Summary

Bondings were rare, taboo to even speak about. There hadn't been a known bond in over a hundred years. Not until Hermione Granger walked into Bellatrix Black's life and turned it upside down. This is the rewritten version from my post on fanfic, it is not complete I just want a bit of feedback to see if it is perhaps going a little better.
Dark clouds were rolling eerily across the moonless night as rain poured down in a torrential of ice and water. It was unusually cold for September but the dark cloaked figure stalking about the dimly lit streets didn’t seem to mind the cold or the icy water soaking through the fabric of their cloak down into the clothes beneath.

Bellatrix Black, a woman who fit her name perfectly, hair falling in glossy wild rings of jet black satin and eyes, depending on her mood, could be dark as coal. Her mother named her Bellatrix because it was a star, but the name meant female warrior and none fit the name better than she did. She had always fought for something; her sisters…her students….her right to live life the way she wanted and now….now she fought her very self. Her very magic. Her very soul.

Which was how she ended up walking around the muggle streets of Crouch End. Under normal circumstances she would have never been caught on a muggle street, not walking around as if she were taking in the sights anyways. But alone, in the dark and the cold rain she took solace in it. Tilted her face to the clouds and let the rain mingle with the salty tears of frustration that were trailing down her pale cheeks.

She'd left Lily Potter's a mess, though she concealed it well enough not to arouse her friend’s suspicion. Despite her outer peace she had been too angry, too stressed and anxious to safely apparate back to Hogsmeade. She had hoped a quiet walk through the barely lit muggle streets would calm her chaotic mind, she hadn’t expected the swirling clouds above her head to release their pent up fury the moment she lost sight of Lily and James' home. Still she didn’t let a little water deter her from her contemplating, she had a lot on her mind and until she worked through it she wouldn’t be able to apparate away. She would not be caught splinching herself. She would not give her students or anyone else gossip like that. And contrary to muggle belief it wasn’t like she would melt in the rain, not like in that ridiculous muggle movie Lily had forced them all to watch. She chuckled huskily at the memory of that night. She had to admit she enjoyed the old movie, despite it’s ridiculous notions of wizard and witches. What muggles lacked in the magical department they sure made up with their imagination, she could admit that much.

She glanced around and found she had wondered quite a bit away from her friend’s home, she spotted a small muggle park, it was in complete disarray. Trash lay on the ground beside a disgustingly overflowing receptacle, the slide had rusted holes in it and the climbing contraption had bars falling through leading her to believe any child brave enough to climb it was risking a broken arm at best. Her eyes landed on the small two seat swing set overlooking a dingy overgrown pond. One of it's seats was handing limply, barely secured by a single chain but the other was properly swaying in the gentle wind. She crossed to it and gingerly took a seat, headless of the water that now soaked her backside.

She sighed heavily, gripped the wet chains and kicked her feet off the ground, sending the swing backwards and a prayer upwards that the creaky rusted chains didn’t falter under her weight. She enjoyed the swinging motion, she had seen Lily’s sons swing just like she was on their giant swing set that took up half her backyard. She hadn’t ever seen the appeal when the boys were squealing for their father to push them higher. She understood now, it felt freeing, almost as good as flying.
She nearly forgot the news she had received from Dumbledore just before she had left for Lily’s ‘beginning of term’ party. Nearly.

Another year. He asked her to wait another year.

Another!

As if she wasn’t already tortured enough. As if she even held any hope getting it over with and out in the open would help her to begin with.

Her hands tightened on the cold wet chains as she shoved her feet into the dirt to stop her swinging. She jerked forward harshly, her hood flying back revealing her already soaking curls to the elements. She leaned forward on the swing and let the ringlets fall into her face, dripping more water on her even as the rain slowly slackened to a drizzle. She breathed deeply, clenching her eyes tightly shut and counting as Andy had once taught her. It quieted her mind a moment, reined back in the anger she felt at Dumbledore, the impatience she felt surging through her. She knew if she let her emotions run rampant she risked using wild magic. She hadn’t been as stable the past few years as she should have been and she was not going to have any ministry officials snooping around trying to find out why she blew up a muggle park. She was a Black first and foremost, whatever that meant to anyone else it meant pride to her. Pride in her control of magic and in her strength. Her father would have never tolerated anything but perfection from his eldest heir, he would have been so displeased with her for her lack of perfection these past few years. He was not a man to displease, even so long after his death many of his lessons stuck with her. If he had still been alive….if he had somehow found out about her predicament…..she’d no doubt be dead and stricken from the family tapestry…..or worse she would have been killed. He would have demanded she do the deed herself.

She tried to shut those thoughts down quickly, despite knowing it wasn’t possible, that he wasn’t alive to demand any such thing, the mere thought of it sent her spiraling into a angry panic. They were not thoughts she needed to dwell on when she was trying to settle herself and apparate home.

Still she couldn’t help but wonder, if she could still be struck from the tapestry. Who was left to do so, who still held the pureblood mindset in the Black Family line. Sirius? Doubtful, he was James and Lily’s best friend. Her sisters perhaps? Andy surely not, she married a muggleborn. Narcissa was still ridiculously prejudice but she loved her sisters, even though she rarely spoke to Andy.

Their father had stricken Andy from the tapestry himself, she remember his rage the day the middle daughter had run off and Bellatrix had informed him she’d gone off to marry Ted Tonks. She had barely saved her sister that day, he meant to kill her and her soon to be husband. At least Andy had chosen him, Bellatrix wondered if her lack of choice would help her case with him, knowing that she hadn’t chosen what had happened. That she hadn’t chosen to be bonded.

It didn’t matter. He was dead. And she was bonded. To a muggleborn.

There had been no escaping the call of her magic. The moment she had seen her, a young girl, her student. She had known instantly. Her magic had pricked her skin as if searching for a way out, voices in her head demanding she test out the connection she now felt with every breath she took.
She was stronger. But her envious control slipped with that newfound strength, a trade-off she would much rather do without. Her emotions were stronger too, she had always been quick to anger but it was worse now.

Sometimes she felt what the girl felt. Felt her sadness when she was excluded her first year, felt the terror when she had been in danger far too frequently for Bellatrix’s state of mind. Only distance dampened the emotions. But the distance provided another problem for Bellatrix. She traded off adolescent emotional turmoil for a chaotic mind. If she was away from the girl too long, for whatever reason her magic would turn on her. It hurt, physically and emotionally. Her skin prickled, her temper became that much shorter and the voices that had assaulted her from the moment her eyes rested on the girl raged at her night and day.

She had endured it. It hadn’t been as bad the first few years. She had believed she was strong enough to endure it even after the girl would leave school. She never had any intention of sharing the bond with the child, she knew the lesser bloods weren’t as affected by the binding as the purebloods.

It had taken a long time for her to accept that the bond wasn’t going to be something she could just ignore. She wasn’t a pureblood fascist like her father but she hadn’t really believed muggleborns were as powerful as pure witches and wizards. For a long time she was angry and bitter that the girl proved her wrong at every turn, that she was just as powerful and smart as any of her peers, more so even than some of the pureblooded Slytherins.

She had searched for answers, for a while hoping if she couldn’t ignore her bond then perhaps she could remove it. She had found diaries in her father’s study, diaries that told her Black's who held the bond fell into madness. A curse on their family. But the only suggestions she had found on how to remove an unwanted binding was to kill the muggleborn or halfborn. She had left the books where she found them and spent another year deliberating what to do about Hermione bloody Granger. She wasn’t about to go off murdering students no matter how insufferable she found them.

She blew out a breath and leaned back, holding onto the swing so she didn’t fall off and stared up into the darkness above.

She had been so bloody angry in the beginning. She had made Hermione's life hell. Giving her detention for ridiculous things in the beginning, and later giving her detention just to keep her close and quiet her mind. In the middle of her third year she realized what she was doing. How she was punishing the girl for her need to have her close. How much she needed the girl close for her own sanity. The holidays were getting worse and worse for her the older Hermione got. She knew she couldn’t handle it alone, knew it was only a matter of time before something would give.

She had gone to Dumbledore. Confessed everything, the bond, the madness that plagued her family when they were bonded, something she had never heard of in any other family before. Not unless the bond mate was killed.

She blinked water from her eyes and began swinging once more. She could remember the night clear as day, the way she marched into his office, the yellow muggle candy only a few inches from
his lips as he stared at her intrusion with a mixture of shock and amusement. She had fallen into a
chair and poured her heart out as he stared back at her over the tops of his half moon spectacles, a
mix between sympathy and something abhorrently close to pity reflecting in the crystal depths.

She had tried to quit on the spot. In fact she had tried to quit several times, had even taken a
torturous week off, away from Hermione before he had forced her to come back. The short
separation driving the point home, she was going to have to tell Hermione or he was going to
discuss it with Andy. He had gotten wind of her state of mind, of her drunken mistake and he was
putting his foot down, metaphorically speaking.

She had convinced him to give her until the girl was seventeen and in her seventh year. It was most
logical. She couldn’t have a student with so much power over her. If Granger rejected the bond
Bellatrix had no idea what she would do. If she would survive after she left. Telling the girl in her
last year gave her less time to think about how to get back at the witch for all the grief she had
heaped upon her. While she didn’t honestly believe Granger capable of intentionally harming even
herself she knew she had made her life living hell over the years.

Waiting so long also gave her the time she needed. Time she could use to prepare and figure out
what role the girl should have in her life should she chose to stay. Though as the years passed and
the bond grew in strength, battering against her will like the waves crashing upon the shore, she
found herself anticipating the day she could get it all out in the open. The day she would finally
know Hermione's mind on the matter and what would happen after she graduated.

Hermione could genuinely want nothing to do with her and without branding the bond Bellatrix
wasn’t sure she could keep herself in check well enough to continue teaching after Hermione left.
She wasn’t sure she could control herself enough to live after Hermione left. Not after the drama of
the girls fifth year.

Bellatrix had gone through hell that year. The bond, the pull of Hermione's magic, had only gotten
stronger over the years. The girls fifth year she didn’t show up for school. Bellatrix had grilled the
boys for answers. She had been away on a family trip. She wouldn’t be back until the following
school year. All excuses, Hermione wouldn’t have missed school for something so simple. Not the
bookworm who valued education above everything.

Bellatrix had gone to Dumbledore once again. She requested she be placed on leave for the year,
terrified of what she may do should she lose control. The bloody old fool had refused her. Told her
he believed in her and that she was needed where she was. Hermione was to return the next year
and all would be well.

From what she could tell Hermione would be fine, she never heard the girl complain from any side
affects due to any kind of separation from her. She never complained of having headaches over the
summer or winter breaks, she never mentioned to Harry or Ron that she heard voices and Bella
never heard any gossip about any uncontrollable magic.

When Hermione had come back the following year Dumbledore had made the decision to put her
back in fifth year, despite the fact that she was already at a seventh year level and could easily skip her missed year. At the time she had never bother to contemplate his decision. She hadn’t seen how it would truly affect her. She hadn’t changed her mind about telling the girl and after the year from hell she held out only to give Hermione a normal childhood, at least for as long as she could. And to delay the inevitable, to delay the rejection she was sure would be headed her way.

But it should have been ending this year. She should have been able to unload her burden, to at least have someone else to share it with. To finally know what Hermione's decision would be.

Instead Dumbledore had pulled the rug out from under her, asked her to wait another year. And he hadn’t had any explanation as to why.

She ran her hand over her face again as she stopped and climbed to her feet. She pushed wet ringlets of hair out of her eyes and cast a simple wandless spell to dry her clothes. She pulled her hood back over her head and sucked in a deep breath. She felt better. No more closer to an answer on how to process Dumbledore’s unexpected request but she didn’t feel as angry. In any case she had no intention of staying out in the weather any longer. She had to return to the castle and prepare for the start of classes. Hermione would be in those classes. Dumbledore had assured her the girl was not taking another sabbatical. That had not been his reasoning. The thought alone gave her a marginal amount of peace……a worrisome amount.

She slipped her wand out of it’s holster and spun, disappearing from the dingy park with an audible crack.

~H~

The crack of thunder pulled her from her nightmare. She screamed out a broken sound in her terror and sat straight up in her bed, shivering from the cold sticky sweat dampening her skin and pajamas. She sucked in a breath and tried to stop the trembling of her hands as she pushed the heavy comforter away. Her owl, Fallow, was kicking up a fuss in his cage by her window, his indignant squawks a plea for her to either shut up and let him sleep or close the window and keep the rain off him, probably both if she was honest.

She set her bare feet on the cold wooden floor and wiggled her toes. She loved feeling the cold on her feet, it reminded her of the stone floors at the castle, although she could never remember taking her socks off and walking barefoot on it she could vividly recall running around a dirty stone floor laughing as the dirt snuck between her toes and the smooth stones tickled her feet.

Fallow let out another shriek of indignation and she was forced to turn her broken attention back to his dilemma. She cooed softly at him as she made her way over and closed the window. She didn’t have her wand but she had enough magic in her to cast a dry and warming spell over him. Wandless magic had been hard to learn but necessary to make her trips home bearable. She still wasn’t very good at them but she could keep herself and her pet from freezing.
He glared at her from behind the bars until she passed him a small treat. “I’m sorry, Fallow. I forgot to close the window didn’t I?” He shot her a glance and ruffled at his feathers. She sighed and made to turn away but he gently nipped at her fingers just before she removed them from his cage to let her know she was forgiven. She smiled back at him and passed him another treat. “Tomorrow we will be going back home. You can be free in the owlery and won’t have to worry about me remembering to close a silly window.” She murmured softly to him, she swore he nodded in understanding.

He didn’t like coming home anymore than she did. More often than not she was finding herself leaving him at school, only bringing him home for summer break so she could send letters to Harry and Ron. He was perfectly fine with that arrangement although she hoped he at least missed her and Sterling. Her little sister loved to spoil the coy little bird rotten. If it wasn’t for her baby sister Hermione knew neither she nor her bird would have ever returned to the house she grew up in. Not with both her parents gone and her stepfather it’s proprietor.

She smiled sadly as she stroked his feathers through the bars, her eyes absently drawn to the alarm clock on her desk, the numbers shining 4:45 in their bright red lines.

No one would be up yet, her stepfather would be waking soon though, he was always up around six on the day she returned to school. She left at one in the afternoon for the train and he had to take Sterling to whatever babysitter Hermione had arranged for her during the days he worked. On the days he was off Sterling stayed with a permanent sitter, an old friend of Hermione's father. Peter’s absentee fathering was his best quality in Hermione's opinion and she didn’t mind making sure Sterling was looked after.

He was a horrible man. Too handsome. Too charismatic. Everyone loved him. Which made it difficult for her to go to anyone about the abuse he heaped on her whenever she came home. Social workers had believed she was an errand child who didn’t want to be raised by a step father and her only other options was to leave his household, to leave her sister behind. The knowledge had put a stop to anything she had ever planned to do to get away from Peter Salt. No matter what happened she would never abandon Sterling.

She had another year of school after this one. Another year of only having to see him for vacation and holidays. After she graduated she planned to run away with her sister, another continent, anywhere he wasn’t. She wouldn’t have the trace on her.....hell it wasn’t there now. She had to finish her education, had to get enough Os to get a good job so she could support the two of them. And then they would be safe. She would be safe from him, she would wipe his memory and leave him somewhere no one knew him.

Despite all her planning, all her fantasizing, she wondered if it would truly work out the way she hoped. He took her wand when she returned and gave it back only when they were in his car and heading toward the station. She had a sinking feeling he would snap her wand her last day out of the station, before she could ever get to Sterling. Without magic she would never escape him. He wasn’t a stupid man, he would know she planned to leave, probably guessed she wouldn’t leave without the little girl currently nestled in her pretty princess bed. She had no idea why he wanted her to stay, he should have been happy she would take Sterling and leave him everything her parents had worked for. But for whatever reason it wasn’t enough. He wanted her under his control.
and he knew just how to do it.

Sterling was Hermione's weakness and Peter Salt knew how to use her. He had known the minute Hermione declared she wasn’t going to school so she could stay home and tend to the infant he and Hermione's mother had been neglecting. Sterling had become important to him that day, because she was more important to Hermione than even her education. Thunder rumbled again, shaking the windows and startling her out of her depressing thoughts. Salt took up enough of her time home without her dwelling on him when he wasn’t in the room.

She glanced around herself, her room was messy, she had been so busy the last few days making sure she got Sterling’s schedule set and all the money the girl would need for groceries at the babysitters that she hadn’t really thought about packing. She needed the distraction now though, she moved through the room pulling books off of shelves and placing them inside the trunk she kept tucked away under her bed. She needed new quills and her parchment stock was running low, she wouldn’t have enough for after Christmas break.

She hated asking for money but her birthday money had only been enough to purchase the books she needed for her sixth year and Fallow’s feed. She could get some from Hogsmeade if Peter gave her the money before she left, at least then she wouldn’t have to endure a trip with him to Diagon alley, he refused to let her go alone although he spent the ride there and back complaining about magical people and their world.

He hated magic, from the moment Hermione’s mother had explained it was real, he forbade she use it in his house. She never asked why and he never supplied an answer. He hated it so much he had forbidden her from returning to school after her mother’s death, Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to persuade him to change his mind. Thankfully he had never felt brave enough to try it again, Hagrid was intimidating enough just by his size but when he is waving his sparking wand around and muttering about no good muggles he is rather terrifying. The memory actually made her chuckle.

She picked up the last book she would pack from her desk. A photo album. Some of the pictures were muggle pictures, stationary glimpses from happy moments in time. A few of them were moving ones from the magical side of her life. It was those she flipped to, smiling at the happy faces of her two best friends as they hugged each other on the bridge at Hogwarts. The boys were grinning widely, she was sandwiched between them, they had just finished their first year of school and Hagrid had insisted they snap a photo to show their parents. It had been the first magical photo Hermione's father had added to her photo journal. He had been so proud of her.

She sniffled and wiped a lone tear from her face. Dwelling on him now wasn’t going to do her any good. He was gone and she couldn’t change that.

She made to set the book in her suit case when her door creaked as it opened behind her. She tensed, an automatic response she couldn’t control any longer. She knew who was behind her simply by the hairs raising on the back of her neck, by the ominous way the door clicked shut as Peter Salt let himself into her room.
“It’s only five thirty in the morning and you’re packing already?” She felt him move up behind her, he took the album out of her hand and flipped through the pages, he scoffed at the moving photos. He had never tried to take the book from her, surprisingly enough, but he had once tried to remove the magical pictures. Luckily she had been smart enough to place a jinx on them, not even she could remove them from their place in the book.

“I….wanted to be able to spend some time with Sterling before we had to separate. And I was tired of the mess.” She added quietly. Fallow screeched from his cage, he was always such a good bird, unless Peter was around. Then he kicked up the most noise he could. Sometimes it made the man so angry he would put the bird in the basement, other times it served it’s purpose and Peter simply left, angry and irritable that he couldn’t rid her of the blasted bird yet. When she graduated she was going to give him to Ginny, just in case.

“Damn bird!” He tossed the book onto the pile in her trunk and she quickly closed and latched the lid. He didn’t approve of her doing her homework either and if he inspected her luggage he would notice the parchment on wolfsbane professor Sprout had required from her sixth years.

“He’s just excited to be heading back to school. I haven’t let him out much this summer.

Instantly she knew it was the wrong response. Peter turned his attention back solely onto her. A glare turning his cool green eyes hard. “And what about you? Ready to escape back to the school for the freaks?”

There was no right answer to his question so she tried to keep quiet. Her hands trembled so she hid it the best she could by heaving her trunk off the bed and straightening up her bed sheets.

“It’s a waste of your time,” she froze as his words hissed right beside her ear, his breath sickening as they tickled the hairs on her neck. “When you graduate you won’t be joining the unnatural cult their training you for. You’ll be living here full time taking care of Sterling and me.” She shivered in disgust and fear, he relished in it.

She prayed it wasn’t going to be true. She didn’t know what to do if it was. He could very well keep her from contacting anyone. Could take her magic away and hold her hostage by using Sterling against her. She had two years to devise a plan against that. If not she was going to have to come up with a muggle way to escape his possession. One that would probably see her arrested for kidnapping depending on how far she would get. Perhaps Azkaban if he somehow found her in the magical world.

His cold hand grasped the back of her neck when she offered no reply, she tensed further and tried to keep absolutely still. “You think I don’t know what your planning?” He chuckled darkly, squeezed her neck until she groaned out a protest before he let go and moved away back toward the door. “You won’t be getting away from me Hermione. Give it up now and just enjoy the last two years you have of that freak show you call a school.”

She let out a breath of relief and sunk to her bed when she heard her door creak open and close
again as he left. She had to believe he was wrong. That he couldn’t control her after she graduated. If she didn’t have that small sliver of hope she didn’t know how she would survive the upcoming holidays with him.

~H~

She was quiet on the ride to the station, Sterling had clung to her when she was dropped off at the woman who kept her during the school year. Hermione knew she liked staying with the woman she was always telling her stories of the fun things they did. But to a three year old the days between holidays were long and she missed Hermione more than anything. She always begged her to stay and it always made the ride to King’s Cross depressing.

Thankfully Peter was silent as well. The first year Hermione had to leave her for school had been terrible. Her mother had passed a few months before and Sterling was a year old and didn’t understand why her caretaker was leaving her with a stranger, with Peter, she thought maybe the girl was terrified Hermione would disappear as her mother had. She had cried and cried as they walked to the pillar and Peter had made continuous snide comments about Hermione abandoning the little girl. Walking through that brick wall knowing Peter was responsible for her well being was nearly as torturous as the cries. “We’re here.”

Hermione blinked. She had been so engrossed in her thoughts and the silence she hadn’t noticed he had parked. She clamored for the handle but he reached out and grasped her wrist. “Don’t forget what I said.” She flinched as he squeezed just that tighter before releasing her. She quickly escaped and grabbed her trunk from the boot and Fallow's cage. He wouldn’t help, she had learned not to bother asking. She had the hindsight to enchant her trunk with a weightless spell before leaving school so she didn’t have to struggle and drag it from the parking lot to the trolley. She felt his eyes on her until she disappeared inside, only then did she let out the tense breath and glance at her thin wrist. He had left bruises. They weren’t the only bruises he had left over the summer.

She had nasty ones on her stomach and ribs from spilling the water when she was refilling the coffee pot. A few more he had given her when his shirt was too wrinkled for him to wear to work.

Some of the others she couldn’t even remember what his excuse had been. It didn’t matter in any case, as soon as she could she would glamour them all away, just as she had done every year since he had started living with them.

She grabbed a metal trolley and carefully deposited her trunk and Fallow’s cage on it. She glanced around. She didn’t see any red-haired Weasleys just yet, but where they were the Potters weren’t usually far behind. They always waited for her before they boarded the train so she moved on, deciding getting onto the platform was her best bet in finding them.

A little blonde boy crashed into her trolley as he ran excitedly toward her. “Sorry!” He grinned up happily at her, straightening his own bird cage and cooing apologies to the owl inside before offering up one to hers. Fallow glared at him with his bright yellow eyes. He didn’t take apologies
unless they came with treats. “I’m Adam Sebastien Hallow!” Hermione wanted to groan at his enthusiasm. He had to be a muggle born, he already reminded her of herself. She had been far too excited to join the magical world her first year of school. She hadn’t been so outspoken though.

“Hermione Granger.” She offered when it became apparent he expected an introduction.

He fidgeted. She fought the urge to ask him if he needed a loo. “Ummm….well….I noticed you have an owl and uh…. well I didn’t see your parents so I thought maybe…..maybe you know where platform nine and three quarters was?”
She stared at him blankly for a moment. “Ummm. No one told you?” He shook his head. “The teacher who brought you the letter didn’t tell you?”

“I… well no. Some Uncle I never met picked me up. He took me to get my things and gave me some money but I guess he forgot to explain the rest. He ran off a little while ago, said he had something more important to do.”

Hermione wondered. McGonagall had delivered her letter. Had explained everything to her parents, shown them a bit of magic and gave her detailed instructions on how to get to Diagon Alley and exchange money for gold and then how to get into the platform. She had never asked but she had always assumed that a teacher did that for all muggle borns.
“An uncle? So you’re not muggle born?”

His little face scrunched up. “I….No but I don’t have any family beside my Uncle and I was put in one of their orphanages when I was seven. I remember mom and dad were both squids.”

“Squibs.” She corrected automatically. It bothered her this little magical boy had been swept under the rugs and left to muggles to raise. It hit close to home. Brought back words she had heard that left a bitter anger burning in her chest. Magic didn’t interfere in Muggle affairs. It seemed magic didn’t interfere anywhere unless it suited itself.

“Right. Do you…can you show me how to get to the train?”

He was staring up at her with ridiculously innocent blue eyes. And she knew he wasn’t sure if she was going to brush him off or help him. That was what adults had done to him. It was a simple request, something necessary, and he wasn’t sure she could be bothered to help him. Not even when it would cost her nothing but a few moments to explain. The world was a cruel and unfair place. The entirety of it.

