slouched and slipped from underneath the Invisibility cloak. Hermione's eyes widened so much, the tears slipped out of them. She wanted to seize her elbow and pull her back but it was too late. Bellatrix feigned a movement of folding something and placed the non-existent thing inside her pocket. Hermione's stomach dropped—she was making sure Hermione wouldn't be discovered.

The sphinx halted her steps. "A woman," she said slowly. "Haven't had the pleasure, haven't torn one open in eternity!"

No, no, no! Hermione screamed inwardly, inching to Bellatrix who certainly must have gone completely mad to have reached the point where she would do such a thing.

"Don't get your hopes up," replied Bellatrix in a firm confident voice. "You can't harm me."

The sphinx laughed a horrible laugh; she sat down, her body taking up the entire width of the passageway. "How come? You have no business being here; I can do as I please with you."

Underneath the cloak, Hermione reached inside her pocket, drawing out her wand.

"Not before you pose a riddle... am I right?" said Bellatrix in a tempting tone.

The sphinx seemed to falter.

"You love riddles, don't you?" she went on and Hermione suddenly understood what she was doing. The wizarding laws had long since forbidden the tamed sphinxes to challenge people to solve their riddles; their only job was to guard things. But their instilled purpose must have been still very much present and burning them alive.
"What would be the harm in that?" whispered Bellatrix.

The sphinx's claws were out as she considered her. It took her a moment to respond, "alright, mortal, earn your freedom if you dare!" She narrowed her eyes before reciting:

"There is one father and twelve children; of these each

Has twice thirty daughters of different appearance:

Some are white to look at and the others black in turn;

They are immortal and yet they all fade away."

Hermione was listening with her attention splitting between the riddle and the problem of how much longer Bellatrix's charm could keep the guards at bay inside the auction house. If only—

"The year, the days and nights." She heard Bellatrix answer almost instantly.

The sphinx parted her mouth, looking so fierce Hermione would swear she was going to attack—in which case Hermione was ready to launch all the spells she knew even if it was just to distract her. However, there was no need: after a moment, the sphinx stood up.

Could it be...?

Without a word, she began moving backwards, letting Bellatrix leave. Sick from relief, Hermione forced herself to move, tiptoeing behind her and trying to walk step to step with the witch so her footsteps wouldn't be heard. Hermione could not believe their luck; they were almost outside.

Upon reaching the terrace, the sphinx seemed to have lingered a moment before taking off with a terrible grating sound of her stone wings flapping and began flying high up into the dark night. But there was another sound; quiet, almost unnoticeable...

A terrifying presage rose upon Hermione.

She dashed to Bellatrix, preventing her from moving any higher as she grabbed her elbow and threw the invisibility cloak over her head; her arms curled around her waist and she pulled her to the side just in time before the giant head of the other sphinx appeared where the first one had vanished mere seconds ago. She and Bellatrix flattened themselves against the wall, falling completely still. Hermione didn't move an inch even though her forearm hurt as it was crushed in between the wall and Bellatrix's lower back.

The sphinx had pointed her eyes into the dark, looking straight past them. She stood there for what felt like an eternity before moving and advancing down the stairs.

Hermione was barely breathing with her front pressed tightly against the side of Bellatrix's back and her fingers piercing the leather corset right under the witch's breasts. Her forehead was inches from Bellatrix's temple and the soft strands of curls that lifted slightly with each of her shallow exhales.

They were unbelievably close, Hermione's grip so firm it was as though Bellatrix's life depended on it—as if she might die if Hermione slackened it even a little.

From the direction of the foyer, there came the drone of male voices, making Hermione rake her nails deeper into Bellatrix's stomach that retracted at the contact.
Relaxing her fingers a bit, Hermione followed the sphinx's head, which was parallel with their bodies now, with her eyes.

They must get out of here.

It was as if hers and Bellatrix's minds worked together simultaneously. They both took one careful step up and paused, waiting. The voices were closer and closer. It was now or never. They sprung up, avoiding a clawed paw that had dispelled after them by inches as they ran toward the lawn. They caught sight of the first sphinx launching herself from the sky without flapping her wings.

Bellatrix managed to Disapparate just before they had a chance to see the granite creature crush into the earth and break herself into myriad pieces.

Hermione's feet hit the ground and the left side of her forehead hit something profoundly hard. Yelping, she took a few steps back. Holding her hand to her face, she focused in front of her, seeing that she'd crashed into the column of the four-poster bed in her dimly lit bedroom.

With her head throbbing, she bent over and placed her hands onto the soft sheets, taking deep breaths. She felt sick; her head was spinning, her stomach churned.

They were alive.

They had bloody survived!

Letting go of her wand, Hermione turned to Bellatrix. "Are you alright?" she blurted at the same time as Bellatrix, sounding out of breath herself, asked, "Do you have it?"

Relieved to see her relatively unharmed, sporting only a faint scratch on her right cheek and pieces of granite in her hair, Hermione slowly sank onto the floor. Her hand was shaking as she reached inside her pocket, pulling out the tube that she had pocketed in a hurry in the room full of drawer faces.

Bellatrix kneeled down next to her. The ringlets of her heavy locks spilled past her shoulders over Hermione's extended hand, who even despite her unceasing dread couldn't help noticing how fluffy they felt against her skin.

Bellatrix took the tube from her hand without them touching and brought it to her eyes. "You priss!" she barked, looking at Hermione as though she'd betrayed her somehow. "This is not what we went there for!"

Gulping, Hermione shook her head. "While you were fighting, I swapped the containers so they wouldn't know—so they'll think it's the Mirror of Erised we're after." Hermione lowered her voice. "We have what we went there for."

The angry frown on Bellatrix's face smoothed out; her lips parted as she glanced at the tube in her hand and back at Hermione, breathing out a surprised huff.

Hermione felt her cheeks burn. "Do you think anyone saw us?" she asked, looking at her knees instead of Bellatrix's impressed countenance.

"Except for the sphinx that annihilated herself," she replied, standing up. "No."

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. "I thought we were never getting out of there," she admitted, shaking her head slightly. "You were incredible!"
"Well, you were preposterous," said Bellatrix as she ambled to the darkened window.

Hermione blinked in bewilderment, the words hitting her stomach like a cold fist.

Preposterous?

Well, alright, perhaps she hadn't been particularly heroic, but nonetheless she'd done what she could to be helpful even despite her limitations—she'd found the clue to Hufflepuff's cup, misled the chasers, and saved Bellatrix from the sphinx; didn't that count at least a little? If Hermione hadn't done anything, the beast would have kept them occupied until the guards came—Bellatrix would have been seen and either attacked by her or the wizards—or both at the same time.

And she said preposterous...

Nevermind. What else had Hermione actually expected? She'd never ingratiate herself with her. Folding her arms, she bit her inner cheeks.

"Don't pout, muddy," said Bellatrix, clearly amused.

Hermione ignored her.

"Aren't you curious about the contract?"

The sound of Bellatrix's footsteps on the wooden floor as she prowled back to her made Hermione turn her head more toward the door and away from her.

"It's not my fault you're a softie," she continued sweetly, sitting down onto the floor across from her.

Hermione let her eyes stray to her face, forming the coldest expression she could muster. Bellatrix smirked at that.

"That softie made sure you wouldn't get attacked!"

Tilting her head, Bellatrix let the tip of her tongue linger in the corner of her lip before biting the bottom one. Then she let out a soft chuckle. "I see what this is about; you expect me to thank you, don't you? Tell you how great—"

"No, I wasn't going for that," interrupted Hermione. "All I wanted was to say that you did a great job. I wasn't fishing for compliments or hoping you would thank me... Actually, I was going to thank you." Sighing, Hermione unfolded her arms, placing them into her lap instead. "Even though it's you in the first place that got us into that situation, it doesn't change anything about the fact that you were brilliant with the guards and the sphinx. You were one against many and you managed to get us out with as little as a scratch." Hermione glanced at the angry line on Bellatrix's cheek, perceiving a sudden urge to touch the reddened area surrounding it. Her stomach gave a lurch. "That's quite something."

For a second there, Bellatrix looked utterly perplexed as she stared at Hermione. Then she frowned. "Don't try to suck up to me!"

Hermione flipped her palm up in sudden exasperation. "I'm not! God, what is it with you? Has no one ever said anything nice to you and actually meant it?" Just as those words left Hermione's mouth, it occurred to her that perhaps, even though unintentionally, she might have hit the nail on the head.
Bellatrix had grown up in an upper-class family; she had married well, had money, power and glory; on top of that she was a very fine woman, appearance-wise, and must have been through enough flattery from men who were after only one thing—also the circles she moved in were surely cramped with phonies or fulsome social climbers with their counterfeit praises, who had never done anything that wouldn’t benefit them in some way. It actually must have been really hard for people like her to distinguish between genuineness and hypocrisy...

Hermione felt her face soften as Bellatrix snorted and, scowling, stood up.

"I'm going to need a Pensieve," she said coldly.

Change of the subject; Hermione concluded she must have been right then, and the revelation cut deeper than she would have expected. Deciding not to push it, though, she cleared her throat and asked, "Do you have one?"

Bellatrix didn't reply, rather drew out her wand.

"Are you going to view it now?" asked Hermione again as she began standing up, meaning to ask if she could come with her, but Bellatrix Disapparated without telling her a word.

Great.

After standing there in disappointment for several moments, Hermione took a few steps back and slowly reclined onto the bed. Her eyes unfocused on the coffered ceiling.

She couldn’t help wondering if Bellatrix actually had friends; real friends, not the likes of Crouch and all those purebloods that would abandon her the moment her ideas no longer fell in with theirs, but someone to be there for her through thick and thin.

As far as Hermione knew, she only had her family—Narcissa, Draco and, of course, her husband who seemed to care about her very much. Her mind strayed to that moment one summer ago, when Rodolphus had tried to console Bellatrix when her uncle Perseus had made an unexpected appearance at the ball which didn't seem to sit well with Bellatrix. He truly seemed to mind her wellbeing, and yet Bellatrix still treated him like garbage.

Strange.

Also, who knew where the wizard was now. Hermione hadn’t seen him around since she came here and it'd been a week already. She found it quite odd considering he and Bellatrix were married—they must have shared a household, a bedroom, bed...

Alright, let's not go there!

Frowning, Hermione looked at her wristwatch. It was something past three a.m. Her eyes returned to the ceiling, her hands curling in her shirt.

When the sphinx had confronted them earlier, she had thought they were screwed... yeah, completely screwed...

Was that aspect of their marriage actually being fulfilled? According to what she'd read about pureblood traditions, it had to... whenever the husband pleased. But were they, despite their dysfunctional communication patterns, sleeping with each other? Draco had told her that Bellatrix was away from home most of the time and Hermione had seen herself how she and Rodolphus had done nothing but rowed after not seeing each other for such a long time.
Out of the blue, her brain reconstructed the movie scene she'd seen last summer where a married couple fought until the husband seized his wife and they ended up engaging in a heated make-out session followed by—

Hermione sat upright, gritting her teeth.

Could it be with them like that too? Bellatrix playing hard to get and driving him crazy and then letting him push her up against the wall and—

Crap, she shouldn't be thinking about such things. Whatever Bellatrix and her husband did or didn't do was none of her business. Just like she shouldn't think about what Blair and Maxim might do once Blair came back from the Grangers...

Hermione felt her heart clench painfully. Perhaps she should have a shower and try to get some sleep—Blair and Maxim would certainly get it on—it had been such a long day, today's morning seemed so distant to her as if it had happened three days ago—more than once—standing up, she unzipped her jumper and threw it across the room onto the armchair in such a frustrated manner as if it belonged to Maxim himself.

Dragging herself to the bathroom, Hermione raised her top and tried to untie the beaded purse from her waist when she gave a start as Bellatrix Apparated back into the bedroom. Yanking the top down, she took a few steps back, feeling the warmth spread into her cheeks.

"Charles Barbary," said Bellatrix without any intro or showing any sentiments over having interrupted her. "He's the owner."

"Eh... Barbary?" repeated Hermione nervously, folding her arms and subsequently scratching her nape. Her fingers brushed against Blair's necklace and she seized the collar of the shirt, lifting it higher to cover it.

"Yes, I just said that, muddy."

Hermione tried to blot out her intrusive thoughts and focus. Barbary... Barbary... "I think I've heard of him," she stated slowly, biting her lip.

"You have?"

"But I can't quite remember where..."

"Think!"

Hermione's eyes began to aimlessly roam around the room. Barbary... why did she have a feeling it had something to do with festivals... music... or hippogriffs? No ... Barbary...

"But of course!" Hermione's eyes widened and she took a step closer to Bellatrix. "Heathcote Barbary! He's in a rock band called Weird Sisters! They were performing at the Yule Ball in my fourth year when there was a Triwizard Tournament!"

"Weren't you listening, Granger? I said Charles Barbary!"

"That's his grandfather! I've read a book about all the members because, well... Unlike most of my classmates, I don't particularly enjoy that sort of music and since they were—"

"You wanted to seem cool instead of nerdy, huh?" snickered Bellatrix.
Hermione's cheeks grew even hotter. "My point is, Charles Barbary is Heathcote's grandfather. We know where to look for the cup and I..." Hermione froze momentarily. "Hang on!" She strode to the bed. With a little struggle, she untied the purse from her waist and plunged her arm deep inside. It took her two minutes to pull out a stack of last month's Daily Prophets.

Hermione dropped them onto the bed and filtered through them until she found the one she was looking for. "Just a second!" she murmured and while was tearing through pages, Bellatrix sauntered to her. "Here it is!" Hermione held the article up for her to see. "They are going on tour next month. We could get VIP tickets and go backstage after their performance. I'm not a fan but..."

"A month? I'm not waiting that long!" objected Bellatrix, taking the newspaper from her, her tired eyes scanning the page.

"What else do you suggest then?" Hermione threw up her hand. "I doubt we can get to them anytime soon. They must be busy rehearsing."

"And getting knackered in between." Bellatrix lifted her eyes from the article, looking at her. "You said he's in a rock band—he'll be at a bar somewhere—that's what rehearsing means, deary. We just have to find the right place and we have him." She threw the newspaper onto the bed.

"So we'll be keeping an eye on all the bars in Britain, right?" asked Hermione, trying not to sound caustic.

"Only three of them."

"Three?" Hermione furrowed her brows. "Which ones? And how come you —"

Bellatrix flung her head back, "You ask far too many questions, it's giving me a headache!"

"How can I not?" blurted Hermione in aggravation. "You never explain anything to me!"

"Because there's no need for you to know anything, Granger!"

"Yes, there is! That's our deal!"

Visibly irritated, Bellatrix took a step closer. "No it's not! The deal—!" she faltered, her eyes fluttering. Her hand sprung forward, gripping Hermine's top at her stomach, scratching her with her long nails, obviously fighting for balance.

Hermione recoiled in shock. She automatically grasped Bellatrix's arms and guided her to sit down onto the bed right next to the tossed newspapers.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked in alarm, bending down to her.

Bellatrix released her top and curled her hands into the sheets instead. "Don't touch me! I'm fine!" she blurted and immediately tried to stand up but Hermione put more pressure onto her arms. Bellatrix was trembling.

Hermione looked at her nightstand, wishing for a glass of water which miraculously happened to be perched on top of it. She seized the tumbler glass and held it for Bellatrix to take, but the witch tugged her hand away.

"What have you done to me?" she murmured, lowering her head.
Hermione widened her eyes. "Me?! This is what you've done to yourself! I've told you, you needed to take care—" Biting her tongue, she stopped rumbling and softened her tone. "Here, drink this, it'll make you feel better!" She seized Bellatrix's wrist and forced the glass into her hand.

"You first," said Bellatrix weakly from underneath the mane of black curls that were hiding her face.

"What?"

"You drink from it first... How else am I supposed to know that you're not trying to poison me?" she demanded.

"What?! Why would I want to do that?" asked Hermione incredulously. "I would never—!"

But Bellatrix turned her head aside. Hermione didn't understand what it was with her. Why would she think Hermione wanted to harm her? Besides, it had been just an hour ago that she'd refused to even hold Hermione's hand and now, she was willing to drink from the same glass as her?

"Alright, I'll do it."

Bellatrix raised her distrustful, exhausted gaze to Hermione, who took the glass from her icy hand and forced down a gulp.

"See? It's just water!"

Bellatrix waited a moment. Seeing that after taking a sip Hermione was still alright, she accepted the glass from her and drank some water herself.

Unbelievable...

"You need to rest," pointed Hermione, putting the glass back onto the nightstand.

"No I don't!"

"Yes you do! Just lie down for a while!"

"Don't patronise me, Granger!" gritted Bellatrix.

"I'm not! I just want to help!" Gently, Hermione touched her arms again, trying to get her to lie down.

"I don't want to do this... " said Bellatrix in a strangely vulnerable voice, still trying to fight Hermione but then her eyes began to close and her hands fell to her side. "Just... don't touch me... please..." was the last thing she said before collapsing onto the sheets.

Hermione's stomach clenched. She quickly felt for a pulse on Bellatrix's wrist. It was weak but regular. Now what?! She should call Billey to take a look at her and make sure nothing serious was going on. Hermione was aware that Bellatrix wouldn't approve but she was in no state to argue.

Deciding to accept her rage rather than risk her getting seriously injured, Hermione called his name urgently.

When the little house elf appeared, she briefly explained to him what had happened and asked him to check if Bellatrix was alright. He was hesitant at first but Hermione's persistent suasion made him agree to run a few spells to check her over. After a series of small sparks resulting from his snapping his long thin fingers, Billey concluded that Bellatrix was okay but extremely exhausted.
and needed to rest. He clapped his hands twice and the bedsheets began to move and lift the unconscious witch a bit and make her roll into a much more comfortable position.

"Billey, I don't think she can breathe properly in that corset," expressed Hermione anxiously.

The elf responded that while he could transfigure her dress into something much more comfortable, he wasn't sure how 'mistress Bellatrix' would react to that once she woke up. Knowing she was entering the lion's den, Hermione told him not to worry for if Bellatrix had any problem with that, Hermione would take the blame. Billey seemed reluctant but eventually acceded. She didn't want to make Bellatrix feel violated, and so she asked him to only loosen the laces on her corset a little.

After the simple spell was completed, she asked him again if he was absolutely sure that Bellatrix wasn't internally injured, and only when he crystallized for the third and the last time that no, she wasn't, and that yes, she was going to be fine, did Hermione let him go.

When Billey Disapparated, she slowly reached behind Bellatrix and seized a wad of the blanket that was resting on the sheets, in her hand. She pulled it up to just below Bellatrix's chin and stepped back, fixing her eyes on the sleeping witch.

She couldn't stop her words from repeating inside her mind.

'What have you done to me?'

'How else am I supposed to know that you're not trying to poison me?'

Hermione couldn't wrap her mind around it. How could Bellatrix entertain such horrible thoughts? It really offended her that after all this time, Bellatrix knew as little about her as to think she would be capable of bloody killing her.

But it took one to know one...

Hermione buried her face in her palms before tugging her hair behind her ears, leaving her fingers tangled in it.

'Don't touch me... please...'

Please. That was the first time she had heard Bellatrix use the word in such context. It sounded beseeching, fearful almost, which was incongruous to Hermione, given the basic self-preservation instinct should have kicked in first and made Bellatrix reach for the helping hand rather than push it away. It was as if she'd rather have something happen to her than let Hermione touch her. That just didn't make any sense; she couldn't despise her that much. Unless... unless she had meant it in a completely different sense—as in 'don't touch me while I'm unconscious'. But then what did she think Hermione might do?

A sinister thought started to creep up on her, and she halted it just in time before it had a chance to fully develop inside her mind.

Her hands slackened their grip and fell to her sides. Was that what Bellatrix thought of her? Hermione put a gutted look on the sleeping form. She'd never given her a reason to think that of her! Never!

And here she thought that things were starting to look up for them...

Folding her arms, Hermione trudged to the armchair. She sat down onto the jumper that she'd
thrown there earlier and that she didn't bother to put aside, drawing her legs up and hugging them. She was so disappointed in Bellatrix; so bloody disappointed and aggrieved it knocked all the other events they'd been through so far out of her mind.

So to Bellatrix she was a maniac, basically.

Right.

Good to know.

From now on, Hermione wouldn't get within ten feet of her. She would keep her distance anytime Bellatrix would try to approach her, and let her experience first-hand how crappy it felt to be treated like a leprosy patient over something as nonsensical as presumptions.

Hermione sank further into the armchair. She leaned her head against the soft upholstery, clocking that the light inside the bedroom was fading and getting replaced by the dusky purple coming from the fogged-over windows. It was morning already. And she was so exhausted. Perhaps she should have a quick shower to freshen up—no matter her disenchantment, Hermione didn't want to fall asleep just in case Bellatrix would wake up and still felt nauseous.

She unfolded her numb legs from the seat. Rubbing her thighs, she stood up and tiptoed into the bathroom, divesting herself of the clothes. Close inspection revealed three blossoming bruises, one on the outside of her left forearm and one on each of her knees; what a great souvenir from her first felony.

Hermione took a hot shower and returned back into the bedroom, taking her place in the armchair. Snuggled like a baby, she realised that the warm water probably hadn't been the best idea as it had relaxed her muscles and mind far too much. She tried stretching and if she hadn't been afraid that her footsteps would wake up Bellatrix, she'd also have gone strolling around the room because blimey, she could hardly keep her eyes open.

Perhaps if she closed them just for a moment... Only one tiny moment...

Hermione woke up to the bright light of the day, feeling as if instead of the armchair, she'd spent the whole night stuck in a pillory. God, did her neck hurt! She tried shifting and found the rest of her body undergoing the same agony. Slowly, Hermione composed her limbs into a much more refined position and tried turning her head.

She gave a small start. On her right, there stood Bellatrix with her arms folded and her hair so messy it was quite difficult to make out the murderous expression incised on her face behind it.

"I hate you!" she spat in lieu of 'good morning'.

Hermione sat up straighter, replying, "Okay," and moving to get up from the armchair. Surprisingly, Bellatrix stepped back, letting her.

"What the hell were you thinking?!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows, her former resentment flooding back in. "Obviously something that doesn't sit well with you," she said, putting more distance between them. "So what have I done this time?"

"Oh, the cheeky muddy doesn't know, does she?" Bellatrix tilted her head. "Don't play stupid!" she snapped. "How come I spent the night here?"
"I don't know, perhaps you found the bed too comfortable to leave?"

"Don't you fucking joke around; I'm in no mood for that," barked Bellatrix and Hermione actually took a step back. "You've wasted ten hours of my time! I thought we were on the same wavelength? Why would you deliberately sabotage everything we've been working towards?"

Hermione shook her head. "I've been trying to do the opposite! I couldn't just wake you up and say 'Oh, you're alive, cool, let's go to the bar to find Heathcote Barbary now!' You fainted from exhaustion, and since you're practically not getting any sleep at all, this was the only way to make you rest."

Bellatrix screwed up her face. "Make me?! Who the hell put you in charge to decide what I should or shouldn't do? You think you can just stand here and order me around?" she yelled in anger. "Fuck you, Granger! You don't get to do that! No one does!"

"I was just——"

"I don't care!" Bellatrix didn't let her finish. "You had no right to assume anything! I've already told you my health is none of your concern and I mean it! You're neither my family nor my friend; you're just a stranger that I was forced to interact with! Don't forget your place!"

"You were SICK!" Hermione raised her voice too, unwilling to let her lashing get to her. "You think it would have benefited you more if I had just let you fall to the floor and poured water over you? I did what I thought was right! Perhaps you haven't realised it yet, but you're not a robot. You're a human being and you need to treat yourself as such! What would have happened if you had fainted in the auction house?! You're saying that I'm a saboteur but by hazarding your health like that, it is you who are putting us at risk!"

Bellatrix stared at her in bewilderment and Hermione took her chance to continue.

"Also, I don't understand why you're making such a big deal out of your sleep! It's what you're supposed to do! Did you miss something? Did you have any appointments?"

"None of your business, mud!"

"So you didn't."

Bellatrix gave her an angry look before schooling her face into an expression that Hermione classified as a, for her very dangerous, scrutiny. "Tell me something—why did you let me sleep here?"

Hermione felt her cheeks flush. God damn it, right now, when she needed to clear up this particular thing. She folded her arms. "As I said, I wanted you to finally get some rest. I knew that if I woke you up, you wouldn't go to sleep since you had already wasted five minutes on it."

Bellatrix licked her lips. "Is that so?"

Hermione's cheeks burned harder. "No, actually it isn't!" she sighed, deciding to hide her discomfort behind sarcasm. "I totally did it for the reasons you think. Even though you specifically asked me not to touch you, I dared press two of my fingers to your wrist when checking your pulse to find out whether you were alive. I also put a blanket over you but sadly enough, without touching a single hair on your head. And then, since I am so perverse, I took the armchair even though the bed is bloody gigantic because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to resist the temptation."

"You little arrogant—"
"I'm not arrogant," Hermione spoke over her. "I'm just pissed that this is what you think of me when all I meant was to help you!"

"Nobody asked for your help!" snapped Bellatrix. "Next time, even if I'm bloody dying, you're not to interfere, got it?"

Hermione frowned. "No matter what you say, if there's going to be a next time I'm going to do the exact same thing; so if you don't want to go through this again, I suggest that you start taking better care of yourself."