“I can help you. We just need to get closer to the wall between platform nine and platform ten.” She led him over and stopped a few feet from it. He stared at it determined and she couldn’t help the small smile. “Are you nervous?” He shook his head, his long blonde locks curling around his ears. She gazed down at him until he looked up and reluctantly, sheepishly, nodded.
“I was too, my first time. I’m muggle born, my parents couldn’t come in to see me off.” She turned her gaze back to the forbiddingly solid wall. “You have to run through it you see, and I was terrified I was going to crash.”
“But you didn’t right?”

“No.” She chuckled a bit. “But second year my two friends did. They were late and the gate sealed itself. Their parents were rather cross, they are seventh years now and they still have to be walked into the platform by their dads.”
He laughed a bit. “Can….can I go in with you?”

She nodded. “Ready?” He gripped his trolley tightly and nodded. She didn’t run but she did set a fast pace, mindful to keep him beside her and stay a little ahead so they would both fit at the same time. She heard his small gasp when they flew through and barely had time to reach out and grab the back of his shirt as he flew through the other side. A few Slytherins shot him a nasty look as he had nearly collided with them in his run. He laughed it off easily.

“That was so cool!” She laughed at his exuberance, he may have been a little daunting at first but she felt lighter than she had when she first arrived. His happiness seemed to be contagious. She had just the right way to thank him.

She moved them off to the side, catching sight of green eyes and messy black hair she waved and held up a finger to signal she would only be a second. “Over there is a friend of mine,” she made sure he saw Harry before she drew his attention further down the line. “And over there is a boy who should be starting school this year too. I know his brothers, Collin and Dennis Creevey, you should go and introduce yourself. It’s never too early to make new friends.” He grinned widely at her.

“Thanks, Hermione! I hope I’m in your house. I bet your in Ravenclaw.”

She laughed, “I was almost. I’m in Gryffindor. But whatever house you're in will be lucky to have you.”

“Still….thanks a lot.” He waved happily at her, she watched him introduce himself to the Creevey family with the same gusto he did to Hermione. Harry moved over toward her, following her gaze and grinning at her.

“Who was that, I think he has a crush on you already.” He laughed as she swatted at him. “Just kidding.”

“Don’t jinx me.” She had enough idiot boys chasing after her since her fourth year. Collin Creevey had asked her out, Fred had, though she was pretty sure he hadn’t been serious. Victor Krum had taken her on a disastrous date after meeting her at the Quidditch world cup. And there had been a few Hufflepuff boys she didn’t know the names of. But the worst of all had been and still was Cormac McLaggen. She did not need a smaller version of Cormac running around.

“Where’s Ginny and Ron?” They moved to the train, Harry helped her store her luggage and owl before they clamored aboard.
“Told me to get us all a cabin, Ginny had prefect stuff to do before she can join us but I think Ron was chasing Lavender Brown.” He chuckled a bit. Ron and Lavender had a love hate relationship trailing back to their fourth year. At the time she had only wanted to snog the life out of him any chance she got and he had wanted a relationship, his first ever. He had broken it off with her and then got back together before the summer, that time he was the one only interested in snogging and she was the one who has wanted commitment. They’d had an off and on thing ever since.

Hermione groaned as they found and empty compartment and fell in. “We will have to listen to all that drama again this year. I swear if they end up married I’m refusing his owls.”

Harry shook his head. “I doubt it’ll go on outside of school. I don’t think he’s all that serious about her, I think she has just become his comfort.” He blushed a bit at the quirked eyebrow she shot him. “I think he's just afraid of asking out who he really likes because he's afraid they will reject him.”

Hermione hummed, turning her attention out to the families still saying goodbye on the platform. She hadn’t heard their other friend had even liked anyone else. Though she had to admit she wasn’t as close to the boys now that she was a year behind them. They still asked her for homework help but their free classes no longer matched up.

“And what about you,” she asked casually, not even bothering glancing back his way. “You serious about Ginny? After school ends and all?”

Harry cleared his throat before he answered, she didn’t have to look to see even his ears were red. “Yeah, I….I don’t want to be too confident, or rush anything but…I’m pretty serious about her.”

She hummed again. Honestly in the beginning of their relationship she hadn’t been for it. Harry was so hung up on Cho Chang the year before and Ginny had always had a crush on him. She had been afraid the girl was going to get her heart broken. Now though they seemed to compliment each other, far better than she could have ever imagined. Ginny calmed down the jokester side of Harry that he inherited from his father. Softened him up a bit and got him serious about studying to become an Auror. She wondered if anyone could do that for Ron.

The compartment door slid open and Luna and Neville popped in. “Blimey, nearly every car is full. I think they need to extend the train if they plan to keep accepting so many students.” Neville complained, flopping down on the plush seat beside Harry. “Why’s your face all red? You feeling alright?” Harry waved off his concern and muttered about being hot. He shot Hermione a meaningful look and shucked his jacket.

“You have several Wrackspurts around your head Hermione, more so than usual I expect. Are you terribly worried about something? That does tend to attract them.” Hermione turned back and smiled at her dreamy blonde friend as she took a seat beside her.

“Nothing more than usual. It's hard saying goodbye to Sterling.”
“Right, I can only imagine. Jasper is bad enough with his crying, he is only one and he knew what it meant that I was packing my bags. He kept unpacking all my stuff when I wasn’t looking. He sure got hold of his magic faster than I ever did.” Neville complained of his young nephew.

“So no throwing him off the balcony then?” Harry chuckled good-naturedly.

Neville grinned, “Na, he's gonna have a good bit of magic in him I bet. He was swiping cookies from his mom and getting it blamed on his dad when I left.”

“How was he doing that?”

“Levitating them from the cookie jar, made sure the crumbs went back up to where his dad was reading the paper though. Smart little bugger he is.” Hermione couldn’t help the grin, Neville always sounded so proud of his baby nephew. He hadn’t always been too friendly with his adopted sister so it was nice to see them working on their relationship for little Jasper. She wished she could tell them more about Sterling. They knew she had a baby sister of her own but like many others believed she missed her fifth year because her mother was ill. She didn’t know how to tell them she was raising her stepsibling.

The shrill sound of the train horn marked the hour. Anyone not on the train already was rushing to climb aboard before it left them behind and students were rushing about the hallway trying to find space in the compartments or friends to sit the ride with.

Hermione turned her attention back out the window as Harry and Neville started talking about Quidditch. She watched as the view outside sped up until she had to focus to see more than just shades of color passing by.

She let the dulled conversation flow around her, barely listened to the boys excited chatter and the occasional punctuation of Luna’s airy voice. It was a good half hour into the trip before their door flew open with force and the two Weasley children strode in, demanding she turn her attention back to the people around her.

“Heya Hermione.” Ron grinned at her, pronounced dimples and messy red hair. And of course the usual endearing speck of dirt, he always had dirt on his face when they boarded the train.

“Hey Ron, how’d it go with Lavender?” He frowned and sank down beside Neville.

“She wants to date Seamus. He's not even interested, he even told her so. He's after one of the Patil twins.” Hermione bet Seamus didn’t even care which one. She sighed, boys were crazy drama.

“How was your summer, Hermione.” Ginny smiled at her as she squeezed herself in between her and Luna. Ginny had become a fast friend when Hermione had been forced to complete her fifth
year while her classmates moved on to their sixth. She was glad to have had her but it still
saddened her that she had never felt comfortable divulging the truth to the girl. Ginny knew her
better than anyone and she still had secrets from her.

“It was okay, nothing really eventful.” Except maybe a few cracked ribs but there was no point
saying that aloud.

“Bill brought home a girl to meet mom and dad.” Ginny smiled wickedly at her brother. “She’s
part Veela, oh Hermione you should have seen Ron-“

“Hey! You swore not to say anything!” Neville and Harry grabbed Ron as he made a break for his
sister. He was beat red all the way to his ears. Hermione could only imagine what had happened.

Ginny only chuckled. “Well, he made Bill jealous but it wasn’t really his fault. Veela have that
effect on men. I think even dad was a bit affected.”

Ron crossed his arms and grumbled, apparently he didn’t find if comforting that his dad was
affected too. “I wasn’t that bad.”
“You yelled across the dinning table that she should marry you and not Bill. He swears you ruined
his proposal.”

Ron blushed even harder. “I couldn’t help myself.” He elbowed a snickering Neville. “And he
hasn’t even proposed yet, he just mentioned he might.” Ron mumbled. Hermione vaguely
wondered if the Veela was the girl Harry had mentioned earlier. She hoped not, she couldn’t see it
ending well if Ron really wanted his brothers girl.

The trolley witch pulled their door open and poked her head in, giving Ron a much needed break
from all the teasing. “Anything for you dearies?”

Harry and Neville bought the treats, both boys coming from well off families, though they never
rubbed it in or flaunted it like the Malfoys.

They spent the rest of the ride avoiding the topic of love and confessions while they munched on
their snacks. Luna let a chocolate frog bounce around the room until Trevor, Neville’s toad,
popped up from his robes and ate it. Neville had stared down at his pet in horror.

“You reckon it’s bad for him?” He asked Hermione a bit in a panic. She shrugged. He picked up
the road and moved toward the door. “I’m going to ask one of the kids from the choir. They should
know.” Hermione did have a vague recollection of the choir kids having toads as backup.

“I’ve got to be going too,” Ginny told them some time later. “We are nearly there and I need to
help make sure the first years don’t get trampled.” She leaned over and kissed Harry quickly
before waving at the others. Ron grimaced and elbowed Harry until the dreamy smile fell off the
“Can we just pretend you're not snogging my sister.” He grimaced.

“I like snogging your sister.” He ‘oomphed’ as Ron elbowed him harder.

“Disgusting. I’m going to try and catch Seamus.” Hermione had no doubt he was going to try and conspire with the boy on how to get Lavender back. Honestly she didn’t see the appeal. Harry just waved him off and bit the head off his chocolate frog. He pulled the card out and gazed down at it for a moment.

“Merlin.” Luna sidled on over to his side of the car and peered down at the rare find.

“Lucky.”

“Yeah, uh…don’t tell Ron.” Hermione smiled to herself and turned her attention back outside. They were slowing down. She could see Hogsmeade in the distance.

“Want to hang around a bit till everyone gets off? We can ride back with Ginny then.”

Hermione pulled her attention away from the vista and nodded. “Let’s get off though, I want to see the first years.”

“The boy?”

“Just want to make sure he made a few friends.” She remember how lonely she had been her first few weeks before she finally made friends with the boys.

“If he's met you, Hermione, he's already made a friend.” She stared at the blonde girl in silence for a moment before she nodded, a small upturn of her lips the only real sign that she appreciated Luna’s words.

They all turned their attention to the window at the sound of squealing brakes. Hogsmeade station. Just a short carriage ride away and she would be back inside those castle walls, safe from Peter Salt even if not from the worries he brought. Harry grabbed his jacket and tucked away his valuable card. “Come on or we will miss seeing them off.” They could already hear Hagrid’s booming voice, a trait which explained why he had been chosen for the job of shuttling the first years across the lake to the castle.

Hermione followed him and Luna out of the compartment, grimacing as her ribs and aching body was jostled by the other students as they hurried off, ready to stretch their feet and eat until they dropped.
She didn’t have to look too hard for little Adam Sebastien Hallow, he seemed to be searching the crowd for her too. He waved excitedly at her and elbowed the boys next to him and pointed toward her. She smiled and waved in his direction, glad to see him getting along so well with others already.

“Told you.” She shot Harry a glare at his reference to the boys crush and stalked off toward a irritated looking Ron. Harry patted him on the back when they got closer. “Didn’t go well then?”

“Ugh. Women. I swear. She was in his car making love eyes at him. Doesn’t she have any pride?” Hermione was wondering the same about him.

“Yeah, mate.” Harry laughed. “Women. Speaking of. I’m going to find Ginny. I think Hagrid’s got all the first years. Grab us a carriage would you, before the empty ones start to head back and we have to walk.” That had definitely happened their third year. Of course it wouldn’t have if Harry and Malfoy hadn’t gotten into it and Harry hadn’t gotten caught trying to play a prank on the boy from under his father’s invisibility cloak. A cloak which Malfoy had politely let him keep after knocking him immobile with a body binding curse. It had taken forever to find him.

She and Ron walked a bit, she let him head to carriage and tie the lead of the horses he couldn’t see to the light pole while she moved to where she could see the castle in the distance. It looked foreboding and magical lit up against the furiously dark sky. It’s reflection in the Black Lake made it all the more magical.

She would never forget her first year, her nervous ride on a wobbly boat across the pitch black lake toward the biggest castle she had ever seen. She couldn’t have imagined what waited for her inside, the magic she would learn the friendships she would make. She had felt so hopeful, so full of a desire to learn everything back then. Even now Hogwarts filled her with hope. Behind those walls she could be herself. She was free. No one could take that away from her. Not for another two years at least.

She sighed and turned away from the sight bumping into a firm body as she did so. “Watch where you’re going, Granger.”

Malfoy sneered, shoving her aside as he and his snickering posse made there way toward the last few carriages.

He wasn’t hard to recognize, he had his hood up so she couldn’t see his white blonde hair but she could tell it was him by his rude attitude. He had made it quiet clear he had no time for a muggleborn her first year and he had made it equally as clear that he didn’t care for “blood traitors” either. She wondered how much of that was his own opinion and how much was brainwashed into him by his parents.

Bellatrix Black was his aunt and she taught at their school. She didn’t seemed to like Hermione, in fact one could say she loved to hate her, but Hermione had never seen her show any other signs of blood prejudice.
“He’s such a git.” Ron glared after the Slytherins, gritting his teeth in anger. He was just as bad as Harry about getting into a fight with that particular Slytherin. Hermione would never know what started the bitter rivalry. “Blasted Malfoy, doesn’t even know how to use his manners. He was better behaved as a ferret.”

He had made a cute ferret. Although Hermione had been aghast at the rules Moody had broken when he transformed the blonde into one for trying to hex Harry when his back was turned their fourth year. Unfortunately it had gotten the head Auror banned from the grounds barring a disaster. Still…sometimes she swore Malfoy would twitch his nose like he could still feel the whiskers.

Ginny sidled up alongside Hermione and threw an arm around her shoulder, she chuckled toward her brother. “Your manners aren’t any better my dear brother.” He shot her a half hearted glare.

“Where’s Harry?”

“Off to get Neville and Luna.” Only then did Hermione noticed Luna had disappeared. The girl had a bad habit of making herself nearly invisible until she had something she wanted to say. Hermione loved her dearly as one of her best friends but the girl could be downright scary with her ability to come and go as she pleased. She was sure she had seen her on more than one occasion chilling out in the Gryffindor common room. How she even got in was a mystery to everyone.

“Hermione…..” The brunet sighed. Whenever Ginny drug her name out she needed something, usually it got her into trouble. “I forgot to write my essay on Sphynxes and Defenses. Black even reminded me during break. She will kill me!” Ginny leaned heavily on her shoulder her eyes gazing pleasingly into her own. She grimaced, mostly from the pain the girl was unwittingly inflicting on her but also from the fact she couldn’t deny her friend.

“Alright. You can check mine out tonight, but don’t copy it. Black hates me enough and I’d like to avoid detention on the first day.”

Neville sidled up alongside her and laughed. “Saving that for the second one right?” She grinned at him, all of them completely aware it was a likely possibility.

Harry groaned as he moved to stand beside Ginny, pulling a flighty Luna behind him. “Don’t even joke. I don’t know what her deal is but she hates you, Hermione. I mean I never would have thought she had it in her when I was little. She loves kids. Well….she loved us anyways.” Of course she did he was her godson, he and Neville both. “She’s had it out for you since first year though.” They followed Ron to the carriage, the ground was kicking up dust as invisible hooves pawed irritably at it. The great thestrals ready to head home and be free of their duties.

“Don’t even joke.” Ron agreed. “She was horrible our fifth year.” He shivered just at the memory. “I got so many howlers from Mom for all the detentions I got and I’m still not sure why I got them.”
Ginny didn’t say anything but she and Harry shared a look. They had talked in great detail about why Ron had gotten detention. It seemed only they had figured out the pattern. Or at least that’s what they thought until Luna piped up.

“She gave you detention every time you mentioned Hermione when she was in earshot.” She said dreamily, smiling as she climbed past the opened mouth boy and into the carriage.

Ron stared at Hermione for a few minutes and then looked back at Harry, who nodded in agreement. “Well bloody flippen hell.” He shook his head, still reeling from the fact that Luna had hit the nail on the head, and climbed in beside the blonde.

“Apparently he talked about you a lot our fifth year,” Neville wiggled his eyebrows her way but she rolled her eyes. Thankfully Ron hadn’t heard him although Harry coughed surreptitiously. Harry climbed up and pulled Ginny up behind him. Neville followed and reached down to offer Hermione a hand up but a voice yelling out to them had her turning around. She groaned at the sight.

Cormac freaking McLaggen was running up to their carriage, a quick glance around proved it was indeed the last carriage back. They had lingered far too long.

“Hey wait up- oh! Granger, must be destiny.” He smiled in a way she was sure he thought was charming. “Let me give you a hand up.” Neville reached down quickly and grasped her hand, she flinched as his fingers settled on the recent bruising but she appreciated his act of heroism. She let him steady her as she climbed the few steps up, turning back to growl at Cormac as his hands reached up and connected with her ass in his ‘gallant’ way of helping her up. He grinned back at her innocently and climbed up himself, settling down beside Harry and Ginny because Neville had squeezed himself in on the other side of Hermione, thankfully putting her between himself and Luna.

“I missed you during break,” Cormac told her, apparently not caring that he was receiving glares from all of her friends, except Luna that is. “You should have written or something. I was a bit busy though, remember I was working as an apprentice in the ministry.” She had a vague image of him moping up spills as a janitor but pushed the fantasy aside.

“Lovely.” She muttered.

He opened his mouth to say something else but Ginny cut him off. “Why were you so late, Cormac?”

“Oh-“ He floundered for an answer. “I uh, thought I packed my wand by mistake.” Ron snorted, no wizard worth his salt didn’t have his wand on him at all times. Not even an arrogant idiot like McLaggen. It only solidified what they were all thinking, the boy was watching Hermione and trying to make sure she didn’t have any other choice but to ride in the same carriage back with him. The boys all glanced at each other, an unspoken agreement between them. They would try and make sure Cormac didn’t bother her too much, hiding in the shadows and trying to force his way
into her life didn’t sound right to them.
“How’s the flying coming, Cormac?” Luna asked happily. “You made a marvelous miss at your tryouts, are you getting any better?” Ginny snickered. Luna may have looked like an airhead, acted like she had no idea what was going on, but Ginny was pretty sure the girl was far more observant than anyone gave her credit for.

“I’m a good flyer.” Cormac shot a glare at Ron. “Technically I am on the team,” He looked pointedly at Harry, who was the Captain. He was right, he was the back up keeper in case anything happened to Ron, and he was a good flyer. Hermione had confunded him so he’d miss the last goal and Ron would win, Luna knew that already and she knew the girl hadn’t forgotten.

The carriage hit a large root and they shuffled a bit as they were bounced harshly in the seat. Hermione gritted her teeth and eased a breath out slowly as the pain receded from her side. Thankfully the ride was coming to an end, she could see the other horses being untethered and led away by professor Sprout as they made a circle to the entrance.

“Last ones in right, you lot?”

Neville waved in response and shot her a brilliant smile. She was his favorite teacher after all.

“Good. First years have already arrived, get inside already.”

Cormac climbed down first, Ginny and Harry followed. Cormac turned back toward Hermione as she rose to get down and held his arms out expectantly. She raised an eyebrow at him and refused to move.

“Hurry up now, don’t dawdle!” Sprout hollered at them.

Cormac chuckled. “I can wait all night, Granger.” She bet he could. She didn’t fancy explaining to Sprout why she wasn’t climbing down, and if she protested she knew the boys would probably break out into a duel right there and land them all in detention.

She would loved to have just jumped down and ignore him but he was in the way for even that.

She sucked in a breath and took a step down before letting his hands come up around her waist. He eased her down to the ground, lingered too long at her waist but otherwise kept a respectable distance between them. She pulled away the second his grip slackened and moved to stand closer to Ginny. The red head had been talking to Harry, both facing the castle so they hadn’t seen what had happened. Still Ginny sensed her discomfort and placed a comforting hand around her shoulder.

Neville shoulder past the boy roughly and led them off toward the castle. He and Ron planned to make sure Cormac was no where near Hermione at the feast, especially after the show they had just witnessed.

“That boy,” Harry asked when he couldn’t endure the heavy silence any longer, “did he mention what house he wanted?”

“Not really.” Hermione muttered.
“Yours then?” Neville chuckled, very aware of how Hermione felt when boys developed crushes on her. She tended to find them more as a nuisance than she found them flattering.

“He thought I was in Ravenclaw.”

“Why would you want to be in Ravenclaw?” Cormac butted in.

“There isn’t anything wrong with Ravenclaw.” Luna spared him a sharp glance.

“I was almost in Ravenclaw. I wanted-“ She trailed off, not wanting to admit she wanted to make friends and the hat believed she would devote herself only to her studies if he placed her in such a knowledge minded home. “I just wanted to be in Gryffindor.” Harry smiled back at her. Ron raised his hand in mock salute.

“Here! Here!” He cheered merrily. They filed in the great doors and passed a disapproving McGonagall.

“Always you three,” She looked pointedly at Hermione, Harry and Ron. They all grinned back sheepishly. “And you lot, getting to be just as bad, McLaggen I must say this is a surprise.” He just shrugged. “Well get inside. The first years are getting antsy.”

They did as they were told, quickly rushing off to their respective tables. Luna bid them farewell with a quick wave as they sat down at the Gryffindor table, Neville and Ginny on one side of Hermione, Ron and Harry on the other. A put out Cormac turned and headed off toward his friends in begrudged defeat, giving Hermione some much welcomed peace.

When they were settled Dumbledore clapped his hands to garner their attention. “The first years.” His voice boomed across the silent hall and the doors opened once again, allowing the small eleven years olds to filter in and make their way down to the front of the room. The head boy, a Hufflepuff named Nigel Finley, moved forward and set out a stool and an old hat. The first years watched it intently. “Welcome to our humble school.” Dumbledore drawled out. “May you find your perfect home away from home and make friends that will last a lifetime. Let the sorting begin.” He turned his gaze on to the hat and smiled gently as it began moving.

Let me first welcome back our tricksters, come one and all to this marvelous castle hall.

Then let me get on with what I am all about, sorting this lot all out.

To Our newcomers both young and small

I say to you, your marvelous journey will start this fall.

In one of these four houses I will place you
Your new friends will cheer and embrace you.

Keep mischievous minds and open books

Explore every Hogwarts crack and nook

Be Yee witty, loyal, brave or cunning

Your place is here in this house of learning

Keep your new friends close and your wits about

For you never know where a Wheezes will sprout

Enjoy your year, it’s all in good fun

But keep your tricks safe and harmful to none.

Hermione could see a few teachers grumbling about the references to Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. She knew they had been causing quiet a few problems since Fred and George opened their shop in Hogsmeade. McGonagall shot her house a pointed look and Hermione saw Bellatrix Black point threateningly at a few Slytherin boys who had chuckled mischievously amongst themselves.

She couldn’t help but stare at the woman. Just pointing at the boys had them sitting up straighter and gulping. She was always so in control and so well respected. And powerful. Anyone could tell without hearing the stories how powerful Bellatrix Black was. Power clung to her like a second skin. Hermione swore sometimes she saw raw magic arching like static electricity between the woman’s fingers, especially when she was lost in thought grading papers. Something Hermione saw a lot of during her multitude of detentions.

But aside from her name and obvious power you would have to be blind not to notice just how beautiful the witch was. Her hair was wild and dark, like her eyes. But her skin was porcelain and perfectly unblemished. Hermione couldn’t deny that she had spent far too much time staring at her while she was in detention, much more time than would have been deemed appropriate for a student to stare at a teacher.

Ginny elbowed her and leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Your crush is showing, clap for the first years and stop staring at Harry’s godmother.”
Hermione grimaced, pulled her attention away from the woman and back to the first years. She clapped dutifully as the young witches and wizards were sorted. She genuinely clapped when little Adam joined his new friends at the Hufflepuff table, he caught her gaze and beamed at her. She nodded approvingly and gave him a slight wave before she once more directed her attention to the sorting.

This time it was Neville who drew her attention back to Black. “Bloody hell Hermione, what have you done to upset her already. We haven’t even spoken to her yet.” He chuckled half heartedly. She glanced his way, both remember the time she had received detention for breathing too loud in the library, Black had nearly given them both a heart attack that day. They hadn’t even seen her coming, Neville had tried to protest on her behalf but had only gotten her another night of detention. He had politely shut up then.

She turned her eyes up toward the table, careful not to look at her first, her eyes softening at Hagrid’s huge frame beside Flitwick’s tiny stature sitting atop his many books. She made her way down the table until they landed on the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. She had meant to keep going, to only give the woman a cursory look to see if she was indeed glaring her way. But their eyes connected and she couldn’t seem to tear her’s away.

Vaguely she was aware the last child had been sorted. A something Zabind. She heard Dumbledore’s chair push away from the table as the celebrations quieted down and he rose to give his start of term speech. All eyes turned to their headmaster as he moved to stand before the podium while the head boy cleared the sorting hat away. All eyes except hers and Black’s, who seemed just as disinclined to tear he gaze away as she was.

She wasn’t really glaring, not as she usually did. But Hermione could practically feel the intent of her gaze on her. Could nearly feel the press of the woman’s thoughts as she stared back at her through the obsidian pools of her eyes.

For a split second she thought she heard the woman say her name in her head, a soft murmur, softer than any tone Bellatrix had ever used on her before. But then she blinked, and Bellatrix shook her head and the connection seemed lost. Bellatrix turned her attention to their headmaster and Hermione, still slightly confused about what had just happened, did the same.

“Another year at Hogwarts. I should like to say a few things, before we tuck in and our minds become too sleepy to remember anything else.” She let his soft soothing tone wash over her, let the tone slow her rapidly beating heart back to an appropriate level. He always had a calming quality to his voice. Hermione wondered if it was because he spoke so softly and slow. He could say anything and it would sound genuine. Even when he was telling you he was sorry he couldn’t help you. Even when he left you to fend for yourself.

She shook herself harshly. Berated herself for her thoughts. And forced herself to listen to his words.

“We will have a surprise speaker before the end of term. In an unprecedented event we will be opening the school up at such a time to all parents, muggles and wizarding alike. The objective of this night will be to give parents a better understanding of the magical and muggle world. Owls will be sent to your parents, muggle parents will be able to ride the train from the platform. Wizarding parents may apparate or floo to Hogsmeade.” He waited patiently for the bit of chatter
to die down. “Remind parents that all those wishing to attend must reply by October. Now…..for a bit of my usual bits of wisdom. I wish to say to you all……fizzlepops.”

Of course he ended the speech on a crazily silly note. It fit him perfectly, just like his affinity for muggle candy. Dumbledore was nothing if not eccentric. He moved back around to his seat and smiled at them all before clapping his hands sharply.

“Tuck in.”

For the moment his speech was forgotten as an extravaganza of food was delivered to every table. Hermione filled her plate slowly, still feeling a little shaken by whatever had transpired between herself and Bellatrix. She could have swore she could almost feel the woman in her head, but she knew legilimency was forbidden on students outside of the classroom. Still she made a mental note to strengthen her shields.

“Arnt ya gonfta eat?” Hermione grimaced as bits of food flew out of Ron’s mouth at the question. She met Ginny’s eyes and shook her head. His words did prompt her to take a few bites, her appetite no where near as strong as it had been earlier. Harry sipped his pumpkin juice and leaned around Ron, “For a second I thought you were going to rebel again for spew.”

Hermione glared at him. “It’s S.P.E.W. As you already know.” He held his hands up in surrender and went back to his meal. Neville quickly changed the subject to Harry’s two year old brother, effectively cutting off her tirade on house elf rights. She let it go. Not really in the mood to debate with them about it when her heart wasn’t really in it, at least not at the moment. She moved her eyes back up toward the staff table but found Bellatrix had disappeared. She couldn’t find a reason to let them linger.

She tried to get into the spirit with everyone else, to eat until she dropped and then groan about the start of classes in the morning, okay so she had never done that last part but she had always laughed with the others while they did. But the feelings eluded her. She picked at her food and felt her friends’ occasional glances. She knew she was worrying them.

She sighed heavily and let her fork drop into her plate. “I think I’m going to head off to bed.” Ginny eyed her critically, she held up her hands and forced a smile. “I’m okay, just tired. I already miss Sterling.” That at least wasn’t a lie.

“Alright. The password is Mandrake, I’ll see you after I get the new first years sorted.”

Hermione nodded, she said her goodbyes to the others and crossed the distance to the doors. She was glad they had chosen to sit further back than usual, she didn’t particularly care for all the attention she received when she left, she knew a few Slytherin would have loved to give her some payback for all the times she escaped them the last year.

She let her eyes trail over the portraits as she headed up the moving staircase, deftly avoiding a fake step as she went. She was enjoying being away from the crowds. Travelling the well known path to her dormitory without the press and rush of student bodies trying to get through and the
prefects yelling out over all the noise. But as with everything lately it all went to hell in a handbag.

“Hey! Granger wait up.”

She did not wait up. But she did have to stop and wait on a blasted staircase, which had chosen just that second to move away. She wanted to beat her head against the stone wall, she settled for closing her eyes and counting.

“Hey, for a second there I thought you would run off.”

She sighed, debating whether it was a good idea to tell him she was contemplating jumping down to the next landing at that very moment.

“What is it you want, McLaggen?”

“Huh? Oh well, I missed you over break. I know I said I was busy but I did actually send you a letter. You never responded.” How could he talk about her brushing him off and still sound arrogant she did not know. She remembered the letter, Peter had been absolutely furious. Not that she had received one, he couldn’t stop the boys from sending her letters for fear of another visit from Hagrid, instead he had been angry about it’s contents. About the way the idiot boys made it sound like they were carrying on some kind of torrid love affair behind school walls. He had asked her to visit his home for heaven sakes, they were not even friends, they weren’t even classmates any more!

“I had a busy summer.” She cursed the damn stair cases. Not only was the one ahead moving so damn slow but the one behind had moved, cutting off her retreat. She glanced to her left at the large portrait before deciding against taking that shortcut. It led far out of the way, down to the dungeons, and she didn’t think he knew about it. She could probably use it to avoid him in the future so long as he didn’t know it was there.

“Well I know it’s early but you could always come to our villa for Christmas, we are visiting relatives in Greece.”

“Why on Earth would I-“ She turned back around to look at him and nearly jumped out of her skin. Black was standing behind him, eyeing her nails critically and leaning against the balustrade. Hermione had no idea where she came from or when she got there. She caught her staring and smirked.

“Don’t tell me you two left the feast early for some kind of lover's tiff?” Cormac whirled around in surprise.
“I- uh no, Professor.” Dark eyes landed on him but only for a second before they once again settled on Hermione. There was something there, behind the dark orbs but she couldn’t figure out what it was. She had the strangest feeling Black wanted to say something but couldn’t. “Just had too much to eat on the train.” Cormac told her, thinking she was waiting for an excuse when the silence stretched too long.

“Mhm….and you Granger, what’s your excuse?”

Hermione stared at her. She felt the prickling in her mind again and slammed up her mental shields. Black narrowed her eyes and Hermione took a step back and gasp.

She had thought….but she hadn’t really believed….

“You-“

“Yes, yes. I’m the bad Black, I break all the rules. I was just messing with you.”

Cormac glanced back and forth between them, completely lost, as most where when the two witches weren’t verbally sparing with each other. Hermione and Bellatrix were never civil around the other, with the exception of classes, where the dark witch either picked on the girl mercilessly or ignored her completely. That was normal. Watching them stare while they tried to figure each other out was not. He was a little afraid of what was going to happen. He did not want to be in the middle of a Black and Granger fight on the first day back, he was likely to get horrible detentions, probably lasting a month.

The steps in front of them snapped back with an audible scrape. Bellatrix pointed toward Cormac, “Off with you. I need a moment with Granger.”

He hesitated, she actually bared her teeth at him and he scampered off up the steps toward the dormitory, toward what was going to be her safe haven.

“What is it you need professor?” A dark eyebrow raised in amusement at her irritated tone. Honestly though, how could she not be irritated when someone tries to invade the privacy of her mind.

Hermione waited through the silence, unwilling to tell the witch to just come out with it and get herself into trouble. Bellatrix sighed. “I’m giving you a private,” she stressed the word, “assignment. Your always asking for extra work and I have…..come across something that made me curious.” If it made Bellatrix Black curious it instantly peeked her own. It didn’t sound like something the dark witch knew too much about. “I want you to research magical bonds. But you need to be careful, the type of bonds I want you to look into are ancient and taboo for pureblood families. I would hate to give you detention for fighting with Slytherins because you couldn’t keep your work private.”
The stairs moved again but Hermione didn’t notice. “Is it illegal?”

Black shook her head, loose dark curls flying softly around her face. “No. Just rare, it's frowned upon in pureblood households. At least...those not branded blood traitors.” Hermione glared, even though she knew what the witch meant she didn’t like all the slurs.

“Where do I even start?”

Bellatrix moved toward her, pulled a slip of paper bearing her chaotic scrawl and passed it to her. “In the restricted section I would imagine.” She smirked again, her dark eyes staring down at the girl. They were so close Hermione could smell her perfume, a mix of sandalwood and something sharper, almost wild, that she couldn’t place.

“Wh-when is it due?” Hermione frowned, pulled her eyes away and to the paper in her hand. She hated stuttering, she hated the out of control way Bellatrix sometimes made her feel when they were alone, she was sure the older witch had no idea what she did to her but she didn’t think it was fair that she seemed so unaffected by Hermione’s feelings. Still, she imagined the alternative would have been worse. Bellatrix could figure out Hermione had a huge crush on her and really make her life hell.

“You’ll know when it’s done.” Bellatrix told her cryptically, a frown replacing her smirk when Hermione glanced up at her in surprise. “You have until the end of next year to complete it, technically…..but I would much prefer you finish it sooner.”

Hermione frowned in confusion, “what kind of assignment is this?”

“A difficult one. If you finish it I’ll write you a letter of recommendation to whatever office you want in the ministry. I know that’s your goal.”

Her mouth fell open, her eyes widened in shock. That...was a generous offer. One that might solve a bit of her problem if she could pull it off right. No one else had the pull in the ministry the Black’s did. If she could secure an internship….if she had Bellatrix backing her they would know something was amiss if she didn’t show up. Someone would come looking for her. It could be her ticket away from Peter if he really succeeded in keeping her away from the magical world after graduation.

I'll do it, but you have to stay out of my head. I don’t know what you were doing back there....”

Black laughed, it sounded a little fake though. “I was just trying to spy on you and little Cormac. I have become enthralled with muggle soaps and I thought I might get to see one unfold right before my very eyes.”

Coffee colored eyes narrowed at her false act of innocence. Somehow she found she didn't believe the witch at all. “And before, in the Great Hall, what was that?”

Bellatrix stopped laughing. She looked a little alarmed and genuinely confused. “I did nothing in
the Great Hall. Certainly nothing of your conversations then interested me enough to pry.” The
question had seemed to unsettle the dark woman, just as the answer had Hermione. They both
stared at each other as if they could pull the truth out by will alone. Hermione was the first to give
in.

“Maybe I'm just tired then.” She admitted softly.

“Off to bed then, you can’t be tired for the first day, I have a great deal planned for class this year
and I will not go easy on you just because I gave you extra work.” And just like that the cocky
Black she knew was back.

“Goodnight, Professor.” She watched the dark haired woman open up the secret passage she had
been eyeing earlier and disappear into the dark corridor behind it.

She clenched the paper tightly in her fist, access to the restricted section, on her first day! And a
promise of a possible internship with Black's recommendation. She never recommended anyone!
She felt a genuine smile break out on her face. Her year might not be too bad after all.

She turned back around and huffed, the blasted stair case had moved again.

~B~

Bellatrix walked in the dark without worry, it wasn’t the first time she had walked the path from
the dungeon to the stairs. She had used it a rather lot over the years to catch Hermione unaware and
deliver her a detention for whatever made up transgression she thought suitable at the time.
Actually she was probably the reason Hermione knew about the passage to begin with. Those last
few moving stairs only led up to the Gryffindor common room and not too many Gryffindors
would be trying to get to the living quarters in the dungeons.

She ran her hand along the stone wall and frowned. Hermione had mentioned something
happening between them in the Great Hall and she had felt something. She didn’t know what it was
but she hadn’t intentionally been trying to get into the girl’s mind, not like she had been on the
landing. It unsettled her greatly that she might have lost that little bit of control on herself without
even realizing it.

To make it worse she was playing with fire giving Hermione that assignment. She wasn’t sure
what she hoped to achieve. The girl was brilliant, there was not a doubt in her mind that she would
find something on the topic, but there was no way she could make a connection from Bella giving
her the task to them being bonded. Not even if she took a full two years to complete it.

It was just her way of getting back at Dumbledore for making her wait longer. And she didn’t feel
as if she were standing still, as if she was just waiting to tell her now. Now she was preparing
Hermione for the news. She hoped the girl would have a better understanding of it when she did
learn the truth. Maybe it would help her decide how to handle it.

~H~
Hermione was resting in bed with a book when the other girls filed in from supper. She had already hidden the slip of paper Black had given her and glamoured away all the evidence of her summer with her stepfather. Ginny smiled at her and rolled her eyes before moving to sit on the edge of her bed. “I should have known you would be in here reading.”

Hermione tilted the book back and glanced at the title. Honestly her mind had been too chaotic to really focus on the words but having a book in her hand had felt comforting.

“Mhm… I left my essay beside your bed for you to glance over, and I have a spare book about Sphynxes you might be able to get some extra stuff on so it doesn’t look like you copied.”

Ginny beamed. “You’re the best.”

Hermione chuckled, setting her book aside and gently shoving the red head off her bed. “Say that when your not copying my homework.”

“I do!” Ginny protested, snatching the book in question and heading to her own bed. She pulled the curtains away from the side their beds shared and stretched out sideways across her own with Hermione's parchment. The other girls were all climbing into their own beds on the opposite side of the room, they weren’t paying either of the girls any mind. Hermione wondered if it would be the best time to bring up Black’s special assignment. The dark witch had cautioned her to be careful but she couldn’t see the harm in asking Ginny. Her family wasn’t pureblood supremacists in any case.

“Hey Gin,” The girl glanced up curiously at the hesitant tone. “Do you know anything about magical bonds?”

Her silvery blue eyes crinkled in confusion. “Are you talking about unbreakable vows?”

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t think so. Black stopped me in the hall a while ago and gave me an assignment. On magical bonds. She gave me two years to complete it. She said it’s…. rare…. and not well thought of in wizarding families.”

She squirmed under Ginny’s gaze. “Black did? That’s strange…. she was talking to mother this summer about magical bindings……they were talking real hush, hush.” So that of course meant Ginny had eavesdropped. “It… was something about binding the magic of two people together. A pureblood and a lesser blood.” She ignored Hermione’s scoff, they both knew she wasn’t prejudiced in the least. “Mom was saying it was something that couldn’t be helped, it mostly affected the pureblood and they didn’t get a choice. It had something to do about keeping magic alive, I guess it happened to keep out inbreeding between the families. You can only have so many purely magical families you know, we are all related. Those pureblood idiots are ridiculous.”
“I guess that’s why she said it was so taboo. I can’t see purebloods happy about being bound to a muggle born.”

“No. That’s for sure. I don’t think I’d want to be bound to a pureblood myself actually. I’m not sure how the relationships worked out but the way they were talking about it they were mostly romantic. I think being bonded to someone took away the purebloods will to be with other people or something. Whatever it was it was supposed to be difficult for the pureblood and not just in society.”

Hermione chewed on her lip, Ginny had given her some things to think about but it didn’t all feel right. She wanted to know what bonded people together. It couldn’t just be their compatible magic. She and Ginny were able to do extraordinary cooperative spells but she doubted there was any chance she would be bonded to her. And then it was so rare she had never heard about it before. Was it like a form of dark magic, or was it so bad the purebloods had stricken it from history? In any case she hadn’t heard about it in their modern world so it might have even died out. She was left with more questions than answers and aside from the restricted section she really had no leads on where to start.

“Hermione…”She glanced up, surprised to find Ginny’s gaze resting intently on her. “Do-do you know why Bella gave you that particular assignment? She never wanted to give you extra work before.”

That was true. Hermione had asked and she had always refused, simply on the grounds that she didn’t want to. It wasn’t like she had needed extra credit, she had just wanted things to do during the breaks to keep her mind busy.
“…she just said she was interested in it. I suppose she couldn’t find too much on her own.”

Ginny kept staring at her. “I guess that would explain why she had asked Mom but ……do you think maybe she is bonded to someone?”

Hermione felt her heart dip suddenly and she sucked in a breath. “I-” She had to cough before she could continue. “I don’t know. She didn’t let on.”

“It could be you.” The words were so soft she nearly missed them. She laughed hollowly. “I seriously doubt that. She hates me remember.”

“Might be why, purebloods don’t have it easy in the bond thing remember?”

Hermione shook her head. There was no way she was bonded to Bellatrix Black. It just wasn’t probable. She didn’t even have a good grasp on what bonds even were but she seriously doubted someone like Professor Black would be interested in staying bonded to her. And if it was as ancient and taboo and Ginny claimed someone would have found a way to rid themselves of it. Black would probably stop at nothing to rid herself of a bond if it meant she was tied to Hermione.
“Your crazy, Gin.” She chuckled again before climbing under the soft warm blankets. “Don’t forget to put my parchment back, I better get some sleep. Black said she was going to be torture on us this year.” Or something of the like anyways.

Bonded to Bellatrix Black. Hermione thought to herself as she let her eyes drift shut. What a crazy notion.
She had dreams of wars fought with the heavy clang of metal on metal, of oppressing armor that obstructed her vision and stifled the air she breathed. She smelled horse sweat and blood in the air around her as she stood in a field staring out at lifeless bodies below her. Broken flags littered the ground, horses lie dead on their masters, spears protruding from most of their bodies.

Her vision moved down. To a shield laying beside her feet, silver around it with ornate golden crowns painted in the middle. Arrows were imbedded in it’s metal. Broken shafts protruding from the image of the three golden crowns.

Something buzzed beside her ear as she bent to pick it up. Someone was speaking to her but she couldn’t make out the words. She felt far from her body, her mind soaring out over the battlefield, wondering how many had been lost, on both sides, in a pointless and needless war.

Smoke billowed out across the horizon, dark and foreboding. Rain drizzled from the sky as if the very clouds were crying.

They had won, she was sure they had won. But she was neither happy nor satisfied.

This battle was over, another was on the horizon. Would her people never have respite?

“Hermione? Hey Hermione!?”

Violent shaking woke her from her disturbing dream. She had to blink several times and take a few quick deep breaths to fight away the smell of smoke and battle. She could swear she tasted lingering blood in her mouth but Ginny shook her again and she was forced to push the girl away, her dream quickly fading from her memory.

“What?” She muttered darkly, wanting nothing more than to climb back under the sheets and pretend she had never woken.

“It’s time for breakfast!” Ginny pulled the blankets from her and tugged on her arm. “Come on. Really what’s up with you, I expect this from Ron but you’re always up at the crack of dawn.”

Hermione groaned and climbed out of her bed. “Can’t I skip breakfast?” She didn’t feel that hungry.

Ginny’s grey eyes glared at her, hands went to her hip as she stared at the disheveled girl. “You practically skipped supper last night, you can’t skip breakfast too.” Hermione wondered if she would be hexed if she said Ginny looked and sounded like her mother right then. She decided it was best not to risk it and climbed out of bed to get dressed. She was a little chagrinned to see she was the last up. The other girls had already cleared out.

“Alright Gin, just give me a moment and I’ll be ready to go.” She took a moment to glance out the small window and out at the gloomy weather outside. It was a rather sad way to start their first day...
of classes. Especially since their first class was outside with Hagrid and they were likely to get a bit wet….

Oh they did get wet.

But not from the rain. Hagrid had them wading around at the edges of the Black lake. It was chilling and uncomfortable work. And to top it all off he gave them a full thirteen inches to write about the ecosystem of the lake and where the squid fit in.

And he wasn’t the only one. Bellatrix hadn’t been kidding or exaggerating when she said she had a lot planned for the school year. It seemed every other professor had the same idea. Sprout gave them chapters to read in three days, Flitwick had them all practicing a very complex charm and professor McGonagall gave them an essay longer than Hagrid’s. Hermione could hear her classmates groaning about the workload they had been given on the first day, and while she liked a challenge even she thought it was a lot. Unlike the others she was heading to the library during dinner to get a head start.

Ginny had not been pleased about her decision to skip, she had placed her hands on her hips again and positively demanded Hermione eat. Aside from dragging her bodily to the Great Hall though there was nothing she could do when Hermione refused.

She had eaten lunch with the others but all everyone wanted to talk about was the work load and how summer was, which reminded her of Peter and her uncertain future, which in turn only put her off eating. Still Ginny had made her promise to attend all meals the following day so she knew the ginger was going to be watching her like a hawk. Ginny was too observant for her own good, and entirely too mothering for Hermione’s.

She pushed through the large familiar doors, not sure if her presence really surprised Madame Pince or not. The woman gave her a quick nod from over her desk and went back to her books. It seemed she hadn’t been the only one skipping dinner. Come to think of it the librarian was always around whenever Hermione came to the library and she couldn’t remember ever seeing her eating with the rest of the staff, except maybe on the first and last days of term. She wondered why but she definitely wasn’t brave enough to ask. They may have both been kindred spirits when it came to books but she always made Hermione feel like she was invading her sacred space. Hermione couldn’t help her space was the school library. Although she did spend a lot of time there, probably more than any other regulars combined.

She sighed and pulled the slip of paper from her robes. She was going to have to disturb the woman if she wanted to get into the restricted section, better sooner than later when everyone else started irritating her.

“Madame Pince?” Sharp eyes bore into her but the woman didn’t say anything so she handed the roughly written scrap of paper over. The woman’s face morphed into a scowl and she scoffed.
“Black’s handwriting is atrocious, I can’t even read what it says.” She cut the girl off when she made to explain. “If you’re giving it to me I know you want the restricted section. Blasted if I know why you want to be in there on the first day of term, really Hermione.” She was rather surprised the witch knew her name.

“Um….she gave me an extra assignment and I just wanted to get a head start. We have a lot of work to do already I don’t want to fall behind.” She quickly shut up when she realized she was rambling.

“Yes well….” She reached under the desk and came back with a small keyring. She handed Hermione one with a pointed look. “Don’t lose it. I won’t be giving you another. And be careful what you open, you know how dangerous some of those books can be.” She gave her a pointed look, as if Hermione needed to be reminded of her near disaster so many years ago. That memory was never going to fade. “Stay away from the section on fiendfire.” She only relinquished the key when Hermione nodded her understanding. “If you need me I’ll be in my office.” She picked up the book she had been reading and retreated without another glance at her. Hermione mused that it was probably the most the two of them had conversed in the six years she had attended Hogwarts.

She held the key tightly in her palm and headed toward the gate. It was imposing. Not so much the large bars that kept people out but the darkness that seemed to reach out from behind them. She had always got the impression the area was locked up to keep things in rather than to really keep students out.

Whatever the reason most students didn’t really like coming there, never mind that it was nearly impossible to get permission in the first place. Most teachers didn’t trust their students with the kind of knowledge those books held. And Pince was right, some of the books could cause problems if they were opened at all. She’d nearly drowned once by accidentally opening one that created a bubble of water around her face. No idea how that could have even been useful but she had been too panicked to think of closing the book. Black had saved her that day, and she had gotten so much detention it wasn’t even funny. She was extra careful about what books she opened in the restricted section now.

She conjured a small flame in her palm and pulled the jar she brought out of her robes. She tilted the flame inside the jar and closed the lid. There were small holes so the flame could get oxygen but the lid ensured she wouldn’t start a fire if she had an accident. Harry had burned a few books when he’d snuck into the restricted section his first year, she was not going to make that mistake, who knew what knowledge had been lost because of his carelessness.

“Hey, neat trick.”

She screamed and jumped back away from the voice next to her ear. “Cormac!” He had been far too quiet coming up to her.

The blonde boy grinned charmingly at her. “Hey, I couldn’t find you at supper. I heard the sixth years got bombarded with work. I figured you would be here.” He knew her so well…
She glared at him. “I’m trying to get a head start on some things. I don’t need distractions.” She tried to ignore him as she unlocked the gate but it was hard when he followed her inside. “McLaggen there is a reason this section is restricted.” She told him snappily, placing the jar with the flame on a nearby table. She hoped he might take the hint and just bugger off.

“Yeah, it sure is creepy.” That was not what she meant. “How in Merlin’s name did you get the key on the first day though? You’re something else that’s for sure.”

She gritted her teeth and moved away from him toward a shelf. “Black gave me permission.” She didn’t elaborate. He came from a wizarding house but she wasn’t sure where it stood on blood status. She was sure he wouldn’t have been any help to her though. She had heard stories about his uncle and father. They were deep in the ministry and they seemed to crave power if a few rumors she had overheard in the leaky cauldron were to be believed. People like that agreed with whoever paid them, in the case of the ministry it was mostly people like the Malfoys. People with old money and deep prejudices.

She had no idea what McLaggen wanted with her but a relationship between them would never work out. He wasn’t likely to be anything more than a wealthy wizard’s yes man and she had no interest in someone like that.

“That’s surprising isn’t it? I thought you two couldn’t get along for anything. Is that what she had to talk to you about last night?”

“Look-“ She turned around and gave him her best glare. “I don’t know why you came looking for me but I really have to get to work. I didn’t skip supper to waste my time with idle chatter here.”

He grinned and moved closer crowding her against the shelves behind. She stepped back a bit until her back came in contact with the shelf she had been trying to peruse.

“What-“

“You’re right. We shouldn’t waste time, who knows when we will get to be so alone again..”