"And I suggest that you shut your insolent mouth because if I hear one more word from you about this, you won't live to see your birthday," replied Bellatrix promptly.

Hermione pressed her lips together. It didn't surprise her one bit that Bellatrix was back to death threats; Hermione had learnt long ago that, just like a lizard shot blood out of its eyes when in danger, Bellatrix did shoot threats—she must hate to come across as vulnerable and since this incident had left her somehow at the mercy of Hermione's hands, no wonder she resorted to her defence mechanism.

"So—" Bellatrix tossed her hair back, lifting her chin. "If it's clear that from now on we'll be leaving my personal life out of our conversations, I think we should move onto the stuff that we're actually supposed to be dealing with."

Sure, I wouldn't want to waste any more of your precious time, let's talk as if nothing happened, thought Hermione.

"As I was saying yesterday," Bellatrix continued, changing the tone of her voice just like a person with dissociative identity disorder would switch from one persona to another. "We'll track that inebriate and then... I'll leave the rest to you."

Nonplussed, Hermione furrowed her brows. "What do you mean, to me?"

Bellatrix smirked, clearly back in her element. "I mean, you'll make a pass on him, get him intoxicated—well, profoundly more intoxicated; make him talk—obliviate him if necessary... and that is it, I guess."

"You expect me to do that?" Hermione's hand motioned toward her chest.

"Who else?"

"You!"

"He's a musician," said Bellatrix as if explaining the obvious. "He certainly fancies young lassies."

If Bellatrix wasn't a presumptuous ass, Hermione would have told her that even despite her ghastly face, she'd easily outshine any young girl at a bar. Under such conditions, however, she only frowned, saying, "No, I couldn't possibly manage to do this!"

"Of course you could," said Bellatrix silkily. "Just forget about being a misandrist for a while and be sweet to him."

Hermione gave her a nasty look. "This won't work!" she paused, warmth creeping into her face. "I have no experience in flirting..."

Bellatrix bit her lip before smiling. "No worries, muddy, I'll teach you."
Two days had passed since their conversation.

Hermione had officially become an adult—she was legally permitted to use magic and she'd also passed her Apparition exams with a surplus of praises from Mr Twycross (Dear Lord—the precision, the poise!) and that, to Hermione's huge surprise, Bellatrix had arranged with the Apparition test centre, of her own accord, for her to take earlier than had been initially planned—of course, Bellatrix hadn't forgotten to emphasize that she'd only done it to make things easier for herself and that Hermione shouldn't try to interpret the gesture in her own twisted way.

She could be such a delight, sometimes.

Hermione was very appreciative anyway but after telling Bellatrix so, she still ended up feeling upset over her responding with a 'You should be!' to her 'Thank you, I'm genuinely grateful!'

What else could she expect, though? There had been no talking to Bellatrix ever since her fainting spell. Why, Hermione didn't understand, for Bellatrix hadn't seemed one bit mad when she had left the bedroom that afternoon. It was only the day after that the tables had turned. She was suddenly so distant, twice as mean and just impossible to deal with. She'd also seemed to have completely forgotten about their plan to keep tabs on those three bars she had mentioned earlier.

At first, it scared Hermione, for she'd thought that her trying to be helpful the other day had only exacerbated their relationship; but after having thought about it, a different idea crossed her mind—perhaps Bellatrix's cold demeanor was just another one of her defence mechanisms; it sounded so crazy to her, but what if her resentment was slowly turning into something else? What if she had developed some level of gratitude to Hermione for being there for her and being concerned and for generally caring so much? Considering her views, such feelings would have naturally made her ashamed of herself, and so of course she would oppress Hermione to feel in control again.

But then, perhaps it was something completely different... perhaps it was as simple as Bellatrix being mad because a bloody kid was trying to tell her, a grown-up woman, what to do...

Either way, Hermione had to be patient and let her sort her feelings out on her own. If anything, it had at least given her some time to deal with her personal stuff.

Hermione got a chance to compose a response letter to her parents, using the rule of a three-quarters truth—which basically meant telling the truth under different sets of circumstances. She wrote about how wonderful it was to hear from them and that while she was incredibly grateful, she felt like they shouldn't have spent so much money on a car and that she could never be able to repay them for being such amazing parents (regardless of the car). Then she transitioned to that fourth quarter that would complete the three-quarters truth rule, writing that when compared to Hogwarts, the new school was quite arduous, but she felt positive she only needed some time to get used to it.

Hermione had mulled over mentioning that she wouldn't be coming home for Christmas but eventually decided against it. Letting her mom know four months in advance would only leave her with too much time to try and finesse Hermione into changing her mind, which was honestly unnecessary trouble.

So at the end of the letter, she had only scribbled a small note regarding Blair's present as very touching and asked her mom to tell Blair 'thank you' for her the next time they saw each other. God knew, Hermione couldn't write her directly. Because writing to her would be like talking to her and talking to her would be like seeing her and seeing her would be like rubbing salt into her wound...
And she didn't need to drown in such sentiments either.

She dispatched the finished letter on the way from the Apparition centre because Bellatrix was a nasty piece of work and wouldn't let her use one of her own owls.

This was the most bittersweet birthday Hermione had ever had. Sweet because of Blair and her parents and bitter because for the first time in her life, she wasn't celebrating it at home. Hermione missed all those things she had previously taken for granted or found too embarrassing to appreciate—the singing, blowing out the candles and making a wish while everybody was looking at her, endless hugs and air kisses... She was such a loser for never seeing the magic in it before.

Well... sometimes loneliness could be quite eye-opening if one let it come through.

Honestly, how strange it felt; before, Hermione was used to being surrounded by people—be it Hogwarts or the bookstore she had worked for just a couple of days ago. And now, she had not a single soul to talk to.

If she at least kept in touch with Draco; but he hadn't written her once, which actually wasn't that surprising considering he had no idea where she was but still... he was yet to send her a birthday wish and Hermione shamelessly expected him to find a way to deliver it no matter what.

Hermione missed him so much. She couldn't believe that the school year was starting in a couple of days and she wasn't going to be there with him. She imagined him and all the other kids getting on the train, being excited about the new year while she... she had to sit here with a burden on her shoulders. Hermione tried very hard not to drown herself in self-pity and think about her youth seeping through her fingers like sand and how much time she had wasted so far trying to live according to the rules and hardly having any fun.

Her thoughts had fled to Blair once again, to how she used to tell Hermione, very kindly, to loosen up a little and just try to enjoy herself as much as she could; that life was all about experiences and that it didn't matter if they turned out to be good or bad because they would still teach her a lot.

Gosh, if only Hermione could go back and make the most of her days... even if it meant putting a book down once in a while or getting a bad grade in school—well, maybe not the latter but still...

Unfortunately, there was no changing the past—Hermione could only learn from it and just like Blair had said, 'a bad experience was still an experience', Hermione needed to see even this entire fiasco with Bellatrix as nothing but a life lesson.

Had she not moved in with her, Hermione would have probably never realised how much she was missing out on and would have hardly learnt how to stand up for herself... the witch, whether she realised it or not, was toughening Hermione up...

In a grander scheme of things, perhaps it wasn't all that bad.

—

Her positive mindset hadn't lasted for too long, though.

Couple days later, the frustrated Hermione found herself pacing around and cursing Bellatrix for having locked her inside the bedroom like a prisoner—anytime she tried to Apparate or touch the doorknob just for the sake of getting some fresh air, she rebounded further into the room, landing on her butt.

After a few tries, Hermione bitterly concluded that there was no getting out of here unless Bellatrix
cared enough to come back and lift whatever spell she'd used.

What was Hermione supposed to do until then, though? Cry in anger? Read books? Lethargically lie on the bed or, if she felt extra productive, charm some hairstyles on the fruit that Billey had left for her to eat and titter at it from the insufferable boredom? Four times check! But what kept her occupied most of all was frantic overthinking; she was constantly going back and forth between Blair, Draco, her parents and of course, the corpus deus.

What intrigued her was Bellatrix's visit to Borgen and Burkes where the witch had learnt that the Slytherin's locket she'd come to purchase had already been sold—to her.

If Bellatrix hadn't lost the memory of herself buying it... there was a very high probability that someone had been impersonating her. But who? Who the hell would do that and why? Dumbledore? Perhaps, despite him saying that he wouldn't meddle, he was doing something after all, just in case Hermione screwed up. But what if it was someone else? What if there was someone else fighting for the same cause Hermione and Dumbledore were?

Just as she was analysing who on Earth could possibly know, the bedroom door flung open. Hermione, lying on the bed face up, didn't move an inch and acted as if she hadn't heard the clicking of heels against the floor as Bellatrix (who else) walked inside.

"Great news, muddy," enunciated her voice as the door clicked closed. "Seems like we got lucky; you'll be meeting the man of your dreams tonight."

So that's what she'd been doing all this time—hanging out at bars. Hermione heard something land on the bed next to her head but she still chose not to react.

"Upset, are we?"

"You think?" she gritted through her teeth.

Bellatrix had the audacity to chuckle. "I'll be back at half past ten," was all she replied to her. "Better make yourself look presentable; Merlin knows you need it."

A sudden fury rushed through Hermione. Leaping to her feet, she turned toward the door, finally willing to splash her frustration into Bellatrix's face and confront her about locking her up but the witch was already gone.

Cursing, Hermione punched her right thigh. How she hated Bellatrix's condescending ways; how she hated herself for trying to give her the silent treatment which, obviously, she couldn't have cared less about. All Bellatrix minded was her bloody plan. The plan Hermione didn't want to have anything to do with.

What if she refused? What if, out of pure defiance, Hermione said that she wasn't going anywhere? Bellatrix would most likely drag her by her hair, anyway. God, if only she could... Even though... perhaps she could—if she planned her retaliation around something else—

Her eyes slid to the bed. There on the sheets were what seemed to be a blood-red satin dress and a pair of black scarpins. She kneeled onto the mattress and took the mass of fabric into her hands, resisting the urge to burn it with her wand. Hermione held it to her eyes. The last time she had worn a dress like that was back in Greece.

Presentable, she had said... Fine, Hermione would look presentable...
When Bellatrix, dressed in all black as usual, entered the room at half past ten, she seemed to have frozen momentarily.

Hermione had taken her 'request' quite literally. She had made the high heels higher, the mid-length strappy dress of a cowl neckline tighter and the split that initially had gone to her knee, up to her thigh. She wore a matching matte blood-red rouge and a generous amount of mascara on her lashes that, in her opinion, brought out her eyes and gave them an unusually sultry touch. Her hair was parted on the side, shiny and voluminous, with loose waves coming down her back and her left shoulder.

In no way, shape or form did she look seventeen anymore.

"I hope you don't mind but I changed it a little bit." She looked at Bellatrix, tugging at the thin strap, holding the dress together.

Bellatrix curled her lip down. "Not at all, the more you look like a cheap slut, the better, right?"

Hermione felt a solid punch hit her stomach but hopefully didn't let it show.

Damn you Bellatrix! If you think of me as a slut, just you wait!

"So," she said, tearing her gaze away from Hermione's waist and directing it at her eyes instead. "The plan is quite simple. You have to make him notice you. I know that you're just a timid little prissy but..."

"No worries," said Hermione, trying not to mind the insult. "I figured what to do."

"Oh, have you?"

"Yes, I have."

She knew exactly what to draw from—or who—Hermione had been watching Blair interact with men for almost a month and they all seemed to melt like liquid sugar in her presence (much to Hermione's dismay); all she needed was to copy her gestures and that would be it. Hermione had had enough time to practice in front of the mirror this afternoon. It had made her feel like a complete idiot but since she'd considered it necessary, she'd done it anyway.

"Granger, you cannot screw this up!" warned Bellatrix.

"I won't!" Hermione tilted her head, narrowing her eyes a little. Bellatrix looked away and oh my, would Hermione love to believe it was because her appearance had some kind of effect on her or that she was at least surprised by her sudden confidence in behaviour.

"I certainly hope so," she grunted, looking at Hermione again with a deep frown. "You do whatever you want with him, except for one thing," she added sternly. "If he offers you any alcohol, accept it but don't even think of drinking it!"

Hermione nodded; of course she wouldn't drink. The last thing she needed was to make a fool out of herself—like last time.

"Once you learn something about his grandfather, you find me and we're out of there," said Bellatrix, inching closer and drawing her wand. She pointed it at Hermione whose breath hitched in her throat.

"What are you doing?"
Bellatrix rolled her eyes, saying in an annoyed voice, "I'm going to use the deluding charm on you —the one I used on myself when we went to that crappy orphanage? Nobody will remember your face."

A chilling sensation swept through Hermione's body as Bellatrix cast a spell over her.

"Alright then," the witch approached her and reached for her wrist but Hermione tugged it away, stepping back. She sauntered to the armchair and picked up a black coat with her beaded purse inside its pocket. Hermione put it over her shoulders and walked back to Bellatrix, offering her just the sleeve.

"You really don't have to touch me, I know how much it bothers you," she said coldly. Bellatrix didn't reply, only looked at her with raised eyebrows. Hermione noticed she looked much healthier than she remembered; her skin almost had a little glow and her eyes weren't red anymore. It made her heart skip a beat. Had she taken Hermione's advice?

She didn't dare ask but even if she would, there would be no time for it as Bellatrix grabbed the offered sleeve and Disapparated.

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A/N: Okay, so I planned on writing so much more but then I figured it would be far too much for one chapter so I'm leaving you with just a taste of what's coming. I really hope you enjoyed it, though!

Also, thank you so much for reading and reviewing! You have no idea how much I appreciate you and the time you invest into this story!

All my love AP

*(the author of the sphinx's riddle is Cleobulus)*
Like A Lazy Ocean Hugs The Shore, Hold Me Close, Sway Me More / CH. 29

CARPE NOCTEM / LIKE A LAZY OCEAN HUGS THE SHORE, HOLD ME CLOSE, SWAY ME MORE / CH. 29

The wind outside the Barmy Beetle, a renowned wizarding night club in Southern England, was much too crisp for an August night, and Hermione shivered in her garbine cloak as she and Bellatrix Apparated in front of the iron door, the entrance.

The rusty beetle-shaped door knob in the centre was described in the brochure 'Top ten places to visit for a magical night out' that had caught Hermione's eye in Flourish and Blotts when shopping for books a couple days after she had returned from the Malfoys' last summer. It was a guide designed for international wizards mainly but Hermione had grabbed a copy herself as she was curious to see whether there were more places like the one she, Draco, and Astoria had snuck out to at the pureblood ball.

She remembered that The Barmy Beetle held the sixth place on the list. Located in an old emergency military storage bunker in Devon, it was well-protected from the unwanted muggle visitors. In order to get inside, the beetle on the door had to be fed ten galleons which activated a simple age-check spell. No underage wizards were permitted to enter as the brochure described the place as the darkest in the wizarding clubbing scene. Hermione couldn't grasp how such a shady place could even appear on the list, but then, night clubs, in general, weren't exactly known for their staid and safe environs.

Hermione cast a nervous glance at Bellatrix, who was rummaging through her pockets, clearly looking for something.

'...frequented by night creatures; excessive drinking and smoking; shut down numerous times for illegal trading...'

She drew a shaky breath, peering into the surrounding blackness that soon, as the wind had picked up and swept the clouds away from the full moon above them, developed into a vast field of yellowing wheat. Her eyes lingered over the heavy spikes swaying in the breeze like an endless sea of waves before returning back to Bellatrix, who had moved closer to the bunker door with a thick sack of galleons clinking in her hand.

"Oh, I'll pay for myself," said Hermione quickly, reaching for her beaded purse as she watched Bellatrix offer the shiny coins to the beetle who had come alive and kept swallowing them one by one.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Nonplused, Hermione paused with her hand halfway to her pocket; if anyone heard Bellatrix at that moment, they wouldn't have the slightest doubt she and Hermione were on great terms. Her tone came out with this dismissive yet friendly blithe touch, which Bellatrix must have registered herself because she immediately added, "It's not like you'd own as much money, is it?"

Should have expected that...

"What makes you assume that I'm poor?" asked Hermione, narrowing her eyes. "I mean, I'm not particularly wealthy, but that's because I don't like to rely on family's money; you know, I'd much rather earn my own," she said, fishing for her purse and approaching the door herself. She was
making a determined effort to appear on top of the situation but inside her reigned a mad panic—Bellatrix was going to kill her for that remark.

"You get cheekier and cheekier by the day, Granger," said the witch after a moment's pause. "If I had the time, I'd teach you some manners right here."

Hermione remained silent. She took out the beaded purse from her pocket and searched it frantically. Why was Bellatrix's voice so silky smooth and why was it making her stomach leap like that, especially with such a statement? She was surely going mad... Her fingers closed over the sack of gold and she took it out of the purse. Having counted ten galleons, Hermione fed it to the beetle; then she returned everything into her pocket and waited, avoiding Bellatrix's eyes at all cost.

Nothing happened at first but then the iron door began rippling like water of many brilliant colours and morphed into a reflectionless mirror—the age-check spell.

Scooping up the courage, Hermione took a hesitant step forward but was stopped by Bellatrix's hand on her forearm. Hermione felt her stomach leap even higher. She turned to the witch, blinking rapidly—Bellatrix's eyes glowed in the dark night.

"Are you absolutely sure you know how to approach him?" she asked.

"Yes," lied Hermione.

Bellatrix scrutinised her for a moment, keeping her hand on her arm. "Don't do anything stupid that might cost us later!" she warned. "Don't mention the cup—talk about it obliquely and let him bring it up." She raised her eyebrows, tipping her head down. "And also... do it before getting too intimate with him, he might lose interest if you put out first."

The statement pierced right through Hermione's chest, knocking the breath out of her. Did she just...? No... No, she couldn't have! Bellatrix couldn't be so messed up as to think that Hermione would sleep with him!

Right...? Clearly, she was.

A plunging wave of apoplexy rioted inside Hermione. Gritting her teeth, she wrenched her arm from Bellatrix's grip. "Speaking from your own experience? No worries, I'll let him deflower me after I've found out where your precious cup is." Having said that, she tore her eyes away from Bellatrix's flabbergasted face and pushed through the mirror, ignoring the chilling sensation that coursed through her body.

Deposited into a tunnel of aged cobblestone and subterranean atmosphere, Hermione took only a second to look around; sloped gently downward to the right, the tunnel was illuminated by rows of torches embedded along both sides of the walls. At the far end, a silver drapery marked an opening, letting in a dim sound of cabaret music which grew steadily louder as she set off straight toward it.

Words could not describe how much she despised Bellatrix at the moment. Why did she always have to think the worst of her? Did Hermione have a sign on her forehead that read 'trash'? But Hermione was going to show her—so what if she made her angry. So what, so what, so what.

A trio of wizards emerged from behind the drapery and ambled toward her, their cheerful voices and laughter only adding to her vexation. Averting her eyes, she moved more to the side, walking as fast as her high heels would allow her. They passed each other halfway through the tunnel, and
luckily for her, none of them looked her way. Soon, Hermione reached the entrance. She had no intention of waiting for Bellatrix as she stepped through the curtain into the space beyond.

In front of her gaped an elegant yet hopping venue, swimming in cigarette smoke and a crowd of insouciant wizards; the neon blue and purple lights were shining through, making it look as though they were underwater, at a bioluminescent coral reef. Small circular tables with pouffes and embroidered sofas, almost all taken by groups of two or more wizards, dotted the left side of the room, leaving the right side to the bar and the middle open for dancing. The elevated stage was positioned straight across from Hermione's vantage point, with a jazz band of about eight members on it, all dressed in long black robes with the exception of their singer, a plump woman of a gorgeous face who was, just like Hermione, dressed in a hot red evening robe.

Hermione took a hesitant step forward. Surveying the occupants, she noticed how many of them were past middle age, how men outnumbered women ten to one, and how very few of those women resided there of their own free will. A tight knot formed inside her stomach. As far as she could see, there was nobody as young as her and what was worse, it seemed to her that people had started to take notice: heads were turning and eyes were shamelessly running up and down her body—and she was yet to take her cloak off.

Putting her best effort to ignore the attention, Hermione sauntered toward the bar, determined to look for Barbary. So far, there was no sight of him and she could only hope that Bellatrix was right in saying that he would be here tonight. How she had figured it out was a mystery to Hermione but she tried not to ponder it. Bellatrix and her questionable ways of ascertaining information didn't matter anymore. All Hermione cared about right now was to do everything she'd been told not to.

Squeezing through the sea of people, she spotted an empty stool right at the end of the bar. Perfect. She'd have a supreme view of—

"Hello, gorgeous!" a raspy male voice said near Hermione's ear.

Hermione turned around and raised her head to see a big broad-chested man of dark hair and a scruffy robe. In the dim purple light, his face seemed craggy and his eyes dilated, acquiring a very unusual shade of green.

"Hello," she greeted out of politeness, blinking rapidly as he smiled at her.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, thank you," she said firmly, noticing how pointed and yellow his teeth were; she'd never seen teeth like that in a human before. "I'm actually waiting for a friend so..."

"What friend?" he asked, inching toward her. The stranger extended his hand over Hermione's shoulder and propelled himself on the pillar that was right behind her back, leaning far too close for her liking. She could practically taste his breath that reeked of whiskey and something, something else... something metallic...

Hermione's stomach heaved as she placed the smell.

She drew back instinctively, letting her eyes roam over the club in hopes of seeing Bellatrix or Barbary or whoever else that might come to her rescue, but there seemed to be no one who would have minded her situation. Hermione realised she had no other choice but to sort this out on her own.

"Heathcote Barbary; do you know him?" she asked, trying not to show how scared she felt as she
looked at him directly in the eye.

"Ah, the musician, big star, huh?" he replied, breathing more of his repulsive breath into her face. "Haven't seen him around. How about I keep you company while you wait? Care to dance?"

"Thank you but no, I don't—"

"Come on, one dance!" He removed his hand from the pillar and closed it tightly over Hermione's forearm.

"No, I—"

"The lady said no!" intervened another male voice. "Let her be, Greyback!"

The man named Greyback released Hermione's arm and faced the incomer of whom Hermione saw absolutely nothing due to Greyback's broad shoulders.

"I told you, one more incident and you're banned from the Beetle for life," the voice continued sternly. "Now, will you leave on your own or should I help you?"

Hermione didn't know who'd taken her side but felt unbelievably grateful. She heard Greyback murmur a bunch of incomprehensible words before falling completely silent. He remained standing on the spot for several more seconds before letting out a throaty growl that sent shivers down Hermione's spine, and striding away, disappeared in the crowd. Now, Hermione could see her rescuer, a small lantern-jawed man, probably in his fifties, with austere blue eyes that softened as they locked with hers. In his right hand, there was a wand which he quickly put into his sleeve.

"You alright, young lady?" he asked.

"Yes; yes I am! thank you!" she said with the deepest gratitude.

"I'll be around the corner if you run into a nutcase again." He winked, pointing behind himself, before turning his back to her and walking away, not even waiting for her response.

What a kind soul, thought the shaken Hermione. He had taken the trouble to come here to help her without even wanting anything in return; hadn't even said what his name was. Good people were evidently still around.

Hermione gave his back one last grateful look before walking to the stool she'd seen earlier and took a seat, placing her hands in her lap. She was off to a bad start and wished for nothing more than to go home and—

*Pull yourself together, you're not a ruddy child anymore,* Hermione scolded herself. She couldn't run and hide every time things got difficult, damn it. She had a job to do; first of all, she had to infuriate Bellatrix and along the way try to find where Hufflepuff's cup was.

Alright then. Hermione drew a couple of deep breaths. She leaned over the bar top and for the first time in her life ordered a shot of fire whiskey. The smirking bartender, sporting one dimple on his right cheek, looked her up and down as if sensing just how big of a sham she was, but didn't say anything as he waved his hand; in front of Hermione appeared a rocks glass, and a bottle of Blishen's firewhiskey descended from the shelf above, pausing in mid-air. He waved his hand again and the bottle poured a generous amount of rich auburn liquid into the glass before placing itself back onto the shelf.

Hermione mouthed a thank you and pulled the glass closer toward her. Now she'd have to wait
Was it the universe trying to make up for all the crap it had been putting her through, or just a lucky coincidence, but there, about ten feet away from her, standing in between two nice-looking witches, just ordering a fire whiskey of his own, was Heathcote Barbary.

So, Bellatrix was right, after all. Hermione gulped, her heart skipping a beat. What should she do now? Obviously, get his attention; but how with two women on his arm, already? However much Hermione didn't want to, she untied her cloak and placed it behind her, charming it to the stool so no one would touch it. She heard a whistle coming from her right but ignored it. Okay, what could she do that would stand out... He was famous, he must be used to women throwing themselves at his feet. What he's probably not used to that much, must be a woman that resisted his charm; a strong opinionated woman, sort of distant, yet still flirty enough to keep him interested.

Adjusting her hair, Hermione took the glass in her hand and glanced in his direction. She couldn't afford to mess this up but she had to take the initiative—had to approach him with a perfect line. But what should she say? Well, there was this one paragraph in the autobiography of Weird Sisters. Maybe she could use it to her advantage.

Hermione scooped up all her courage. Deep breath in, deep breath out, she squeezed her way up to him. Pumped up with adrenaline, she tapped his shoulder. Barbary turned his head to her only for a brief moment. "Want my autograph, doll, don't you?" For a rock band member, he was surprisingly soft-spoken. Yet, for such a soft-spoken person, not at all humble.