Her heart sped up, that had not been what she was aiming at. She held up a hand to stop his approach and cursed at herself. Was she a witch or not? If she threatened to jinx the life out of him maybe he would finally get a clue.

She fumbled in panic for her wand to do just that but she had underestimated how close he was. She froze when he placed his hands on the shelf on either side of her head. He was far too close, she could smell his musky cologne. An expensive one she recognized from a store in Diagon Alley, it was too strong and had a faint odor of old broom.

“I really missed seeing you over the summer. I asked you out a lot last year but you kept saying
you were too busy catching up on classes you missed the year before. Well you’re all caught up now right?”

She got her hands between them and pushed on his chest. He was too tall and didn’t want to move.
“Look I told you last year I’m not interested.” She had tried to let him down gently. Had tried not to say it quite so bluntly but he just wasn’t getting it. “I don’t even see you as a friend.”

“You just got to give me a chance.” He chuckled, he didn’t move. If anything he leaned in closer. His spearmint toothpaste made her a little nauseous and she turned her head to avoid his lips. They left a wet trail down her cheek and she renewed her efforts to shove him off, despite the weak clammy feeling spreading through her body.

“That’s enough.” Black’s voice cut through the darkness. Cormac sprung away from Hermione with a yelp, she was pretty sure Black had cast a stinging jinx at him. He stood shifting from foot to foot rubbing the backs of his hands over his robes as if to get a feeling to disappear.

Hermione leaned back against the stacks and crossed her arms around her middle as she tried to catch her breath. She felt a little unsteady. She should have been able to send Cormac sailing but her strength failed her when she couldn’t get to her wand. She had panicked and been caught far too easily. Sure it was a harmless flirt wanting to date her now but one day it would be her stepfather holding her captive. She had to be quicker, less prone to panicking when she lost control of the situation.

She heard Cormac stuttering out excuses when the ringing in her ears finally dissipated. She forced herself to listen, because it sounded like he was telling Black they were looking for somewhere they could be alone and that was not what had happened at all. She started to protest but she had already been silent too long. Black’s obsidian eyes were focused on her and the dark witch looked positively ferocious.

“I gave you that pass for your assignment. Not to neck with your boyfriend.” She gritted out through dark red lips.

“That’s not- He’s not my boyfriend.” Hermione protested weakly.

It only seemed to anger the professor more. “Twenty points from Gryffindor and you both have detention with me. Separately.” She growled. “Get out of here McLaggen and don’t let me catch you back in here again.” The coward practically ran, he didn’t even offer an apology for getting her detention, not that she really expected one. She supposed she should just be thankful Black came around when she did. Not that she thought Cormac would have done anything aside from stealing a kiss but it was still something she didn’t want to endure.

“I expected better.” The dark woman still looked positively furious. She looked ready to curse something, it was a little frightening and Hermione wondered if she hadn’t just jumped out of the frying pan into a fire. She didn’t really understand why the woman was so angry, it couldn’t have been the first time she had caught students making out. Even if that wasn’t what had been
Black started pacing, the agitation flowing from her almost palpable.

“I-“ Dark eyes glanced up at her sharply, effectively cutting off whatever she had to say.

“I give you an assignment…something important. I give you access to the restricted section. Something I would not give to anyone else. And on the first day…..the first day! I find you necking like a…..like a teenager behind the stacks.” She scowled furiously and ran a hand through her wild hair. “That’s unacceptable.”

“I came to study. He followed me in here and I was not interested in any kind of necking.” She matched Black’s glare with her own. “And we weren’t….making out or anything.”

“It sure looked like it from where I was standing.”

Hermione turned her head away. “I can’t help what it looked like, it wasn’t like that. I don’t like him like that….or at all really.” She crossed her arms tighter over her chest and ignored the scoff she heard.

“So you just go around being intimate with anyone?” She jerked her gaze up, angry at the insinuation and flabbergasted at the livid tone.

“No I don’t. We were not being….intimate. And even if we were it wouldn’t be any of your business.” It was the wrong thing to say, when was she going to learn to keep her damn mouth shut around Black. The woman seemed to live for confrontations with her.

Bellatrix took an imposing step toward her, hands outstretched like she had planned to grasp her, perhaps shake her, but at the last moment she froze. Her eyes widened and she turned away. “Keep your dalliances private. But do not, do not, take advantage of the privileges I gave you or I will take them away.” Hermione could see her fists clench in anger and she swallowed thickly. “Understand?”

“Yes.” She didn’t trust herself to say anything else. It hurt that Black didn’t believe her. For whatever reason she wanted to believe the worst about Hermione, she didn’t appreciate being thought of as some kind of loose hormonal teenager.

“Detention will be the least of your troubles if I catch him in here with you again, Granger.” With those parting words she strode away. Leaving an angry and embarrassed Hermione behind.

~B~
Bellatrix barely managed to make it back to her rooms before she lost control of her anger and threw an outright temper tantrum. She broke her table, flung her wand around and her magic tore scars into the walls, ripped her curtains to shreds and blew up any book she laid her eyes on.

When she was done she was breathing heavy and still so damn angry. She wasn’t even sure what she was so angry about. Sure she felt like Hermione had broken her trust but she was a teenager. She was barely seventeen years old and they were notorious for believing their love was the most important thing in the world, that it was worth any risk. She had often caught students making out in random locations throughout the castle. They were not even the first couple she had caught in the forbidden section.

Normally she found it amusing to interrupt. She loved seeing the terror and embarrassment cross their faces at being caught before she slapped them with weeks worth of detentions. It had not been as fun when it was Granger she caught locked in an embrace. She had nearly attacked the boy. Had sent stinging hexes at his hands, a light punishment considering what she had wanted to do.

Which was curse the brat to next week.

Was it the bond? Was it something else? She didn’t have the answer.

She growled and spun around in her kitchen, she tried to focus on her breathing like Andy taught her and planted her palms on the counter. She could hear breaking glass as objects exploded and cursed herself. Black’s were not supposed to lose control like this. She never lost control of her magic before, not since she was a very small child. It had to be Hermione. It had to be their bond. It had to be the instability she read about in the Black journals.

She sucked in deep breaths and tried to count. She could hear whispering in her ears, a signal that she had let things get out of hand, something that hadn’t happened since the year Hermione had disappeared on her. When she heard the whispering she knew something had to be done. She couldn’t be around the students, her magic was too strong and her hold on her temper was entirely too fragile. She had dueled Dumbledore the last time the whispering was so bad.

Normally they were faint and she could ignore them. They had been with her since the bond, seven years was a long time to be plagued with something gnawing at her sanity. They had only ever been this bad the once before.

Dark whispers, tempting her to unleash her power, to stop holding back and let everyone see how strong she was. To let everyone see that she was powerful enough to have Hermione. The girl was hers. Hers!

All she could see was his hands by her face, his head tilted toward her while she gave him her neck.

The counters cracked under her palms and she tried her breathing again.

It wasn’t right. Just because their magic bonded them together did not mean Granger’s life
belonged to her. She was her own woman and she could make her own choices. Bellatrix had decided that. Whatever Hermione chose that was going to be that. She had decided.

The voices laughed at her.

She closed her eyes, focused on what she could feel rather than hear. It didn’t help. She could practically feel the dark whispers, like bits of smoke clinging to her, encircling her like dark magic, enticing and powerful. Promising her so much….. She shook her head sharply.

Blasted Andy! She couldn’t have given Bella some kind of exercise that would work for this! Of course if she really expected her sister to help she would have to tell her the truth. It was bad enough Dumbledore and Pomfrey knew. Dumbledore she had told herself but Pomfrey had been a necessity, the older witch wouldn’t supply the calming drought she had needed two years ago without knowing why.

Narcissa knew, a moment of weakness she had regretted ever since. Her younger sister let her prejudices get in the way and their relationship had been strained ever since so she knew she couldn’t expect help from her.

She could go to Pomfrey though. Ask for the drought…..maybe a stronger dose. But she was sure the blasted woman would ask what triggered it. Hermione being absent was one thing, telling Pomfrey she had caught the girl with her boy toy and gotten jealous was another. Jealous.

The voices echoed the word. They rarely spoke together. They spoke to each other, they spoke to her, little hints about how she could become a truly powerful witch if only she would hex this person, or that. But they rarely ever agreed on anything. They seemed to be agreeing she was jealous though. Jealous of the boy.

Her eyes flew open, traces of dark smoke filled her vision before it dissipated. Anger and turmoil replaced by shock and disbelief.

She pushed off the broken counter, she would fix everything later she needed to get away from the castle. Get ahold of herself somewhere safe where she could figure out what the hell was going on in her mind.
She moved around the destroyed living area and headed for her closet, she was grateful she hadn’t taken her anger out on her bedroom.

Muggle clothes were what she needed. A pair of tight fitting skinny jeans and a white shirt with her favorite leather jacket were what she chose, all gifts from Lily for her birthday the year before. She made sure her wand was tucked into the special zip pocket and took off for Hogsmeade.
The small sleepy town of Cokeworth never knew it was visited by the magical world, and that was how they preferred it. If its mundane residents knew anything out of the ordinary was going on they would have written a very strongly worded letter to Mr. Evan's expressing their discontent. Not that he would have cared mind you, but it was the principal of the matter. As it was they knew nothing, blissful in the ignorance that he had any knowledge of anything abnormal they considered Mr. Evans to be of the best sort with wonderfully beautiful children and grandchildren.

Billy Evans was sad to say once upon a time he too had been like the other sticks in the mud. It had taken him quite some time to get used to having a witch in the family, and even more when the magical world started to affect more than just the school year for his daughter. She'd married a wizard, had a son who was also a wizard, and another little boy now who was already practically sneezing magic at two months old. Holidays and Birthdays were full of magical toys and magical people and had it not been for his beautiful wife he might have stopped going. She reminded him, well no she 'strongly' told him, they were just as good as magical people, and to get his head out of his bum because their grandbabies deserved to know where they came from.

They were such good grandbabies too, he smiled at the memory. His greatest fear was that Harry would prefer the magical world to his own and the boy wouldn't like the toys he got him or made for him. He should have known better, Mari raised her girls' right, both of them, so of course his grandsons were raised right. Harry loved his toys just as much as the magical, more even sometimes and he even shared the magical ones with Dudley, much to his mother's amusement and his father's horror. Billy even got to craft Harry a broom stick which Lily had taken to have magically enchanted, he had only been four at the time but Harry had absolutely loved it, Dudley as well but it was just as well the little chubby kid was too scared to fly it, he had no magic and Billy wasn't sure just how that worked.

It was memories like that which had him sitting out on his front porch in his rocker, intensely aware of his wife's own empty one creaking with the breeze. If he closed his eyes it almost felt like she was there with him knitting one of her doylies. Tears misted his eyes a bit, there would never be enough time passed for him not to miss her. He'd give his girls a call at a more decent hour, hearing about his grandkids always brought him out of his depression, and then he could go talk to his wife in the rose garden where he felt she was always listening.

He heard a faint 'pop' from that very garden and stopped his rocking. Perhaps he wasn't the only one missing his Marigold tonight. He got to his feet unsteadily and reached for the cane he'd made, the pattern had roses he'd engraved on it one night in front of the fire and it had always been her favorite. Since she passed he'd needed it to walk with in cold nights. He stuck to the stone pathway idly noting he needed to add lights, despite the bright moon illuminating the light grey stones it was hard to see the uneven bits.

He was shocked to see none other than Bellatrix Black standing in his rose garden, her tense figure illuminated in the moonlight making her seem almost ethereal. He remembered she and Mari were close during her last few years but he never expected to see her standing there after her passing. Mari used to sit and talk with the dark woman for hours under that very arch on a bench he had carved out of a large piece of drift wood for their anniversary.
Bellatrix was running her hand over it now and even as far away as he was he could see a light spray of tears glistening on her cheeks in the pale light. Yes. He wasn't the only one missing his love tonight. He moved into the garden where she could see him. She didn't move away as he sat down and leaned his cane up against the bench. "Sorry for intruding." He smiled ignoring her apology and patted the seat beside himself with an old wrinkled hand. His wedding band caught the light and she sniffled but sat down next to him.

"Ms. Black." He said as greeting looking away from her and out toward the pride and joy that was his garden. "Mari said if I ever felt like I couldn't catch my breath I could come here and talk to her. I know she's gone but I didn't know what else to do." It was difficult for the raven to admit it but he didn't mock her or scold her for showing up unannounced as her own father would have before his death.

"Hasn't changed," he said pleasantly. "I like to think she's here in this place and I know she isn't gone. She goes with me wherever I go," he touched his hand to his chest over his heart and rubbed a slow circle before letting it fall. "I imagine she goes with you too Ms. Black. She thought a lot about you." Bella hung her head letting her hair cascade down to hide her face as she silently wept. Her emotions overwhelming. He patted her hand with his tanned one and stood up. "I'll be in my shed dear, come find me if you need me. I imagine you want to have a word with the missus. I'll leave you to your privacy."

She hear the shed door close softly but didn’t bother moving. She felt at peace where she was. She had spent so many nights sitting with Mari after one of Lily’s parties. They talked about anything and everything. Except for Bellatrix bonding to Hermione. It was the one thing she had never been able to tell the old woman. How could she? She had been so sure she was just going to ignore it. Now sitting in the garden with the woman’s ghost all around her she didn’t know what to say. She had never been good at talking about her problems, not the serious ones. Despite Andromeda's suggestions she had never gone to a counselor about their father, hell she never even talked to her sisters about his abuse and they had witnessed some of it. She felt weak. Weak for needing someone to talk to. But she also felt weak for not doing it sooner, when the woman was alive. Would it have really been so hard to have someone share the worry. To have someone to rant to or to sing her bond's praises. Someone on the outside who could offer advice.

She shook her head. Mari was gone but her husband was right. There was no ghost of the woman haunting the road garden he had so meticulously built for her. But she was all around them. Bella could feel her. Feel the comfort she had always given. It was in the roses, in their gentle yet sharp beauty and the soft fragrance they left behind. Mari always smelled of roses. And she had always been so nice, so gently. Threaten one of her children or grandchildren though and you got the thorns. It was one of the reasons Bella had taken to her, even though she had been a muggle.

No one else had ever gotten Bella out of her shell the way Mari had. Not even Lily and Molly, whom she considered two of her closest friends.
The old woman had walked up to her at a party and demanded to know what her problem was. Bellatrix had gotten over her prejudices against muggleborns but an actual muggle talking to her that way…..she would have cursed her once upon a time. She was glad she hadn’t, the woman gave her the closest thing to motherly affection she had ever had.

“I miss you.” The breeze carried her grief stricken words before swooping back at her and tugging at the wild strands of her hair. “I’m so lost Mari I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how I feel. Two more years of this limbo. Of not knowing if I’m going to get a reprieve or if a life of craziness and hell is all I have to look forward to.” She sighed harshly.

“I need some help, old woman.” A part of her expected an answer. Mari had always been very forthright. But of course there wasn’t one. The dead don’t speak to the living. Not in the muggle world anyways.

~H~

Hermione closed the journal she was reading and rubbed at her eyes. She couldn’t concentrate. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Black. She had looked so angry. Hermione couldn’t believe the woman honestly thought she had come with McLaggen to fool around. They were in the same house, if she wanted to do that she could have done it from the safety of a Gryffindor couch where teachers wouldn’t normally interrupt. And she damn sure wouldn’t have skipped lunch to do it. Black had obviously lost her mind. Or at least all sense of rationality.

She rested her head on the book, feeling a headache pounding away at her temples.

She had detention. On the first sodding day. And she had been doing so good. She was going to kill McLaggen. Honestly she thought the world might be out to get her when it came to him. She had confounded him one blasted time so Ron could be keeper. Just once! And ever since it seemed like the world was out to get her, like she had to make up for cheating the boy out of one thing his arrogant ass wanted.

Two things she supposed. No matter how much he tried she was never going to want a relationship with him. There was nothing he could say or do. The only person she had ever been attracted to was Black. And that was about as possible as her marrying Ron.

She turned her head to the side and fiddled with the spine of another journal, she knew she should lift her head and get back to her research. She just couldn’t find the drive.

Ginny had said Bellatrix had gotten interested with bonds over break but she wondered where the woman first heard about them if they were so rare and do deeply hidden. Was Ginny right? Was Black maybe bonded to someone. She had heard the woman had been blood prejudiced once upon a time but she had never seen any evidence of it. Still she came from a pureblood household so being bonded to a lesser blood would not have been easy for her.
Maybe Black was bonded to someone and was looking for a way to undo it. Maybe she couldn’t
find anything, maybe she was too busy to really look and thought Hermione would be able to do it
for her.

Whatever her reasons it didn’t really matter. Hermione was going to do her best to find everything
she could on the subject. And she was going to downright ignore the jealousy she felt when she
thought about Black being bonded to someone else.
About as likely as marry Ron. She reminded herself.

~B~

Billy didn’t know how long he was inside working on the rocker he’d built for Lily’s new boy, he
knew it had been a while and he hadn’t heard anything from his spontaneous guest. He thought she
could have gone home, he supposed he could have missed the pop she would make when leaving.
Somehow he didn’t think so, something, or someone, was telling his heart she was still out there
and he wanted to be here if she wanted to talk to the living. He would stay there and wait all night
if that’s what it took no matter how tired his old body was. He sanded a little more then took his
whittling knife and whittled off a pattern on the headrest. More roses, Lily would appreciate the bit
of her momma in it.

He heard his shed door creak open, he’d been meaning to fix that. He didn’t smile but he did look
up, the arresting woman looked a bit edgy. "Did it help?"

She shook her head. "As much as I expected it to." He nodded. The dead didn’t really give direct
answers so the living weren’t as attuned to hearing them.

"Come here, this always helped me to settle my mind. Give my hands something to do and my
mind something to concentrate on, helps me pick one problem at a time to focus on." He laughed,
"Never worked for my brood, they couldn’t be still long enough to learn, but you look like you got
some patience in you." Bella moved forward curiously. Billy handed her a rough square piece of
wood, it was deceptively small, a little larger than her forearm, but it was heavy. He showed her
how to place it on the table where she could work on it and handed her a wood knife. "Wherever
you feel the wood telling you, that’s where you cut. The wood will take care of the shape if you
just listen, that’s how you make wood art. You got to listen to the wood." He went to sanding his
rocking chair.

Bella looked dumbfounded at the knife in her hand. "I could just use magic...." She trailed off at
Billy’s good natured laughter. He didn’t look back at her just continued to sand.

"You could at that. That’s what little Lily did." The sound of his sand paper smoothing the rough
edges of his rocker was strangely soothing, the voices in her head seemed to quiet. "But there’s
something about doing this kind of work with your hands and some primitive tools." He inhaled
deeply. "With magic there was no smells, no small cuts or wood shavings littering the floor. It was
too clean. That’s not the point of woodwork."
Bella inhaled the scents as he meant her to. It did smell clean and fresh, a little woodsy. She expected it was all the different types of woods he had stacked about. But it was a good smell, a calming smell, she could appreciate it. She seemed to think it over staring curiously at the block of wood he'd given her. It was heavy but soft, she felt like it was almost pleading for her to take a stab at it and see if she could make something beautiful out of its dull features. She put the knife to it and slit off a sliver. It felt relaxing, it felt right, and the voices in her head were completely gone as she focused only on what the wood was telling her.

Billy smiled as he continued his sanding, his kids may not have been interesting but as he covertly watched the dark beauty get so absorbed in her work he had a wonderful feeling his talents and passion might be passed down after all.

~H~

She spent the night sitting at a table in the dark. She had realized it was past curfew some time around midnight but didn’t really want to risk heading back to her dorm. She didn’t want any more detention on top of the work she already had. She spent most of the night searching for information on bonds, of which she found very little. She managed to finish both her potions essay and her transfiguration when she had grown tired of searching the dark tombs.

Somewhere around three she had rested her head on the desk, tried to rub away the headache she could still feel pounding at her temples and promptly fell asleep. Something she vowed never to do again as the rest of her night was filled with more dreams of sword fighting and all out war and ended with her being ran through with a rather shinny sword.

Peeves woke her up in time for breakfast. He had stumbled upon her in the early morning he claimed and opted to “guard” her as she slept. She loved the ghost terribly. If she had been anyone else she knew he likely would have gone straight for a teacher, or he would have caused enough chaos to bring Filch around.

She would never regret lying to the Bloody Baron about where Peeves had been her second year. Whatever he had done had pissed the other ghost off royally and she had known just where Peeves was hiding. Her split second decision to save his ass had made her a lifelong friend….perhaps even afterlife.

In any case if it hadn’t been for him she would have had Ginny to contend with, the girl was already put out that Hermione hadn’t returned to the dorm that night. She would not have been happy had Hermione broke her promise on top of it. She walked the path back to the Great Hall sleepily. A quick clean spell had seen that she looked and smelled presentable, at least she didn’t look like she had spent the night awake in the library.

Ginny had still fussed. She insisted Hermione pile her plate high with food even though Hermione tried to tell her she wasn’t all that hungry. Under Ginny’s watchful eye she managed to eat half of what she had been given before she swore she couldn’t handle anymore. They were both finished eating by the time any of the boys showed up.
“Post come yet?” Ron mumbled, pretending to gag when Harry bent down and kissed Ginny’s cheek.

“No. Are you actually expecting something?” Ginny asked her brother, her hands going out to Harry’s hair in a vain attempt at taming it.

“I am.” Neville told them sheepishly. “I forgot to pack my pajamas.” They chuckled good-naturedly.

“Hermione what time did you get in last night, Harry and I waited forever for you?”

She glanced at Ron and grimaced. Was it really too much to ask he not talk with his mouth full?

“I didn’t. I fell asleep in the library. Peeves woke me up for breakfast just before Ginny came looking.”

Harry grunted. “I have no idea how you got that poltergeist to like you.”

“Right he never plays pranks on you. And he even makes sure you never get caught breaking rules if he is around.” Neville complained.

“Did you hear what he did to Padma’s hair. He had a knight lob her ponytail off when she walked by.” Ron chuckled. “She was so mad about her hair, I think she needs to sort out her priorities a bit. It could have been her head. She could be the envy of Nearly Headless Nick and the new member of the headless ghost club….thingy.” Harry and Neville silently agreed.

“I was only kind to him.” She told them pointedly.

Harry sniggered. “Cuz that’s so easy right?”

She had to admit the ghost did like causing trouble. He was usually good about it but sometimes he would go overboard. It wasn’t like they could really do anything to him though he was already dead. Teachers would sic the Bloody Baron on him if he got out of hand but that was rare and Peeves did a good job avoiding him on a regular basis.

“As fun as it is to watch you guys chew and talk at the same time Hermione and I have to get to class.” She gave Ginny a funny look, classes didn’t start for another half an hour, Ginny groaned and pulled her to her feet. “Come on. They gave us so much homework we need to start now.” The boys all out laughed when Hermione told her she was halfway done with most of it already.

They headed out toward Hagrid’s hut. Another outdoor class in dreary weather with the Slytherins……it wasn’t ideal but it gave Ginny the time she wanted to talk to Hermione without prying ears.
“Is something wrong?”

Hermione, who had been looking out over the castle grounds blissfully unaware of Ginny’s burning curiosity, sighed. “No Gin. Everything is fine.”

“Really?” She had to stop walking when the redhead reached out and pulled her to a stop. “Because we haven’t even been back two full days yet and you already skipped meals and spent the night in the library. That doesn’t usually happen till middle of term.”

Ginny was right. She usually enjoyed the freedom Hogwarts offered the first few months back. And she didn’t generally start stressing about studying until the middle of the year after Christmas break.

“I-“ She paused. Wondering if it would be so bad to confide in Ginny. To have a friend who knew what was going on, perhaps someone willing to help if the worst came about….she shook the thoughts off. Grown wizards with power wouldn’t go against the muggle government for a muggle child, she couldn’t ask her friend to possibly get herself jailed to help her. And she couldn’t put that kind of emotional stress on her either. Ginny’s life shouldn’t be about her problems.

“Me and Black got into it last night. She gave me detention.”

“Already? What on Earth for you were in the library for crying out loud.” Ginny shook her head in disbelief and let Hermione go. They both continued down the overgrown steps to Hagrid’s hut.

“Mclaggen followed me. He made a pass and that’s when Black showed up. She was angry I had abused her trust for a romantic tryst.” She practically growled the last bit out.

“He’s becoming a bit of a nuisance. I can’t believe she gave you detention. Didn’t you tell her you and him were-“

“I couldn’t hardly get a word in she was so mad. And she didn’t believe what I did have to say.” She didn’t like the cunning look Ginny was throwing her way.

“Are you really sure you and Black aren’t bonded?” Hermione shook her head. Honestly she didn’t think she wanted to be bonded to the woman. As much as she didn’t like the idea of it being someone else she didn’t like the idea of having herself forced on the woman either.