"Gee, thanks, but no; I only wanted to see in person what the simpleton that believes in the flat Earth theory actually looks like," said Hermione placidly, leaning in so he'd hear her clearly over the music. It was mentioned in the autobiography that he was a big enthusiast of conspiracy theories and that his favourite was the one about the flat Earth, namely—allegedly, he could annoy people by talking about it for hours.

Barbary took a moment before turning to her fully and scrutinising her. His eyes were dark and challenging, filled with a black eyeliner inside his lower waterline. His long obsidian hair was tucked in the collar of his leather jacket and the thin primmed lips hid behind an extended goatee.

He didn't seem happy to have been called out and Hermione had to resist the urge to flee; it wasn't exactly her style to be rude, especially to someone she'd just met, and for a moment she thought she'd blundered but then Barbary smirked.

"Let's bet that by the end of the night you'll be a simpleton, too," he put forth as he surveyed her face some more.

Damn, it had worked; it had bloody worked!

"Not a chance," replied Hermione, trying to hide her excitement behind her narrowed eyes, but felt like some sparks of it still slipped into her voice.

Barbary didn't seem to have noticed as he drew closer, "Why? Are you scared I'd change your mind?"

"Hardly." Hermione held his gaze as she inclined closer herself. "But alright, give it your best shot."

Barbary's smirk turned into an intrigued smile, which gave his face a completely different
character; with the deep lines on his cheeks and his eyes twinkling, he looked rather handsome.

"I bet you a hundred galleons that I can change your mind about flat Earth."

"And if you don't?"

"You'll dance with me."

Hermione couldn't help rolling her eyes as she suppressed a giggle. "That is not how it works! But tell you what, let's make it fair and go a hundred and a hundred," she suggested, confident she wouldn't lose; in no time or space would she believe in such nonsense as Earth's flatness.

Visibly amused, Barbary winked. "Deal." Then he pointed to the tables on the other side. "Let's sit over there, we'll have more privacy."

Hermione shrugged, saying that she was just going to quickly grab her cloak. She adjourned to her seat, leaving Barbary to excuse himself from his two pretty ladies. On her way back, with a glass of whiskey in one hand and the cloak in the other, Hermione noticed that they didn't seem too happy about having been ditched and were looking at her in such an angry fashion it made Hermione blush. She averted her eyes, trying not to feel guilty as she bypassed the dance floor to get to the table Barbary had chosen for them. There were no chairs, only a sofa that seemed to be far too small for a casual conversation between two unromantically-linked people.

Hermione's stomach churned. She'd never felt more adult, more feminine than she did right now. Face covered in sultry makeup, her body in a tight dress, having a grown man in front of her taking that dress off of her with his eyes. He was making it so obvious that he liked her and the observation couldn't have made Hermione feel more omnipotent. It was as if her juiced up appearance erased her timidness altogether and gave her a completely different persona.

Placing her glass onto the table, she slowly settled next to Barbary, keeping as much distance between them as the small sofa only allowed her. Hermione put the cloak behind her and crossed her legs, letting the skirt slide off and expose her naked leg.

The jazz band had just started playing the slower version of Sway by Markus Haider.

"Well then, doll," Barbary commenced over the singer's voice, resting his arm on the back of the sofa, his eyes briefly resting on her thighs.

"Delphi," emphasised Hermione firmly. It made him smirk.

"Of course, Delphi. I suppose you already know my name, don't you?"

Hermione tipped her head to the side, twisting her lips.

"In that case, we can skip the formalities," he said, taking a pause before adding, "Tell me one thing, though. How did you find this out about me?"

"Does it matter? I was under the impression we were going to discuss the flat Earth theory, namely," said Hermione, quite surprised at how easily the words were coming to her tongue. Perhaps it were the years and years of practice of talking to Draco.

Barbary's eyes twinkled as he looked down again, holding his hands up in surrender.

"So tell me." Hermione turned more toward him, his gaze snapping back to her face. "What is it that makes you believe in a theory that is so absurd it defies most common sense and logic?" she
asked probably too impudently.

Licking his lips, Barbary inclined closer. "Logic or programmed thinking?"

"You're not going to start with brainwashing or simulation theories, are you? Because if so, I'm out of here," warned Hermione, lifting her eyebrows.

"You don't believe in those either?"

Half-joking, Hermione rose from the sofa, making Barbary place his hand over her forearm as to keep her in there. Sitting back, she removed his hand and moved it to rest on his leather pants. Then she faced him, noticing that somehow, his smirk was much closer than before. Mechanically, she pulled away.

"Don't try your charm on me, sir!" chided Hermione in an amused tone. "It's not going to work."

"Let's bet."

"We already have and so far you're losing. I still haven't heard anything that would make me reconsider my opinion."

Barbary tilted his head, taking a moment before saying, "You were serious?"

"Of course, I was serious! What? Did you think that I agreed to talk about this because I'm secretly a fan and want to become close to you?" smirked Hermione. "I genuinely want to hear your arguments. I mean, how did you even come to think of such nonsense?"

Barbary seemed as if he didn't know whether to feel offended or taken aback, and compromised by smiling. "Well—" He wet his lips again. "The man that got me questioning things was Samuel Rowbotham and his Bedford Level experiment. In 1838, he and his friend went to the Old Bedford river—Samuel waded in with a telescope held eight inches above the water, while his friend got on a boat with a five-foot mast and rowed away from him. Now here's the thing, had the water surface been curved with the accepted circumference of a spherical earth, the top of the mast should have been about eleven feet below his line of sight, right? But it wasn't! The vessel remained constantly in Samuel's view for six bloody miles."

"That could be easily explained by atmospheric refraction," said the unimpressed Hermione, wiping the victorious grin off his face. "Your next argument?"

Barbary stared at her for several seconds before recovering and saying, "The Bible."

"The Bible?" repeated Hermione incredulously. She better be dreaming.

"Yes, it specifically says there is a firmament above us! A firmament! Also the passage about the Earth expanding to four corners?"

Hermione closed her eyes for a brief moment. When the hell had Luna Lovegood died and reincarnated into Barbary. "Are you seriously basing your arguments on a Christian book?" she asked. "A book that was written by people who knew absolutely nothing about science? I wanna hear about the empirical evidence!"

"Well now, that is a bone of contention." Barbary took a sip of his whiskey and Hermione utilised the time to look up and search for Bellatrix but her mane of curls was nowhere in sight. God, if only she knew what Hermione was going through.
"What do you consider evidence? Experiments, pictures? Because you see, my dear, those are all provided by NASA, whether we're talking about the wizarding or muggle department. How can we trust them after that fake Moon landing? Besides, all they give us are composite images. The Earth can't be photographed in one shot; they go and take multiple pictures and put them together in those little software thingies of theirs—try inspecting them closely, though, and you find that there are spots like cloud formations that repeat several times. That's definitely fishy." Barbary paused to take a deep breath. "If you fancy more evidence, there's also this flight."

Hermione gave him a quizzical look.

"There was an airplane flying from the Philippines to Los Angeles. They had a pregnant woman on board whose water broke and they needed to make an emergency landing. They could either turn around or fly to Los Angeles. You know what they did? They flew to bloody Alaska which is completely nonsensical if you look at it from the 'Earth is a globe' perspective. But—"

Barbary took out his wand and, waving it for several moments, created a small model of a disc-like Earth made of pure mist with the continents spread out on it.

"Look at this—if the Earth was flat, from the Philippines and Alaska, it's a straight line—not a roundabout route," he finished and as Hermione looked at the model, she found to her great surprise that he was actually right.

"That hardly explains anything," she objected, still not buying into it.

"Maybe not, but you cannot deny that it's very strange."

Hermione tried not to argue, thinking it would only result in back-and-forth bickering. Her eyes darted to the bar again.

"And there's this game from the eighties, The Illuminati—have you heard of it?"

Shaking her head, Hermione faced him again, intrigued against her own will; she really hadn't heard of it.

"It's a card game with four hundred and fifty cards. On each card there's a picture and a short text, referring to the means as to how to control the world. What's deeply unsettling is the fact that the game seems to imitate reality. Tons of those means have been already exploited or are being exploited at the moment."

"Give me an example," said Hermione.

"Well, there's the card called A.M.A., depicting a doctor with his arms wrapped around a skeleton. Many believe it indicates the pharmaceutical business. There's so many new diseases discovered each year; people are experiencing intolerances to food and just, generally talking, health issues like never before... They make us sick so they can stuff us with pills and their pockets with money."

Hermione took a deep breath. While she wasn't a fan of conspiracies and the majority of Barbary's points sounded crazy, there was definitely something about the healthcare system at least. Hermione touched her whiskey glass, saying, "By them, are you referring to the Illuminati?"

"Who else?" Barbary snorted. "There are cards like Gun control, which you cannot deny is now a real thing. Then, let's see...Rewriting history which I think refers to the Mandela effect; The Saturday morning cartoon depicts muggle kids obsessing over technology. The card named Paranoids specifically talks about some drugs being forbidden because they make us see reality as
it is, and there's also the card with a flat Earth."

Hermione shook her head, swirling her whiskey in the glass. "I find impossible to believe something without sufficient proof, but let's assume just for a tiny moment that you're right. What would be the reason behind all this?"

"Control," replied Barbary simply. "They distract us with meaningless stuff like material possessions and cheap thrills because it makes us easier to control."

"But what about that flat Earth of yours? If it's true why would anyone want us to think otherwise?" asked Hermione.

"There are two possible explanations. The first one is that behind Antarctica, which is believed to be the ice wall surrounding the flat Earth—mind you, we can't even cross Antarctica without someone monitoring us, and even like that we can only get to a certain point before we're forced to get back; and don't even get me started about the protective charms that are placed over the area—but basically, it's believed that behind that ice wall there are actually continents the government doesn't want us to know about," said Barbary, taking a gulp of his whiskey before continuing. "And the second explanation; well, that one touches on religion in a way... an orbic Earth aimlessly roaming through space doesn't necessarily need God, because, you know, the Big Bang theory, the evolution; but a flat Earth, which is static, would require a creator. And to me, an Earth created by something higher than us rather than just developing on its own by chance actually makes a lot more sense. Everything we see, including us, is designed with the most amazing precision; the entire universe, every little detail in it is mathematical; the math is bloody everywhere and in everything—the Fibonacci sequence and the golden ratio. Just look around you, what are the odds of something so perfected happening coincidentally. And that leads me to another theory and that is the question of reality in itself."

Hermione looked at him for a while. "You mean the question whether or not we are real? Whether or not we're in a simulation?"

"Exactly. And it's not just me; many well-educated, credible people like doctors and scientists think it's a huge possibility."

Hermione let go of her glass. She had tons of questions to ask him but she had her task to think of. So far the conversation hadn't touched on anything she'd come here to find and she felt like it was the right time to change the subject before losing her attention completely. "Not that I'd believe any of this." She gestured with her hand vehemently. "But listening to it makes me so anxious that I'm willing to pay you those hundred galleons anyway if only we could stop talking about it."

Barbary smirked. "That's the first step."

"What do you mean?"

"Never you mind." He dismissed. A short silence ensued before he turned to Hermione. "Well, now that I lost, I think I deserve a consolation prize—the dance."

Smirking, Hermione turned to him. "Uh oh, I didn't agree to that."

"Oh come now, how else am I supposed to stun you? You said my smile wouldn't work, my opinions have obviously done the opposite... The only thing left is dancing."

Sensing an opportunity, Hermione decided to finally try and dig something out. "How about your wealth? You're not going to brag about that?" she asked.
"Nah, you don't seem like the type I'd charm with gold."

While smiling, Hermione bit her lip and tilted her head, exactly like she'd seen Blair do last summer. "What makes you think you wouldn't get me hooked on money? Or...perhaps you do—only there's nothing to offer," she teased, letting her eyes dart to his drink before shooting up again.

"What? You think I'm one of those people who drink away their money and then beg their parents for financial support?"

Hermione twisted her lips.

"Wrong; I would never ask my parents for gold," said Barbary. "I usually go to my grandparents," he added, faking seriousness, which made Hermione chuckle. He chuckled too, then nodded toward the table.

"You haven't drunk a drop, Delphi."

"Ah, I was so wrapped up in your tales that I completely forgot," replied Hermione, taking the glass in her hand. As she lifted it toward her mouth, a soft cinnamon scent hit her senses. Instead of a toast, she recalled Bellatrix's voice telling her not to drink and took a large gulp out of pure spite. It stabbed at her tongue, burning all the way to her stomach where it spread, sending heat into her blood like an opiate.

"How about another one?" asked Barbary.

"Only if I'm buying," replied Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"By no means!"

"Then you can forget about dancing with me." She shrugged, finishing her whiskey. Her eyes prickled but she quickly blinked the sting away.

Barbary sighed with clear reluctance. "Fine, but it's only one drink!"

Hermione was grinning as she stood up and, seizing her beaded purse, began adjusting her dress. She could already feel the whiskey taking a mild effect on her and she lived for every second of it. Aware of Barbary's roaming eyes, she sauntered to the bar, doing everything she could to move as sultrily as the crowd of people only allowed her. There, she ordered two shots of whiskey, paying for those and the two she and Barbary had already drunk. When she returned a short time later, it was obvious she had the man exactly where she wanted.

Fifteen minutes later, surrounded by a number of empty glasses, Hermione and Barbary sat close to one another, looking at each other, both with different intentions, laughing and talking until there lapsed a comfortable silence which Hermione took as a suitability designed to help her open a subject she needed. She might have been a bit drunk but she had enough clarity so as not to forget why she was here.

"You're lucky your grandparents are still alive," she said, feeling awful about her next choice of words. "Mine unfortunately..."

Barbary shrugged. "I don't see them often, though. My grandfather's always travelling and... Oh, this, you hear that? This is my song! You're just too good to be true, can't take my eyes off you," he sang to her with his eyes closed.

No no no! Not now, when the conversation finally took the right turn!
Barbary stood up, handing Hermione her own glass while lifting his to his lips. "Cheers!" He downed the shot and Hermione downed hers, biting her lips as the liquid warmed up her cheeks. It felt good, so ridiculously good that Hermione should probably slow down otherwise she'd end up completely plastered and she felt like she wasn't that far from it. She seized Barbary's arm, trying to hold him back but he wouldn't take no for an answer. Still, the song he kept singing along to was almost over when he finally managed to persuade her to dance with him.

Barbary held her hand as he linked her arm through his and led her toward the dancing pairs in the middle. The alcohol in Hermione's blood was like a small fire, making her feel so alive, so sure of herself, and so enraptured by the moment she couldn't help a genuine smile from blossoming upon her lips. How she hoped Bellatrix was there to witness it. But no, there was still no sight of her. Where the hell was she?

Hermione felt a hand slipping to her lower back.

At long last love has arrived
And I thank God I'm alive

Barbary was singing aloud along with the pretty singer in such a dramatic voice it made Hermione throw her head back in laughter. He laughed himself and as he pulled her closer, Hermione saw a wolfish grin plastered across his face which she didn't mind one bit. He must have thought she was all over the moon but he couldn't have been more wrong, thought Hermione, grinning in her drunken daze. Oh, she was going to have so much fun spoofing him tonight. They were swaying together, occasionally stepping on pieces of the broken glass that was shattered across the floor here and there. Barbary certainly knew how to hold a woman and guide her body and Hermione couldn't have been bad herself since she'd had the best teacher, her grandfather, to draw from. She imagined they must look amazing but then, she might be too drunk to judge.

You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off You

The pace of the song quickened and Hermione let out a surprised gasp as Barbary swept her into his arms and spun before putting her back down.

I love you baby
And if it's quite all right
I need you baby.

He made her turn and while still holding her hand stepped away for a short moment only to pull her to him next second. Hermione didn't even know how but suddenly there they were, spinning and laughing, Barbary trying his best to imitate Hermione's hip swings which made him look ridiculous but all the more lovable.

Oh pretty baby

Now that I've found you stay
And let me love you, baby
Let me love you
You're just too good to be true.

The song came to an end but as Hermione made to leave, the jazz band began playing another one, a ballad this time. Barbary chuckled and with his eyebrows raised, shook his head, saying, "No, no, no, we're not leaving just yet."

Tightening his arm around her waist, he pulled her even closer. Hermione felt his breath stir her hair as she rested her cheek against the warmth of his chest. It had been such a long time since she'd been held with affection. Such a long time. She couldn't help clinging to him like a wounded child.

Then there came a soulful voice of the singer.

*Stay beside me, stay beside me*

*Say you'll never leave me*

*How I love you, how I love you*

*How I need you, please believe me*

*In your arms, I've found my heaven*

*And your lips have done their part*

Hermione's smile began to slacken, her eyes unfocusing.

*Your love is all I need in my world*

*Let tender kisses plead in my world*

*How could I ever live without you*

*My heart belongs to you, so take it*

*And promise me you'll never break it*

*Say you'll stay here in my arms*

Each word sung felt like a needle thrust into her heart time and again, spilling her forlorn love which bled and bled, pouring over her ribs and through her lungs, stealing her hitching breath. What was she doing touching him? He wasn't who she wanted to be here with like this. It was all so very wrong; his arm around her waist, his flat chest pressing into her own chest. Oh, she didn't care for his warmth. She wanted nothing of him.

Barbary adjusted her hand in his and, bringing it toward his mouth, placed a small kiss against her knuckles. However sweet the gesture, it didn't affect Hermione in any pleasant way.

It wasn't the touch she longed for. Hermione needed the touch granted to her so rarely; that touch that was so delicate and fleeting it felt as if it was a butterfly brushing her skin rather than a human being... for in the spark of that ephemerality that had seeped through her skin and buried itself deep within her, she'd found magic more glorious than she had ever known before.

It was she, still alive in her heart, in her every waking thought... so distant and so far away.

*Were you ever even real?*
Hermione released her hand from Barbary's grip and traced her neck. Had she taken off the necklace or had she only imagined having it? Barbary's now free palm strayed to her shoulder blade, caressing the bare skin. *No, no, no...*

She could feel her heart break for a thousandth time. His body against hers didn't feel right. He wasn't Blair—and while his scent, spicy and clean, might smell alluring, it was nowhere close to Blair's, for she smelled of fresh gardenias and love and Hermione needed her here with her so damned much, talking to her, cradling her, losing herself in the incredible softness of her body. She had so much love for her. So much irrational, mad love, she couldn't stand it.

Her stomach heaved.

What the hell was Hermione doing letting someone else touch her when she mountingly longed for her arms only? And why the hell did it, of all days, have to dawn on her tonight?

*Whiskey*—bloody whiskey and that bloody song, making her feel like dying without her right now. *Oh Blair, does a thought of me ever cross your mind? Do you ever think of seeing me?* Naive, naive Hermione. If Blair was here, she'd most likely feel the same way about Hermione as Hermione felt about Barbary. Damn... that cut deeply.

'Why are you doing this to yourself?' asked a quiet voice inside her head.

'Because I like drowning in self-pity.'

'Yeah? Listen to this then, Blair would also much rather spend time here with him than with you.'

Hermione released a tearless sob mixed with a desperate titter.

"Hey, hey, what is it?" Barbary's voice murmured against her hair.

Gripping his shoulders, Hermione shook her head in a desperate effort to ease the pain. She gave him a quick look before leaning in. "I miss her so much it makes my heart ache," she half-whispered, half-cried into his ear.

"What...? Who do you miss?"

Hermione wasn't thinking as the name escaped her lips, coated in so much tenderness that her stomach clenched.

"Who is Blair?" asked Barbary intriguedly and Hermione looked aside, sighing.

"A spectre."

"I see." He swept a loose curl from her eyes, making her look at him. "How about we forget about your spectre together. Would you like that, Delphi?" He cupped her cheek. "You're so—"

Hermione tore herself away from him. "No... I want to see her. I want to go to her and to—" Her tongue tripped over her own words. "I want to bring her a daisy."

"You want to bring her a daisy?" repeated Barbary.

"Yes, yes, a daisy, and I'd tell her that my feelings for her are like daisies; that just like they grow around the world regardless of the conditions, my whole body blooms with them every time I think of her... regardless of the conditions," she said quietly.

God, she must be so so drunk.
"Tell me something... are you in love with Blair?"

"Heartbreak... I'm heartbroken with Blair."

He nodded as if putting one and one together. "So this is why you resist my charm, huh? Well, in that case, there's nothing I can do except... except I could accompany you to your Blair if you want to see her so much. Maybe the three of us could sort out that heartbreak together."

It took Hermione a moment to get the full meaning behind his words. "What?!" she barked, pushing him away from her. "I can't believe you would—don't you dare think of her in such a way; she's no sex object to fulfil your fantasies! And neither am I, got it?! Honestly, is this what women mean to you?"

Barbary looked so dumbstruck Hermione had to push him in the chest again to wake him up. People dancing close to them moved out of her way. "Goddamn it, have some respect!"

Backing away, Barbary held his hands up. "Shit, I'm sorry! I—it was just a joke!"

Sure it was, you prick.

And there Hermione thought he was actually sweet.

"How about another drink?" he asked, obviously trying to fix it.

"No way; you screwed up!"

"I know and I'd like to make up for it," said Barbary but his innocent tone didn't soften Hermione's glare in the least.

She wanted to punch him so badly, to show him she would not stand for such objectification, especially when it came to Blair, but then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of thick, jet-black locks. Bellatrix! Freezing, Hermione took a moment to think. She did not turn to see whether or not it was really her because damn it, Hermione had gotten carried away and still hadn't really learnt anything helpful.

Taking a deep breath, she gave Barbary one last angry look. She'd much rather eat a piece of the broken glass that was under their feet than talk to him again but the problem was, she didn't have that choice. And it was all Bellatrix's fault. Had she not provoked Hermione, Hermione wouldn't have drunk and she wouldn't have danced with Barbary and she wouldn't have thought of Blair with so much heartache and—

Hermione looked to her left. Bellatrix was sitting at the bar with an amused expression and her legs crossed; the tips of her fingers were touching her glass while she talked to some stranger who was standing far too close to her. A twist of deeper anger coiled inside Hermione. So she was having a good time? Fine, Hermione could too.

"Alright, let's get another drink!" she gritted, looking at Barbary, who seemed visibly relieved. Folding her arms and holding her head high, she set off back to their table, doing what she could not to look at Bellatrix and that man as she and Barbary walked past them. Why are they laughing? Nevermind, it doesn't matter!

"Look, what I said there was really inappropriate," started Barbary as soon as they settled on their little sofa. "I am really sorry!"

"Forgive me, please?" he pouted, dousing her anger just a little.
"Only if you promise that from now on you'll be more respectful toward women!"

"I'll promise you the world but please, don't be cross with me anymore," said Barbary with puppy eyes, his breath brushing her cheek.

Sighing, Hermione gave him a look of resignation, which made him smile.

"So," he opened. "You're in love with a—"

"No, no, we're not going there. Besides, it's your turn to spill the beans about your sad life. You were talking about your grandpa earlier," said Hermione, trying to be casual. "What's the deal with him being away all the time?"

Barbary laughed. "You want to talk about my grandfather? This date is so not what I expected."

Raising her eyebrows, Hermione seized her glass but unfortunately, there was nothing in there anymore. "First off," she said, setting it aside. "This is anything but a date and second, why wouldn't I want to hear about your grandfather; if he's rich enough to finance your exuberant way of life... perhaps he could finance mine, too. Care to introduce us?"

Barbary laughed. "I must disappoint you, he doesn't care about women; not even dolls as pretty as yourself."

"I see, how come?"

And just like that, Hermione learnt every little detail she needed to know about Charles Barbary. But did she walk to Bellatrix and inform her about it? Of course she didn't. She downed a couple of more shots, which only fueled her desire to make Bellatrix as angry as possible. Then, under the table with a confidence she'd never assumed she might possess, Hermione pretended to be looking for something in her bag and as the suspicionless Barbary waited, looking around, she pointed her wand at him and for the first time in her life cast an 'Obliviate'. There was no doubt in her mind that she had performed the spell just right as Barbary returned to the conversation they had had at the beginning and was now trying to persuade her to dance with him because he hadn't changed her mind about the flat Earth.

This time, Hermione agreed without putting up any resistance. Powered up by a couple more shots of whiskey, she let Barbary pull her toward the dancing pairs once again. Long gone was her sadness. She felt bloody amazing and she was bloody hammered but oh God, what a night to be alive.

They were just passing Bellatrix and her companion when someone smacked Hermione's bottom. It didn't bother her at all but Barbary stepped in front of her, immediately pulling out his wand and pointing it at a young man who held his hands up.

"Do it one more time and I swear you'll have no hands to cast spells with!" he gritted while Hermione stood beside him, covering her mouth to smother her laughter. All she could think about was that Bellatrix was there to witness the scene. What a night. What a night.

"I'm sorry, man!"

Barbary turned to Hermione. "Are you okay?"

She let her hand fall back to her side and, biting her lips, giggled. Somebody had learnt their lesson, she thought, but of course didn't say it out loud because Barbary couldn't remember anything of her speech. It didn't matter though. At least he'd tried to be a gentleman and over that simple fact, she
instantly liked him more.

"Yeah... thanks, that was really sweet of you," she said, dragging her nails down his chest softly. It was flat and hard, so unlike what she imagined Blair's to be, but nevermind the difference—Bellatrix saw her getting affectionate with someone and that somehow made everything much more bearable.

"Of course," said Barbary, smirking. "If there's anyone touching that cute little butt tonight, it's gonna be me, no one else." With those words, he took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

The band was playing a cheerful tune now and even though Hermione could clearly imagine Blair pulling off the funniest and yet the most sensual choreography at the same time, she decided to push the thought to the back of her mind and become Blair herself just for this one moment. And so she let a wide smile blossom upon her lips, added her signature lip bite and Barbary seemed to be on cloud nine as she hadn't averted her eyes from his even once and was turning around him and touching him with the most fleeting of touches. Eventually, he gripped her waistline with both hands, pulling her so close to him that their breaths mingled intimately.

Entwining her fingers with his, Hermione began swaying her hips while gradually moving lower and lower. She was trying to get Barbary to do the same but laughed because he got stuck in the middle and complained about his bad knees. He pulled her up to him, their legs commingling; their burning bodies were against each other and Hermione closed her eyes, trying to imagine it was Blair gripping her waist with so much possessiveness. Her hands slipped to Barbary's back, her nails sinking into his jacket. When a quick chorus came on, Barbary led her into a turn and another one and another until she began laughing in her drunken spinning daze. She almost fell but Barbary caught her and suddenly their lips were upon each other's. She could imagine it was Blair. She could try—but it wasn't working at all. Why wasn't it working? Hermione pulled back, furrowing her brows and looking into his darkened eyes briefly before grabbing at his neck and pulling him in again. She smashed their mouths together, trying harder to imagine. Still no emotion; and she desperately needed to feel something. And he wanted her—no one wanted her. Parting her lips, Hermione bit down onto his nether one in frustration, which made Barbary moan and grip her waist harder. *Come on, why can't I feel it?* Barbary's palms slipped, one to her neck, one into her hair, and he moved his head to the side, deepening the kiss which finally broke through Hermione's numbness. If only she liked it; why didn't she like it? Breaking away from him, she turned her head to the side, which Barbary misinterpreted as an invitation to overstep the boundaries and placed a wet, prickling kiss onto her skin.

At this point, Hermione's imagination failed her miserably and she didn't feel the need to try anymore.

Freeing herself from him, Hermione uttered she was heading for a restroom and set off through the dancing pairs, some of them twice as naughty as her and Barbary. She found the right door at the first try but she barely touched the handle when an arm came into her view, blocking her from entering. Hermione turned her head to the side, her heart skipping a beat as her eyes landed on Bellatrix. Perhaps it was the lighting, perhaps it was real but the witch looked even paler than usual, her eyes flaring like two molten flames. O—oh somebody's angry.

"Did you find out anything about the cup?" she asked, her voice threatening to tremble.

Hermione nodded, inwardly dancing with satisfaction. *How do you like the feeling, Bellatrix?*

"Well, well, well. If this isn't my lucky night." They both turned to the soft voice of Barbary, who was ambling towards them.
What was he doing here? Dear God, did he think Hermione was going to be waiting for him in the restroom?

"So this is the infamous Blair, huh," he added, eyeing Bellatrix up and down with this weird mixture of surprise and happiness.

How—why did he remember Blair? Pondered Hermione, more with curiosity than alarm. Hadn't she erased their argument about her from his mind? Oh well.

"Blair... clearly," said Bellatrix, her eyes jumping from Barbary to Hermione.

Hermione was too intoxicated to be concerned about Blair's name slipping from Bellatrix's lips. And why should she? It sounded so beautiful when she said it... And now, at least, she'd stop thinking she was the centre of Hermione's universe—because she wasn't. Blair was.

Barbary winked at Hermione. "Wouldn't you ladies like to join me? I could play some music for you. Then we could—"

Well, clearly, he didn't remember the argument about Blair at all, otherwise he wouldn't have suggested this. Well, at least some parts of their conversation were missing from his memory; hopefully that one about his gran—

Hermione's dress tightened around her back and it took her a lot not to throw up as she landed in her chamber after having endured the most uncomfortable sensation. There was no more smoke, no more colourful lights, no more music, only a terrible sensation of her head spinning.

Her knees buckled and she plopped onto the floor, right in front of her bed. There was a sound of something landing beside her and as soon as her world stopped moving, she turned her head, realising it was her coat and her beaded purse. Bellatrix must have taken them for her.

"What did you find out?" She heard her ask coldly. Hermione looked up. Bellatrix had her arms folded and was looking at Hermione with so much spite it looked like it could physically burn, which was somehow bloody hilarious, and all Hermione's doing. She held back laughter.

"Well?"

Hermione bit her lip but her shoulders shook.

Bellatrix twisted her lips. "What? What's so funny?"

"It's just that—uhm," said Hermione in between the smothered giggles. "You." She burst out laughing covering her face, then added, "I'm sorry, but you're so funny when you're angry." She lowered herself on her side onto the floor, letting more laughter out.

There was a momentary silence on Bellatrix's part. "Are you fucking drunk?!" she growled, inching closer. She kneeled down to the now openly giggling Hermione who was lying on her right arm, watching her. Bellatrix leaned over her and Hermione couldn't help blowing into her face shortly. Bellatrix recoiled, blinking; next second, her hand shot up, grasping Hermione's jaw so forcefully it made her lips part. She brought her face closer to Hermione's, granting her a perfect view on the tiny flecks of gold in her otherwise dark eyes that she'd never noticed before.

"Breathe out!"

Hermione pursed her lips as much as Bellatrix's cold fingers only allowed her and breathed out slowly. And in that weirdly electrifying moment she couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't just
lift herself and kiss her. It would infuriate her even more and Hermione would finally feel what it was like to kiss someone she actually liked. Sure, she'd had a few sensual dreams about Blair, but those must have been all derived from the sensation of that one unwanted kiss Hermione had shared with Draco. It was nothing real. *If only you hadn't pulled away that night, Blair, you could have been my first kiss. You, my Southern bell.* Hermione wondered if Blair would get jealous if she saw her like this with Bellatrix. But she also wondered if Bellatrix would get jealous if she saw the dreams Hermione had had about Blair. Had she gotten jealous when she'd seen her making out with Barbary? Those kisses were no magic. Hermione was sure that if she kissed Bellatrix, there would be plenty of it; her kisses must feel a lot softer than Barbary's—hell, even if they didn't, even if Bellatrix bit her or did all sorts of wild things to her mouth with her mouth, Hermione was positive that if it came from her, she'd take it all.

*Just show her what she's missing out on, Hermione; it's just a few inches.*

Unfortunately, before Hermione could do anything, Bellatrix pulled back and leapt to her feet with curses leaving her mouth like an avalanche. When she was done, she snapped, "What did I tell you, what was the one thing I told you not to do and you fucking did it, anyway?!"

Hermione sat up, biting her nails. "Drink?" She whispered before raising her eyebrows innocently. Then she burst again.

"I'm gonna kill you, Granger! I swear, I'm this close to doing so!"

"No you're not. Come, sit down next to me!" Hermione patted the floor, grinning. "I'll tell you everything I know."

"If you gave us away—!"

"Nah, I obliviated him," said Hermione blithely. "Doesn't remember a thing, trust me!" At least Hermione hoped he didn't.

Bellatrix closed her eyes as if praying and gritted, "I don't have the nerves to deal with this." Then as she opened them, she added, "Just tell me what you found out so I can crucio you without fear of you losing memories."

She's just joking, thought Hermione, tilting her head. She looked down and began playing with the dress split on her thigh. "It's a secret, I'm gonna have to whisper it to you." She glanced at Bellatrix who really did seem prone to killing her soon.

"Spill it!"

"Uh uh, I can't say it out loud. The walls might hear me."

Bellatrix let out another tide of expletives. She seemed to be so done with Hermione; so done, Hermione thought she might curse her any second. To her surprise though, she settled on the floor opposite her. Wasting no time, Hermione got on all fours and, smiling, climbed forward, seating herself next to her. And it felt so good to be close to her, even though they weren't touching.

Hermione gave her profile a scrutinising look. "Why are you so angry?" she sang in a happy tune, her head lolling from side to side with each syllable. "Is it 'cause you can't stand me?"

Slowly, Bellatrix turned to her and for a second there, Hermione thought she was going to laugh, but it was as if Bellatrix caught herself and retightened her jaw.

"Ready?" asked Hermione, smiling wider.
"Like never before."

"Okay... but this might shock you."

"Will you tell me already or do you need some help getting the words out of your mouth?" asked Bellatrix in one breath, raising her eyebrows.

"Okay, okay! No need to bite my head off!" said Hermione. She wanted to pinch her cheek but Bellatrix slapped her hand away, which made Hermione pout. Bellatrix was visibly suppressing a smile now and it was the most delightful sight.

"Speak up already!" she said, her tone not as harsh anymore.

Hermione's stomach jumped as she leaned in and so she pressed the side of her palm to her cheek. It was smooth. So so smooth. And her hair felt and smelled like heaven even mixed up with the cigarette smoke from the bar. "He's an explorer!" she whispered.

Bellatrix pulled away, looking at Hermione as though she was an idiot while Hermione nodded her head seriously.

"That's your secret? That he's a damn explorer?"

"Shhh!" Hermione covered her eyes with her palms. When she removed them, Bellatrix's expression seemed to have softened. "He goes places; and the cup, he takes it everywhere with him, all his treasures, actually, because he's an old paranoid chap—well, that's what Barbary said."

Bellatrix's eyes were glued to Hermione's. "Where is he now?"

"No idea," shrugged Hermione, then smiled. "But I know where he's going to be in two days."

"Where?"

"Paris," she said softly, playing with a lock of her hair that spilled over her eyes. The alcohol in her blood was still making her feel strangely irresistible and she couldn't help biting her lip and subsequently hiding the gesture behind her shoulder. She raised her gaze to Bellatrix who seemed to have drawn back a little and smiled. "On rare occasions, The Louvre organises these 'painting tours'," she went on. "The old Barbary is obsessed with them and luckily for us, in two days, there's going to be a tour into 'The Embarkation for Cythera'. According to his grandson, Barbary would rather die than miss this."

Bellatrix didn't reply. She averted her eyes from Hermione, letting them run over the room.

Hating the lack of attention from her, Hermione cleared her throat. "Has this come to the point where we would have to... you know."

"Steal from him?"

"Yes, it has," she whispered back conspiratorially.

"Oh I just knew you'd say that." Hermione dropped her shoulders in defeat. "Why can't we buy it from him? Oh, I know, I know, he wouldn't sell it. Bummer."

A comfortable silence grew between them.

"Are you sure you obliviated him?" asked Bellatrix after a while.

"Positive."
"Why were you arguing?"

Hermione tugged at her lower lip. "What do you mean?"

"You hit him."

Letting out an angry sigh, Hermione slammed her hand against the floor. "Ugh, don't even remind me! He was being a jerk, suggesting me and—eh—" She took a deep breath, starting anew. "He just talked about women as if we were some objects willing to roll with whatever he says!"

Bellatrix smirked. "That is why you hit him?"

"Basically."

"According to that logic, you should have slapped every single one of those men, then," said Bellatrix, shifting as if she wanted to stand up.

"I would have but that first one really scared me," said Hermione quickly, unwilling to give up Bellatrix's company just yet.

Bellatrix paused. "Was there anyone else you talked to?"

"Yes, those two men," replied Hermione. "It was all along the lines of 'can I buy you anything' from that Greyback and that other man was only trying to be nice, oh I didn't catch his—"

"Greyback?" repeated Bellatrix, her eyes widening.

"Yeah he—"

"Did he touch you?"

Did he touch you? What kind of question was that? "No, he—wait, actually, yeah, he grabbed my arm because—"

"Where? Show me!"

Perplexed, Hermione extended her arm. The words that were on the tip of her tongue died as Bellatrix closed her hand over her wrist and brought it closer to her eyes. She was turning it from side to side, examining it, while running her cold fingers along Hermione's burning skin. Instantly, there was a rush of goosebumps which Bellatrix must have noticed but Hermione was too overwhelmed to care about it. Bellatrix's skin felt so soft and fragile as if she could dissolve into the air with the barest touch, and yet when her nails made contact with Hermione's skin, it was Hermione who felt like dissolving.

She watched in silence as Bellatrix's fingers trailed lower and lower until they paused at her forearm, exactly where the small splatter of her freckles resided. Her stomach jumped. Did Bellatrix like them? If only she liked them.

"Well, I can't see a scratch. You were lucky, muddy," concluded Bellatrix, letting Hermione's wrist slip from her grasp, and it fell into Hermione's lap like a rag.

"He's a werewolf, isn't he?" said Hermione after she had recovered. "His teeth..." She scrunched her nose, clamping her teeth together twice like a baby cheetah.

Bellatrix turned her head away from her but before she did, there was no mistaking the smile upon her lips. Hermione saw it clear as day and it made her extremely happy. When she turned back
though, there was no emotion on her face. "Why the hell did you drink, Granger?" she asked.

"Because you told me not to."

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I was angry with you!" said Hermione pointedly, closing her eyes. Perhaps it was the whiskey, perhaps the anger, but she felt a sudden need to lie down as the room around her began spinning.

"You were angry with me." She heard Bellatrix drawl. "Why, because I assumed you'd sleep with that musician? Aren't you a little hypocrite? If I hadn't come in time, you two would have been in the ladies' room at that moment, doing it."

*How dare you! I wouldn't do it with anyone but Blair! And you. Wait...*

Hermione's eyes snapped open. "No, we wouldn't have! I went there to—to get away from him, it's not my fault that he followed me."

"Spare me, I know your type far too well."

"My type!" breathed Hermione, leaning on her hands. "I've never been intimate with anyone and you think I would lose something as precious as my virginity to someone I just met?"

Bellatrix tilted her head, taking her time before saying, "Well, that explains why you're so frustrated. If you got it on once in a while, you—"

"I'm not frustrated because I'm not having sex!" blurted Hermione, her arms shaking under her weight. "I'm frustrated because—"

*Because I'm madly in love with a woman who would never even see me as someone more than her friend's daughter! But how on Earth would you get it?!!*

"Because?"

"You don't deserve to know; there's no empathy in you so I'm not telling."

Bellatrix was looking at her as though debating whether or not to slap her but then asked, "Why were the two of you talking about me?"

Hermione frowned, shaking her head. "We weren't talking about you at all."

"Is that so? What about Blair, then? Who is she?"

*My American Aphrodite; ethereal creature, as soft as a smile, as mild as a flower, lovelier than the starry sky—Hermione's stomach turned over, a spark of clarity entering her mind.*

Oh no, no, no, she really shouldn't be talking about Blair.

"I uh," she started slowly. "Now that you mentioned it, I remember. I think I introduced you as Blair or Brielle, but he probably misheard." Hermione felt her mouth filling with saliva. This wasn't good. "Barbary—eh, he asked me who I was there with and I—" Hermione's stomach heaved again and there was no stopping this. She leapt to her feet and rushed to the bathroom, emptying the contents of her stomach down the toilet.

With tears in her eyes, she leaned her head against the seat, the marble floor cold against her naked
leg. She'd drunk too much tonight. Far too much. A cold sweat washed over her as she retched and vomited again.

Hermione spat out the terrible acidic taste and flushed the toilet; then climbed toward the bathtub, blindly running the water and washing her face first before taking a few gulps. She needed to brush her teeth. She needed to brush her teeth so badly. But where was her toothbrush? On the sink. Why had she left it there when it was so far from here? With her eyes half-closed, Hermione crossed the one foot from the bathtub to the sink which felt like a mile to her, clumsily feeling for her dental supplies. Having found them, she put too much of her minty toothpaste on her toothbrush and moved back to the bathtub, where she, slumped over the edge, began brushing her teeth frantically.

She hoped Bellatrix hadn't seen her and she refused to even look at the door to find whether or not she'd managed to close it on her way in. It would be beyond embarrassing if she witnessed this imbroglio. Hermione held her breath, listening; there was silence in the room. Perhaps Bellatrix had left. If only she had left. She knew about Blair now; knew her name at least. Hermione couldn't get over how beautifully it sounded spoken with Bellatrix's posh accent. Still, she must do everything in her power to never hear it out of her mouth again. She must fix this... but she would do it tomorrow, the headache was too rapid.

Hermione leant her forehead against the cold bathtub with the toothbrush hanging from her mouth.

"How charming," came Bellatrix's voice from the door. Flinching, Hermione snatched the toothbrush away from between her numb lips and shoved it into the running water before splashing some of it on her face and rinsing her mouth. Meanwhile, Bellatrix had sat down on the bathtub next to her and as Hermione raised her eyes, she could see Bellatrix was sporting the same fake sympathy as she had back in Malfoy Manor.

"See, this is what happens when you don't listen, love," she said, pouting. "Doesn't feel good, does it?" She lowered herself down to Hermione, looking directly into her eyes, and she was so beautiful it made Hermione's stomach ache ten times worse. "Look at you, you poor, poor thing," she added softly. "Would you like me to help you to bed?"

Those words alone were enough to make Hermione's world spin more than any alcohol could. But then there was this faint pressure on her skin and the staggered Hermione realised that Bellatrix was trailing her nail down her neck and Hermione's breathing had somehow quickened and oh God, oh God, what was it Bellatrix doing? Why was she touching her like that? Touching her at all? Hermione broke out in a cold sweat. There was no stopping the audible gasp from escaping her lips as Bellatrix's cool palm closed over her throat, softly working its way up until her thumb slipped just below Hermione's parted lips, following their outline. Hermione's eyes fluttered shut and her chest rose and fell with quick little breaths. Bellatrix's fingers were travelling up her cheek now and strayed to Hermione's hair, tucking a few wet curls behind her ear with those long, torturous nails.

"Come," she whispered, taking Hermione's hand and Hermione automatically pressed her fingers into Bellatrix's pillow-soft skin. Kicking the high heels off, she got to her shaky feet, because that's what Bellatrix asked her to do; and right now, she'd do anything for her.

Bellatrix led her out of the bathroom and into the room, fleetingly putting her palm on her lower back as she walked her to the bed and helped her in. Hermione's head was spinning so badly and her heart raced like it was stuck on high speed, and she couldn't help thinking she must have passed out on the bathroom floor, perhaps from alcohol poisoning and she was just hallucinating because there was no way this could be really happening.

Leaning back, Hermione rested her head on one of the pillows. Her hand, however, was reluctant to
leave Bellatrix's. If only she lay down next to her and just spent the night here, letting Hermione hold her freezing palm against her stomach as she was doing now.

"Better?"

"Why are you doing this for me?" asked Hermione, running her thumb over Bellatrix's knuckles. She would never dare to do that sober and even now it pushed an incredible amount of heat into her cheeks.

"Well, maybe I'm repaying you for taking care of me," replied Bellatrix. "I'm not as heartless as you may think," she added, gently freeing her hand and sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Hermione stared at her in disbelief. Was she losing her mind or was she still in the bathroom, dreaming a bizarre dream?

"Now, promise me something, will you?"

Bewildered, Hermione had to take a moment and even after that, she was only capable of nodding.

"Don't ever ever drink again." Bellatrix ran her eyes over Hermione, who couldn't look anywhere else but at Bellatrix. "Look what it has done to you; not to mention what it might have done. You said you didn't intend to do anything with that musician but he clearly had his own idea—"

"No, no, of course I didn't," blurted Hermione, wanting to set things straight. "I went to the restroom because I felt uncomfortable with him."

"Did you? From my perspective you seemed to be enjoying his company quite a lot," said Bellatrix, putting a spare blanket over Hermione. The gesture was so sweet and was she... was she referring to Hermione and Barbary kissing? Could it be she was jealous? Could she actually see Hermione like that? Hermione's drunken heart seemed to have stopped beating altogether at the possibility.

"I wasn't."

Bellatrix seemed hurt as she locked their eyes. "Then why did you kiss him?"

Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn. This cannot be. This cannot be!

"Because I," she started slowly. "I wanted to see..."

"Wanted to see what it's like with a man?" finished Bellatrix as Hermione failed to do so.

Blushing, Hermione shook her head. "No, I'd already kissed a boy. Well, a boy kissed me, but—" Draco, specifically, but Bellatrix didn't need to know the details. She'd most likely get mad and that would do her no good even though she was funny like that. "I guess, I just did it because I missed... someone," said Hermione lowly, feeling a sudden urge to tell Bellatrix everything about Blair but she couldn't do that, could she?

"Why don't you visit that someone then?" asked Bellatrix.

Hermione turned to lie on her side, facing her. "I can't, I promised I wouldn't leave."

Bellatrix's lips twitched. "Who did you promise?" she asked, moving closer and placing her hand on Hermione's knee, stroking it gently.

"I..." began Hermione, looking down, her insides on fire.
"Yes?" Bellatrix's palm moved higher, gliding up her thigh and her hip, pausing on her waist. She neared a bit closer, gently pressing down with her hand and making Hermione lie on her back. Then she leaned over her and Hermione's stomach clenched painfully as the scent of her spilling locks filled the air around them.

She was too drunk, too worn out to wait for more to make sure Bellatrix was actually being suggestive. Her hand moved on its own as it made its way to Bellatrix's bicep before meandering up, and drowning in the cold softness of that lustrous hair, which felt like running water against her famished skin.

Bellatrix didn't seem to mind as she inched forward, Hermione's eyes fixed on her crimson lips.

"You want it, don't you? Well... I want something, too," whispered Bellatrix sensually, brushing their noses. They were so close Hermione could taste her breath which caused the hairs on her body to stand on end, sending electricity down her spine. There was no fighting it. Moaning, she tore herself away from the pillow, trying to ease the longing building up in the pit of her stomach but Bellatrix pulled away, placing her hand on Hermione's neck, her sharp nail resting on her jugular.

"Slowly, love," she cooed. "First you need to tell me that name. Then, you can have it."

Hermione was breathing hard, staring at Bellatrix, a bitter disappointment covering everything inside her with frost. Her hand fell against the blanket. Bellatrix was just trying to get information from her; she hadn't been jealous of Barbary, she didn't like her at all; she was just playing her and the stupid Hermione let her.

Bellatrix removed her hand from her neck, trailing her nails down her chest and it felt so damn good...

But Hermione just couldn't tell her. Even though she felt delirious for her, she couldn't betray Dumbledore. Besides, Bellatrix didn't want her, she was just being a little bitch trying to sell herself for a piece of information. Hermione shouldn't want her, she just shouldn't... but she did. Like crazy.

"I can't!" She placed her shaking hand over Bellatrix's, stopping her just below Hermione's breasts.

"Surely you can," purred Bellatrix, her teeth sinking into her juicy lips. It was painful to watch but Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from her. "Tell me their name and then, it's just you and me," she added silkily before lowering herself and whispering in her ear. "Whatever you want me to do to you, I'll do it."

There were goosebumps all over Hermione's body now and her stomach and lungs hurt like clawing talons.

"All night long," breathed Bellatrix before her teeth nibbled at Hermione's jaw. And dear God, were those her lips? Hermione moaned into her hair, feeling the slickness of arousal on her thighs. She squeezed Bellatrix's hand harder, seizing her arm with her other hand, trying to pull her down to her, but Bellatrix didn't let her.

"The name..."

"I can't," cried Hermione, tears forming in her eyes. Resisting Bellatrix felt like dying and in a way, Hermione would swear some part of her was. She wanted her so much, almost as much as she wanted Blair. And she was here, doing all these things to her. If only Hermione could tell her that
damn name, they could... but then wouldn't she just use her like a cheap slut? Bellatrix was so much more than that, so much more... and Hermione could show her, pour all the love she felt for Blair into her and then...

And then, Dumbledore's plan would fail. She couldn't do this! *Pull yourself together, Hermione. Force some responsibility into that drunk head of yours.*

"Don't," she let out, squeezing her eyes shut. She forced herself to sit up, making Bellatrix do the same, headache hitting her full blast now. She was still gripping Bellatrix's hand and her head was still spinning and she could still feel every single touch. Tomorrow she was not going to believe what had happened here. Bellatrix had actually made a pass on her and it had yet to sink in as real.

Opening her eyes, Hermione looked at Bellatrix, her cheeks aflame. Smirking, the witch leaned forward, but with an iron will, Hermione turned her head away. "I said no," she said resolutely.

There was a moment of silence. Then, wrenching her hand from Hermione's grasp, Bellatrix leapt to her feet.

"Stupid girl, don't go thinking for a second I would actually touch you," she spat with a repulsed grunt. Her cruel eyes ran up and down Hermione's body. "Now I'm going to have to scrub my skin off so as not to feel your hands on me anymore. *God,* I feel disgusting," Granting Hermione one last hateful look, she spun around and stormed off, slamming the door behind her.

Hermione stared after her, grasping at her hurting stomach. She plopped back onto the pillows, tears oozing down her cheeks like two rivers. She felt so stupid and sickened with herself. How on Earth could she have been so naive and fallen into Bellatrix's trap like that? Did she have a sponge for a brain? She'd known it was just a trick on Bellatrix's part but she'd gone with it anyway!

Hermione clawed at her skin, trying to erase the feeling of Bellatrix's curls slipping over her neck, but her memory wasn't willing to do her the courtesy.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had always known that she had a soft spot for Bellatrix, she'd just never known how soft exactly. And it was so scary to even think that Bellatrix was capable of drawing such profound feelings from her. But then, it was nothing but damned lust. And Hermione was drunk. Perhaps she wouldn't feel like that when sober. She better not. Bellatrix didn't deserve her affection. She was the most wicked human that Hermione knew, a bloody dementor sucking people around her of every bit of happiness.