“I don’t think so. She treats me like she always had. Sometimes she seems to enjoy our debates and other times she is just nitpicking at me until she can give me a detention.” Ginny reached out and steadied her when she nearly slipped on a wet stone. They were nearly to Hagrid’s now and they both knew they would have to stop talking about bonds. Ginny was a gossip but she knew when to be quiet about something. Hagrid on the other hand had no filter. Half the time he didn’t even realize he had said something he shouldn’t have.
“I don’t know…..I…. well….she is always looking at you. And she always does your detentions herself. Most of the time she pawns detentions off on Hagrid or Filch even. But she hasn’t ever done that to you.” Ginny reach out and grasped her shoulder as they stopped a little ways away from his little shack. “And we weren’t kidding about that year you disappeared on everyone. She was hell to deal with. Short tempered and if anyone said your name loud enough for her to hear they got detention with Filch in the dungeon cleaning the old chains. Ron said he threatened to string him up so often he was about ready to do it himself.”

Hermione shook her head and pulled her cloak over her hair. “She probably just wanted to know why I got out of school that year. You know better than anyone she doesn’t like secrets or mysteries.” Ginny had told her about the time she had helped Harry get his godmother a secret birthday present…..needless to say the dark witch spoiled it because of her impatience and hatred of surprises.

“You’re awfully determined for it not to be true.” The redhead said quietly.

“Because it isn’t. Gin I have had a crush on the woman since first year I watch her all the time without meaning to I think if something was trying us together I would have seen it. And honestly I bet Black would have already found a way to get rid of it.” She breathed a sigh of relief when her friend seemed to concede her point.

“Yeah…..maybe. I just have this feeling when I see you two together….but your right.”

Hermione snorted. “All we ever do together is argue. I swear sometimes I think she might just hex me and get it over with.”

Ginny hummed but their conversation was thankfully put to an end by Hagrid opening the door for Fang to come barreling into the girls.

“You lot early you are.” He told them beamingly. “Got ter feed the Thestrals, thought I might give yeh six years a lesson about wha’ pulls yeh carriages.”

It would definitely be an improvement from wading around in the lake. Though a lot of students undoubtedly can’t see the decaying horses.

“What about the students who cant see them?” Ginny asked, she couldn’t see them but she knew what they looked like.

“Got a few tha’ll stand still and let yeh touch em. Gonna get a feel for em tha' away and gonna have yeh lot sketch out wha' yeh think they look like.”

“And the ones that can see them?” Hermione asked.

Hagrid grinned. “Not gonna be many of yeh. Might let yeh ride em….not fly mind you but they might take yeh round the clearing a bit.”
She was relieved to hear he didn’t plan to make them fly. Harry had ridden a hippogriff their third year and he had loved it. Hermione had down right refused to try even with Harry and Hagrid’s encouragement and the added fact that Buckbeak had loved her to death hadn’t even been a good enough incentive. He had actually been so excited to see her when she visited Hagrid’s once that he bowed first, something unheard of for the proud creatures.

“Recon you can ride them Hermione?” Ginny asked, probably aware of where the girl’s mind had drifted to.

“If they are on the ground. I’ve ridden horses before.” Had she? Strange she couldn’t quiet remember when she had ridden them. She could recall having to put on a saddle, knew instinctively how to ride, what to do in an emergency and strangely enough how to shift her weight to lean away from an incoming opponent.

“And yeh don’t have ter worry bout ripping out the feathers.” Ginny asked why, she remember Harry telling her how hard it had been to hold onto Buckbeak and fly without pulling on his feathers. “Their wings more like a bat.” Hagrid said simply and then grimaced. “I ain’t tellen yeh any more it’ll ruin yeh assignment.” Ginny smiled innocently as Hagrid marched off toward the forest muttering about bloody witches. “Send the rest o yeh class my way when they get here yeah?” He disappeared into the dark woods before they could answer.

“Eh….you know where the clearing is right?” Hermione shook her head. “Bloody Hagrid, always forgets the important bits.”

It was a good class, for the Gryffindors anyways, once they found the clearing that was. Most of the Slytherins didn’t want to do the assignment, either touch or ride the Thestrals. Hagrid whipped them back into shape with the threats of blast ended screwts. No one wanted to see those things ever again. But their complaining must have grated on his nerves because he ended the class a little earlier than usual.

The rest of the day passed by just as easy, thankfully they weren’t given any more homework and Hermione had kept her promise to eat lunch so she hadn’t had to deal with a mothering best friend again.

It wasn’t until she was out side of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom that she had a sinking feeling her day was about to take a nose dive. She hadn’t even crossed the threshold and Black was already glaring daggers at her. Probably still mad about what she thought was going on in the library the night before. Hermione was too proud and angry to try and explain again. Let her be mad. If she took the key away she would find her own way to do the assignment.

“Get inside. Take your seats.” Bellatrix waved her wand at the board and flipped open a copy of their work book. Once everyone was seated she instructed them to take notes. “Now since Hagrid keeps mentioning he wants to bring in exotic and dangerous animals for his class I thought it best to educate you on how to defend yourself should his lessons get out of hand.” Her tone conveyed
she had no doubt his lessons would get out of hand at some point.

“Now these are illegal,” She stressed the word. “And the ministry has put a ban on trading their eggs and classified them as an extremely dangerous beast but I have heard Hagrid mention them multiple times so you will study them.”

She waved her wand again and an image of a Chimera appeared on the board.

“What is this- anyone besides know it all Granger.” Hermione hadn’t actually raised her hand, she rarely ever did in Black's class anymore she got ignored so what was the point?

“It’s a Chimera. Half lion and snake and goat.”

Bellatrix shook her head. “The misconception is it’s tail is a snake. It’s not. It’s closer related to a dragon. It has a barb on the end.” She pointed at the arrow shaped ending.

“Can anyone tell me the only wizard ever said to have slain one?” Hermione didn’t bother to raise her hand but it didn’t matter an excited Slytherin shouted out the answer.

“It was a Caerphilly Catapult player!” Bellatrix seemed impressed he knew anything about the Chimera at all, likely though he was just a fan of the Catapults.

“No, although the player was killed by one while on vacation. The actual recorded wizard who killed a chimera is unknown but a few reports have him falling on one from a great height, probably flew like Granger and fell off a broom.” The Slytherins cackled, even Ginny gave her a small smile. And Hermione couldn’t really argue she was lousy at flying. Brooms actually literally ran from her, Hooch had banned her from trying anymore. “Other reports have him dueling the Chimera, but he died not long after of exhaustion. In both stories the wizard perished. These beasts are dangerous and very difficult to kill.” She waved her wand again and the board cleared. It seemed the Chimera wasn’t the only beast she was going to educate them on today.

“You were out in the water yesterday. There are Selkies out there. The ones we have usually stick to themselves but lately Hagrid said they have become restless. Now I need to remind all you lovely hormonal children,” Her eyes landed hard on Hermione. “Selkies have been known to shed their skin and come to land to look for mates. They don’t typically harm anyone but….your teenagers. Try and stay away from any immoral temptations yes?”

A few of the boys snorted until Bellatrix leveled a hard glare their way. “Now I know he got permission for Chizpurfles, they are attracted to magic. Hagrid is usually good about keeping his creatures safe so I don’t worry too much about him letting these escape but if they do happen to get lose you should be aware they will go after your wands. They will chew through the wood to the core and then your wands will be useless. I won’t give you a run down of these, that’s for Hagrid to do, but I will show you what spells specifically attract them so that you can help Hagrid recapture them if necessary.”
Hermione wondered if this was going to be a lesson on how to survive a year full of Hagrid’s lessons. Bellatrix wasn’t the only teacher than sometimes did those. Sprout had once cultivated an entire crop of ingredients for potions that helped with injuries received in the Giant’s class. She had her third years helping for credit in lessons.

“Now you are sixth years and some of his lessons will have you going into the forest. It’s dangerous in there, the safest thing you could come across would be a Centaur. They will not harm a child but do not be foolish and try and attack them if you do come across them. They will retaliate.” She glared at the Slytherins.

“Surely unicorns would be safest?”

“No.” Bellatrix rubbed her temples and sat down at her desk. “It is not well known but unicorns can attack when they feel threatened. The horn is a powerful weapon and they have the body of a horse, power which can kill you with a single well placed kick to the head. Also there are rumored to be unicorns in the forest that can make you forget your worries.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” A Gryffindor piped up eliciting a heavy sigh from their professor.

“You forget all your worries, Griva. You worried about your parents? You forget your parents. Your tests or your boyfriend losing interest in you? You forget you ever had them. Everyone worries. They say those unicorns make you forget everything. People go searching for them and no one knows if they find them because they never return. So no, aside from being incredibly rare, unicorns are not the safest creatures you could come across in the forest.”

Black took a sip from the mug on her desk and grimaced at whatever was inside, it obviously held something rather nasty. “Start work on a thirteen inch paper on the history and myths of the Chimera and why it’s classified as a non-tradable creature.”

The others groaned and started pulling out their parchments but Hermione stared at Bellatrix with worry. She didn’t look like she felt all that well. And she never let them do homework in class she typically lectured for the entirety of it, they still had half and hour left.

Ginny nudged her and shook her head. Hermione grimaced at being caught staring at pulled out her own work. She couldn’t help the occasional glances back toward the witch though. The fact that Bellatrix was pouring over some journal and not paying them any attention allowed her to look as much as she pleased. At least as much as Ginny would let her get away with before she would elbow her again and look pointedly toward the Slytherins, a few of who loved to tease Hermione about how much Bellatrix hated her. At least no one but Ginny had ever discovered her ridiculous crush on the woman.

She tried to throw herself into the assignment. She probably got father than the others before class ended. She was carefully rolling up her parchment when Black called out to her.

“I need to speak with you about your detention before you go.” She went back to the journal without another glance.
Ginny shot her an unreadable look but followed the rest of the class out, leaving the two witches alone.

Hermione took her time finishing up her pack up. She didn’t have a class after D.A.D.A so she wasn’t in any big hurry, neither was Bellatrix because she didn’t shoot off any of her normal impatient grumbles.

“When’s my detention?” She asked when she finished, she didn’t approach the desk and she was still angry at Black for their argument the night before.

“Every night this week, starting Wednesday, tomorrow. Except Saturday. McLaggen's detention will be then. You two undoubtedly spend enough time together you don’t need to do it in detention too.” The dark witch hadn’t even bothered to look up from the book she was reading. Hermione gritted her teeth irritably, of course she had three days and the prat that started it got one.

“Is that all, Professor?”

“Yes- no….” Black looked up then, her gaze uncertain. She sighed heavily and rubbed at her temples again, she almost seemed torn about something. It wasn’t something Hermione was used to seeing. Bellatrix certainly never let her see her this vulnerable before, the blasted woman prided herself on her stubbornness and ability to seem invincible in front of her students. “You and McLaggen….?” She trailed off.

Hermione didn’t know where the conversation was going but she wanted to head it off in case it was headed awkwardly. It was common knowledge her mother passed and she had quiet enough of the birds and bees talk with McGonagall. Once in her life was enough.

“There is nothing between me and him. There isn’t anything between me and anyone! I’m not interested in casual make outs or casual sex, I don’t need a sex talk and I haven’t got time or energy to waste on romance.” She could feel her cheeks heat up as she finished her tirade. Black just stared at her, black eyes wide in surprise. Hermione half expected her to mock her or laugh. She did neither, in fact she wasn’t sure she had ever seen the woman so damn serious, even when they argued she looked like she was enjoying herself.

“Nothing? So in the library what was that?”

“He-“ She didn’t know how to explain. “He has been trying to get me to date him for ages. He thought if he kissed me it might make me realize I want to date him I guess. I turned away-“ She scrubbed at her cheek where his lips had pressed as if that could rid her of the memory. She could still feel it, wet and hot it made her skin crawl. Bellatrix watched her until she made her cheek red and then she stood up and rounded on her.

“Stop.” A slender hand reached out and pulled her own away. “Next time curse the hell out of him. No matter the reason he had no business trying to do something you didn’t want him to do.”
“I know. It just surprised me. I think he got the hint.” That was a lie, the boy was denser than Ron, but she didn’t want McGonagall to find out as it would likely result in a letter to his parents and hers.

“If he didn’t let me know.” She swore Bellatrix growled the statement but her attention was taken by the fact the woman had yet to release her hand, she stared down at their joined hands in fascination until Black noticed and pulled away. “Here.” She used the distraction to grab the journal off her desk and pass it to Hermione. “A family journal, it has information on a relative of mine that had a bond. Black’s are different than your typical bonded couple. Just….keep that in mind.” She turned away and headed toward her office.

“Professor….”She wanted to ask why Black had given her that particular assignment. Was it just curiosity, did she not have time to look into it herself. But her bravery failed her as dark eyes sought hers out once more. She cleared her suddenly dry throat and croaked, “Do I still have detention?”

A familiar smirk crossed the witch's pale face. “Yes, Granger you do. I’m sure I can come up a good reason for it later.” With those parting words she finished the journey to her private office and shut the door firmly behind, leaving a very vexed Hermione in the empty classroom.

“Damn woman.” She shook her head at herself for hoping to get out of the detention in the first place. Black’s favorite thing to do was argue with her and give her detention. Sometimes they argued during her detentions. She never could figure out why Black seems to dislike her so much. She didn’t exactly treat her wrong, she by no means abused her physically, but she could tell the minute she met her that Black did not like her. She glared at her a lot her first year. She made snide comments about Hermione always having to answer, and lately she had become increasingly judgmental about her love life, if McLaggen was anything to go by.

If they could just find common ground they might not be friends but she was sure they might be able to enjoy each other’s company. Black always put her on edge and she seemed to enjoy it. How the hell it all resulted in the crazy crush Hermione had on her she would never know. Love isn’t just blind it has to be stupid too.
She shoved the journal in her bag and pushed the door to the classroom open and nearly ran straight into Ginny. She should have known, Ginny couldn’t help but be nosey, Hermione was pretty sure the girl was the inspiration for Fred and George’s extendable ears.

“So what did she say? What’s your detention?”

Hermione sighed, motioned for them to keep walking. “She didn’t say. She did seem to believe I didn’t betray her trust though.”
Ginny raised an elegant eyebrow at her as they made their way down a flight of stairs. “But you still have detention?” Hermione nodded, ignoring the hint of amusement she head in the Ginger’s voice. “Isn’t that something….”

“Ginny.” Her tone was warning enough for the girl to raise her hand in mock surrender.
“Alright, alright. I’ll stop. But if I’m right I get to say I told you so for the rest of your life.”

“Ginny if you were right it would probably be the worst thing that ever happened to me. What I have read about bonds, and it’s very little mind you, but….well it’s not good. A lot of the purebloods chose to kill the lesser blood. It drove them crazy too and drastically weakened their magic. But the accounts I read said that was better than being bonded. Can you imagine how that would be for someone like Bellatrix Black?”

“She’s not like that, Hermione. She’s not prejudice like that.” Ginny told her softly.

“Maybe not, she couldn’t be right? Not and teach muggleborns. But the Malfoys are and they are her family, her sister. It…wouldn’t end well. Never mind I’m her student and I’m not a powerful witch, not like she is. I’m just book smart. If Black was bonded she would need someone like herself. Beautiful, smart and powerful.” Hermione sighed sadly.

Ginny frowned at her thoughtfully. “How-” She shook her head but Hermione could still see questions and concerns shinning in her eyes. “Never mind. The boys’ classes have ended for today too and Harry and Ron were going to the pitch to practice before tryouts. Want to come?”

She thought about saying no. She had a burning desire to start on the journal Bellatrix had given her. But she was afraid of the questions she knew Ginny wanted to ask. She wasn’t doing a good job of convincing her friend that she was a happy sixth year student excited to be back.

“For a little while. I should see if Ron still has what it takes to stay keeper, maybe this time I won’t have to confound McLaggen.”

Ginny laughed. “Oh when he graduates I am so telling my brother you’re the only reason he got on the team. Harry wouldn’t have played favorites.”

“Yeah well, he had me so Harry didn’t have to.”

They both groaned when they made it outside, it was drizzling again. The weather was cold and wet and it seemed it wanted to stay that way for quite a while. Hermione wished she was good at the charm that would keep them dry, she made a mental note to study it.

“It always makes my hair frizz.” She complained as Ginny cast the spell and they started down the long path that would lead them to the Quidditch Pitch. Ginny wasn’t very good at it either, she couldn’t keep it sustained for very long.

“Eh, then it’ll remind us of the young Hermione. You keep your hair straighter than you did as a kid.”

She grimaced. Ginny wouldn’t know her mother helped her straighten it before her second year.
She had been upset that she was still getting teased about it and she wanted to be able to fix it without magic. It was one of the last things she and her mother had done that had left her happy. In the end she had been afraid she would get teased for changing it so she had left it bushy that year. After her father died teasing didn’t bother her quiet as much and she had used magic to keep it straight. Strange, bullies hadn’t really been much of a problem at all since she stopped caring about them, she hadn’t paid it any mind until then.

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“Hermione?”

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“Hmm? Oh sorry. You reminded me….my father said he liked my hair straight. He had told me it made me look older.” She smiled faintly at the memory. Whether it had been true or not at the time it had made her smile.

“You do look more mature but then your already of age.”

“In the wizarding world. Not yet in the muggle world.”

“Yeah but that world doesn’t have much on you anymore. You can already do magic at home without the ministry breathing down your neck.”

If only. “You live in a witch's house. Don’t act like you don’t do magic all the time.”

Ginny grinned slyly. “Yeah okay, sometimes. They can’t tell who cast it and they aren’t as strict in magical areas. But mom still doesn’t let us do it much.”

They climbed the Gryffindor stand, already noticing Ron and Harry up in the air circling the goals. They waved once they were high enough to see them and took their seats.

“I wish we could have gone to the cup again.” Ginny complained. “The Irish won this year. Dad won a hundred galleons on it and got Ron a new broom.”

“Hmm? I had heard from Viktor that he took the year off. He said something about a personal problem, I got letters from half his team mates begging me to get back together with him. Apparently they think I’m the reason he needed a sabbatical.” She shook her head at the ridiculousness of it. “It was just bad timing. Neither of us wanted to be anything but friends.”

“Cuz your too busy lusting after Bellatrix Black.” Hermione elbowed her. “I speak only the truth!” She laughed heartily. “Still, that letter you wrote to Ron about Viktor taking time off was what prompted dad to bet against the Romanians. So technically you’re the reason Ron got a new broom.”

“Eh, he deserved it. He complains a lot about his hand me downs but I know he doesn’t mention it to your parents.” Ginny agreed silently. Ron did complain a lot about being given only used things. He got Errol, the bloody bird was well past it’s prime. He got used books when they could use
them and he got used robes, even his wand had been used until he broke it. He never complained to their parents, he was always grateful for what they could give him. Ginny knew it had to be hard for him to see Harry get so spoiled by his parents. They had money and Harry was the eldest. But Ron managed his jealousy well. And it helped that Harry wasn’t like the Malfoys and didn’t rub it in everyone’s face that he was well off.

“Hey!” They glanced up to see the two boys hovering in the air above them. “Ginny wanna practice?”
Ginny glanced at Hermione indecisively. Hermione laughed and shoved her. “Go. I have a book I want to read.”

“No…I’ll stay with you.”

“Gin. I’ll be in the dormitories in time for curfew.”

“Dinner.” The witch told her stubbornly. “You promised.”

“Alight fine. I will meet you there in an hour. Go and have fun.”

“Okay if your sure.” She waved up to Harry as they both climbed to their feet. “Be there in a second!” She turned back to the retreating bookworm. “Don’t forget!” Hermione nodded and headed toward the lake. She was already wet so a little more water wouldn’t kill her. Plus she liked the view. She wouldn’t be able to read the book for fear of it getting wet, Black would kill her if she ruined a family journal. But if she couldn’t get immersed in the book then perhaps she wouldn’t forget about going to supper.

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There weren’t a lot of students out and about on the grounds. The rain and the fact most were still inside having class helped give her the seclusion she wanted. The water was too cold to swim in, not that she would try with the Selkies and the Giant Squid in the lake, but she stripped her shoes off and sat down on the beach to let the water wash up around her feet. The cold was refreshing and the view was beautiful. She could forget her problems and sit for a little while and maybe she would actually start to believe everything would be okay.

She let her body fall back against the sands. Closed her eyes and let the feelings of the breeze and the cold water take her away. She could be anywhere if she was in her mind. Exploring ancient caves, camping with her parents, playing dollhouse with Sterling. Her imagination was all she had when the world got too overwhelming. She could lose herself in memories or in feelings. The skill to detach herself had gotten her through more than one tense situation over the years. It had also been what prompted her to study Occlumency.

“You are just asking to get sick.” Her eyes shot open just as none other than Black took a seat beside her. The woman was wearing muggle clothes and a cloak thrown over them. She must have been on her way out of the castle when she spotted Hermione on the shore, the trail to Hogsmeade
would have led her right by.

“Professor Black?”

“Don’t think getting sick will get you out of your detention with me.” Bellatrix told her sternly. Hermione pulled herself back into a sitting position and shook her head.

“I won’t get sick. I just wanted some peace and quiet.”

“Don’t we all.” She was told bitterly. “I was on my way to visit my darling sister. I merely stopped to remind you about detention. You’ll be going even if you are sick.” She warned.

“What is it? My detention?”

“Hagrid asked me to look into something in the forest. He noticed it when you lot had your class on Thestrals. He said it was lingering…” Bellatrix’s brows furrowed in concern as she glanced away from the lake and at Hermione. “Did you notice anything?”

Hermione had noticed Hagrid had cut the lesson shorter than necessary but she had assumed that he was just done for the day. The Slytherins had been a pain in the ass the entire lesson she had thought he was just tired of their whining. “Nothing except the Thestrals. They can be creepy enough.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize you could see them.” She didn’t ask so Hermione didn’t explain. A bird squealed over head and Black glanced up at it and cursed. Her eyes flew back to the Castle and she glowered at something Hermione couldn’t see. “Until we investigate stay out of the forest. You are the center of far too much trouble for your own good. Only bloody troll in centuries to make it inside the castle and you get locked in the bathroom with it.” She muttered darkly.

Hermione chose to chuckle rather than get angry. The woman had a point. It was either Fred, George or Harry and Ron causing the trouble but somehow she always ended up the unlucky one in the mix.

“I’ll wait until detention to investigate I suppose.”

Black scoffed. “Just stay out of trouble. I would love to give you more detention but I have a busy enough month already planned.”

“And I have enough school work for the week.”

Black stood up, stared down at her for a moment, debating whether or not to say something else but
in the end she shook her head and walked off toward Hogsmeade, leaving Hermione to her own devices.

She watched her go. Wondering at how much she had conveniently ran into the woman lately. It wasn’t unlike Bellatrix to appear out of nowhere and give her detentions, they didn’t usually converse quite as much though. It was almost as if the woman was seeking her out......

She shook her head harshly and fell back onto the sand. As likely as marrying Ron. She reminded herself viscously.

~B~

Bellatrix cursed her sister the entire way to Hogsmeade. She had been worried about this meeting all day, she was starting to wish she had never contacted her sister to begin with. Of course Andy would require her company when she asked for more methods of calming herself and her magic down. Of course her loving sister would want to know just what the hell was going on with her favorite sister, the sister who may have had a form of post traumatic stress but who never had issues with her magic. Bella didn’t have the answers she wanted. She just needed help.

The hobby Billy had introduced her to was fun and she had to admit it consumed enough of her focus to give her the time she needed to get herself under control. It had worked the night before anyways. But after spending two hours cleaning up the mess she made of her room she knew she was either going to have to explain things to Poppy or ask her sister for other ways to calm herself and these attacks she seemed to be developing.

She just hadn’t made her mind up on what to say. Should she make something up, blame their father and her childhood or should she just tell the truth and hope Andy didn’t react the same way Cissy had. Granted when she had told Narcissa she had been drunk, foolish and at the end of her rope with no one willing to tell her where Hermione had gone and why the witch, whose hobby was practically homework, had taken a year off school. At least she was a bit more composed meeting with Andromeda. She wasn’t drunk yet in any case.

She took a moment and made up her mind on what to say before entering the Three Broom Sticks. She waved to Rosmerta before heading to her sister’s table. She barely sat down when the beautiful owner was setting down her usual. “Anything else Black?”

“No. Just privacy if you will Rosmerta, what Andy and I have to discus shouldn’t be overheard. It’s family stuff.” The beautiful witch nodded, nosey as she was she wasn’t keen on pissing Bellatrix off. Anyone dumb enough to do that usually ended up without a knut to rub together. She liked her wealth and her pub just the way it was, which was why she was shooting off some regulars to another table and leaving the entire area around the two sisters empty.

“Is it that bad, Bella?” Andy asked quietly as Bella placed a muffliato around them.
She shook her head and took a generous gulp of firewhiskey. “It’s not good. It’s not too bad either I suppose. Just the way you look at it.”

Andy pushed her drink away and pulled Bella’s away from her. “Tell me.” She insisted, already fed up with the run around as her sister tried to garner the courage to tell her whatever was so damning.

“I have a bond. Like the ones father was always telling us about.” Andy shook her head, curly locks flying around her face as she voiced her disbelief. “Stop.” Bellatrix reached out and took back her drink. “I’ve not made it up and I can’t explain how I know I just do.”