She hated her so so much. And she hated herself, with the same force.

Curling into a ball of despair, she let out a strangled sob. Blair would never do such a thing to her. She'd never play with her emotions like that. When Maxim had come into her life, she had even waited four months to share such, for her amazing, news with Hermione's mom because she knew the first thing Jean would do would be to tell Hermione. Blair was sensitive enough to at least try to spare her the pain. *She* was kind—the polar opposite of Bellatrix—and yet there, just a couple of minutes ago, she had felt for Bellatrix the same longing she had only ever felt for Blair.

Hermione bit into her pillow, crying harder. She didn't want to feel that way about Bellatrix; couldn't go through the same thing all over again. Especially not with *her.* She just couldn't.

Exhausted by the emotional and physical pain, Hermione slowly cried herself to a dreamless sleep.

The next morning came like a punch in the face. Hermione woke up with the worst sickness she had ever experienced. Her head felt like it had been removed from her neck, thrown under the
stampede of wildebeests and then returned to her body. The room around her was still spinning as
she tried sitting up and so with a pained groan, she instantly ended up back on the pillows. Her
mouth felt dry like a desert and her stomach was loudly demanding food.

But the worst feeling came when the memories of the previous night flooded in.

Bellatrix. She... she... Hermione's stomach turned over.

Had she...? Yes she had.

And had she really...?

Oh no... no, no, NO!

The world was suddenly spinning faster. If only that terrible nausea would subside to let her think
clearly. Collecting all her strength, Hermione rolled over, glancing down from the bed. Her purse
wasn't there. But where it was then? It took her a while to remember Bellatrix had thrown it onto
the floor at its foot last night. Crawling to the edge, not even caring her butt was all out as the dress
had ridden up her waist while she slept, Hermione blindly untangled the purse from her coat and
drew out her wand from its pocket before summoning the sobering potion. And there she was, a
couple of months ago, debating whether to pack it with her or not.

It had taken thirty drops of the potion for the headache to go away, ten more for the bedroom to
stop spinning, but unfortunately, there were not enough drops to erase the mounting burden of
shame that had gathered in the pit of her stomach.

How could Hermione have messed up like that? How?

The fact that she had allowed a complete stranger to touch her in such an intimate way was
profoundly embarrassing to her. The memory of Barbary's lips on hers made her feel so dirty and
so disappointed in herself, principally because to her, kissing wasn't just something she'd do for fun
with whoever happened to be standing next to her at the moment. It was something beautiful and
sacred she only wanted to experience with a person that meant something to her.

And yesterday, she'd wasted her first time of that sacredness on a man who was a decade older than
her and who meant absolutely nothing to her. All because she needed to feel wanted, which she
subsequently did, but by someone who wasn't Blair, so therefore rather than bringing at least a bit
of comfort, the interaction had left her frustrated and sad, with longing twice as difficult to bear.

It sickened Hermione to the core that she had exploited herself like that and she wished for nothing
more than to be able to take everything back, erase his touches because they felt so very wrong...

Unfortunately, she couldn't.

What she also couldn't take back was the fact that yesterday something utterly unimaginable had
happened between her and Bellatrix. That wicked woman who constantly acted as though touching
Hermione cost her extreme allergic reactions had seemed to have forgotten all about it as she'd
literally offered herself for an exchange of information. She'd touched Hermione in a way no one
ever had before, and Hermione hated herself for having responded to her like soft butter to a knife,
only to get spat on next moment.

The whole situation was so awfully embarrassing, Hermione was sure she could never look into
Bellatrix's eyes ever again. Now she knew Hermione had a thing for her even though she'd told her
on numerous occasions she hadn't. And now she even knew about Blair, in a way.
Hermione would like to punch herself in the face. How could she have been so reckless and fucked up like this, all because she'd wanted to make Bellatrix angry? How could she ever forgive herself for hazarding like this? She hung her shoulders down, sighing. Why did everything always have to backfire on her end? Perhaps deliberate vengeance never worked in one's favour...

Yeah, next time, better let karma sort everything out.

Hermione stayed in bed for the better part of an hour before finally heading for the shower. She tried her best to wash her guilt and shame off of herself but unfortunately, the only thing that came off was her smeared mascara. The fact that the whole thing with Bellatrix had started right there was definitely one of the reasons why.

All clean now, Hermione returned to the bed, which had already been made by Billey and who'd left her a tray with food on her nightstand. It was almost eleven a.m. Bellatrix didn't show up for the rest of the day but Hermione wasn't complaining. She really needed some time to process everything and try to forgive herself before facing that fille de joie.

Still, somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered what was going to happen next. The tour to 'The Embarkation for Cythera' was tomorrow. Perhaps Bellatrix would decide to go on her own—perhaps she had been drinking a bit herself last night and now felt uncomfortable to see Hermione, too, because of what she'd done.

As it turned out the next day, Bellatrix didn't.

It was something past five pm. Hermione was sitting in an armchair by the half-open window through which came from the garden the soft scent of the chocolate cosmos that she'd admired many times before but had never had a chance to see up close. She was reading 'The Gifts Of Imperfection' which she almost dropped at the sound of the door opening, followed by Bellatrix's clicking of heels. Despite her heartbeat growing faster, Hermione kept her eyes on the page, intending to ignore Bellatrix, or better, be just as mean as her if she needed to.

But lo and behold, Bellatrix acted as if nothing had happened, asking Hermione without any foreword to change into more appropriate clothes for the exploration. Why, Hermione didn't understand, for as far as her peripheral vision allowed her to see, Bellatrix herself was wearing her usual black dress which was anything but appropriate. Since she had no intention of picking up a fight though, she set her book aside and stood up without a word.

Hermione took her beaded purse from her nightstand and set off for the bathroom, never looking at Bellatrix once—she didn't want to see the reality of previous events reflecting in her eyes as she felt like it would only make them all the more true and embarrassing. If Bellatrix didn't bring them up, she was more than happy to pretend everything was just a figment of her imagination, too.

Closing the bathroom door behind her, Hermione kneeled onto the floor. She had no idea about the plan Bellatrix had contrived to rob poor Mr Barbary, but she was sure it was going to be dangerous as hell. There were going to be around fifteen more people beside them and Hermione doubted there wouldn't be one person at least who wouldn't notice something weird going on as she and Bellatrix would attempt to steal something from an old man.

Wow, that sounded so immoral even unspoken.

Rubbing her face, Hermione tried to push the thought to the back of her mind for the sole reason of it making her already feel guilty and nervous which was a good enough warning sign not to do this but could Hermione say no to Bellatrix? Hardly. Besides, stressing about something that hadn't even happened (yet) was stupid and unnecessary; maybe Bellatrix could reconsider... Yeah right,
as if she'd ever done that before...

Hermione glanced at her purse. She needed to hurry. Now, what should she wear? The weather in the painting seemed warm enough for a short-sleeved shirt, and she had this small travelling backpack she'd had at the Malfoys' last summer. That could look believable. Perhaps she could stuff it with a few items from her purse. A set of warm clothes and some healing potions to have near at hand as there was a high probability they'd need it if they had to fight their way through. But then, if they got caught, the healers at Azkaban would take care of them just the same...

Don't think about that!

Hermione entered the bedroom, having changed her clothes and carrying a backpack on her back. She kept her jaw locked, looking anywhere but at Bellatrix. As she walked further in, a thought dawned on her, that at some point they'd have to touch, and she immediately felt her face redden.

"We're going to use Floo powder," said Bellatrix coldly as if hearing her thoughts, then turned on her heel and marched out the door. Strangely relieved, Hermione followed. It had been such a long time since she'd been anywhere else in the house except for her bedroom. Looking around the high walls, her eyes involuntarily paused on Bellatrix, whose hair was slightly bouncing off her back as she walked down the long corridor.

Damn, Hermione could not believe they—

Abruptly Bellatrix stopped and so as not to crash into her, Hermione did, too. Bellatrix was looking to their right, where a massive ornamented door had been left slightly ajar, an odd scratchy sound coming from behind it. After staring at it for a couple of seconds, she averted her eyes to Hermione who, even despite the dimly lit space, felt her cheeks getting too hot for her liking.

"Go to the office and wait for me there," she whispered. "It's the door on the left at the end."

Confused, Hermione blinked a couple of times before willing herself to move. What was going on? Why was Bellatrix whispering? Reluctantly, Hermione set off through the corridor. Half-way through, she heard the sound of a door opening and closing. Bellatrix must have entered. Cautious as she was, Hermione couldn't help pausing after a couple more steps.

There were voices coming through that door; angry voices. Bellatrix's and... who was that? Could it be Rodolphus? Hermione thought carefully about her next move but eventually stepped back, tiptoeing toward the argument. She couldn't make out the meaning of the words that were being said, but the voices were definitely picking up the volume.

Hermione risked getting closer to the door. Subsequently, she recoiled at a loud crashing sound coming from the inside.

"You're sick! SICK! How dare you—?!” She heard Bellatrix yell full force now.

"How do you think it made me feel?" A male voice shouted over her. "We've been married for eighteen years and we've slept together once, Bella! ONCE! You act all hurt, but if you weren't so stubborn, it could have been you who—"

"Shut your mouth, you filthy animal!" Bellatrix yelled back at her husband. "No one disgusts me as much as you do! I'd rather die than let you touch me ever again!"

"Obviously!" bellowed Rodolphus. "You wouldn't do it with me but you go looking for it everywhere else. That harlot is no different than you!"
"Fuck you!" yelled Bellatrix, series of banging noises emerging through the door.

Rodolphus began laughing now, the sound so disturbing Hermione’s spine erupted in goosebumps. "But you already have, my darling! Through her, I've had you in every way I wanted! I know every inch of your scrumptious little bod—!"

"I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!" screamed Bellatrix, more explosive sounds coming through, one louder than the other.

Hermione's heart beat like a drum. She knew she should do something before—

Rodolphus screamed, "NO BELLA, STOP! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL US BOTH!"

The loudest explosive sound thundered inside, followed by deafening silence.

It took Hermione only a second to unfreeze and throw the door open. She couldn't help a horrified gasp from escaping her lips as she stepped inside. The entire room was in chaos. A cloud of powdery white dust was slowly falling down at the broken pieces of furniture covering the floor. The window opposite her was hanging on its hinges right over the crying Rodolphus Lestrange, who was lying underneath the debris, trembling, his face covered in blood. Hermione had to help him! But there was a movement to her left and upon turning in its direction, she saw Bellatrix leaning against the wall, her neck soiled with blood, too.

Without thinking, the terrified Hermione rushed to her but before she could say or do anything, Bellatrix grabbed her arm and Hermione found them Apparating.

She had no idea where they landed, but it didn't matter because Bellatrix crumbled to the wooden floor, breathing hard and looking worse than before. Had she...? Had she splinched? No, no, no! Hermione got to her knees. She removed her backpack from her back, trying to get to its inside pocket but Bellatrix gripped her hand tighter.

"Cast protective spells around the house, go on, quickly," she half-whispered, obviously in a lot of pain. Hermione's heart clenched at the sight, her eyes filling with tears.

"First, you need to drink—" she started but Bellatrix interrupted her.

"Do as I say!"

Hermione didn't listen as she unzipped the pocket with her trembling hands. "There's a healing potion that—" She tried to fish it out of the pocket but Bellatrix pushed her away.

"I'll find it, you cast the spells!"

Reluctantly, Hermione turned around, complying and casting all the protective spells she could think of. When she turned back, Bellatrix was lying on the floor, her eyes closed.

Hermione's wand slipped from her fingers and landed on the floor. She felt physically sick. What had happened? Bellatrix was supposed to feel better, wasn't she?!

But then, Bellatrix's eyes fluttered and opened again. Relieved, Hermione watched them run over the ceiling for a couple of moments before Bellatrix shifted, trying to get to her knees.

"You shouldn't move!" said Hermione quickly, hastening to her and searching her backpack for her purse. They were going to need more potions. "Try to lie down and I—" There was a moment when their eyes locked and Bellatrix brought her hand up to touch Hermione's cheek.
It made Hermione's breath hitch in her throat.

"You..."

"You need to lie down for a second, I need to find Dittany!" said Hermione firmly, moving further away from her. Bellatrix's hand fell against the floor.

"Are you going to lie down with me?"

"Wh—I, no, don't worry, I wouldn't—" blurted Hermione, remembering the last time they had had a conversation of a similar tune.

"But I want you to... now!" In a second, Bellatrix pulled herself from the floor, seizing Hermione's shoulders and toppling both herself and Hermione over. Hermione's back hit the floor painfully, Bellatrix's body falling on top of her, the smell of blood hitting her nostrils. What was happening? What was Bellatrix doing? She was going to injure herself even more! With her stomach clenching, Hermione used all her strength to roll them over. Leaping to her feet, she backed away.

"Stay here!" protested Bellatrix, trying to crawl toward her. "You can't leave me!"

Hermione's eyes widened, her heart breaking. "I'm not going anywhere but I—"

"You're trying to leave me, aren't you?!"

"No!"

"Yes, you are! But you're mistaken if you think I'll allow you!" Bellatrix had her wand in her hand now, pointing it at Hermione, who dropped to the floor just in time before the red flash of a spell could hit her chest. Quickly, she lunged for her own wand that she'd dropped earlier, deflecting another spell rushing after her. It bounced off the wall and flew toward the window, breaking it to pieces.

Had Bellatrix gone mad?!

"Please, I'm not going anywhere! What is it with you!" cried Hermione.

"Me?! What is it with you! You don't love me anymore!" Bellatrix began shooting spells at her, and while trying to block them, the bewildered Hermione had to crawl behind a nearby wall to save her skin.

You don't love me anymore?! What the hell?!

Bellatrix's spells were getting more aggressive with each time and Hermione concluded she'd have to knock her out to protect both of them from her tantrum. It was imperative she had her wounds inspected and healed. Despite those injuries though, Bellatrix fought with an admirable will and it had taken Hermione five tries before finally hitting her in the arm with the Stunning spell.

Having waited a moment, Hermione crawled from behind the wall. Seemingly unconscious Bellatrix was lying face up, a thin stream of blood coming out of her nose. Hermione's eyes slid from her face to her arm where a small, empty bottle was resting on the floor. But that—that wasn't the Healing potion!

Shit, what was it that Bellatrix had drunk?

You don't love me anymore...
All of a sudden, the revelation hit Hermione like a tidal wave, knocking the breath out of her. The night before the pureblood's ball last summer; the designer who had made the dress for her at the Malfoys', Vittorio—on his way out, he had forced something into her hand, a potion which Hermione had put into this specific bag that was now lying at her knees.

Bellatrix must have drunk it instead of...

She must have drunk the bloody love potion, an experimental love potion, that hadn't even been approved by the Ministry and that must be at least eight months expired!

Hermione's widened eyes looked at Bellatrix, an incredible amount of fear forming inside her stomach.

She was screwed. Completely screwed.

A/N: Hey, I hope you enjoyed the new chapter! As always the biggest thank you goes to Irymia for being an angel and editing this long chapter! And of course, all of you for keeping up with the story, it means the world to me!

This is the first time in two years (at least I think it's been two years) that I managed to update before Christmas and now I'm at a loss of words so I'll keep it simple.

I'd like to wish you all, the most magical Christmas you've ever had and even more magical New Year all the way to the next year! See you in 2020!

All my love, AP
It wasn't until Bellatrix's blood pooled on the floor around her that the flummoxed Hermione was awakened to action. She immediately rifled through the bag that was lying at her knees, fumbling for her beaded purse. *Come on; it was right on top!* Plunging deeper, the tips of her fingers grazed the smooth surface of the beads. Her hand clenched around them, pulling out the purse before flinging it open and summoning Dittany from its depths.

*It was going to be alright; Bellatrix was going to be alright...*

Drawing closer and taking a better look at the unconscious witch, Hermione was momentarily struck by panic: Bellatrix's chest, as well as her hair and clothes, were stained with blood so thickly, it seemed impossible to detect the source of her injuries. But it was nothing alarming, was it? Hermione could clean up the blood and then, she would see; she would see where Bellatrix was wounded and she would make it better, right? She could make it better! Hermione pointed her wand at Bellatrix's chest, moving it gently in short, slow motions so as to sweep the blood off to the sides. There were cuts revealed as she did, marking Bellatrix's shoulders, collarbones, and her breasts; even her stomach seemed to be injured as fresh blood soaked through her robe right there.

*What had Rodolphus done to you Bellatrix, what?*

There was no time for upholding the decorum. Without thinking, Hermione dropped her wand and grasped the plunging neckline at Bellatrix's breasts, ripping the garment down to the hem of the leather corset before unfastening the busk and proceeding tearing the fabric all the way to her hips. She cleaned up the blood again, her head spinning upon noticing new incisions, some of them so deep the blood that was flowing out of them seemed black instead of red. But what forced tears into her eyes and a frightened gasp out of her mouth was a wound right under Bellatrix's brassiere, which was open and about as large as a tile.

"No, no, no..." she cried as she unstoppered the bottle and poured three drops of Dittany over the bleeding tissue that sizzled and momentarily disappeared behind a greenish smoke which, after it had cleared, revealed a wound that, although not bleeding anymore, still hadn't healed completely—but it was all Hermione felt confident doing. With tears oozing down her cheeks, she continued pouring Dittany drop by drop, onto the rest of the wounds that stitched themselves, leaving pristine white skin behind. After several moments of unceasing work, it seemed that Bellatrix was out of danger. She would still need to take The Blood-Replenishing potion, but she would be alright. She was going to be alright... Hermione fished the first aid kit out of her purse and gingerly dressed the wound, placing a clean gauze over the laceration and applying some tape around the edges before softly pressing down with her fingers to hold it in place.

"Billey!" she called up and even though he had no obligation to come to her, there was a quiet pop in the air nevertheless and the tiny house elf appeared at her side.

"Miss Hermio—" started Billey, but soon turned her name into screeching.

"Shhh, Billey, don't worry! She's alright," Hermione assured him quickly, leaning over Bellatrix to see if there were any cuts on her side left to heal. "She's just fainted but in your house, in one of the rooms upstairs... there's Rodolphus and I need you to check up on him and heal him if you can and then, then report back to me. I know I can hardly beseech any favours of you but please, Billey, if he asks, don't tell him anything of our whereabouts! Now, take this with you." She forced Dittany
into his hand. "A drop for a minor injury, three for a major one. Go!"

The frightened Billey hadn't gotten a word out of his mouth before he was forced to depart with yet another quiet pop.

Hermione was taking deep swoops of breath, her heart thumping in her chest like a steam hammer. Regardless of what kind of person Rodolphus was, regardless of what he had done to Bellatrix, he was still a human being who had gotten crippled like a slaughtered animal himself and who Hermione couldn't, in all conscience, let bleed to death like one. She could only hope it wasn't too late.

Her eyes returned to Bellatrix. She glanced at the remnants of the black dress lying at her sides, drenched with blood, clammy and sticky and she knew she should do something to get it off of her but the thought of invading Bellatrix's privacy further than she already had mortified her more than she was willing to admit. Her hesitant eyes flicked to Bellatrix's hollow, milky-white stomach, then followed up the gauze that was affixed below the black lace covering her spilling breasts and lingered there until realisation dawned on her, and she looked away, blushing. She dipped into her purse again, drawing out her knitted blanket which she placed over Bellatrix's unmoving form. Then she pointed her wand at a piece of clothing that was sticking out of it and whispered, 'Evanesco'.

Hermione cast a troubled glance over the vast room. She thought of moving Bellatrix elsewhere as she deemed it unkind to leave her lying half-naked on the cold floor like this. Her eyes paused on a Victorian velvet sofa across from them. That should do it. She raised her wand but then the third pop echoed in the room as Billey returned, the seemingly empty bottle of Dittany falling from his hand and landing on the floor with a loud thud. His already wide eyes began to dilate even more as they stared at Hermione, pointing her wand at Bellatrix.

In an instant, Hermione lowered her arm. "Please be calm, Billey, I'm only trying to help," she paused and then asked, gravely afraid of the answer, "You're back quickly... Did you find him? Is Rodolphus alright?"

Billey hesitated a second before nodding and the relieved Hermione let out a heavy sigh.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed quietly, straining not to imagine the consequences that would have ensued if the situation had a different outcome. She gestured toward Bellatrix, adding, "I'll give you another potion for him to take later, but now if you could help me here, please."

They held Bellatrix up by magic as they lifted her off the floor and lowered her carefully onto the sofa. Billey, meanwhile, filled Hermione in on what a narrow escape it was for master Rodolphus, that if it hadn't been for miss Hermione's kindness, he would have surely met a sticky end.

Hermione shook her head and was about to dismiss the praise when Bellatrix's bare arm slipped from under the blanket and hung over the edge of the green sofa, softly bouncing up and down.

"We're lucky it wasn't too late," said Hermione, plodding toward her. After a moment of hesitation, she closed her hand over Bellatrix's forearm, meaning to put it onto the blanket but paused, noticing the scalding temperature of her skin. How very unusual: Bellatrix's hands were never warm, they had always been as cold as marble. Hermione looked at her face; it seemed glossy, her cheeks were rosy pink and there was a narrow ribbon of blood coming out of her left nostril which had curled above her lip and flown down her cheek. She must have a fever. A terrible, terrible fever.

Hermione gently wiped the blood from Bellatrix's face with a cuff of her jumper, scarcely touching her skin. It was burning.
It must be a side effect of that odd Amortentia, she reckoned. But what could she do to quell it? Hermione had a potion that cured ague and also murtlap essence in her beaded purse, but she doubted either of those would be helpful given it was a love potion that had caused the fever in the first place. They would do nothing against it. What she needed was an Antidote; but where to get one? She certainly couldn't brew it as what Bellatrix had drunk was no ordinary love potion but some bloody experimental elixir and Hermione had no idea what it was made of.

The only person that could tell her that was Vittorio D'Avalos. Hermione studied the thought for a moment, deciding that the best thing she could do was to contact Narcissa Malfoy—she'd get in touch with him sooner than Hermione.

"Billey, could I ask for another favour?" she said. "Could you bring something to Draco Malfoy?" He must have arrived at school by now as the Hogwarts Express had set off three hours ago.

"Young Mr Malfoy?" he asked, looking a bit unsure but then nodded. "Of course, miss."

Hermione gave him a small smile. She knew her time was limited and so she scribbled a simple note, asking Draco to write off to his mother in his name, requesting an immediate meeting with Vittorio for whatever reason he could think of; then fill Billey in on her response letter. Surely, Hermione could ask Narcissa directly, which would be far quicker and easier, but she had no idea how much she knew about the whole corpus deus situation and whether she was aware of Bellatrix's and Hermione's deal at all. She couldn't risk her appearing here and demanding the answers Hermione didn't have.

"Here," she said after she had finished writing on the small piece of parchment, which she handed to Billey. "Please, don't tell Draco anything about what's been going on here. If he asks about me, don't tell him anything either, except maybe that I'm safe and mad at him for forgetting about my birthday, and that this is his chance to make it up to me. When you deliver him the note, you may go and check on your master Rodolphus again, but please, keep close to Draco." She leaned in, emphasising her next words. "As soon as he gets a response letter, he's going to call you and tell you the address—you know who Vittorio D'Avalos is, don't you?" Billey nodded. "As soon as Draco calls you, you go to the place whose address he tells you and you get Vittorio here." Hermione reached into her beaded purse again. "I'm going to pour off some of the Blood-Replenishing potion for you to take to Rodolphus and..." She fell silent as she struggled to find the bottle.

"No need, Miss Hermione," said Billey quickly. "There's a grand supply of replenishing potion at Lestrange manor! Billey can use it!"

"Brilliant," she mumbled but persisted with her search nonetheless as Bellatrix would need to take at least three spoonfuls herself later on. When she finally pulled the potion out of her purse and put it into the pocket of her jacket, she looked up and saw the house elf bowing to her.

"Billey will be back soon, miss!" he promised and, giving her a small nod, Disapparated.

Hermione looked after him for a few seconds before lowering her gaze and noticing how dirty she actually was. She cleaned the blood off her hands, clothes, and the floor, then sank into the nearby armchair which, thanks to Bellatrix's tantrum, had its stuffing oozing out like a busted cotton sack, and clamped her hands over her face. The thoughts she'd been successfully pushing to the back of her mind up until now were whizzing back like tidal waves toppling anything that was standing in their way; Bellatrix had taken a love potion.

She had taken a love potion.
She was going to kill her for this even though it wasn't Hermione's fault at all. Hermione had completely forgotten it was in her bag; it had been there for over a year now; she couldn't have possibly known... Hermione could only hope Bellatrix would let her explain. Right, as if she had ever done that. Of course, she wouldn't; there was no doubt that after getting back to normal, Bellatrix wouldn't be interested in the least in hearing Hermione's side of the story as she would be certain Hermione had planted the potion there on purpose.

Goddamnit! What had Hermione done to deserve such affliction? Had she been cursed? Since meeting Bellatrix, it had been nothing but constant misfortune clouding her life like a thick fog, which she started to doubt would ever disperse.