“Who is it?” Her sister asked after a few moments of stunned silence. It was a heavy thing to be told. All their childhood they had been told how vile and unnatural bindings were. And that was only when their father even deemed to discuss them. He would tell them over and over that if anyone of his children were bonded then they must kill the lesser blood immediately. Bellatrix obviously had no intention of doing that and neither did Andy. If it were true it would cause madness, they had seen the consequences of killing the lesser blood. Their father had killed a muggleborn right before their eyes, a bonded mate to their older cousin. He had gone insane, and his magic had been nothing. He was nearly a squib after but all their father could say was the Black line was not to be tainted. Apparently a squib was better than a bonded pair.

“Hermione Granger.”

Andy's frown deepened but she was quiet for another moment, taking her time to process, to weigh the reality of the words. “Potter and Weasleys' friend? The one that took a year off.” She nodded to herself, remember how Bellatrix had been that year, how volatile she had seemed. “She's of age now, have you told her?”

“I….have her doing an assignment on bonds. I gave her a book from our personal library, an account of our cousin... Dumbledore asked me to hold off telling her until her seventh year. It should have been this year but she took that year off.”

“But she is of age!” Bella held her hand up to silence her irate sister and glanced around nervously, even though she knew the others couldn’t hear their conversation she didn’t need them reading lips. It wasn’t just that she didn’t want the knowledge out but she feared for Hermione’s safety if it spread that they were bonded. Idiots with pureblood ideals might try and hurt the girl and the Three Broomsticks was full of people willing to sell any kind of information for the right price.

“Be quiet.” She didn’t need attention drawn to the fact she had muffled their conversation, people would only try to listen more.

“Sorry. But it seems wrong. You asked me for help so you are obviously suffering more than just nightmares about our childhood.” Bella grimaced. “I know it won’t be easy but surely you could come to an arrangement with the girl.”
“I decided I would leave it in her hands.”

“What? What does that mean?”

Bellatrix sighed, knowing her sister probably wasn’t going to like her answer any more than Narcissa had. “I decided when I tell her we are bonded I’ll let her decide what she wants to do about it. That’s why I chose to let her do the assignment. So she could have an unbiased opinion. Either she will be willing to stay with me, we can work it out somehow after she graduates, or she wants nothing to do with me and goes her separate way.”

“Are you stupid?” Andy whispered harshly. “I read those damn journals the same as you, I know what it says about Black bonds. They are strong and dangerous. A curse was put on our house, even if Hermione lives you could go insane if she isn’t around. Our magic was supposed to be too strong, the bonds are too strong on our side.”

“But not for her. Andy she deserves a choice.”

“Not at the expense of your life she doesn’t!”

Her sister was always the voice of reason, always wanting to chose the right path. It seemed she forgot what that was when it came to her family. “She will get to chose, and I will not take kindly if you decide to interfere.”

Andy blanched. Bellatrix had never gone against her sisters. Not for anyone. She paled and shook her head again. “I wouldn’t hurt her.” She told her sister gently, nearly afraid of the fire she saw glowing in her dark eyes, a fire directed at her because of an obtuse threat on Hermione’s freedom to choose. “You…you love her.” Her eyes widened in awe and understanding. “No. That’s not how it is. She was just a child when the bond happened. A first year.”

“But she isn’t now.” Andy told her firmly. “You can lie to yourself all you like but your very protective of this girl.”

“It’s the bond.” Bellatrix protested weakly.

“Maybe, but I read the books.” She told her again. “Bonds don’t require you to love one another. Love grows on its own and I think you love her. No….I think you are in love with her, Bellatrix.”

“Andy she is my student.” Even she noticed she wasn’t denying the claim again. She wasn’t sure she could even do it if she was honest. Hermione did stir something in her. But if it was love she didn’t know how to recognize it. And she didn’t want to think about it right then, not surrounded by people and sitting across from her sister.

“Fine, I’ll drop it. Tell me what I can do to help you. And know I have already voiced my
disapproval of your crazy decision to let her go if she decides to run away.” Bella sighed, she was likely going to have to force Andy to make an unbreakable vow just so she knew she wasn’t going to chase Hermione across the world and drag her back if she left. She was still glad she told her. Glad to finally have someone willing to help her, who could at least partially understood what she was going through and wasn’t asking her to wait another bloody year!
Bella’s meeting with Andy had her running scared. She couldn’t be in love with her bond. She was a student. She was smart and caring and a bunch of other things the dark witch admired, but she was ultimately a student.

She was in the middle of a full on break down yet again when Dumbledore knocked politely on her door. “Go away!”

He, of course, didn’t listen and let himself in. She cursed at him but barely spared him a glance as she continued her path back and forth across her kitchen. At least she had cleaned up her mess from her earlier break down.

“Mr. Potter expressed his worry. He was on his way to see you.” She managed to stop for a moment and stare at him curiously, it was well after curfew, she had spent two hours with her sister going through a myriad of emotions before Andy had finally let her leave, allowing her to process her feelings and the panic they brought from the comfort of her own home away from prying eyes. “His map showed you pacing, I convinced him I was on the way to see you myself.”

She wonder why he bothered. Part of her problems were his fault after all.

“I’m fine.” She bit out at him before throwing herself ungracefully into a chair. She leaned forward and rest her arms on the table her head following.

“I see. I am here,” sometimes she really despised his slow easy drawl. “If there is anything you need to discuss. I hope you know that, I am your friend, Bella.”

She snorted, not even bothering to raise her head. “Unless you plan to explain why I have to wait I have nothing to talk about.” Her words were muffled by her arm but he heard all the same. She could hear his frown as he spoke.

“I wish I could, it is not my story to tell I’m afraid.” It was more than he usually said on the matter, but it only left her with more questions.

“Did you tell someone about the-“ Her head snapped up, her intent to lay into him if he had betrayed her trust but he shook his head gently.

“I have not. Not even the ministry is aware. What forced my hand in this is something else completely. Just know that I have everyone’s best interest at heart and I am hoping it will all resolve itself next year.”
She had no bloody idea what he was on about and she wasn’t in the mood for his cryptic bullshit.

“I’m not waiting another year, Albus. She has until seventh year, until her first blasted day of school. I can’t take any more of this uncertainty.” She hated the pitying look he gave her. She was Bellatrix Black she did not do pity. She forced herself to get it together and glared at him.

“Did you really want something or was this just to appease my godson?”

“I just wanted to ease Harry’s mind. And to also warn you Minerva has heard of Hermione’s detention and is not happy she received it on the first day of term.”

That brought a smirk to the dark witch’s face. She did so love to annoy Minerva. “Tough, she earned it.” She hadn’t actually, Hermione had explained it and she had believed her once she had time to process what it had looked like, but no one else needed to know that.

She had vaguely thought about canceling the brunette's detention but she wouldn’t have taken McLaggen as back up into the forest, the boy would have been useless and she had no desire to enter it alone if something had spooked Hagrid, the oaf was always going in and out of the dark woods. Hermione would be good help in an emergency and her company was preferable to some of the other teachers. Worst case scenario she would send the girl back to the castle for help and defend her retreat. Honestly though she didn’t expect to encounter anything, not anything more dangerous than they already had anyways.

“I will head Minerva off for now but please try to make these detentions more deserving than they were last year. Breathing too loudly in the library…” He shook his head and chuckled as he headed out just as rudely as he had entered.

Bella rested her head back on her arms. Had she really given Granger detention for breathing loudly in the library? She had given the girl so many she couldn’t remember the reasons she made up anymore.

At least one good thing had come from Dumbledore’s interruption, she was no longer freaking out about her feelings. Whether she loved the girl or not was meaningless, she could never do anything about it and she was sure there was no way Hermione would ever reciprocate, not the way she had treated her over the years. The best she could hope for was respect and perhaps friendship, it all depended on her decision after she found out about the bond.

~H~

Bellatrix had asked her to meet her by the lake after class the following day. She had some kind of disturbance with some Slytherins to sort through before she could begin Hermione’s detention. Whatever it was must have been bad because she had been waiting for half an hour when Hagrid had appeared, blocking the sun as she peered up at his huge figure.

He was grinning down at her, his eyes and red cheeks all she could see past his bushy beard. “Wha
yeh doin ere Ernione?” His eyes drifted to the lake and his smile dropped and she could see worry flitter into his eyes as they landed on the forest. “Might not be safe on yeh own, somethin out there. Can feel it watchin.”

“I’m waiting on Professor Black. She gave me detention.” His bright eyes turned back to her and his frown deepened.

“She can’ be taken yer into the forest with her? No….tis not safe.” He shook his head and turned his attention back to the castle, they could see the witch in question making her way down to them, her arms waving in aggravation as she fussed to herself about whatever mess she had been forced to deal with.

Hermione watched her approach, she looked irritated as hell which didn’t bode well for Hermione's detention. Hermione had a feeling Hagrid was going to protest her going into the forest which was probably going to make the dark witch angrier. Minerva herself had tried to get the girl out of a few detentions over the years, those had been the worse, and for whatever reason Dumbledore had always sided with Black.

“What is it, Hagrid I know that blasted look, do not make my night any worse.” She pointed at him as her eyes rounded on Hermione. “You did bring your wand?” She got a what the hell look and simply shook her head, she pulled the wand from her robes and received a nod of approval.

“Yer can’ make Ermione go into the forest. S’not safe!” Hagrid protested. Bella rounded her dark eyes on him and he took a step back, funny considering he was far larger than Bellatrix.

“Unless you can give me one good reason why I can’t have her serve her detention in a possibly useful manner don’t think to tell me how I can punish her. And your bad feelings are not enough justification for me not to drag her into the forest with me, you take her, Weasley and Potter there all the time for things other than classes.”

Hermione held her tongue, the witch was right, Harry had just gone with Hagrid their first school day back to help check on the humongous spiders Hagrid was friends with. Ron had flat out refused to go and Hermione hadn’t been around when he asked. Not that she particularly liked them anyways, they always stared at them like they wanted to eat them. In hindsight they probably did.

“But…” Hagrid sighed utterly defeated. He didn’t have another excuse. Just his gut feeling that something was wrong. Bellatrix was right though, Hermione had been in the forest more than most other students at Hogwarts and she could handle herself better than most of the teachers. “Yer, right I 'spose.”

“Now if that’s all the complaints about my detention methods can we get this over with.” She waved for Hermione to follow and took off without glancing back to make sure she was. Hermione waved Hagrid off and took off after the teacher. When they were far enough away Bellatrix finally spoke again. “You’ve never tried to get out of detention before. You frightened?” She chuckled lightly. “I didn’t try this time.” She protested. “I usually just try to avoid you so I don’t get
detentions in the first place. No one else gives them to me.’”

Bellatrix fell back into a moody silence, her shoulders where stiff and her head held high but Hermione had the strange feeling she had hurt the witch somehow. She had only been telling the truth, she spent a lot of time trying not to get caught around Bellatrix. Detentions ruled havoc over her sleeping and homework schedule, something she hadn’t ever managed very well. “We won’t go very far in tonight. I need to properly inspect the area where Hagrid does his classes and keeps the creatures. We will go deeper as the week goes.” Hermione hummed her assent but said nothing else. Bellatrix obviously didn’t believe Hagrid’s feelings had too much basis on truth because even as they crossed into the forest boundary she didn’t draw her wand. They spent an hour walking the boundary, they stayed just inside the woods keeping the castle in sight the entire time. Neither felt anything different, they didn’t feel the eyes on them that Hagrid had seemed to feel, and by the end of the hour Bellatrix decided it would be safe for Hagrid to have classes back inside the forest. Good news because Hermione was tired of wading knee deep through the black lake.

“Go to dinner.” Bellatrix told her as she headed toward Hagrid’s hit to give him the news. “Meet me here after dinner tomorrow. We will see if anything changes during the night.”

For a long time Hermione stared after her. She had hardly spoken, hadn’t sent any jabs at her or made any snide remarks about something just to irritate her. She didn’t seem to be her self and it worried Hermione.

~B~

She told Hagrid the good news and then she headed back to her apartments. She didn’t feel like going to dinner herself. She had always known Hermione avoided her, she was always the one who sought the girl out and that was only ever to give her detention and more reason to despise her. It could have been different had she been able to control herself and stop acting like a bloody child about the binding in the beginning. Now she didn’t know how to change. She wasn’t a nice person anyways. She was snappish and rude, she held too tightly to things she wanted and pushed anyone who could hurt her away. She pushed her sisters away and it seemed she had done a very good job of doing the same to Hermione.

Hermione. The brightest witch of her age. The witch who had the power to break the most powerful witch in all of England by simply refusing to stay.

She was already as good as gone. She had admitted that much. She had all but told her she despised her to her face.

I usually try to avoid you.

Bella sighed. She had a lot of things to get ready for Hermione's seventh year. She decided there was no better time to start.

~N~
Nymphadora Tonks walked into her mother’s kitchen, she could instantly tell something was wrong, her mother was making cookies. The muggle way. She never baked unless something was on her mind, it was her therapy.

“Mom?”

Andy smiled up at her daughter as she dumped her fifth batch of sugar cookies onto the cooling wrack. “Honey, so lovely of you to drop in. What’s the occasion?” Her smile was genuine enough but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It’s our family day.” Tonks raised an eyebrow, her mother never forgot family day and she hadn’t seemed to have cooked anything for dinner except cookies. Her father would be home any minute and she had no idea what his reaction would be to the five dozen cookies he would have to eat.

“Oh….I forgot.” Andy sighed. “Blast it all, I’ve been cooking since this bloody morning.” She groaned and sat heavily down at the island. Tonks took a seat beside her and turned to stare at her mother.


Andy held her hand up at her daughter’s rapid fired questions and shook her head. “No one is sick but your bloody aunt is in love.”

That got her attention. “Aunt Cissy? She’s married, there is no way she would leave Draco's....” she trailed off as her mother shook her dark curls. “Aunt....Bella?!!”

“Yes. She swears she isn’t but I can see it. She is so protective and she is doing everything she can to shove the girl away from her. I don’t know who she is more scared of getting hurt herself or Hermione. If she doesn’t do something they will both be living with the consequences.”

“A woman….I never would have seen this coming. Oh this is rich.” Andy swatted at Nymph as she started laughing.
“No Nymphadora it is not anything to laugh about.”

“Oh mom come off it, Aunt Bella will get her shit together, when has she ever been good at denying herself what she wants?”

Andy shook her head, stared out the window of the kitchen, tears misting her eyes. “Bellatrix suffers for the people she loves. If she thinks she isn’t good for the girl she will push her away until there is no hope of reconciliation. To make matters worse they are bonded.”

Tonks paled. She was not pureblood, her father was a muggle born. But even she knew what bonds were, as an auror she had investigated the death of a muggleborn caused by one. She knew how the wizarding society saw them, knew how purebloods handled them.
“Hermione you said?” Andy nodded. “A student.” Tonks grimaced. She could understand her Aunt’s dilemma. Of all the Blacks alive she never would have suspected Bellatrix would ever be bonded. If it had to be someone she would have thought it would be her own mother.

“Don’t tell her I told you, Nymph. She won’t be happy with me. It wasn’t my secret to tell, I’m just so worried for her.” She hugged her mother tightly, nearly knocking them off their stools.

“Come on, let’s get supper on the table before dad gets home and thinks we’re bonkers.” She would look into this Hermione, for her mother and her aunt. She recognized the name but she couldn’t recall from where. In any case she had to shelve it for now, she needed to get her mother together first.

~H~

For Hermione the week passed slowly, her detentions with Black were uneventful and silent. The dark witch spoke only when she needed to, she made no cutting remarks and asked no questions. In class she was much the same, even the others were starting to notice. She gave her lectures, she answered questions without being sarcastic and she ignored Hermione more so than usual.

Her sudden change in attitude had Hermione waiting around after class. She waved off Ginny’s curious look and moved to Black’s desk. “Professor?”

Bellatrix glanced up toward her and sighed. “Is this about the journal?” Hermione felt a flash of guilt, she hadn’t even looked at it yet, she had spent all her free time over the week making sure her friends stopped worrying about her behavior and spent the rest trying to get ahead on all the homework.

“Oh…no. I just…I was wondering if you’re okay is all?”

Black glared up at her, her fingers twirling her wand lazily around. For a moment Hermione wondered if Black was thinking about hexing her.

“Do you really care, Ms. Granger. I was under the impression you couldn’t stand me.” Hermione gazed down at her in confusion. Sure they never got along and she had never said otherwise but not being able to stand her was a bit much….Filch she couldn’t stand he was just down right mean. Black was…well she was something.

She could be mean, snarky and a down right pain in the ass, but she was passionate about teaching and her field. She took pride in her students mastering difficult spells and she always tried to figure out who really was the injured party when a fight broke out. With Hermione she had always been a bit biased and the girl had no idea why but she had seen the way Bella was around the others and she admired her. She didn’t hate her.
“I-I- where-” She wanted to know why she thought that? Why it seemed to matter to her? But Bellatrix was unamused by the floundering and cut her off.

“I’m fine, Granger. You’re not getting out of this last night of detention.” She bit the words out harshly making Hermione flinch. Obviously she had done something to piss Black off, she wished she hadn’t bothered asking about her. But she had been so concerned. The woman looked….lost.

“Get out of here, I’ll see you tonight after dinner.” She stood up abruptly and moved off toward her office. “Hopefully you won’t screw up and get any more detentions from me.”

Hermione sighed heavily as the witch slammed the door shut. She had obviously upset the woman by her offhanded comment the first night she had detention but she didn’t know why it upset her. Black couldn’t have made it any clearer over the years that she disliked her. And she could not even fathom a Bellatrix Black with her feelings hurt.

She thought about knocking on the office door, of trying to explain that it wasn’t exactly Black she avoided but the detentions she didn’t have time for. Instead she left, an unsettling feeling setting in the pit of her stomach.

~H~

She had been quiet herself throughout dinner, Ginny said something about it and she mentioned that it was her last night of detention and she and Black had argued after class had ended. She wasn’t looking forward to detention so of course it came all the faster.

At nine o’clock she was waiting for Black by the entrance to the forest, sitting on one of Hagrid’s pumpkins. They had made plans to check the other side that night and Hagrid’s hut was where Black had instructed Hermione meet her.

“Ready then?” She jumped as the voice came out of nowhere. Black was dressed in black robes and Hermione hadn’t seen nor heard her approach, her hood was thrown up over her unruly dark curls. She didn’t make any kind of comment about startling the girl and instead took off into the dense foliage, she didn’t even bother to see if Hermione was following.

“Profes-”

“Keep quiet. We can’t expect to find anything if you’re yapping all night scaring things away.” Brown eyes stared at her back, irritation and guilt warring in their depths. She couldn’t keep quiet though, not when she preferred arguing with the witch over the stony silence she was being tortured with now.

“I’m sorry.”
“I don’t need an apology just be bloody quiet.” Came the hissed reply. Hermione didn’t let it deter her.

“I'm sorry for telling you I avoided you.”

Bellatrix swallowed thickly but Hermione couldn’t see. “It doesn’t matter.” She could hear how strained her voice was though. Maybe irritation, maybe Hermione had it all wrong and the woman just wanted a break from her. Still she felt she had to clarify, if for nothing more than her own peace of mind.

“I avoided detentions, not you.”

Bellatrix didn’t reply so Hermione let the subject drop. They continued on in their strained silence. They walked farther into the woods than Hermione had been before, the light from her wand barely illuminating the steps in front of them. She half suspected the witch was lost in thought and hadn’t yet realize just how far they were going. Hermione had no idea where the woods ended, it could go on forever for all she knew. But just when she was about to say something Bellatrix came to a halting stop, she crashed into the back of her and the witch turned her body as if to shield her and held an arm out against her chest as she moved to keep her from going forward.

Hermione could feel it then. What Bellatrix had stopped for. An oppressive darkness that nearly felt alive. It felt as if it were breathing….watching them…..stalking them. It was almost suffocating just how heavy it felt.

She reached out and grasped Bella’s cloak, needing to have a hold on her, almost afraid the witch would shift and disappear into the nothingness that surrounded them. She knew something was wrong when the dark gnarled wand suddenly sprang into her hand.

Bellatrix pulled her close enough she could whisper. “Run. Back toward the castle. Don’t stop for anything.”

Hermione could feel it, excited and anxious around them. It felt ancient and powerful. Whatever it was Hagrid had been right to fear it.

“I can’t leave you.” She clutched at the fabric of Bella’s robes, unwilling to let her go.

“Stupid girl, I’ll be right behind you.” She spun Hermione and shoved her back toward the way they came.

They took off. Black cast a lumos but the bright light did hardly little more than Hermione’s own in such oppressing darkness. There was laughter around them. High pitched and delightfully crazy. Hermione could swear she heard it muttering Black in the wind.

She glanced back, fearful for her teacher, and stumbled over a protruding root. Inertia had her flying a short ways in the air before she tumbled down a small hill landing hard on her side. Bellatrix, cursing for all she was worth, launched herself after her, hauled her up by her cloak but
held her still when she made to run off again.

“It’s too late. I don’t know where it is now.” She held Hermione behind her but she had no idea where whatever was hunting them was. She could be putting the student right in it’s path. Hermione did not like their odds. If something frightened Bellatrix Black it had to be terrifying.

“What is it? It knows your name!” Dark eyes landed on her for a moment, illuminated in the light of their wands, before they went back to sweeping the darkness.

“Something old, something dangerous.” Her fingers tightened where they were connected to Hermione's arm. “Hagrid had been right to be afraid, and he had been right not to bring you, blast the oaf!”

Hermione didn’t exactly agree. If she hadn’t been with Black the woman would have been alone. Perhaps the creature was hesitant to attack because there was two of them. Maybe he would have already gone after Bellatrix had she been alone.

“We can’t stay here we have to move.” She started to pull Hermione away, towards the edge of the small hill the girl had tumbled over when a voice echoed all around them.

“Yes! Yes, do run. I do so love a challenge. Fear makes the meal so much sweeter.”

“Who’s out there?” The wild haired woman didn’t sound frightened, although Hermione could feel the slight tremble that went through her. A maniacal laughter was the only response. It sounded as if it were all around them, right beside them. Something brushed up against Hermione, a nail raked her cheek making her scream, Bella spun them around, putting herself in it’s path.

“What do you want?”

“I want a Black to play with! Such powerful things Blacks are. Had one or two in my time.” That blasted innocent childlike tune creeped Hermione the bloody hell out. “The other one will be nice too, perhaps even better. Ohhhhhh the power you two have! I could live for centuries off of it.”

Bellatrix shot a spell toward the castle, a patronus.

“Oh, naughty naughty.” The creature chided.

“There!” It let out an unholy screech as Bellatrix launched an incendio its way. She grabbed Hermione and practically shoved her up the hill, her patronus came running back at them ready to guide them back toward the castle. “Follow it! Be quick.”

Hermione took off running, determined not to get them caught again. She could hear Bellatrix launching spells behind them, hear the trees exploding as she tried to cover their desperate flight, but she didn’t stop. She ran for what felt like forever, fled like the hounds of hell were on her heels. Just when she could see the end, see the lights of the castle in the distance she heard Bellatrix cry
out from further behind her.

“Black!” The woman didn’t answer. Didn’t scream for her to keep going. Hermione didn’t think about anything, her mind completely focused on the other woman. “Bella!” She heard the beasts laughter and took off toward it. It wasn’t getting Bellatrix Black, not while she was there. She was not going to take her escape at the price of the dark woman’s life. Nothing was worth that.

She burst through the foliage falling bodily into the beast and knocking it away from Bellatrix’s prone body. It had felt leathery and it’s smell had her heaving, it smelt of putrid rotting flesh. It smelled like pure death. She launched an incendio, the most powerful fire spell she knew aside from fiendfire, at the creatures Shadow and wasted no time feeling triumphant as it howled in pain and rage. She levitated Bellatrix’s body, grasped hold of her cloak and crashed through the remainder of the forest, stopping only when her legs couldn’t hold her any longer and her spell collapsed on itself, dropping the witch from air harshly to the hard ground.

She drug herself the short distance back to the teacher. Forced strength into her protesting muscles as she rolled the woman over onto her back. She wasn’t breathing. Hermione forgot everything and anything she had ever learned about magic, forgot about the beast screaming in anger slowly getting further and further away from them as it retreated back into the forest. Her eyes sought helplessly toward the castle, saw the lights from wands approaching them but they were so far away. She turned her gaze back to the pale lifeless witch.

“You can’t die.” She reached out and tilted her head back, forgetting how muggle CPR worked but willing to try anything to get the woman breathing again. “You just can’t die.” Because she didn’t want to live in a world without you in it. She leaned down to give Bellatrix a breath when a hand reached up and threaded through her hair pulling her down to meet soft lips. Her breath exploded in a soft oh, the feeling electric traveling through her entire body. It was marvelous, more than anything she could have ever imagined. It was also familiar and over much too quickly.

Dazed eyes stared up at her as she pulled away. Soft lights were shinning on them now, lumos casting them both in a pale white light.

A hand slipped from her hair as Bellatrix lost consciousness again. Hermione gazed down at her in shock, unsure of what had just happened.

“What….what the bloody hell just-“ She barely heard Snape’s voice.

“We saw your patronus.” Dumbledore said softly. Ignoring Snape’s sputtering questions.

She still wasn’t paying attention, lost in her own mind, forgetting about the horror they had just gone through because at the end she had gotten taste of heaven. Her hand went to her lips as she stared at the woman in surprise. She hadn’t initiated that. She had wanted to save the woman’s life not kiss the life out of her. Great Merlin what a kiss though, sadly it broke her heart that she knew Bellatrix hadn’t known what was going on, or that it was even her.
“Oh hell enough of that.” Snape snapped. Hermione jumped, finally glancing up at the two teachers, one who was thoroughly annoyed and the other amused.

“There was something out there! Something dark and dangerous.” She turned back to the dark woods to see if she could see any sigh of what had attacked them. Dumbledore leaned down and motioned for Snape to check on the unconscious woman.
“There is blood,” He drawled. “But she won’t die.”

“You should both see Poppy. Severus if you would.” He motioned for the potions teacher to take Bella’s prone body back to the castle. Before he turned his wizened eyes on Hermione knowingly.
“I believe you were trying CRP?”

“No- yes it’s CPR. She wasn’t breathing.” Hermione stood up as Snape levitated the witch once more. She stared down at her pale face, at the drops of blood she could see running down her forehead, her hand, one not listening to her at all, went to touch the witches chest coming to rest over her heart. It comforted her to feel the quick thump beneath. She had been so afraid Bella would die.

“Aurors will be called and sent into the forest. I will ask them to be on the look out.” Dumbledore told her, stepping aside and allowing Snape to pass with the woman.

“Come along, Granger. To Pomfrey.”

She had no idea what was going to happen now, how Black was going to treat that accidental kiss. If she would even remember it. But at least she was alive. If she never spoke to her again, if she never said another kind word to her again, at least she was alive. And Hermione had that accidental kiss to burn into her memory. It would have to be enough.

~BH~

Bellatrix had tried everything to escape the hospital wing, her wand had been left in the forest and she was adamant about going back in and retrieving it, damn the bloody concussion she was rather attached to the thing. But of course Poppy had made her stay. Threatened to tie her to the bed if she even tried to get up.

The only consolation was that Hermione had been forced to stay as well, the girl had collapsed the moment she entered the wing, and although she was doing everything she could to deny she had any feelings at all toward her student Bellatrix was finding it soothing to watch the girl sleep. The gentle rise and fall of the girl's chest comforted her in a way nothing else ever had.

She couldn’t sleep though, she feared her nightmares. She wasn’t going to allow Hermione Granger to see her weakened and frightened after a night terror. Granger probably already thought she was useless after having to save her in the Forbidden Forest. Bellatrix still couldn’t believe she had been taken down by a simple blow to the head.
A gentle sound drew he attention back to the girl and away from her self berating. Hermione was frowning now, her eyes clenched shut and her mouth muttering frantic whispers Bella couldn’t quiet hear.

She climbed from her bed and moved closer, leaned over to hear and sighed heavily. She should have realized Hermione would be frightened of what had happened. She fuzzily remembered the girl refusing all of Poppy's draughts, which meant she wouldn’t have gotten the dreamless sleep.

Bellatrix reached out and grasped her shoulder. Intent on waking her up out of the nightmare, on letting her know she hadn’t died, as Hermione was pleading with the dream version of her not to do.

“Granger?”

Coffee eyes shot open, she grasped Bella’s slender wrist and tugged hard, dragging the woman down toward her. Only a breath separated them and Hermione's expression was murderous.

“Granger?!”

Slowly the fire died from her eyes as they focused on Bella's face. Hermione blushed bright red and released her immediately. Apologies spilling from her lips.

“I’m sorry, I have nightmares. I usually ward my bed I was just so tired.” She trailed off. Aware she was giving away far too much.

“Ward your bed?” She didn’t get an answer but she knew Hermione hadn’t fallen back asleep despite the fact she had closed her eyes. “Do you want to talk about them?” A good teacher would ask, Minerva would ask, so that’s what she was doing. It wasn’t because she just wanted to know everything about the girl.

Hermione shook her head though, she couldn’t tell Black anything without explaining her situation at home and she was not wanting to see pity in those dark eyes.

Bellatrix hummed. She pushed at Hermione’s shoulder until the girl opened her eyes and focused on her. “I plan to get some sleep so budge over. Perhaps sleeping next to someone will keep the nightmares away.” It was a flimsy excuse but Bella assumed they may both need a bit of comfort after that nights affairs. And she just wanted to hold the girl. Even if it was the only time she would ever get to do it. Even if Hermione looked back on this and thought she was being manipulative, trying to be nice to her in an effort to coerce her into staying for the bond.

Either way the girl slid over onto the other side of the bed. Making enough room for Bella to slide under the covers. She slipped her hand under the pillow and drew the brunette's head down onto her chest. It was intimate, Hermione knew her heart was racing a million to nothing but she didn’t
care. She was wrapped in Bellatrix Black’s embrace and nothing could have made her feel any safer.

Nightmares were forgotten as she focused on the breathing beneath her, her own arm came up and wrapped around the dark witch’s waist.

They rested peacefully on the verge of sleep when Hermione suddenly filled the silence. “I thought you were dead.” Her voice was small and broken, arms tightened around her in response, pulling her closer. “Go to sleep. I’m right here and I’m alive.”

Hermione’s eyes drifted shut. Her breathing slowly evening out. Only a few minutes after the brunette succumbed Bellatrix followed.

~B~

It’s an odd feeling, knowing in the back of your mind you’re dreaming but not being able to wake up. A young Bellatrix was sitting at the top of the owlery with an elderly woman making paper lanterns and watching as the old witch charmed them so they floated up into the night sky. She was enjoying it immensely, clapping as they burned up high in the air into shapes of animals before they fizzled out.

They burned so brightly that at first she mistook the brilliant bobbing light in the distance for another one. Only this one was moving on the ground and moving closer to the chilling forest she could see in the distance. It was a lumos spell, conjured at the hands of, from what she could make out, a very old long bearded wizard.

She could faintly hear a commotion going on down below them, a lot of fearful shouts before more brightly lit wands were quickly moving in the direction of the first one before they too disappeared into the pitch black trees.

"Let's go see." She held out her hand to the witch who smiled as she took it and helped the little girl off the alcove and down the flight of steps. The further down they got though the less room there seemed to be, until the steps were so narrow only Bellatrix could pass through. She was frightened for the witch, instead of a wall there was a large gaping chasm beside them, how was the old lady going to get down.

She looked up into beautiful blue eyes, eyes that seemed to accept her bad luck. She smiled kindly down at the child. ‘You go on ahead dear, I’ll be fine here.’ She heard the kindly voice in her mind but she never saw the woman move her lips, it sent chills down her spine and gave her the prompt she needed to struggle across the narrow ledge.

It wasn’t long before she was running parallel to the forest searching for the blue lights she knew she’d find in the distance. She was an adult now and her pace quickened with the lengthening of her
legs, slowing only when she saw another smaller figure in the mist. "Hello."

The figure turned, it was a little girl with curly black hair and blue eyes so bright they mirrored the beauty of a clear cloudless day. "I want to go see, but don't want to go alone." The little girl held out her hand and Bella immediately took it. It felt so small in hers but it was warm and it felt right. "Will you go with me?" She found herself nodding and pulling the girl along behind her but at a slightly slower pace so her little legs could manage.

Suddenly they were at the spot she'd seen the first wizard; only the forest was gone, replaced by white marbled walls and black marbled floors. It reminded her of the ministry but she'd never seen this area before. Witches and wizards were shuffling away from an elevator all wearing the same matching look of anxiety and dread. Whatever they had seen had given them a fright, but not enough of one that they needed to run away in terror.

Bellatrix had a feeling the real horror had yet to be released and they knew it, which was why they weren't in a haste to get away just yet, they'd have time to prepare.

They passed a witch dressed in black robes with silver linings, she looked rich and familiar. Her hair was jet black and straight down to her waist where it curled in natural ringlets and her eyes were the same haunting blue of the little girl. "Wait," she called out to them before looking at another wizard, "Are you really going to let her go alone? She shouldn't be going at all she's just a child." She demanded harshly of him. The man in question was hooded making his features hard to make out but Bella could see him visibly shrug and turn away. The hauntingly beautiful woman let out a sigh and smiled down at the two. "I could go with you." She was ignoring Bella completely, she had a feeling the woman couldn't actually see her.

"I'm okay. I know what to expect." The raven was shocked speechless by the words but her stunned silence gave the little girl time to drag Bella onto a waiting elevator.

The man outside closed the grate and the man inside looked down at the child. "Are you sure about this? It's awfully frightful." She nodded. "It could be dangerous if you're the right one, can you go through with it?"

"I'm not afraid." The girl said it with such conviction the man stopped trying to dissuade her and instead pushed a button. Bella tried to see what floor they were going to but it looked as if the button had been pressed so many times the writing had rubbed off.

It didn't take long before the descent came to a halt and the man looked down encouragingly at her as he moved to open the door. Bella was too busy watching the look of concentration that came over her companion to look into the room, the girl didn't scream or jump in fright at what she saw, but her beautiful blue eyes began swirling with a strange black fluid. She couldn't seem to look away as she watched in silent horror as those once beautiful eyes took on such an unnatural quality.

Suddenly the child looked up at her and away from whatever was held within that room. Her eyes were completely black, as dark as night it was unsettling. "You have to close your eyes. You can't
see it. You're not ready yet. You have to know everything to be able to face what’s inside you." She grew frustrated and impatient when Bella didn't do as she was told. She grabbed both her hands in her tiny ones. "Please. If you don't, if you see it you might never wake up. This isn't just a dream, I think you know that." Bella did know that, she felt something evil with her and she quickly made her choice to trust the girl. With her eyes closed the feeling of being pursued by some nameless entity blanketed her. She had to use all of her willpower to keep her eyes tightly shut, grounding herself with the tiny hands clasping tightly at hers.

"It's going to try and get you to open your eyes. It wants more than you now. If you look at it, you feed it everything that makes you who you are. You'll feed it her, everything you feel for her, everything you have ever felt for her. Keep them shut."

Bella didn't have to understand the meaning behind the cryptic words to know the girl was desperate. She already felt hands tugging at her clothes and foul breath blowing in her ears and at her nose. She wrinkled it trying not to inhale the stench of rot and decay. "Focus on waking up. Can you feel her, she's calling for you. You need to wake up."

Bella was suddenly jerked away from the girl, her eyes opened on their own and all she could see was a swirling mass of black smoke but she could feel sharp talon tipped hands and evil eyes on her. She felt a pulling sensation in her stomach akin to apparating, she wasn't sure she wanted to go where it was going to take her. "WAKE UP!"

~B~

Hermione was muttering her name in her sleep. Bella pulled her closer, rested her cheek on soft hair and muttered sweet things she had never spoken to anyone else ever before.

It worked. The arm around her tightened and Hermione settled back into a peaceful slumber just as Pomfrey came bustling in. She gave the two a reproachful look and moved over to Bella’s side of the bed.

“That bed wasn’t meant for two people.” She chastised the older woman gently.

Bella smiled a little, “Let me have this, seems to be keeping her nightmares away.” Pomfrey huffed, although Bellatrix knew she never had any intention of making her get up. She knew they were bonded after all, it was none of her business what went on between Bella and Granger, not even in the capacity as a student and teacher at the school. Dumbledore didn’t even have the right to tell Bellatrix what she could do with Hermione, and aside from murdering the girl or forcing her to do something against her will the ministry had no control over them either.

“Just make sure you keep the curtain pulled, don’t want any kids spreading rumors around.” She made to pull the curtain around the bed but Bellatrix stopped her.

“Poppy I need a favor.” The mediwitch raised an eyebrow expectantly. “Tell her it was her that came in unconscious. I want her to believe I hauled her out of the forest and everything after she fell down the hill was a dream.”
Pomfrey didn’t really understand, wasn’t it supposed to be a good thing they were getting along? Wasn’t that the goal? To make Hermione want to stay near by? She just didn’t know anymore. In any case it was Bellatrix’s choice and as much as she despised lying she would tell Hermione what the professor asked her to. If anyone had the girl’s best intentions at heart it would be Bellatrix.

“I doubt she will believe me but I will tell her whatever you want.”

“Thank you, Poppy.” Bellatrix glanced back down at the young woman in her arms and tried to burn the image into her mind. She never wanted to forget the peace she felt at this moment. She sighed and eased herself out of the bed, carefully so not to wake Hermione and spoil the plan she had already formed.

She wasn’t ashamed of being knocked out, whatever had chased them would have likely killed her had Hermione not turned back to save her. She was proud. Not many other students would go back for her with something so terrifying chasing them, and Hermione was hers. Her bond, her equal in just about everything. She couldn’t have asked for a better partner, no one else would have fit her magic and temperament better.

But she couldn’t have Hermione believe she had actually kissed her. She couldn’t take the rejection she knew was coming. She was a coward. What’s worse is she knew it.

Perhaps one day, if the girl chose to stay, to make her life easier, maybe then she would tell her that she cared about her. That she wanted nothing more than to kiss the life out of her and wake up with her every morning. To start a life with her, as equals, friends and lovers.

But for now….for now she had to focus on getting through the year. And right at that particular moment she needed to have a talk with Dumbledore about the creature in the forest and the lie she beseeched he keep up for her.

~H~

Hermione woke alone in the hospital wing the next morning, her head ached from so much sleep and the side of the bed she was sure Bellatrix had been on was empty and cold. Madame Pomfrey was bustling about emptying water pitchers and refilling them with fresh water, she smiled at Hermione. "Good to see you finally up dear, you gave us quiet a fright coming in the way you did. I couldn't find anything wrong with you a little sleep wouldn't cure so you should be fine to be on your way now. Dumbledore mentioned some aurors were wanting to have a word with you, I told him I would send you to Minerva when you were feeling up to it so you could answer their questions. No hurry though, dear. Rest if you still feel like you need it I can send for them to come to you."

Hermione sat up and sipped the water beside her bed, her mouth was incredibly dry. "What happed to Professor Black?" Her voice was husky but coughing and a little more water helped it get back to normal.
"Black? She's fine; She left you in my capable hands after she realized you weren’t terribly hurt. Not a scratch on her, lucky me that woman is the worst patient ever." She scowled at the thought.

"But I thought….wasn’t she unconscious, I thought professor Snape brought her….” Pomfrey frowned at her, a gentle hand coming to her forehead in concern. Hermione's head ached, it hadn't felt like a dream but lately she'd been so tired it very well could have been. "Never mind I must have...dreamed it, what time is it even?" She supposed it did make more sense that Black be the one to save her, and the kiss…she should have known it was all her imagination.

"It’s mid afternoon, you missed most of your classes I’m afraid but Ginny Weasley said she would keep your notes up to date. Oh and we had to dispatch a letter to your parents letting them know about the incident and that you were likely to make a full recovery. I’d send them an owl if I were you, I know how parents are when they think their children are hurt." Hermione really did feel ill now; honestly though she couldn't tell if it was from the owl to her step-father or the fact that she would have to read Sanskrit if she had any hope of figuring out what went on in her classes.

She thanked the nurse and climbed out of bed. She would tackle the aurors first if McGonagall wasn’t busy in a class. Then she would try and get something to eat, she was sure she would need to eat now even if she didn’t feel hungry. She really hoped Ginny could decipher her own notes.

~B~

Bellatrix was annoyed. Dumbledore had agreed to go with her lie, small as it was it made no impact on the aurors ability to do their jobs. He would not, however, let her return to the forest to search for her wand. It irritated her to no end. Nymph had promised to run to Olivanders’ as soon as she was done with Granger and get her a suitable replacement until hers could be found but it still infuriated her that her trusted wand was missing, perhaps even gone for good.

To make matters worse she had been forbidden by Poppy to teach her classes that day, McGonagall was teaching them. She couldn’t read her notes so now her classes had spent a waste of a day learning random bits of whatever Minerva had felt like teaching them. Not that she didn’t do a good job but honestly Black would rather have had Severus step in. At least he loved the subject and would have taught them something interesting, like dueling or how to create new spells. He loved to make new spells, he was credited with at least four she knew of. He probably kept a few more just for himself.

A knock pulled her away from her bored musings, a small Slytherin stuck his head in her office and fearfully told her professor McGonagall was looking for her, Miss Granger had woken up.

She dismissed him with a careless wave of her hand, careful not to show any of her nerves. She hope Poppy had pulled off her lie. The woman wasn’t very good at them.

Everyone was present when she finally arrived. Hermione glanced up at her nervously and she gazed back with as much confidence and arrogance as she could afford. She was supposed to have
saved the girls life after all, she had to keep up appearances even if she hadn’t believed Pomfrey’s lie.

“Bout bloody time.” Her niece elbowed Mad Eye Moody, he rolled his one good eye and adjusted himself in his seat, his wooden leg squeaked annoyingly as he moved. She didn’t remember him having so many missing parts, he certainly had his leg the last time he had been to the castle and turned her nephew into a very adorable ferret.

“Ohay so we got some of Black’s story but we need Granger’s to finish up. We already swept the area and didn’t find anything.” He grunted irritably. “Black says something chased you, you fell down a ravine and lost consciousness do you remember anything else?”

Hermione hesitated, her eyes wandering up to Black. “I…I think I remember it smelled horrible. And I think it’s skin was kind of…leathery maybe. It had long claws, it scratched at me.”

Bella couldn’t comment, she had seen the scratch just before Poppy healed it but she had thought maybe the girl got it on a tree limb in their dash, or when she fell. She hadn’t realized it had gotten close enough to touch her, the thought of what could have happened made her shiver, she crossed her arms over her chest to cover the involuntary movement but her niece’s Sharp eyes latched onto her. She grimaced, there was knowledge there. She was going to have to deal with Andy and her loud mouth, right after she dealt with Nymphadora “don’t call me that” Tonks.

“Interesting.” Moody was saying. “And you’re sure it wasn’t kids playing pranks?”

Bella hissed. “Do you think random immature children have enough power to challenge me? You couldn’t even best me in a duel Moody, do not insult me.” He held his chubby hand up in surrender.

“Covering all the basis. The alternatives are not good, not good at all I’m afraid. Perhaps it’s best to tell the students to avoid- no.” He changed his mind shaking his balding red head thoughtfully. “No don’t tell them anything or they will just charge right on in like the idiots half of them are.”

Hermione resented the pointed look Bellatrix shot her, she didn’t always charge in. She knew the boys would have wanted to investigate but since she lived through the experience already she knew this one she would let the professionals handle. That creature, whatever or whoever it was, terrified her.

Hermione shivered as she remember all it’s taunts. “Oh.” All eyes fell on her once more and she blushed. “I remember it kept talking about how tasty we would be. How much power we had. It said it could live for centuries, so it must have been old. I….maybe it meant to eat us. I don’t know but it was definitely sentient and it was talking and taunting us.”

Moody's frown deepened even further. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully with one hand and adjusted his grip on his wooden cane with the other before he turned his attention back to Dumbledore.
“Not good at all, Albus.” He glanced back at the two teachers. “Ms. Granger can go, if you remember anything else send an owl to Tonks here. She will pass it along. We should discuss security measures, Albus, Minerva. Black if you want you can return as well.” Bellatrix simply shrugged and held the door open for Hermione as well.

When they were free of the room she grabbed the girls arm and pulled her to a stop. “Stay out of the forest. That thing, if it’s what I suspect it may be, was attracted to your magic. It may target you but I don’t think it will come out of the safety of the woods and reveal itself.”

“What is it? Why didn’t you tell Moody—“

Bellatrix let go of her sleeve and cut her off. “Mad Eye and I have already spoken, he already knows what I believe. You do not need to know, I won’t have panic spreading around the school. Just for once in your life do as you’re told and stay out of the woods or so help me I will string you up by your toes in the dungeons Hermione Granger.” She glared at her for a few more minutes and then spun off away, back toward her private quarters and away from any more questions the girl had. She had a blasted headache anyways, a good nap would do her some good…..

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She didn’t get a good nap, she didn’t get any nap. Not twenty minutes after she got back to her room Nymphadora knocked on her door. She opened it, stood there staring at her for a moment and then growled at her as she allowed the woman to walk in.
“Your mother needs to learn when to keep her mouth shut.” She grumbled, moving to her kitchen to pour them both a shot of firewhiskey, she had a feeling she might need it.

“She was baking….on family night. She had five dozen cookies.” Tonks gave her a pointed look, one that just spoke Black.
“That doesn’t mean anything. It could have been a rough day at-“

“It was family night. You know she doesn’t work on family night, Aunt Bella.” The dark witch cursed and threw back her shot, Nymph politely refused hers. It was unusual for the girl not to accept a drink with her favorite aunt but she waved it off and tossed back Nymph's as well.

“She’s worried you’ll push her away, that you won’t give her a choice and are just going to condemn yourself.”

“I’ve got everything in order. I plan to tell her, and see what she wants to do. I can’t force her to be in my life, Tonks.”

“But you can tell her everything. She seems like a smart girl. You should tell her you’re in love with her.”
Bella wanted to rage, was the world just determined to spread her life’s story. She didn’t, instead she just felt incredibly tired. “No- It’s not something that can happen. I’m not the type of person that loves. Hermione is young and will settle down with a nice young man and have many children. That is not something I am going to take away from her. This bond is not going to take that away from her.” No matter how hard it was for her to control her jealousy. No matter how much she wanted to believe one day she would be able to tell the girl how she felt. She was determined to at least give her a chance at normalcy.

“But what if she loves you, Aunt Bella? What then?”

“She can’t love me!” Bella placed her hands on the table and felt it strain under the force of her pent up magic. At least she reigned it in enough not to split it. “I’m broken, Nymphadora. My father broke me. He beat me into submission, used my love for my sisters against me, I had to endure all of their tortures for them, my love for them forced me to protect them! He beat any kind of tenderness I had out of me before I was in my first year of school. I can’t be that weak again!” No one was going to use Hermione against her because she refused to give in to her love for her. Not now. Not when Hermione couldn’t truly defend herself. She had no choice but to endure the bond, she would lose her mind otherwise, but she would not give anyone that kind of power over her.

Tonks stared at her aunt in shock. No one had ever discussed what things were like growing up with her grandfather. She wondered if her mother even knew….if this was what she had been trying to tell her that night at supper.

“I’m pregnant.” Nymph told her softly, her fingers going up to brush away errant tears as they streamed down her cheeks. “But the father thinks I’m too good for him. He thinks I should be with someone who can offer me more. He thinks he is broken and dangerous, he is giving up on this wonderful thing. He is giving up our love and our child because he is afraid of being hurt. Just like you. You’re not broken, Aunt Bella. You’re amazing. You protected your sisters from suffering because you loved them. That’s not a weakness that’s pure strength. Now you love this amazing girl who happens to be the very thing your soul and magic want more than anything. And your running away scared. You are miserable because you are afraid she won’t love you back.” Tonks stood up and carefully approached her aunt, she rested a hand on her shaking shoulder. “Does she need to. If Mom and Aunt Cissa hated you, if you had just never told them you loved them…..would you have stopped protecting them? If you didn’t say the words would you just stop loving them? Loving her?”

Bellatrix shook, tears fell from her eyes and landed on her hands still pressed against the table. It wasn’t fair. She had just discovered her feelings and she was so torn. She wanted to be noble. Unselfish. She needed enough from Hermione already. But Tonks was right. Even if she didn’t say the words, if Hermione never knew, she wouldn’t stop loving her. She couldn’t. Bellatrix swallowed reflexively before she finally moved to hug her niece. “Nymph when I look at Hermione I see everything I have ever wanted.” She moved back so she could look into Nymph’s eyes. “But when I look at me I see absolutely nothing Hermione needs.”

She feared losing herself to the voices. Forcing Hermione to do something against her will, hurting her in random acts of violent uncontrollable magic. Or just simply hurting her by being herself. The
greatest threat to Hermione's happiness was Bella, one way or another she knew she was going to hurt the girl and she desperately wanted to avoid it.
“I don’t believe it. Love does amazing things. You just have to give it a chance.”

Bellatrix only sighed.

~B~

It had been a fitful night for Bella, actually it had been a fitful weekend. She hadn’t been able to shelve her anxieties and had spent nearly every night going over lesson plans she could do without a proper wand. She had a new one, but it wasn’t the same, and she had no intention of showing her students how advanced she was at wandless magic. It was a very well guarded secret she intended to keep, as it was something she had developed after bonding.

Nymph had kept her word and gotten her a new wand after Bellatrix had made her promise to go straight home afterwards and tell her mother she was pregnant. She had listen to the girl talk about this mysterious man for half an hour before the girl let slip that he was a werewolf. Bellatrix could understand his hesitation for tying her to him but the deed had already been done. Nymph was going to have to take her own advice and be brave enough to tell him the truth, and soon, before she started showing.

There was nothing she could do about it now, she would have to let Nymph sort out her own mess. She had enough on her plate as it was. In fact one of her problems was going to be walking in with the rest of the sixth years very soon.
She forced all thoughts about her family and problems away and glanced over at the notes Minerva had left for her regarding her sixth year classes. She was grateful to see the witch hadn’t managed to skip too far ahead, they were still on creatures. Mimicking creatures now it seemed. They always creeped her out. Wendigoes and skin walkers…..she shivered.