Hermione leaned further into the armchair. Her distraught eyes cut toward the pieces of broken glass splattered across the wooden floor, then went up the panelled walls, pausing on the outer window pane that thankfully had remained untouched. The sky outside seemed to be getting darker, pushing a strange wave of unease inside Hermione's stomach. In a few hours, she and Bellatrix were supposed to be in Paris, filching the cup from Barbary senior, but by no means could they go there like this. Bellatrix was in no state to travel and Hermione wouldn't dare leave her on her own or with Billey; even if she would, she had no idea as to how to get the cup without getting herself arrested—Bellatrix had never told her what her plan was. Besides, leaving her unsupervised for just a second might result in a windfall of nasty accidents. The potion had surely tampered with Bellatrix's head and Hermione didn't have the slightest clue as to what to expect from her at this point.

One way or another, something needed to be done about it. They couldn't just wait around for the effect of the potion to subside. It might take hours, even whole days for it to evaporate from Bellatrix's blood. Also, Vittorio himself might have trouble squeezing in a meeting as he was most likely swamped with work, especially now with the ball season approaching. What was Hermione going to do until then? Keep Bellatrix unconscious? She could hardly do that. But what if Bellatrix tried to attack her again? Hermione pointed her eyes toward the floor, where Bellatrix had dropped her wand when Hermione had stunned her. It was suicidal, sure, but imperative at the same time.

Standing up from the armchair, Hermione walked over there and collected the crooked wand before putting it into her purse, all the while mentally going over the many ways Bellatrix might kill her. Because she was going to do that; if not over the love potion or the missed chance to get the cup, she'd certainly do it for having her wand taken away from her. Still though, unarmed, how dangerous couldn't she truly be?

Hermione retraced her steps to the passed out witch, casting a nervous glance at her face. She noticed that her skin colour had gone from soft pink to coral. Was she getting worse? Maybe Hermione, after all, should try the murtlap essence and also get the blanket off of her to keep her cool. But then, Bellatrix was only in her underwear, Hermione couldn't violate her like that. She better tried the murtlap essence first. Summoning a small piece of cotton cloth from her purse and a bottle of murtlap essence, Hermione poured a generous amount of liquid onto the cloth, then approached Bellatrix and carefully placed it over her forehead. Her stomach clenched at the incredible heat that almost instantly penetrated the wet fabric.

Hermione could feel her own face softening. Seeing Bellatrix in such a poor state made her forget about their clash in the blink of an eye. The pain Bellatrix was going to have to go through once she woke up; her stomach was still wounded, although the bleeding had stopped, but combined with the fever and that bloody infatuation... it was going to be hell on earth for her.

Hermione's fingertips drifted from the cloth onto the burning skin of Bellatrix's temple, tracing it gently before she realised what she was doing and quickly retreated. Fear washed over her like a
cold breeze, bringing a revelation upon her, of which she, deep down, knew; she had suspected for quite a while now and—

Bellatrix shifted, a smattering of unidentifiable words slipping past her lips. She scrunched her face as if in protest to Hermione's thoughts, but her eyes remained closed and her breath, although barely discernible, quite regular. Hermione's heart was plummeting inside her chest as she stared at her with her eyes widened, and it sped up even more as Bellatrix's movements and somniloquy became progressively more animated.

No, no, she couldn't wake up just yet! Hermione wasn't ready; she—

She froze.

Bellatrix's exposed arm stirred deliberately now, rising from the blanket and moving toward her forehead to push the cloth with the murtlap essence aside. She tugged at the blanket, lifting it slightly and looking at her stomach that obviously hurt like hell as her face contracted and her lips let out a pained gasp.

With mad anxiety that suffused into every curve and every corner of her body, Hermione watched her prop herself on her hands and slowly turn her flushed face towards hers. Hermione instinctively took a step backwards. Bellatrix shifted her weight to her right elbow, the knitted blanket gliding down a bit and revealing her shoulder with a black lace strap. Tilting her head, she ran her narrowed eyes up and down Hermione's body before sinking her teeth into her lower lip.

Was she going to attack Hermione again? Suspect she wanted to leave her? Tell her she didn't—?

"Could I have a glass of water?" asked Bellatrix in a deep, raspy voice, catching Hermione completely off guard. She wanted what...? Water, right. She had a fever, of course she was thirsty; should have thought of that; should have had it prepared!

Hermione cast about, seizing an empty aluminium vase that she'd found resting on the long table next to the sofa, and transfigured it into a clear glass which she filled to the brim with water by using the Aguamenti Charm.

"How do you feel?" asked Hermione nervously as she approached her, holding out the glass from a far-enough distance, which made Bellatrix's lips curl in a smirk.

"Never better," she replied and, after a small pause during which she hadn't reached for the glass once, added, "I don't bite, love."

*Yes, you do, now probably more than ever, *Hermione abstained from saying out loud, yet took a careful step forward nevertheless.

Bellatrix gave an adorable chuckle before sitting up and finally taking the offered glass from Hermione, who started to retreat. Bellatrix's other hand closed over her wrist before she could, though, making her double over as she pulled her forward. Panicking, Hermione planted her feet but didn't dare to put up much fight as she had to mind Bellatrix's injury.

"No, no, no don't! I—" Hermione cried in alarm, uncertain of her next words, but Bellatrix sorted out her dilemma.

"Shhh, deary, come, sit next to me!"

Hermione had to think on her feet. Arguing might be the wrong move as it had proven to infuriate Bellatrix before, so perhaps negotiation would do the trick. "Will you let go of my hand if I do?"
she asked in a trembling voice.

Bellatrix dropped the glass she was holding into her lap, spilling water all over herself and bringing her now free hand to rest upon her other. Hermione picked up the glass and quickly set it onto the floor before drawing her wand that she had tucked into her jeans just a moment ago and pointing it toward the drenched blanket. She gave an elaborate wave, making hot air stream from its tip but soon broke the spell as it was taking too long. Trapped by Bellatrix's hands, she could only do as much as to summon her beaded purse from the floor. She caught it in the air, almost dropping her wand as she did.

She put the purse onto the sofa and with some difficulty delved her arm in, feeling for clothes. Quickly enough her fingers sank into the soft cotton fabric and she pulled out a dark long-sleeved t-shirt, which she put onto the blanket and quickly made it the size of a dress and held out for Bellatrix to take.

"I promise, I'll get you something more fitting later, but if you could, at least for now, put this on. I had to remove your—!" Hermione's words faltered to a stop as she recoiled and turned her head so quickly her neck popped. As she was talking, Bellatrix had released her wrist and thrown the blanket aside, revealing a lot of her porcelain skin, covered by nothing but black lace lingerie which, although Hermione saw it only as a smudge, set her cheeks ablaze. She'd never seen her with so little on, and she had never imagined she would. This was Bellatrix Lestrange, for Merlin's sake; Draco's aunt, a well-respected pureblood witch. This just wasn't supposed to happen; ever!

"Did you do this?" asked Bellatrix, her voice strangely distant, and it took Hermione a while to figure she must be talking about the gauze attached to her stomach.

Still facing away, she nodded. "Yes—I mean no, not the injury." She put more distance between them, adding, "When we were apparating, you splinched. It was a nasty wound but I healed it... as best as I could."

"It still hurts."

"I know and I'm sorry," said Hermione lowly; if she could, she'd swap bodies with her in a second. "I'll try to make it better but please, put on the t-shirt."

"No, I'm good; I am too hot anyway."

That sums it up.

"Please, at least for now, there's something we need to discuss and I—"

I can't do it with you half-naked and smiling at me in such a provocative manner. I won't be able to finish one single sentence.

There was a moment of silence, then ruffling of clothes. "Done," said Bellatrix, and on turning back, Hermione witnessed the most unusual of sights: Bellatrix was wearing a muggle t-shirt, which later might only add up to her list of reasons as to why she should murder Hermione in her coldest blood, but damn it if it didn't suit her. Hermione had never seen her wearing anything but the same-styled dresses with leather corsets and low necklines over and over again, hence this was certainly a sight to behold. As Bellatrix had obviously regained some of her lost weight, the t-shirt fit her well, far better than it had fit Hermione; it clung to her prominent hips and slender waist more than her own dresses which initially made Hermione anxious that her wound would be bothered until she recollected that the fabric was flexible and wasn't actually that tight at the stomach. It snaked further down Bellatrix's thighs and ended just below her knees, which she had
folded to the left side—a somewhat carefree pose that gave her even more statuesque poise than she already possessed.

"Better now?" Bellatrix tossed her head to get her curls out of her eyes, revealing that the coral tint of her skin had reduced back to pink. Her fever must have gone down, thought Hermione—perhaps now she wouldn’t be so difficult.

Hermione took out the replenishing potion from her pocket but paused, realising that for an accurate measurement, she’d need a dosing spoon. She glanced at her beaded purse, still placed on the sofa. Bellatrix's eyes slid down toward it, too, and before Hermione had a chance to move, Bellatrix extended her arm and seized it, holding it tauntingly on one level with her shoulder.

A simple wand movement and the purse slipped from her grasp and flew toward Hermione, who caught it, pleased that her non-verbal magic had clearly improved. A strange smirk flitted across Bellatrix's face at the retrieval.

Having summoned the teaspoon from the bag, Hermione pocketed her wand and commenced, "I don't know how much of what happened you remember, but before we left your house, you and your husband had a fight. He injured you enough to make you lose some blood and while you may not necessarily feel bilious, I still think you need to take the replenishing potion to forestall any complications." While talking, Hermione warily approached Bellatrix. She extended her arm, meaning to hand her the teaspoon but the witch did not take it.

Heaving a sigh, Hermione set the purse aside and filled the spoon with the potion, holding it out for the second time. Bellatrix glanced at it before slowly leaning in and parting her lips. Was she serious?

Afraid that most of the precious liquid might end up on the floor as the spoon shook in her hand, Hermione secured her arm against her side before bringing it to Bellatrix's mouth. She glanced away and only after the soft pressure that was making her hand shift had subsided, did she look back, the weirdly intimate moment leaving her somewhat unbalanced. She refilled the spoon two more times and when Bellatrix swallowed the last load, Hermione picked up the glass from the floor, filling it with water and holding it up. "Please," she accentuated, which surprisingly made Bellatrix drink it.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked, taking the now empty glass from her and setting it on the table next to them.

"No."

Hermione was about to turn to her and say it was probably going to take some time when she found herself being pulled backwards by her elbow. Yelping, she landed on the sofa beside Bellatrix, who, before Hermione could escape, put her leg over Hermione's lap, leaning her knee against the bottom of her sternum.

"But now I do."

"No, no, wait! Don't do this! Please, I—" blurted Hermione, shrinking into the backrest, her stomach turning at the influx of minuscule creatures bouncing about as if she had a trampoline affixed to its walls.

"Aren't you adorable, so timid and scared," cooed Bellatrix, inching closer and pressing the shin of her other leg against the length of Hermione's leg, the warmth of her fever-stricken body seeping
through Hermione's clothes like a white flame. The wickedly strong smell of blood was still wafting from her hair which was but a small aid to keep Hermione alert.

Slanting forward, she tried to get away but Bellatrix placed her burning palm along her collarbone with a pressure that, although faint, made her stiffen like a statue. It took Hermione a lot of self-control to collect herself, jerking her head to the side so as to avoid Bellatrix's hand that had moved higher and against all odds managed to slip into her hair.

"He didn't injure me, you know."

"Huh?" murmured Hermione, hyperventilating.

"Rodolphus—he didn't injure me," said Bellatrix, resting her right arm on Hermione's shoulder. "I did. You see—" Her fingers trapped a thick lock of Hermione's hair. "Pureblood marriage is a wayward bond."

"Is it," said Hermione, swallowing the excessive saliva pooling in her mouth.

"Oh yes... it is a curse, really." Bellatrix paused before whispering, "A wife can't harm her husband without harming herself, too."

Hermione halted, facing her. Bellatrix was very close, her eyes, darker than ever, boring into hers with the sharpness of a surgeon's knife.

"You... you mean... there's a curse placed upon your marriage?" she stuttered, completely transfixed. "That whatever you do to him happens to you, too?"

"Mhm," Bellatrix nodded, tilting her head and tucking a few curls behind Hermione's ear.

"That's barbaric!" blurted Hermione.

"No... do you know what is, though?" murmured Bellatrix before leaning in, and it was her lips, soft as a dream, whispering against her ear, "It doesn't work the other way around." She nuzzled her temple against Hermione's, her fingers pulling softly at the tips of her hair, and Hermione couldn't tell whether it was the touch, the incredible warmth radiating from her body and her breath, or her words that sent an excruciating stream of goosebumps down her spine.

"It doesn't?" she breathed, her chest rising and falling like a swell in the sea. "He can—ub—he can do to you what he sees fit?" Oh, Hermione couldn't talk properly with her so close, and this was so important for her to know. In a desperate need to regain control over her numbing senses so as to give proper attention to what Bellatrix was saying, Hermione managed to gently weave her way away from her arms and legs and leaned back on her hands.

"He could kill me and nothing would happen to him, whereas if I..." started Bellatrix but didn't finish. She put a scrutinising look on Hermione, who was pulling away from her as if her proximity might kill her. "Would you mind if I died?" she asked out of the blue. "You seem to care so much; I just wonder sometimes... Why..."

Hermione felt her eyes widen. She wondered sometimes?

Bellatrix waited for her to speak, not even trying to get closer anymore, probably content with their right and left knees touching. But Hermione, too, remained silent, inwardly debating whether she should ask her the question that was burning her tongue, seeing that now, Bellatrix would give her all the answers she'd want, but swiftly discarded the idea. She couldn't violate Bellatrix's privacy by asking about things she wouldn't want to talk about under normal circumstances.
"I... " rasped Hermione before clearing her throat and starting again. "Of course I would mind, you're Draco's aunt, he'd be very upset if anything happened to you."

Bellatrix leaned against the sofa, still facing her. "Is that so?" she asked, the blush on her cheeks turning a darker red right in front of Hermione's eyes.

No...

"Well?" drawled Bellatrix, her voice different, somewhat huskier now. Something was off...

Hermione should get away before—

She made to bolt up at the same time as Bellatrix pulled away from the backrest, swiftly lifting her leg over Hermione's lap and straddling her hips. Hermione's hands slipped and her back was forced against the armrest with her head hanging over its edge. The muscles in her stomach contracted at her t-shirt riding up a few inches above her jeans, letting her experience first-hand how unbelievably smooth, hot, and sticky Bellatrix's bare thighs were against her skin. There was an outburst of heat seething in her lower belly and she was gasping audibly, trying to stay calm, repeating over and over with so little clarity that was left in her aching body and soul that this was wrong and so far from what Bellatrix actually wanted. She repeated it out loud while trying to block Bellatrix's hands from creeping down to her belly but they slid past them easier than a spoon through a soft pudding. Bellatrix grasped the hem of her shirt, shifting her weight before yanking the fabric up to her bra. A cold sweat washed over Hermione, almost throwing her into catalepsy as Bellatrix sat back, more of her skin sticking to Hermione's, the delicate lace the only barrier between them.

And she was so painfully soft; so warm and feminine... and so Bellatrix!

A grander spark of morality kicked in—this wasn't supposed to be happening between them. In no time or space was Hermione supposed to know her like this.

"No, no, stop!" she yelped, forcing Bellatrix's straying hands away from her clothes. "Don't do this! Please! You don't like me! You don't like me at all! Remember?" she said, almost crying. "And— and—we're both women! You detest that!"

Bellatrix listened but didn't seem too eager to understand. "Stop resisting," she whispered and tightened her legs around Hermione's hip bones before wrenching her wrists from Hermione's grasp and gripping hers instead. She pinned them to the sides of her legs and lowered herself down, her hair spilling onto Hermione's chest, who had drawn her head back and let it hang over the armrest to avoid further contact.

"You wanted it so much the other day. And now when I want it too..." went on Bellatrix, her breath so sensual against Hermione's exposed neck she stood no chance against the abrupt throbbing that emanated in her loins.

Then Bellatrix licked her; her tongue, as smooth and venomous as daffodils, slid along her skin, leaving a trail of hot poison from her pulse point up to her jaw.

That's when breathing began to hurt; that's when every nerve in Hermione's body began to hurt from fighting the desire to let this Bellatrix take whatever she wanted of her, to let herself take whatever she wanted of Bellatrix, because she did want her. Sober—not drunk, she wanted her with the same sane yet mad wanton as she had wanted her that night.

The sylph of Bellatrix's breath grazed her jaw. "...let's make wild love until your heat is mine and mine is yours..."
At that moment, Hermione's heart stopped. Those words were enough to pierce through her skin and snatch every bit of sanity that was still left in her mind. A strangled gasp escaped her open mouth, and she writhed underneath Bellatrix to free herself so she could touch her and—

"Oh, damn you, damn you!" Bellatrix leapt to her feet, leaving her panting and throbbing, instantly missing her touch with every fibre of her being.

"Wh—?" started Hermione, close to fainting. She wanted her back, she wanted her back on her hips, wanted to give her what she had asked for.

"You should have told me you don't want me as I'm only making a fool of myself!" seethed Bellatrix, folding her arms, the long shirt pulled up just below her bottom. God, she'd got some legs, thought Hermione, watching her pace back and forth before finally snapping to reality. As though slapped, she quickly sat up and crossed her legs, her hands raking into her hair. What did you want to do, Hermione?! Are you insane?

Dragging her sleeve across the distracting, cold with time, wetness on her neck, her eyes stumbled upon Bellatrix's alabaster skin again, noticing for the first time a long scar marking her left inner thigh. In an instant, her eyes snapped up, because Bellatrix was talking again.

"I practically threw myself at you and you reject me like this?" she fumed. "But suit yourself! I can find someone else who'd appreciate my..." she paused, feeling her hips as if searching for something. "My wand... Where is my wand? Where?! Do you have it?"

Hermione fell into a mad fright. "I... no, I don't," she lied, her voice trembling.

Bellatrix's face faltered and she stayed quiet for a while. "I'm exhausted; can't we go to bed?" she said finally before smirking and adding, "You can sleep next to me." Then went on whispering, "So very close. I know you'd like that. We could play mommy and daddy. Well, perhaps just mommy." She winked at her knowingly.

Hermione must have gone red as a tomato, the throbbing inside her loins intensifying. How could she...?

But Bellatrix's face scrunched again. "My head hurts... and it's all... it's all you!"

There was a popping sound in the air and Hermione jerked in surprise. In between her and Bellatrix appeared standing Billey, holding onto none other than Vittorio D'Avalos. The extravagant designer was casting around the half-destroyed drawing room in confusion, obviously trying to detect where he was and why. Then his eyes landed on Bellatrix.

"Il mio amore!" he exclaimed in his strong Italian accent but hesitated. "But... my bella Bella, what are you wearing?"

Bellatrix scoffed and approached him in two long strides, looking over his shoulder. "Vittorio, she doesn't want me! How come she doesn't want me?"

Vittorio turned from Bellatrix to see who it was she was glaring at and set his widened eyes on Hermione, who quickly stood up from the sofa, saying, "Hello."

"Hello," he replied, tipping his head and gesturing toward the floor. "What happened here? I thought I was summoned to tailor a dress rather than clean up a battlefield. Explain to me what—"

"There's nothing to explain!" Bellatrix interrupted him, almost hitting Billey as she motioned toward Hermione in obvious frustration. "She doesn't want me!" Bellatrix anchored her hand on
Vittorio's shoulder, his arm curling around her waistline. "No one has ever rejected me! Ever! Even you wouldn't do that, would you, my Venetian angel?" She grasped his jaw, turning his face toward hers and pulled him down for a solid kiss straight on her juicy puffed up lips.

Hermione felt something wild and heavy snap out its claws and dig them into the walls of her stomach. Her teeth clashed together as she grasped a handful of her jumper, squeezing it like a dry lemon.

Two seconds later Vittorio pulled away, his face scrunched up in surprise. "Madonna santa!" He breathed, licking his lips and giving an amused laugh. "We better not tell Rodolphus about this." Then, touching her arms, he gently turned Bellatrix to face him fully and bent his knees to look into her eyes, asking, "What's going on with you?"

Hermione cleared her throat, which made Vittorio cut his eyes to her. "Mr D'Avalos, I don't know if you remember me," she started, feeling her voice tremble with emotions and so as to shake them off, she paused, which Vittorio took as his chance to say:

"Of course I remember you, how could I forget those striking eyes, eh?" He made to extend his hand, but Bellatrix put her index and middle finger on his forearm, bringing it back down to his side. He looked at her.

"No," she said, shaking her head like an annoyed five-year-old while looking so damn important and adorable. "You don't touch that because that's Bella's."

Hermione's stomach tightened like a rattlesnake when strangling its prey.

"Excuse my impertinence, Bella, but," said Vittorio, "I don't understand what is going on here. Have you had a bit too much to drink? Or is this some kind of an ill-suited prank?" He let out a small laugh. "Why are you talking about this young woman in such a peculiar way? I was supposed to meet with young Draco and here, this little creature, whatever his name is—" He nodded at Billey, who was crouching beside him and squeezing something in his hand. "—snatches my coat—by the way, it's silk so careful next time—and brings me here to find you, Bella, among debris, wearing this rag and acting so... not yourself?"

"His name's Billey," clarified the still annoyed Hermione, attracting Vittorio's attention back. "And to address your question—perhaps you remember that last summer at Malfoy manor you gave me a potion, a potion which Madame Lestrange here has unfortunately taken instead of something else and now she..." Hermione paused, watching his lips twist in recollection before going on. "I'm really sorry I had to disturb you like this but I saw no other choice as I'm in desperate need of an Antidote which I'm afraid only you can provide. I can't stand—"

"You can't stand me?" Bellatrix cut in and set off toward her but Vittorio swiftly wrapped his arm around her and pulled her back.

"Careful, her stomach's injured!" cried Hermione in alarm and Vittorio instantly loosened up his grip. Hermione guessed he must have felt the gauze under the thin fabric as he moved his arm lower and secured it around her hip bones instead.

Even in her concern Hermione couldn't help debating whether it was truly necessary for him to be touching her that much.

An angelic smile settled on Bellatrix's face. "See how she cares? She always does these little things, asks me if I've eaten or gotten enough sleep. I was positive she had a crush on me but look at her now, rude little thing, when I want to have SEX with her—" Bellatrix accentuated and
Hermione's cheeks heated up like Finnish sauna. "—she's playing hard to get!"

Hugging herself, Hermione drew a shaky breath, her lower belly tightening in one painful throb. Bellatrix was going to skin her alive when she remembered what she had said in front of Vittorio.

"Why is she injured?" he asked and Hermione shifted her eyes to him.

"Splinched while Apparating," she replied. "I couldn't risk trying to heal her fully since I had no idea what your potion consisted of. The ingredients from different concoctions, as you surely know, might clash in her stomach and I was afraid that by trying to help I could actually make things worse."

"I am tired," announced Bellatrix, placing her arms over Vittorio's and leaning against his front. He glanced at her briefly before prompting her forward and walking her to the sofa. Bellatrix plopped onto the comfort coil and, closing her eyes, leaned against the backrest as Vittorio pressed his hand to her forehead.

"She's got a fever."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, it fluctuates without a warning and comes with rapid mood swings."

Vittorio's eyes darted to her. "The potion must have expired at least five months ago," he said and straightened up, studying Bellatrix with slight concern. "I'm not sure if at this point... but then..." he paused. "Has she thrown up? Complained about stomachache or anything of such sort?"

"So far she's mentioned a headache and tiredness, but those might as well be attributed to her blood loss," replied Hermione.

"Bella!" Vittorio inclined over her but Bellatrix only scrunched her face so as to tell him to leave her alone. Scratching his temple, he turned to Hermione. "Listen, I'll get her the Antidote, but dealing with a potion after such a long expiration period... You have to be prepared, it might take quite a while for it to kick in."

"What do you mean?" Hermione narrowed her eyes, a strange wave of unease washing over her. "How long approximately?"

"We might be talking days, whole weeks. It depends on various factors like the general state of her immune system—"

\textit{Bad.}

"Her lifestyle habits."

\textit{Even worse.}

Surveying Hermione's expression that must have gone from worried to freaked out, Vittorio took a step closer, taking her hand. "Don't worry, cuore mio, if you make sure she's drinking plenty of clean water, gets enough sleep, perhaps does a little bit of exercise or something that might help her sweat it out, which by the way, is going to be so adorable since she's going to smell like the candy the potion consists of," he halted himself. "Well, I can't give it away, can I? Anyway, I was thinking about hot showers or perhaps a sauna; both might help immensely..."

Hermione's head spun as she imagined Bellatrix trying to seduce her while smelling of caramel toffees. She took two deep breaths and nodded. "So... if I make sure she does all these things, there's a high chance it won't last for more than two days, right?"
Shrugging, Vittorio gave her a sad smile and squeezed her hand. "Hope springs eternal." Then he let go, adding, "I'm going to get the Antidote now. Luckily, I brewed some last week." With that, he Disapparated.

Hermione looked at Bellatrix, who seemed to have fallen asleep on the sofa like a tired child, with her lips slightly parted and her long lashes casting even longer shadows down her upper cheeks.

How was Hermione ever ever ever going to survive her advances?

"Miss Hermione?"

She almost jumped upon hearing a quiet voice coming from her left. As she turned, she saw Billey emerging from behind the damaged armchair. Hermione had completely forgotten about him; he must have cleared off while they were talking as nobody had been paying attention to him.

"Billey! I... you were incredible getting Vittorio here so quickly. Thank you!"

Blushing, Billey came closer and, shaking his head, replied, "Billey cannot possibly take any credit for fetching Mr D'Avalous as it was all Mr Malfoy's doing. He alarmed Ailey, the old house elf of the Malfoys, who went to Mr Vittorio like many times before and lied to him to get him to Diagon Alley, saying it was a matter of life and death, because young Mr Malfoy—oh, Mr Malfoy actually asked me to deliver you a letter." Billey handed Hermione a folded parchment. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Thank you, Billey! Thank you so much!"

Billey let out a strangled gasp. "Miss Hermione is too kind to Billey."

Smiling, Hermione patted his bony shoulder, which he clearly couldn't take and burst out crying. He held his palms to his mouth as he probably didn't want to wake Bellatrix up and with eyes welled up with tears, bowed to Hermione and Disappeared.

Hermione stared after him for a moment, thinking that when this corpus deus fiasco was over and she survived, she was definitely pitching a campaign for freeing the house elves. They were too good to be living this menial kind of life.

Her eyes darted to Bellatrix while unfolding the letter. She came over to one of the large windows, careful not to step over the broken glass.

You ungrateful woman,

as if my existence wasn't a gift enough for you! Cool off, though. Being my awesome generous self, I did send you a birthday card which, as I've come to know, must have missed you. No wonder; Merlin knows where you are.

It's beyond me why you need services from D'Avalous. Are you going to be having fun while I'll be stuck in classes? Because if so, our friendship is over. Anyway, I did what I could and hopefully, he'll be with you soon enough. I've sent him a note saying I'm going to elope with Astoria and she needs a wedding dress right this instant.

On a serious note. I don't say this often but I miss you, Brain. There's so much I have to tell you. Perhaps you'll find some time for me one of these fine days, seeing as you're building an army of house elf allies. They can get you to Hogwarts, you know that, right? If my dear aunt lets you, I'd like to see you. Hogwarts is not the same without you and I barely had a chance to unpack.
P.S. It's good to know you're safe. Hope it stays that way.

— Draco

When Vittorio returned ten minutes later, carrying a wooden fruit basket full of small bottles, Hermione's eyes were still oozing with tears.

"Oh what's this?" he cooed, setting the basket onto the table. "Why the tears?"

"I... it's nothing." Hermione quickly wiped her face. She missed her life so much. She missed Draco so much. But she needed to be strong now; couldn't let her emotions overwhelm her.

"Don't you worry, everything will be okay!" Vittorio nuzzled her cheek with the back of his hand, clearly thinking she was crying over Bellatrix. "I can only imagine how uncomfortable you must find this whole situation but it's going to be over very soon."

Hermione let out a strangled scoff.

"Now, about the Antidote." He pushed one bottle of carmine fluid into Hermione's hand. "Make sure she takes a spoonful three times a day, preferably after a meal—at least in the morning: works better that way. It's likely that the mood swings will persist and the infatuation will intensify overnight but it will wane later on and turn into something like a strong friendship and will remain that way until she's back to normal."

Back to hating me.

Vittorio stayed for ten more minutes, and as a true gentleman, which Hermione didn't appreciate as much as she probably should, he scooped Bellatrix into his arms and carried her upstairs to one of the vast chambers of the sumptuous villa, which only now Hermione, marching with the fruit basket in her hands behind them, allowed herself to examine.

It was just as regal and opulent as the Lestrange manor: with a number of tremendous impressionist paintings hanging on the walls and various artsy objects perched on the carved furniture, it resembled a gallery rather than an ordinary house someone might live in. The likeness revived the terrible worries about the cup as it had become clear that at this point, there was very little, if anything, that Hermione could do to obtain it from Barbary senior. In a moment of her despair, a pair of words resurfaced from the mayhem of her thoughts.

'...army of house elves'.

It would be against everything she stood for, but perhaps their only chance... still though, how could she ever ask anything of such sort of Billey?

When Vittorio lay Bellatrix onto the immaculately made four-poster bed, he pointed his wand at the dark-toned limestone fireplace to his left, making flames burst upward with a shimmer of iridescent sparks. He reclined his head to Hermione, who had placed the basket with potions onto the vanity right next to the fireplace and came to stand behind him. "When she wakes up, try to explain the situation to her," he said. "Keep doing so over and over again until she gets used to the idea and, uhm... if she does anything inappropriate, try to forgive her."

He regarded Bellatrix with one more look, studying her as he pulled the emerald sheets up to her shoulders. "She's a force of nature, isn't she," he uttered before leaning over and brushing her hair aside to peck her cheek.

Watching the scene with frowning eyes, Hermione asked, "Mr D'Avalos, a quick question. What
was the purpose of giving me that potion?"

Vittorio straightened up. "Isn't it clear?" He turned to Hermione. "I thought you'd use it on young
Draco. He seemed so enamoured with you but not quite ready to accept it. The potion was
supposed to numb anything that was holding him back from exploring his feelings to the point he'd
feel confident enough to open up about them. Of course, the expiration reverses the effect and
changes the feelings completely. She probably isn't a big fan of yours, is she? Anyway, I wanted to
give you and Draco a little nudge. Pity he's marrying this other girl. You'd make a pretty couple."

Hermione gave a small scoff. Perhaps they would.

Vittorio smiled as he took her head into his hands to give her a firm kiss on both of her cheeks.
"Don't worry, there's plenty of fish in the sea."

"Yeah... yet I only want that one mermaid from the Salton sea, thought Hermione to herself.

"Let me know if you need anything," said Vittorio. "I'll try to come to check up on you as soon as I
can."

When Vittorio left, Hermione flopped onto the padded chair in a corner of the room, watching
Bellatrix from afar and hammering it into her brain that she could not afford any more slipups like
the one from earlier in the drawing room. Bellatrix wasn't herself right now. Soon she'd be back to
normal. Didn't Hermione remember what she was like before?

"You will listen, stupid girl! Get this through your head! I am no friend of yours and I'll never be!"

"You are so pathetic!"

"How hard is it to live with yourself, knowing what a distorted little fiend you are?"

"I don't want you anywhere near me! God, you make me sick. I've always thought mating with
muggles should be outlawed. Just look at how you've turned out!"

"That's why I can't take you or anything you say seriously. You're a joke!"

"You're neither my family nor my friend; you're just a stranger that I was forced to interact with!
Don't forget your place!"

"Let's make wild love until your heat is mine and mine is yours."

Hermione felt her stomach tighten. She bent forward, burying her scrunched face in her palms.

Snap out of it! Those hot-blooded words weren't Bellatrix's; it was the brew making her talk like
that. You cannot be as naive as to fall for fantasy!

But Hermione definitely felt something for Bellatrix even before she was this chocolate-sweet.
Could it be that she...? Surely not! If Hermione cared for Bellatrix, it would mean she was falling
out of love with Blair, wouldn't it? Was she falling out of love with Blair? Tracing the necklace on
her neck, Hermione studied her feelings. When she recalled Blair's warmth, her laughter and
playfulness, her sensitive way with words, the delicate yet electrifying touch of her hands, every
particle of her being tingled with painful imperishable love. Hermione was still dying for her
presence and it was still heart-wrenching for her that not only could she not love her, she could not
even be near her, and she still needed her like she needed her next breath and would move
mountains for her well-being if needed. And if it was her in Bellatrix's place...
The muscles in her stomach churned more violently.

No, Hermione certainly didn't feel any less love for Blair. Logically then, those feelings she had for Bellatrix must be components of some lusty crush: she was a stunning woman, irresistibly seductive—a true embodiment of Lilith; but most of all, beyond all that grandeur, she was a compelling, fierce woman... mysterious and astute, and Hermione wished to get to know more of that side of her; wished for more of those rare moments during which Bellatrix omitted her stuck-up behaviour, showing, although unintentionally, there was much more to her than her ruthless character.

Hermione saw it in her eyes that twinkled anytime Hermione managed to stagger her; she had noticed it in her suppressed smile that night... It was but mere evidence but still enough to warm Hermione's heart with the hope she would have never expected to experience in regards to Bellatrix.

Besides, if Hermione's panic earlier was anything to go by, she must have admitted that despite everything Bellatrix had put her through, she cared for her well-being far too much.

Slumped in the armchair, Hermione was trying to process the news. She cared for Bellatrix. She had feelings for her. It wasn't just lust, it was so much more than that. But Blair... How...

"Thinking of me?"

Flinching, Hermione quickly straightened up; Bellatrix had woken up. Why had she woken up? Zooming in on the bed, Hermione saw her lying on her side with the blanket pulled down to her hips, outlining the round contour of her waist and hips. She was propping her head against her left hand and watching Hermione with the flames from the fireplace reflecting in her deep expressive eyes.

She was smiling at her dreamily and looking so lovely it made Hermione's belly tingle. They remained gazing at each other for quite a while until Bellatrix started biting her lip, which finally nudged Hermione to action. The Antidote! Clutching the armrest, Hermione hastened to stand up but Bellatrix was on her feet quicker than her.

Unwilling to give her any more chances to advance on her, Hermione jerked her wand from her sleeve and pointed it forward before blurt, "Protego!", forcing an invisible wall in between them.

"What did you do that for?" Bellatrix asked in an incredibly hurt tone as she tried to move closer but couldn't.

Hermione stood up, stepping to the side carefully. "Madame Lestrange, you need to listen to me now—"

"Madame Lestrange?" scoffed Bellatrix before adding sweetly, "It's Bella. For you."

More butterflies. Many more of them. Clearing her throat, Hermione said, "That's very kind of you but I don't think you'd appreciate me calling you that after you're back to normal."

"Back to normal? What are you implying?"

"I'll try to explain as best as I can," said Hermione, still holding her wand outstretched in front of her while moving in small steps toward the vanity where she'd set down the fruit basket loaded with Antidotes. "When we Apparated here this afternoon, you were bleeding profoundly," she said. "I tried to give you a healing potion but you insisted I rather cast protective spells around the place,
assuring me that you were capable of finding the potion on your own. I told you it was in the front pocket of my bag," Hermione paused, gulping. "What I was unaware of was the fact that there, in the pocket, was already one more potion, which I had put there a long time ago and completely forgotten about. Unfortunately, it was the one you took instead of the healing potion and... it seems like it's made you... develop some sort of... feelings for me."

"So?"

Blushing, Hermione tried not to trip over her words. "So... you need to take the Antidote to dispense them." Hermione took one bottle of the Antidote from the basket together with the silver spoon that she had dropped there before. She half-lifted her hand, meaning to throw it to Bellatrix, who hadn't torn her eyes from her once.

"Has your mother never told you it's rude to throw things at people? Come here and hand it to me," she said authoritatively yet suggestively, which made Hermione's blood run hot.

*What are you doing to me...?*

"I'd rather not," said Hermione, choosing her words carefully. "Look, you—you're not yourself; I don't want you to do anything you might—*will* regret later."

Bellatrix swept her hair from her eyes and, glossing over Hermione's point, cooed, "Lift that spell. I can't even see your face from this far." They weren't far apart from each other at all, and Bellatrix herself must have realised it was a very poor excuse as she quickly added, "You should have a look at my wound, I think it's starting to bleed again."

"No, it is not."

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows. "What if I make it bleed?"

"Then you'll bleed to death," replied Hermione in what she hoped was a careless tone.

Bellatrix scoffed at that, lifting the t-shirt and saying, "Well, I'm not scared of death."

"Wait!" blurted Hermione, knowing she needed to be cautious as at this point, Bellatrix was capable of anything. With her heart picking up speed, she slowly lowered her wand and took the first step forward, ready to re-cast The Shield Charm if needed, but the obviously satisfied Bellatrix let go of the t-shirt and seated herself gracefully on the bed, waiting.

Hermione's heart was beating faster and faster as she plodded toward the bed, the heat of the flames behind her imitating the burning in her cheeks. She was less than two feet away from Bellatrix, giving her a cautionary look before unstopping the Antidote with her wand in between her fingers and pouring the carmine fluid onto the spoon. Inconspicuously, Bellatrix inched closer but paused, her face as innocent as a child's upon Hermione's warning glance. While pulling the bottle away from the spoon, Hermione didn't have a chance to halt Bellatrix, who leaned in and sank her teeth into her t-shirt at her stomach and pulled at it. Hermione's hands shot up and she spilled the potion straight into her own cleavage. She yelped and backed away, hearing Bellatrix's teeth clash as the t-shirt slipped from between them.

Bellatrix stood up from the bed, smirking before flicking her eyebrows. "Well, well... you should have told me you wanted me to take it like this."

Hermione's hand made a motion toward her stomach, which curled in one painful throb. She remembered far too well how Bellatrix's tongue felt against her skin and she'd certainly lose her bearings if she was to experience it ever again. Quickly, she wiped the potion off her chest, saying,
"No, stop! It's—this is really important so if you could just sit down for five seconds and not move! It's imperative that you take the Antidote! Please... do it for me," she added, blood rushing to her face.

It took Bellatrix only a second to back away and sink onto the bed.

Hermione willed herself to walk up to her, utterly shocked at the effect her words had taken. "I promise it'll make you feel better," she said as she refilled the spoon with the Antidote, holding it out for Bellatrix to ingest.

"Better," she repeated, glancing at the spoon before twisting her lips. "It's amusing, isn't it... This is actually the first time in a very long time I feel any good."

Hermione stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm never happy," she replied emotionlessly before her plump lips slipped over the spoon, swallowing the crimson liquid.

*Oh Bellatrix, what are you saying...*

Hermione blinked a couple of times. "Never?"

"No. Even as a child. I've never—"

Hermione's heart sank. No matter how much she wished for Bellatrix to finish that sentence, she couldn't just let her. Not when she wasn't actually aware of what she was saying.

"How do you feel now?" she cut her off, cleaning up the spoon. She set it together with the rest of the Antidote onto the bedside table before looking back at Bellatrix, whose unblinking eyes were running up and down Hermione's body, the side of her index finger pulling her nether lip down.

"Famished."

"Eh... " Hermione lowered her gaze in fluster. "Right, I think you should probably have a shower now, there's still some blood on you and uhm, I—I'll go ask Billey to prepare dinner for you."

Bellatrix smirked. "How about you come with me?"

"Madame Lestr—" started Hermione, automatically backing away as she saw Bellatrix standing up.

"I told you, it's Bellatrix."

"I think you should go alone."

"But I'm still going to need your assistance, love. You put this strange thing on me and now you have to take it off," said Bellatrix and without a warning, began taking off the shirt. Hermione's eyes snapped down, eyeing the floor beneath her feet and then the black mass of fabric that had landed there. Bellatrix was standing in front of her in her underwear again and Hermione knew she had to look at her because she really needed to do something about that gauze.

Reluctantly, she turned her eyes toward the ivory skin, trying not to stray anywhere else except the gauze but how could she not. Bellatrix was painfully gorgeous. So slim, yet full at all the right places and looking incredibly silky-smooth to the touch.

Trying to control her breathing, Hermione pointed her wand at the gauze, whispering, "Impervius!" and adding quietly, "There."
"Do you like seeing me like this?"

"I...? What?" she murmured, her face bursting like dry leaves catching fire as she grasped the Antidote and the spoon from the table and carried them back to the basket just to get away from Bellatrix, but she followed her.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

_Breathtaking... you're breathtaking, Bellatrix; you and Blair both, are the two most beautifully frustrating creatures I've ever seen, but I can hardly admit that to you._

"Because if you do," she went on huskily, coming closer. "I don't see a reason why we shouldn't —" Her hands slipped to the sides of Hermione's thighs, softly at first before her fingers dug in and moved higher. Alarmed, Hermione jumped away from her, hitting her kneecap on the vanity leg, making the potions inside the basket clink against each other before stumbling to the side.

"Stop! Stop it," she blurted almost angrily, backing away, looking stubbornly toward the ground. "You—there's thousands of reasons why—I mean... look!" Hermione took a deep breath. "I made the gauze waterproof. I suppose you won't need my help anymore. I—I can get you some products to uhm—"

"What are you doing to me, Granger?" said Bellatrix in her deep voice, making Hermione's breath hitch in her throat. "I swear, I can hardly control myself. You're delicious; so nervous and stuttering."

Hyperventilating, Hermione was backing toward the door and feeling for it with her hands behind her. She couldn't stay here with her any longer. "I'll get you some body wash and—"

"Don't trouble your pretty head," said Bellatrix, her voice a mixture of amusement and lust. "I'm here more often than at Lestrange manor; most of my belongings are already here."

"Okay, brilliant... so if you've got everything you need, I'll be back with dinner in about thirty minutes," she blurted before finally grasping the handle and stumbling out of the room. When she closed the door, she heard Bellatrix chuckle under her breath.

So Hermione being a nervous mess was funny to her.

Holding her wand, Hermione murmured a shaky 'Lumos' and quickly climbed down the spiral staircase back to the drawing room. She lit up the fireplace and pocketed her wand, then started pacing back and forth in long strides, ignoring the burning logs casting fantastic shadows along the wooden flooring. She needed to allay it! She needed to allay the excitement and fright mixing in her lower belly. "What the hell, what the actual hell..." she kept on repeating out loud and breathing as if fighting an asthma attack. She could still feel Bellatrix's naked thighs on her stomach, she could still feel her lips against her ear, her tongue on her neck... her hands on her hands.

"...let's make wild love until your heat is mine and mine is yours..."

"Oh my God!" muttered Hermione, doubling over with her face in her palms. What utopian alternate reality had she entered? Just this morning, Bellatrix would have rather stabbed herself than touched Hermione and now, thanks to that bloody potion, the woman didn't know what to do with herself.

"...I can hardly control myself..."

The scenario involving herself and Bellatrix with hardly any clothes on, making passes on her, was
beyond her range of imagination. Hermione had never and would never fantasise about anything like that happening; what for? It was a script pulled out straight from a porn movie with lazy writing; what for, when Bellatrix had made it very clear how she felt about same-sex attraction? About Hermione? But here she was, in her lace underwear, so indescribably gorgeous that Hermione's spine erupted in goosebumps when she even recalled the memory of her. Bellatrix's facial expressions, the way she moved, talked, *touched* were out of this maddening ancient world. When she had bestrode Hermione, right here on this sofa...

Hermione's stomach curled for a thousandth time today and she couldn't stop a gasp from leaking past her teeth. Bellatrix was making her go insane. And there was nothing Hermione could do to stop her from doing so. She couldn't just say 'screw it!' and go along with whatever Bellatrix's drugged consciousness was urging her to do. Hermione had to persist in rejecting her until this madness was over. Until Bellatrix remembered that she hated Hermione and then raged like a she-demon from hell.

A thought of Merope Gaunt crept into her mind as Hermione was now experiencing first-hand how tempting it was to make the attention she was getting last for the longest time possible. She could relate to her so much, but her morals and empathy would never let her act like Merope had. Hermione could never take advantage of Bellatrix in such a horrible forceful way. No matter how much she might desire her affection.

The sound of breaking glass came from beneath Hermione's shoe. Pausing, she raised her left foot and saw that she'd stepped on a piece of shattered window glass that was spread all over the floor. Sighing, she drew her wand and cleaned up the mess: pieced the broken glass together and sent it zooming into its frame, stuffed back the leaking armchairs and charmed the pieces of panels to return to the wall. Once everything seemed to be back in order, Hermione called Billey and asked him to prepare an easily digestible dinner for Bellatrix—because who knew when the last time she'd eaten had been—and send it to her room. Hermione didn't ask for anything for herself as her stomach was too tightened to accept any food.

When Billey had left, she sank onto the armchair with her thoughts swirling around in her mind like leaves in the wind. Bellatrix, Rodolphus, Bellatrix, Barbary, Bellatrix. There were so many questions stemming from everything she'd heard today and yet, the thought that kept arising above all was that Bellatrix wasn't happy. Hermione couldn't even imagine how miserable she must be all the time to say such a thing. No wonder she was so bitter. But she hadn't been like that when Hermione had first met her at Malfoy Manor, had she? She had been different then; or had it all been just a pretence because she needed Hermione on her side? She was a great actress, after all, so who could tell? Engrossed with possibilities, she hadn't realised how quickly the time had passed and it was only after Billey had appeared at her side to tell her that Bellatrix had requested to see her, that she reluctantly stood up from the armchair. However much she didn't want to, she knew she had to return to that princess of lust sooner or later and somehow get her to sleep. Gripping her wand, she set off upstairs.

As she entered the chamber, she saw Bellatrix sitting in front of the fireplace, leaning slightly forward and gazing toward the door in anticipation. As soon as she recognised Hermione, she beamed an angelic smile that tugged at Hermione's heart a little and she leapt to her feet. The long, dark, very silky, very revealing nightgown she was wearing and of which the deep v-neckline slid a little down her milky shoulder, swayed in the hasty motion and the contours of her body made themselves more visible. Her lips looked in the flickering shadows fuller and darker and her eyes more alive, turning the strength Hermione had been gathering on her way here to ineffable slush.

At once she was with Hermione, pulling her by her sleeve further into the room, the smooth, creamy scent rising off her body making Hermione's head spin momentarily.
Concentrate!

Hermione wrenched herself from her grip.

"I only want to talk," said Bellatrix soothingly, her hand falling back to her side. Facing Hermione, she backed away and hopped onto the bed, motioning for her to sit down next to her. There was a strange sense of sincerity in her voice that willed Hermione's feet to move. She traipsed forward and sat on the far edge of the bed, folding her arms.

"So... have you eaten your dinner?" she asked the first thing that came to her mind.

"Yes," replied Bellatrix. "Although I still feel like having a dessert."

Hermione blinked and began to rise from the bed but Bellatrix quickly added, "Wait! I was just joking; I'm joking most of the time and you take everything so seriously."

Hermione frowned. "Well, with you it's hard to tell."

"Is it?"

"Yes," said Hermione, her eyes pausing on a golden chalice on the nightstand by the bed. What if...? Perhaps there was still a chance! "Uhm... Bellatrix," she commenced, feeling utterly bizarre about calling her by her first name but Bellatrix's face lit up so much that the feeling left her immediately. "Do you remember your plan as to how to get a hold of the Hufflepuff's cup? I could go and try to procure it from him. I've still got an hour to get to Paris and seek him out. I'm quite familiar with the city as I used to go there with my parents and—"

"Oh, don't!" Bellatrix threw her head back in annoyance, exposing her defined white neck. "Let's not discuss the corpus deus tonight. It's all I think about and for the first time in years, it hasn't crossed my mind once."

Hermione took a deep breath, pleating her t-shirt. "I understand, but we have to address it. Surely you remember how crucial it is to you!"

"So it is to Dumbledore and yet I don't see him being consternated by anything regarding its progress. Instead—" Bellatrix slightly leaned in, whispering, "—what he does is sit around in his precious little castle while one of his students does the dirty work. Perhaps I should hire someone, too."

Hermione froze. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead, the shock knocking her breath out. Bellatrix knew about Dumbledore. She knew, she knew, she bloody knew! But how could she possibly...?! There was no time for dwelling in shock; Hermione had to mislead her, had to deny! Had to— "Dumbledore?" she repeated, hearing her own voice as if it was coming from a far distance. "What does he have to do with all this?"

Bellatrix gave her a knowing smile. "I saw it; saw it all that night; you didn't keep your mind closed, deary."

Hermione felt like being sick. She had given herself away. She had given Dumbledore away. He trusted her and she had failed! And...If Bellatrix had seen Dumbledore... what else had she seen?

"I don't understand," Hermione tried again, feeling the words choking in her throat. "Why would Dumbledore—?"

"When will you stop lying to me," Bellatrix interrupted quietly. "Don't you know I'll always come
to know the truth?"

Hermione suppressed the tears of panic. She shook her head and parted her lips but nothing came out. It was over for her... over.

Bellatrix went on, "Ah, it was diverting to watch you struggle... All the while I knew."

Her words resonated in Hermione's scared, shocked mind like a sick, morbid taunt. All the while she knew? A flush of anger crept past her fear, locking her jaw. "Look, I don't know what you think you saw in my head," she said, her voice trembling, "but if you thought you already had your answer, why did you—why did you continue?"

"Continue what?" asked Bellatrix, smiling wider.

"Soliciting me," said Hermione, her choice of words making Bellatrix laugh.

"I wanted to see how far till you crack."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "And how far were you willing to go?"

"Not far at all... but now..." Bellatrix leaned on her hands, her cleavage almost spilling.

A sinister thought entered Hermione's mind. What if she did the same to Bellatrix? What if she played with her emotions like she had? What if—no! A scolding voice inside her objected. She was better than much better.

"It's just the potion making you feel this way," she said. "One more day and you'll be cursing my name again."

"I won't."

"Believe me, you will," spat Hermione belligerently. "You hate me."

"I don't."

"Yes, you do!"

"No," said Bellatrix, twisting her lips. "You frustrate me. Too much sometimes, but I don't hate you. And now... I certainly have some fond feelings for you."

Hermione blinked in felt the urge to pace again. "How about all those horrible things you've been saying to me?" she choked out of her.

A look of genuine sympathy flashed across Bellatrix's face. Her shoulders shrugged, her lips parted, hesitating, but there slipped nothing out of them.

Nevermind. This should be the least of her worries at the moment, anyway...

Hermione plonked down onto the sheets with her face in her palms. A second later, she quickly propped herself on her hands, giving the witch a scared look, but other than regarding her with an amused glance, Bellatrix did nothing to use the situation to her advantage. Shifting, she moved further away from Hermione and reclined onto the bed from the opposite direction. Hermione was unmoving for a couple of seconds, waiting, but soon relaxed. Perhaps the Antidote was finally working its wonders. Slowly, very slowly, she bent her elbows and lowered herself onto the sheets beside Bellatrix. She didn't know what had possessed her to do that but decided not to question it. She was scared, angry, and indecisive as to what to do. Well, primarily, she needed to talk to
Dumbledore and tell him she had doomed them and then, they would see what to do then...

"I don't remember saying anything explicitly bad about you," said Bellatrix's voice beside her.

It took Hermione a while to understand what she was talking about. "You constantly talk badly about me," she said after considering whether or not to address it. "You harrow me every chance you get. You called me sick multiple times," she went on, her emotions rioting inside her. "Told me, that if I... if I liked women, I wasn't normal and I should be put into a mental institution."

"Well, it is an illness, isn't it?"

"No, it's not!" objected Hermione fervently. "You're experiencing it right now; I mean, technically, it's the potion, but if you compare these feelings to the feelings you might have had for someone, eh, special in the past. Does... liking me feel any different from liking them?"

"I wouldn't know," replied Bellatrix. "I've never felt what I feel now."

Hermione sighed. "Of course, the intensity must be a bit—"

"No, that's not what I meant," objected Bellatrix again. "I've never felt affection for anyone."

Hermione frowned. "Never?"

"I've been involved with several men but I've never felt love for any of them."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, then bolted upright; what was she doing chatting here with Bellatrix as if nothing had happened? Not only did she have no business asking her about such things, she also should be on her way to Dumbledore. The quicker, the better. "I think I should go," she said but Bellatrix rolled over and closer to her, her creamy scent rising around Hermione.

"Jealous?"

Hermione drew back, tensing. She gave Bellatrix's beautiful, smug face a sullen look before standing up.

"No, no, don't go anywhere!" Bellatrix sat upright. "I want to talk!"

"Believe me, you don't." Hermione walked to the door and turned to her. "Without the potion, you wouldn't want me to know anything about you."

"I would! I want to talk to you; sometimes I want to ask, too, but—" Bellatrix faltered and didn't finish. Instead, she gave Hermione a pleading look and said, "Stay... please."

Hermione found herself reciprocating her gaze with the same sentiments. She didn't know what it was about Bellatrix making her so soft-minded but even despite her shock, despite her panic, perplexity and anger at her, she was unable to just walk away like that.

"Alright," she yielded. "How about this: we adjourn the talk sine die and if you, even after the potion evaporates from your system, if you still feel like talking, we'll talk then. I promise I'll listen. But I can't do it now; not when you're drugged." Hermione shook her head, leaning backwards and feeling for the door. "I don't want you to say anything you might regret later." Her hand grasped the doorknob. "Look, it's getting late and I'm tired," she lied.

"I don't want to be by myself tonight," said Bellatrix lowly.

"I can't stay here with you."
"You can do whatever you want," said Bellatrix, her eyes unmoving.

Hermione gave her a long look before her feet moved.

"Goodnight, Bellatrix."

She walked out of the chamber and with a beating heart, rushed through the door straight ahead of her, locking herself in. She leaned up against the door, closing her eyes, taking deep breaths. What should she do now?

She lit the tip of her wand and then a crystal chandelier that she had spotted above her, the radiant light revealing a lavish chamber. Having taken a few deep breaths, she called out, "Billey!" and watched the elf appear out of thin air, bowing in front of her.

"Billey," she stooped down to him. "Could you take me to Hogwarts to see Professor Dumbledore? It's possible for you, right? To take me there in spite of the protective spells?"

Billey nodded awkwardly. "Indeed, miss, but Billey is afraid he cannot take miss Hermione to Hogwarts."

Hermione drew back. "And why is that?"

Billey looked down as if embarrassed, his hands fidgeting. "After Billey delivered the letter to young Mr Malfoy," he said, "Professor Dumbledore summoned Billey to his office."

"Dumbledore talked to you?" asked Hermione and Billey nodded.

"Professor asked Billey to tell Miss Hermione that there was no need for her to see him because he already knew about everything; that Mistress Bellatrix had contacted him a few days ago... and that it was a giant step forward, for that had been his plan from the beginning. That Miss Hermione shouldn't worry and that she should stick to the plan. He gave her a hesitant look. "Billey would have told Miss Hermione sooner, but professor said to tell only if she asked."

Hermione was looking at the elf as if he had slapped her.

It was alright? It had been his plan from the beginning? As far as Hermione knew, the plan was to keep his damn part in this a damn secret, so what plan was he talking about?

Drawing closer to the elf, Hermione asked, "Are you telling me the truth, Billey?"

Billey locked their eyes. "Billey is, Miss Hermione!"

"And are you sure you heard Dumbledore right? Did he specifically say it was his plan for Bellatrix to know?"

Billey nodded.

"And... this may sound strange, but are you sure it was professor Dumbledore who told you this? Was he in his office? Did he talk to you with respect?"

"Professor was very kind, Miss. He offered Billey a toffee, but Billey refused because Billey knows his place!"

So it must have been Dumbledore who talked to him—no one else would offer candy to a house elf.
Hermione stood up, unable to digest it. It made no sense! One year ago, Dumbledore had set completely different conditions! He had told her Bellatrix must not know! He... She felt her face falter. Could it be he had deliberately kept this away from her? Could it be he had been stringing her along this entire time? But why? They were on the same side, weren't they?

Hermione paced away from Billey. She was risking everything here with Bellatrix; she'd put her life on the line, put her family... And he... he didn't even have the courtesy of being honest with her?

"I need to talk to him," she said, turning to the elf, who had hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Miss," he whispered. "Professor forbade Billey to take Miss Hermione to him."

Hermione parted her lips. Oh... so he didn't consider it necessary to even explain himself? He didn't consider it necessary to say sorry for not trusting her enough to tell her the real plan; sorry for being an arse and leading her on?

How could he have lied to her like this?

"Did he say anything else, Billey?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"No, miss."

Hermione looked up, nodding. She had an impulsive urge to order Billey to take her to Dumbledore anyway, just so she could tell him what a manipulative unscrupulous man he was, but decided against it and rather sent Billey away. She went into the chamber's bathroom instead and took a hot shower, trying to sort out her thoughts.

Dumbledore had really let her down. Trusting him in this bloody twilight zone had been the only thing she had ever felt sure of and it turned out to be the worst decision she could have ever made. Why couldn't he be honest with her? Did he think she was that untrustworthy? And if so, why had he asked her to hop on this train of madness then? Maybe he had seen how naive she was, a voice in her head chirped, maybe he had tricked her into helping Bellatrix. Sure, it sounded far-fetched and utterly ludicrous, yet he had never actually given her a valid reason as to why she should help her, other than 'trust me, all is going to work out in the end.' Hermione stomped the water pooling around her ankles. She could only marvel as to how credulous she had been to believe every damn thing Dumbledore had told her. And there she had been, feeling awful for betraying him...

Perhaps she should leave this sojourn while she had a chance; go on a quest on her own and instead of helping Bellatrix, get rid of the corpus deus like common sense suggested. The abrupt idea immediately made her want to act on it, but before she could, she had to figure out how much Bellatrix actually knew. Not about Dumbledore, no, screw him, but about the only reason she was still here. Blair. If Bellatrix knew about Dumbledore, it was more than possible she knew about her, too...

A giant knot formed inside her throat and Hermione burst into tears. It was bloody irresponsible of her to have been risking it like that when in the end, it wasn't worth it at all.

Half an hour later, although emotionally drained and exhausted, Hermione returned to Bellatrix's chamber. Having knocked, she had barely opened the door when she saw the witch rushing to her.

"You're back?" she said, obviously pleased, her scent making Hermione forget the purpose of her visit for a second. She glanced at Bellatrix's beaming face before it faltered. "You've been crying," she pointed.
"Uh, no," dismissed Hermione, shaking her head. "No; I was just taking a shower and got shampoo in my eyes."

"I can always tell when you've been crying," said Bellatrix, fixing her with a scrutinising look. "It's your expression. You—"

"It's nothing," Hermione interrupted her, trying not to read too much into what she'd just heard. "Look, I came here because I need to ask you something."

Bellatrix closed her mouth and stepped aside to let her in without another word. She sat down on the bed with her legs crossed, her nightgown slipping over them like water. Hermione seated herself on the chair opposite her; she entwined her fingers and, glancing at them, opened her mouth but nothing came out at first. She was terrified in the same way children were terrified of punishment after doing something naughty and so rather than facing the consequences, they decided to keep their mouth shut. Hermione, too, was afraid of facing them but the thing was, she was no child anymore... Besides, the price for her cowardice was far too high to pay. If Bellatrix knew about Blair...

"I need you to tell me exactly what you saw in my head that night," she blurted suddenly.

"Do you, now?"

"Yes," she said, trying to control her voice. "What else did you see?"

"You mean, what else apart from Dumbledore? And—" Bellatrix smirked before adding, "apart from the fact that you wanted to kiss me?"

Hermione didn't see any point in trying to deny it and so, looking to the ground, she murmured, "Yes... apart from that."

"My, my, somebody's sincere for a change."

Hermione briefly closed her eyes. "Please, could you just answer me?"

"Why do you want to know it so much?"

Shrugging, Hermione let her arms slide around herself before looking at her. "I was just thinking that if you saw something out of context, it might have given you the wrong impression. I just want to set things straight," she said.

"Oh, I see." Bellatrix's eyes left Hermione's eyes as she looked at her lap, smoothing down her nightgown. "And here I thought it's because you're afraid I saw something that I shouldn't have," she implied and looked at her pointedly. "Someone I shouldn't have."

Hermione felt her stomach drop. No... please don't let it be...

"You lied to me," added Bellatrix. "I asked you that night who she was, and you told me it was just a name that came to your mind." She paused for a moment, letting her words sink in. "I couldn't care less about her, but I don't appreciate you lying to me!"

"You—you mean you don't care about her now?" asked Hermione in a trembling voice, a beam of hope springing inside her. "Or did you feel that way even before you took the potion?"

Bellatrix looked surprised. "What does it matter?"
"It matters immensely!" Hermione leaned forward, her tone so urgent it made Bellatrix narrow her eyes.

"Who is she, Granger?"

"Please, if you could just answer me!"

"Does she matter immensely?" asked Bellatrix before letting out a soft laugh. "But of course she does." She spoke those words with such self-assurance Hermione didn't find it within her to lie anymore.

Her breathing became shallow, her eyes were running over the room but they could not help her escape anywhere. She glanced back at Bellatrix, seeing her blurred.

"It's eating you alive, isn't it," whispered Bellatrix, tilting her head, and Hermione looked down again.

"Stop it," she pleaded, wiping her tears away before they could slip out of the corners of her eyes.

"Is she beautiful?"

"Bellatrix, please..."

"She must be."

"I said stop!" whispered Hermione and although it was quieter than anything she'd said so far, for a brief moment, there fell silence upon them.

"You know," started Bellatrix anew. "All this time I thought it was me. I thought I was the reason you were here."

Hermione didn't say a word and so she went on. "It was quite unexpected to find that wasn't the case." She cleared her throat, shifting. "How is she involved, anyway? Is she helping you from the outside? Has Dumbledore made—"

"No!" interrupted Hermione, straightening in her armchair. "She has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with this!" she said, emphasising every word.

Bellatrix twisted her lips at that. "Then why were you just as scared of me finding out about her as about Dumbledore?"

Hermione looked at her for a while, then whispered, "You know why."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do."

"I don't think so."

"Then think again."

"I am; doesn't ring a bell."

"Surely it does."

"Not at all."
They remained looking at each other for a few more moments before Hermione lost it. "You saw it! You saw why!" she snapped, her emotions running loose. "Dumbledore told me what fate awaited every single person I cared about if you succeeded in bringing Riddle to our world! There would be nothing and no one in your way and I couldn't—" Hermione felt a sob crawling up her throat and she halted herself. She rubbed her face with her palms, looking up and taking two deep breaths. She would not cry in front of Bellatrix. "I know you plan on getting rid of them," she spat through her teeth.

"And why would I want to do that?" asked Bellatrix with her eyebrows raised.

"Why, I have broken your family, remember? Thanks to mine and Draco's friendship, the Malfoys lost their status and as Narcissa's sister, you must have lost some credibility, too. Don't you care for revenge?" hissed Hermione.

"What a ridiculous idea," scoffed Bellatrix. "Once the Dark Lord's here, everything would be forgotten. Every pureblood will know who helped him! Our status would be restored in the blink of an eye."

Hermione stared at her. "Don't tell me you wouldn't try to get back at me! You'll be allowed to do anything and without consequences."

"Again, love, why would I bother?"

"Stupid potion!" Hermione muttered under her breath.

"I've never planned on, as you say, getting back at you—at least not in such a way; you were—well, obviously, you are now—but before, you were of no great importance to me. Just a little fish amongst the many whose fins will be severed like tree branches." Bellatrix lowered her voice. "Tell me, isn't losing your magic the most devastating thing that could happen? More tragic than losing your family?"

Hermione stared at her before asking, "What are you saying? You want to take magic away from wizards? How?"

"No, not wizards—counterfeits," said Bellatrix. "But all in good time."

While it was scary to even imagine, the scenario seemed far more plausible than a possible genocide. Still...

"But Dumbledore, he assured me! He specifically stated you would kill my family and my friends!"

"No!" Bellatrix widened her eyes and let out a surprised laugh. "My, my, I clearly underestimated dear Albus." She shook her head in disbelief, chuckling. "I'm impressed! For a Gryffindor, for someone who has been called the most honourable wizard since the times of Merlin, he's quite a wicked snake," she looked at Hermione. "Whatever he said to you, my dear, annihilating your little friends has never played any role in my plans."

Hermione was gaping at her as though Bellatrix was speaking a foreign language.

"On a side note," she continued. "There's something I can't quite make sense of. If you thought—think I want to get rid of them, why are you here then? Wouldn't it be easier to take your own route? You've got your venor floccus gift, so why are you here, helping me?" She held out her hand. "Oh wait, wait! Let me guess! He told you that if you helped me, I'd see what a sweet little girl you are and I'd change my mind about everything?"
Hermione felt like the biggest idiot in the world.

Bellatrix laughed again. "Unbelievable!"

"So you," started Hermione slowly. "So you haven't—you don't...?"

"I don't care about your friends, Granger," said Bellatrix, twisting her lips.

Hermione stood up and began pacing. "No...I'm sorry but I'm finding this hard to believe."

"That's because you lie so much you cannot see a drop of truth in anything anymore," said Bellatrix and smirked. "Fifty points to Dumbledore for his brilliance but fifty from Granger for being a dum-dum; oh, I'm just teasing you, love, you know I'm very fond of you," Bellatrix winked, making Hermione look away. There was a soft ruffling sound as Bellatrix stood up and came closer to Hermione, who glanced back at her. "Don't feel bad," said the witch mildly now. "Dumbledore knows his way around words; he can manipulate almost anyone into doing exactly as he pleases. Trust me."

Bellatrix came even closer and briefly touched her right wrist before pressing her fingers into her palm fully. Hermione felt her body tremble at the contact and she almost crumbled at her proximity.

"Trust you," she breathed, affixing her eyes to the bed. "Dumbledore asked of me the same thing and look where it got me. Besides, if I had to choose, I'd still rather..."

"...trust him," finished Bellatrix for her. "Why, because he's kind with his words? At least I'm open with mine." She freed her hand but Hermione grasped it now.

"Do you mean it?" she asked, locking their eyes and instantly blinking as Bellatrix's gaze was far too intense to look at. "Have—have you never envisaged harming my family or my friends?"

"No," said Bellatrix. "It's a different story with you, of course." She tilted her head, her eyes running over Hermione's face. "There were many times you infuriated me to the point I had to restrain myself from cursing you into oblivion, but no—not your family."

"But... why would Dumbledore lie to me?" whispered Hermione helplessly.

"Well, that's something you have to ask him."

They were looking at each other with emotion, so raw and ineffable that Hermione could not take it anymore. She let Bellatrix's hand slip from hers and walked away, trying to cope with her chaotic thoughts. She stopped in front of the fireplace, surveying the deep tangerine flames for several moments.

"Are you in love?"

Hermione looked down before briefly glancing at Bellatrix. "I don't think this is a good time to discuss it," she said slowly. "You should get some rest and I... I should go."

"How about you stay the night," suggested Bellatrix, blocking the door with her body.

"I can't. Now, if you don't mind..." said Hermione, motioning toward the door but when Bellatrix didn't move, she sighed. "I wouldn't want to hex you but if you—"

Bellatrix laughed. "Wouldn't be the first time someone did that to me."
Hermione gulped, trying not to imagine what could be hiding behind those words. Hell, the more she listened to Bellatrix dropping hints here and there, the more she felt like the witch's life couldn't be as perfect as she'd have her believe.

The thought hit Hermione hard enough to make her soften.

"Alright," she resigned. "I'll stay, but I'll sleep on the floor," she added, inwardly debating her own sanity.

"I'll sleep there as well."

"No, you stay in bed!" said Hermione authoritatively.

"As you wish, mother," Bellatrix smirked, winking. She threw the bedding onto the floor, one item after another, accidentally hitting Hermione with the pillow. "Use a doubling charm," she called. "I still don't know where my wand is." Oddly enough, it didn't even seem to bother her.

"I'll help you look for it tomorrow," suggested Hermione, using the most casual tone she was capable of. Then she did as she had been told: doubled the covers and pillows, then charmed them back on the bed and used The Shield Charm all around her so Bellatrix could not come within three feet of her. Hermione had to look out for her, and while the witch seemed very offended now, she'd surely be glad once this was over.

Bellatrix marched to the foot of the bed and climbed in, lying on her stomach. Still facing Hermione, she put her head in her palms, looking at her with intrigue.

Hermione seated herself down in the middle of the sheets, the heat from the fireplace licking her side. Her head felt like it could explode any second. So much had happened in the span of a few hours that it seemed impossible for her to manage to process it all.

"How did you know you liked women?"

Hermione raised her eyes to Bellatrix. This really wasn't what she wanted to talk about at the moment. But she also didn't want to give Bellatrix prompts to make fun of her in the near future, especially because it was her who had made her realise her attraction when Hermione found her and Crouch all chummy with each other.

"Have you tried to cure it?"

"You can't cure it, Bellatrix, because it's not a disease," said Hermione, rubbing her forehead.

"I heard my father talk about it years ago," said Bellatrix grimly, smoothing down the sleeve of her nightgown. "A distant relative of Nott's was put into an asylum after his brother caught him with some mudblood boy. They tried to cover it up, of course; Nott's family paid a lot of gold to keep him locked up for good but also to silence everyone in the asylum. But people talked... My father said it must have been the mudblood who infected him."

"What nonsense!" blurted Hermione.

"Anyway," went on Bellatrix. "They got rid of the mudblood boy and—"

"They killed him?!"

"I believe so," Bellatrix shrugged dismissively, then tilted her head. "What is it? Why are you looking so shocked?"
Hermione widened her eyes. "Because we're talking about murder?! What so immoral did that man do to deserve execution?! But most importantly, who gave Nott's family the right to take matters into their hands?"

"Well, they are purebloods," said Bellatrix as if presenting an obvious answer to a stupid question. Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "You're joking, aren't you?" She wasn't and Hermione was at a loss for words for a short while. "I can't believe this," she choked finally. "You, purebloods, think so highly of yourselves, you think you're living, breathing Gods walking on Earth; flaunting your status and nobleness, saying you're better than everyone while under all that facade, the majority of you are inbreds! You marry your own cousins, calling it 'maintaining purity', but why not call it a proper name, 'incest'?!" Hermione shook her head in disgust. "Think what you want but... for me, that is what is truly perverse... not liking someone of the same gender."

"How dare you compare it!" Bellatrix's eyes flared. "The whole menagerie of these individuals suffer from degenerative sickness and—"

"How are they sick?! How am I sick?" asked Hermione hotly.

Bellatrix sat up, frowning. "I... it's just against nature."

"Oh come on, it's been observed in animals too so how exactly is it against nature?" retorted Hermione.

"A man and another man cannot conceive a child!" reasoned Bellatrix. "Just like two women can't! Such a bond defies logic!"

"Well, you are married to a man and yet you have no children, yourself," snapped Hermione rudely. "That defies my logic. You were supposed to give him an heir, weren't you? To ensure the lineage of the purebloods."

Bellatrix parted her lips in obvious shock.

"If you're so loyal to your pureblood ideology, why didn't you fulfil this condition?" Hermione knew she was going too far, but couldn't stop herself.

Bellatrix's lips seemed to have trembled. "Because I hate him!" she gritted. "I hate it when he touches me, talks to me, even looks at me."

Hermione furrowed her brows. "Why are you with him then?"

"Because I have to!"

"No, Bellatrix, you don't!" objected Hermione, leaning forward. "You say I'm wicked because I care fora person of the same gender but tell me, how normal is it to marry someone without love and stay unhappy for the rest of your life just to contribute to the hypocritical agenda that's fundamentally so immoral it should be outlawed and its adherents medically treated?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" Bellatrix half-whispered, half-gritted and for the first time, she seemed to have snapped to her true self. "I was raised with the most..." she paused, clearly looking for the right words.

"...misled beliefs," Hermione finished for her. "You were raised by people who lacked compassion, elementary humanism and, excuse me, common sense! You've got nothing to base your beliefs on. You say 'Oh, I hate mudbloods because I'm better than them' but give me one good reason why!"
Why are you, a pureblood, better than me, a muggleborn? I'm just as human as you are, just as capable of emotions! You hate people like me only because your racist family taught you to! And I'm so so angry at them for spreading such hatred and instilling it into their own children, but—" Hermione took a deep breath. "I am even angrier at you for not forming your own opinion!"

"I formed my own opinion years ago, thank you," said Bellatrix, her voice trembling. "I've seen what mudbloods are capable of. If it weren't for them, Perseus would still be sane and he would have never done—!" Bellatrix faltered, looking as if she had said something indecent.

But Hermione's blood was boiling too hotly to care for her discomfort. "Finish it!" she demanded.

Bellatrix was glaring at her, clearly battling something within her. Her lips parted but then she moved backwards on the bed and slipped under the covers.

No, honey, you're not running away from this...

Hermione stood up and went through the magical barrier to Bellatrix's bed, anger knocking the rationality out of her head. "You wanted to talk earlier, so let's talk! What would he have never done?"

"Get off my back, Granger!" Bellatrix's muffled voice came through the covers.

"You're an adult so act like one!" snapped Hermione, deep down surprised by her own unhinged behaviour. "What horrible things did mudbloods do to Perseus?"

When Bellatrix remained silent, Hermione snorted. "Exactly as I thought... they did nothing!"

Bellatrix sat up and turned to her, locking their eyes. "You don't know a thing," she whispered angrily.

Hermione decided to push her luck; she was so done with being nice. "He's your uncle, isn't he? Was he doing inappropriate things with mudbloods, too?"

There was a storm reflecting in Bellatrix's eyes upon looking at Hermione; she swallowed, her jaw tensing and her teeth gritting before she let out a barely visible and short-lived smile. "No, not mudbloods. Me."

Having said that, she averted her eyes and slowly reclined back onto the pillow.

Hermione's face faltered. She was staring at her profile in shock, her eyes widening. "Bellatrix, do you... do you know what you've just said?" she whispered after a long moment of thick silence.

"Do you?" asked Bellatrix's deeply modulated voice. Pulling the covers to her waist, she turned her head away from Hermione, who sank onto the floor and sat there quietly for a very very long time.

No...no, this couldn't be...

Trembling, she placed her elbows on the bed, eyeing Bellatrix's hand resting at her left side. Hermione hesitated before reaching out and gingerly touching the soft skin. There was no reaction from Bellatrix. Hermione placed her hand over hers fully, holding it like a flower made of thin glass. She lay her head on the bed and stayed unmoving even long after Bellatrix had closed her eyes and fallen asleep.

A/N: Dear God, I've never received such a high amount of comments and messages as I have for
the last chapter. Words can't do justice to how much I appreciate it! Thank you!

I'm really touched but it's all very bittersweet since I'm bringing a bit of bad news.

Even though I know exactly where I want to go with this story and I've got everything planned out, I'm not sure when there's going to be an update. I've always tried to be transparent about everything and so, even though I'll probably disappoint a few of you I must admit that I'm finding it harder and harder to stay motivated and excited about Bellamione ship. I don't want to mess up the story by being forced into writing just for the sake of updating and therefore not giving my all...

(Also, I might have fallen for Madam Spellman, so I'm strongly debating writing a story about them, and by strongly I mean, I'm already doing research.)

Yeah this situation is totally my fault and I'm giving you all permission to call me a bitch.

(So if I don't show up for quite some time... you know what's going on.)

—WITH ALL MY LOVE, AP

(P.S. if you wanna help a good thing, please, have a look here —
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSehuRWEMSde8NES3G0grOYiVprJy-k6xizq0J9lcFqZEXp5dw/viewform)

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