She didn't have a better idea so it would have to do. She let out a huff as the class began to file in. Out of time to think of anything else Bella began writing facts on the board. She ignored Granger's searching looks trying her best to act normal for the girl. The last thing she needed was for Hermione to start asking more questions.

She finished writing just as the last student filed in and took their seat. She looked at Hermione, "Write this down."

"Miss we copied this just yesterday with Professor McGonagall." Bella glared daggers at Colin Creevey's blonde head. He squeaked in fear and sunk low in his seat.

"So you're comfortable giving the lecture I have planned on it Mr. Creevey." He shook his head furiously. "No. Pity looks like I'll have to earn my pay today after all." She looked at Hermione to make sure she was still writing. "Who was paying attention in yesterday's lesson…." She walked slowly between the desks running her fingers over the wood. Many students gulped. "Who can tell me how many confirmed skin walkers there are in the world?" No one said anything, not even Hermione's hand went up.
"Not even you Granger."

Hermione shook her head and put her quill down. "I only know what little the muggles know about them." Bella waved her on to explain. "I think it's mostly American Native Indian stories. Skin walkers would kill humans and skin them then they would wear their skin...or something like that."

Bellatrix cringed. "That is disgusting, close I guess, still disgusting. Copy this down." She made sure everyone had parchment and quills out before she continued. "There are three known skin walkers. Not much is known about this strange creature except it picks its target and it will wait years until it acts. Walkers find witches or wizards with unsurmountable power and they will wait and stalk their prey until that power reaches its peak. When that occurs they lure the witch out by taking the shape of loved ones. No one has ever survived an attack from a walker." She let that sink in and gave them a moment to finish writing.

"One of the walkers we know about is considered the deadliest. Unlike the other two who only stalk from a distance and lure their prey in to them, this one infiltrates. It bides it's time within its prey's inner circle and it's said it stays well after it's done to enjoy the after effects of its kill. It seems a little closer to a serial killer than a magical creature if you ask me." She smiled slightly; McGonagall knew what topics to pick to keep the kids interested that was for sure. Her kids were hanging on her every word, give them a boogey man and they'd listen to her talk about it for hours. Even the dopey Slytherin next to Hermione was paying attention for once.

"Has there been a sighting of a walker lately?"

Bella shook her head, not willing to admit to Hermione that was what she believed attacked them in the forest. She was going to keep up the appearance she was continuing the lecture Minerva had started. "If there has no one has noticed. It's hard to separate an attack from a walker and anything else. Contrary to muggle belief they don't strip the skin from their victims. They suck out its very magic which leaves no trace. It doesn't have to strip skin from anyone it uses the stored magic to alter its physical appearance to something its victim will recognize."

"How do we know all this if they're such difficult creatures to place?" Bella smiled at Hermione grateful she had asked the question, she was really hoping the answer might freak a few of them out.

"Why Ms. Granger walkers can talk. There is a record somewhere of one sitting down to converse with its victim...a sort of diary I suppose. The walker allowed the man to write down his memoirs before it killed him. Later a few eye witness statements of people being in two places at once popped up. The memoirs started to gather validity bodies dead without any evidence of foul play." She stopped at the head of the class and stared at the nervous class. "Muggles and wizards alike knew the truth after that diary was published. Walkers walk amongst us, and they could be anyone. They could be your closest friend and you would never know it...." Everyone looked around at their partners anxiously.
"BOO!" She laughed as a few students, Creevey mostly, jumped a foot in the air. "Don't worry your pretty little selves; I doubt a walker would want students. They want powerful wizards like Dumbledore or even Flammel. Write me a foot and a half on telling different types of mimicking creatures apart and research any accounts of the victims you can find. I expect it on my desk by Monday."

They all groaned as she dismissed them. It was going to be a long weekend.

~H~

Fall was turning into winter. Snow was beginning to fall heavily and traveling the grounds was beginning to get tedious. Which thankfully meant less students out and about and more time Hermione could spend on her own, not even Ginny cared to come searching for her in the knee deep snow. Only McLaggen seemed to be that determined to find the brunette. Despite his persistence Hermione's mood improved drastically as the months progressed. She was eating better and even enjoying D.A.D.A despite the fact that she and Bellatrix had gone back to their typical arguing. It wasn’t until the last day in November when her mood took an abrupt nose dive.

The post had come that morning, and she never got much mail, sometimes she got an occasional birthday card and present from the boy's parents, but regardless Fallow always came to see her. She knew something was wrong when he didn’t follow Hedwig in.

She found him in the owlery, a small letter attached to his leg. He must have gone home to visit, Sterling, sometimes she drew pictures and he happily delivered those back to Hermione. If he was reluctant to deliver the small paper he had now it was because he knew it meant they would be returning home for the holidays.

He nipped her finger when she made to take it from him. “Fallow.” She scolded him gently. She understood his desire to remain at Hogwarts, really she did. But she couldn’t ignore the letter. It could be something else, Sterling could be ill or something else could have happened. He nipped again and hopped back away from her. She sighed.

“Alright I’ll make a deal with you. I will return home and you can stay the vacation here. I won’t make you come home until summer vacation. How does that sound?” He stared at her, his wide brown eyes seeming to weigh her honesty. Finally he extended his leg so she could take the bit of paper. “Thank you, Fal.” She scratched him affectionately and idly handed him a treat. He climbed up onto her shoulder as he ate it and watched as she unrolled the paper. She let out a heavy breath.

No one was sick, Peter only wanted to remind her she was to come home for Christmas break and she wouldn’t be allowed to go to any of her friends homes this year, he left a few scathing words about her illicit relationship with Cormac and her being attacked in the woods but he was very clear she was not to ask him to go anywhere else. He claimed it was her punishment for causing trouble.

Fallow screeched in an I told you so way and she let him skitter on down her arm back to his perch. “A promise is a promise.” She told him dubiously. “But I'm going to miss you.” He hooted his
agreement.

She left him after a few more moments of scratching and climbed back down the winding stairs of the tower. She wasn’t likely to get any sleep that night, letters from Peter always left her feeling unsettled, no matter what news they contained.

She stumbled over an uneven stone and would have toppled down the path had it not been for a quick arm reaching out and grasping her around the waist. She was jerked into another’s body as they struggled to balance the both of them out.

“Bloody hell, Granger, could you pay more attention. I’m not in the habit of saving mudbloods.”

She flinched and pulled away from the lanky blonde boy. She couldn’t believe he had saved her, granted she wouldn’t have died and she didn’t exactly think him evil but she never would have expected Draco Malfoy to be a bloody knight in shining armor. Not for her at least.

“T-thank you, Draco.” She half expected him to snarl at the use of his given name but instead he waved her off distractedly.

"Don’t mention it.” He continued his journey up for he owlery but quickly turned back to glare at her, “Really don’t mention it. Can’t have people thinking I’ve gone soft on a mudblood.” She nodded, she should have been angry he kept calling her that ridiculous slur but it just didn’t seem to have the same disgusted tone behind it that he used to use. He turned back and this time didn’t turn back around to face her. She couldn’t help but wonder what had gotten into him.

~H~

She took her time getting back to the castle. She enjoyed the crisp evening air and the view wasn’t anything to scoff at either. It seemed no matter how many times she had looked at it the scenery always kept it’s beauty. She loved the lake, it’s dark waters spreading far and wide with the dark Forbidden Forest behind it.

“Hello Hermione.” She turned back toward the castle, surprised to see Luna and Dean standing only a few feet away from her. “Lovely view isn’t it?” She told the brunette dreamily.

“Uh-Yes. Yes it is. What are you two doing out this way?” The owlery was all that they could get to without leaving the path and heading for the forest. She didn’t want to spread panic or have students doing stupid brave games by going into the dark woods but she didn’t want her friends hurt because she kept quiet about what happened the night of her detention.

“I’m sending a letter to father. He always gets a tad depressed during the holidays, I like to remind him he’s not alone.” She said if so airily but Hermione could tell she still missed her mother.
Sometimes she forgot Luna had witnessed the woman’s death. She reached out and touched her hand for just a second, offering a small, gentle smile.

“I’m sure he appreciates it. Losing a loved one is hard. Especially around the holidays.” Luna nodded.

“Dean here I believe was looking for you though.” The blonde smiled at the nervous boy, internally Hermione groaned. He had turned a few shades darker when they attention was drawn back to him. “I’m just going to send my letter then.” They both watched as she made her way easily up the uneven path.

“Luna….I hope she never changes.” Dean said suddenly. Hermione turned his attention back toward him and sighed gratefully. She had gotten it so wrong. The poor boy had it bad for Luna and Hermione doubted the girl even knew he was alive, in that regard anyways. She wasn’t sure her dear friend would know someone was flirting with her even if they expressly told her.

“Were you really looking for me?” She asked him with a knowing smile. His dark skinned darkened further but he drew up a dazzling smile and extended her his arm.

She chuckled but took it. “I was actually. Ron and Harry are going to floo their parents and asked if I could fetch you for them. His map let them know where to look and well….Luna…was heading this way so I volunteered to come fetch you.”

“Oh I see. An excuse for you to walk with Luna.”

He didn’t seemed to mind her good natured teasing. “Exactly.”

“Very well then.” She laughed. It was nice to enjoy a bit or normal teenage things. She was happy Dean had a crush on her friend. Luna was a good person, a bit loopy but what was life without a bit of insanity.

“I don’t think she even knows I like her.” He admitted. “And I have been super obvious.”

“She is a bit…. Oblivious.” Hermione let go of his arm as they stepped back into the castle so she could tug off her robes. Outside it was freezing but inside it was warm enough she could wear her short sleeve shirt in comfort. In fact most were walking around the castle grounds in short sleeves, it might have been a little too warm inside. “Honestly I’m kind of surprised she hasn’t mention some sort of creature that tells her when people have crushes or are in love with one another. That seems like something impossible she could see and believe in.”

“Yeah, but she’s really talented. And you have to admit she is usually right, I might not be able to see the things she can but when she says they tell her something she’s usually right about it.” Luna had predicted Ron and Lavender were going to be an unhealthy couple, she can’t remember what
creatures she said were swarming around their heads that told her so. She definitely hadn’t been wrong. Although Hermione had knew that relationship was going to the dogs when Lavender starting calling Ron her Won-Won. She shuddered.

“Bet you were just thinking about Ron and Lavender.” He laughed when she rolled her eyes.

“She couldn’t have been more right about them. Honestly if those two get married I’m never going to holidays at the burrow. They drive me insane.”

Dean agreed, he placed his hand on the small of her back as the stair case shifted, a gentlemanly gesture she barely noticed as they maneuvered on the moving stair case. Harry had done it many times because she was famous for losing her balance in their first year. She had nearly toppled off them more than once. By second year Fred and George had taken drastic measures to keeping her between them whenever was a mad dash up the stairs to the commons room. She always seemed to get shoved when she had been on her own. It wasn’t in any way needed anymore but it seemed the gesture was imbedded in a few of her fellow Gryffindors. Even Ginny did it from time to time.

They were still chuckling about Ron and Lavender and their obnoxious PDA when they arrived at the portrait. Bellatrix Black was standing beside it, wearing very snug jeans and a black tank top, tapping her foot in irritation and glaring at the Fat Lady for all she was worth. Dean stared at her for a minute, almost unsure who it was as he had never seen their professor in anything but wizarding clothes.

“You blasted, ungrateful, tone deaf-“

“Oh! Students. Password!?” Their House Guard looked positively haggard. “For the love of Merlin tell me the password so I can let this ridiculous excuse for a professor in.”

Bellatrix turned her dark eyes on them and glared hard at Dean. Her eyes tracing the path of his arm behind Hermione's back. Her eyes narrowed and flickered between the two before her lips settled in a grim line. “My idiot godson's mother wanted to have a word with me. Since he is flooing her I thought I would take advantage of it.” And she had wanted to see Hermione but now she wasn’t so sure it had been the right decision, she should have just popped in on Lily to see what the blasted witch wanted.

“Chocolate Frog.” Hermione turned her curious eyes on Dean. He shrugged, unaware of the professor's jealousy directed at him. “Neville said a first year let it slip to a Slytherin, had to change it after they pulled a prank in the commons room.” Bellatrix scoffed and trudged inside before the Fat Lady could change her mind.

A few young Gryffindors took one look at their DADA teacher and scampered off up to their rooms. She grinned wickedly up after them. A few others just glanced nervously at Hermione as if she were the fuse required to make Black blow, they weren’t wrong but she couldn’t possibly imagine what she could do to make the witch angry in their own common room. At least here
Black was the outsider.

“Hey Aunt Bella.” Hermione wondered how exactly Harry and Draco both managed to have the same witch as their favorite aunt. They couldn’t have been more different if they tried and yet somehow she got along with both of them.

“Your mother said she had something to tell me. That she apparently couldn’t put in a bloody letter.” The dark witch groused. Harry smiled widely, he obviously knew something.

“Your gonna love it.” He promised her. “I thought you might floo her yourself though, I didn’t know you were going to be coming tonight.”

Bellatrix shrugged and shooed some students away from the area around the fireplace. “I heard you and Ron talking about flooing them and thought it would be easier if I just got it over with.”

Ron chuckled. “You make it sound like a horrible chore talking to your mates, Professor.”

“Have you met your mother?” Bella deadpanned. “She exhausts me.” They all chuckled a bit at the dramatics, her eyes flew back to Dean as he waved them off, intent on heading over to see what a group of third years were doing with some of Fred and George’s new merchandise.

“See you later, Hermione, oh….don’t say-“

“I won’t.” She smiled kindly at him and ignored the boys and Bella’s inquisitive looks.

“Another crush?” She elbowed Harry rather harshly in the ribs, he groaned but his eyes lit up as Ginny came down the stairs toward them. “Gin I need help, Hermione is out to abuse me.”

“Oh really? Want to know where he is ticklish? I find it’s the best torture.” The red head's grin was nearly as wicked as Bella’s.

“Oh I got him to wet himself when he was a kid!” She cackled as Harry blushed bright red.

“Oh Merlin Aunt Bella!”

“You shouldn’t have tattled.” She laughed brightly at the memory. Hermione couldn’t look away. Her long arms encircling her own waist as she bent over and chuckled, tears steaming down her face at the memory.

Harry groaned. “She was sitting in my mom’s favorite spot and I told her mom would get mad. Well being the little shit that I was when my mom came out I pointed right to her and mom fussed at her. It wasn’t all that funny.” He scolded his aunt.
“Oh yes it was. You had the smuggest look on your little face. You had deserved to be tickled.”

“Let’s just floo mum already.” He muttered glumly. A chuckling Ron handed him the powder and he flung it into the fireplace irritably. He stuck his head into the violent green flames and uttered his address very clearly. A few seconds later he shouted for his mum and pulled away from the fireplace. The green flames died down and an image of Lily Potter replaced them.

“Oh, Bellatrix. I didn’t know you would be here.”

“You made it seem urgent in your letter.”

The younger witch scoffed as she stared curiously at her friend. “Not that urgent...Ron, Gin your mum was supposed to be here to talk to you two but she got held up, an accident at Fred and Georges joke shop.”

“Are they alright?” Ginny asked worriedly.

“Yes, George just blew off his ear and it seems it may be a permanent feature. She said they were making holey jokes left and right and driving her insane. He’s at St. Mungo’s.”

“As long as they are alright. We will see her for Christmas holidays in just a few days anyways.” Ron said, shaking his head and muttering about his two older brothers and their jokes. He loved them really, but permanently blowing off an ear and still making jokes about it….that was just like them.

“Oh, Bella, let me get little Olie, for your surprise.” She disappeared and came back a few moments later, a sleepy baby boy with dark messy hair appeared in the image beside her. “Your going to love this, it’s his first word.”

Bella sighed. “That’s what all the fuss-“

“Bewa!” The dark witch stopped her complaining and practically shoved her godson aside as she scrambled to get closer to the fire. Hermione thought her excitement was down right adorable. It was the loving and gentle side she didn’t get to see very often.

“Say that again, little man.” The baby chuckled delightfully and repeated her name over and over. “Oh he is a smart one. Aren’t you!? I knew you were my favorite. Your very first word is my name. Ha!”

“Yes. He practically refused to say anything else. We were worried about his development and then we start talking about you coming for Christmas and all of a sudden it’s Bella this. Bella that.
He is even calling his stuffed Lion Bella.”

Bellatrix hummed. “Need to get him a snake, I can’t have him naming a lion after me, I’m a proud Slytherin.”

Ron laughed. “Your in the Gryffindor common room though, gotta be some bad luck for a proud Slytherin.”

Bellatrix shot him a glare. “Can still give you detention.” He gulped.

“Oh I’ve got to get him back down for bed. I just couldn’t wait to show you. Harry your father wanted me to pass on that he will be picking you up from the platform. He said he found something you were looking for…” Harry nodded, a wide grin on his face.

“Excellent.”

“What-“

“Not telling. It’s a surprise.” He told Ginny affectionately, sharing a look over her head with a grinning Ron.

“Oh and Hermione dear, Molly and I are throwing a Christmas bash we were wanting you to come if you wanted. We would pick you up in a car so not to scare your poor stepfather again.”

She bit her lip, having the two mothering witches pop into the kitchen and frighten her stepfather into falling on his ass had been the funniest thing she had ever seen but she still held the scars from where he took offense to her laughing.

“I will have to let you know. He said he may have something special planned.” Like keeping her away from anyone who actually cared about her.

“Just owl us when you know. We have presents for your little sister too. The picture she sent little Olie is adorable.” Hermione smiled, Sterling had worked extra hard on it when she hear Hermione’s friend was getting a baby brother. She wanted the little boy to know how awesome siblings were.

The baby in question started fussing. “Oh….I need to go. I love you, Harry. And the rest of you too,” She laughed brightly and disappeared a few seconds later.

Hermione loved her friends parents, she really did, but sometimes after talking with them she felt so depressed. She missed her loving father and the kind loving woman her mother had been before she lost herself to the bottle and ultimately died because of it.

“I can’t believe Oliver’s first words was Bella.” Harry shook his head at Bella’s scowl.
“He’s a smart boy!” She pointed accusingly at the two boys who had been friends since diapers. “Both of yours was Wobby!”

“Hey we love Dobby, he played with us and got us treats when you guys weren’t paying attention.” Ron told her brightly. They had been told the story of their first word multiple times, they had both said it together at a dinner when little Dobby had popped in to bring out a special treat, in honor of Bellatrix getting her teaching position.

“It should have been Bella too, I am supposed to be everyone favorite.” The dark witch groused. “I’m the fun one. I let you get away with everything.” Hermione barely managed to cover her indignant scoff with a cough. Black’s eyes narrowed on her playfully. “I am the fun one.” She repeated. Hermione shook her head and held her hands up in surrender.

“What was Draco’s first word?” She hadn’t really meant to ask the question aloud. Dark eyes lost the playfully edge and hardened slightly. She didn’t think the woman was going to answer.

“Ohchit.” Oh shit. They broke out in laughter.

“I bet you taught him that.” Ginny told their teacher mirthfully. Bellatrix looked guilty.

“I might have said it a lot when he was born, I thought I would drop him.”

“You mean you didn’t?” Ron was practically rolling on the floor, they were drawing a few are you crazy glances from their fellow Gryffindors. It was often students laughed with Bellatrix. And she didn’t usually come see her God son in his common room, so no one really ever got to see what she was like outside of school but them. Even Hermione knew she had a softer side, even though she never turned it on her. “That would explain so much.” Bella shoved Ron over but he kept laughing.

“Alright you lot. Have your fun. Don’t forget to do the homework I gave you,” She told the boys, effectively ending their merriment. “And you,” she pointed at Hermione, “don’t help them. If they haven’t started it’s their own fault, they have had all month.” They both shot her pleading eyes but she held her hands up in surrender. “Goodnight you lot.” She brushed up against Hermione as she left making the girl shiver as their skin touched. Even such a small bit felt so ridiculously smooth. She couldn’t help but wonder if the rest of her was as soft.
Aside from class Hermione hadn’t seen Bellatrix since the night she had come to the common room. She had seen enough of McLaggen to last a lifetime though. He was showing up everywhere. The library, the owlery, if she went to the Quidditch Pitch he was there, it was annoying and his pestering was driving her insane. She was forgetting why she hadn’t just hexed the hell out of him and moved on already.

She had been blunt with him, he didn’t seem to care. She wondered what kind of egotistical idiot didn’t seem to understand when he was being rejected. Far as she knew he wasn’t even that popular, so it wasn’t like girls never told him no.

She wrote to Viktor about it. Wondering how he got rid of crazy stalker fans. He had expressed a great deal of concern and let her know he had people who did that for him but he was by no means a slouch when it came to dueling. Being able to hex someone was apparently a lot easier when you were a famous Quidditch player. He had wanted to meet with her, they may have had a disastrous date but they were still friends. He thought if the boy could see them together maybe he would believe the old rumors that Viktor was still hung up on Hermione. That he was trying to convince her to come back to him. It may be enough to intimidate Cormac. After all who wouldn’t be intimidated by Viktor Krum?

It was a shame she didn’t want to start those rumors up again. The mail she had received after that date had been a nightmare and it was even worse when Viktor took his break from Quidditch. She wouldn’t go through that mess again, it would be like leaving the frying pan covered in grease just to jump into the fire.

She made her way down to the lake shore, the only place McLaggen hadn’t seemed to trace her back to, it helped that she had found a more secluded spot, although it was a little too close to the forest for her taste after what had happened. Still to get away from his mindless pestering she was willing to chance it. She didn’t think whatever had attacked her and Bellatrix would risk coming so blatantly onto school grounds and she wasn’t actually all that far from Hagrid’s hut if an emergency did arise.

She sat down heavily, dropping her bag and books beside her, completely unmindful of the wet sand as she scratched idle patterns with her fingers beside her legs.

She enjoyed the quiet. Enjoyed staring out at the black lake watching ripples disturb it’s peaceful surface. Normally she was able to forget her problems, if only for a few minutes, the respite was welcome and much needed. Tonight she just couldn’t quiet the fears in her mind. She knew it was because vacation was so fast approaching and she was nowhere near ready to return home to Peter. She missed Sterling vastly but she could have gone her entire life with never laying eyes on her step father again.

She sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest. She was tired. She had nightmares since reading the letter Peter had sent, not that he let her go to the Weasleys’ or the Potter’s very often but the fact that he had expressly forbid her from asking didn’t bode well. She was reliving a lot of his
abuse toward her the past few weeks. Waking up with quiet screams lodged in her throat after only a few hours of sleep. It had taken a lot of work to keep Ginny and the others from noticing just how tired she was, how jumpy she was. Glamours were becoming her best friend, spells she had learned ages ago to cover up bruises after vacations worked just as well on bags under her eyes. It was just a shame it only covered up, she could have done with a pick me up lately. She wished she had an excuse to ask Pomfrey for a pepperup potion.

“Deep thinking, Gryffindor?”

She jumped, letting out a completely undignified squeak that left an amused smirk on the dark teacher's face. She hadn’t heard anyone approach or she would have taken off back toward the school. She came out there to avoid people not engage in conversation or get herself detentions.

“I-I just needed to get away from….everyone.” Bellatrix raised an eyebrow at her and sat down gracefully beside her before the girl could jump up and run off.

Dark eyes glanced toward the forest and a frown settled heavily on her immaculate face. “I thought I told you to stay away from the forest. This is awfully close, Granger.” She glanced down at the brunette disapprovingly but managed to keep her tone even and devoid of the worry she actually felt. Part of her was afraid for herself, it had been a rather traumatic experience.

“I’m not in the forest and Hagrid is inside,” Hermione nodded off toward the hut just a little ways away. If she couldn’t have run she could have made enough noise to alert the giant. They both knew he would face down anything for his students, especially for Hermione, Harry and Ron. “I don’t feel uneasy either.”

Bellatrix hummed, she didn’t feel the presence either but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. It had wanted them both and she wasn’t about to let it get Hermione. She wasn’t leaving the girl until she went back inside, she didn’t much care if Hermione didn’t want her company.

“I still don’t want you coming out here. Not alone.” Coffee colored eyes glanced toward her sharply. Bellatrix could tell Hermione was annoyed, she was the only student who had been told to steer clear of the forest, a place she had frequented since her first year with no problem.

“No one told the others to stay out of the forest. They are in just as much—“

“I don’t c—“ Bellatrix stopped, sucked in a deep breath. She nearly said she didn’t care about her other students, she did care, but Hermione’s safety came above the others and for the moment keeping the others in the dark about the danger was the safest thing they could do for them. “I told you. You know what happened, how serious it was. For once, Hermione do as I ask or I’ll give you detention every night for the rest of the year if I have to.”

Hermione sighed sharply, she didn’t doubt the woman. Black would without a shadow of a doubt give her detention for the year. And she knew she was being slightly childish, she knew why she
was the only student who knew about the danger lurking in the forest. “I won’t go in the forest. I just… I need somewhere where I can be alone. Where I don’t have to deal with anyone bothering me and trying to pressure me into dating or making jokes about my life. I….” She left off, not wanting to share too much with the one teacher who could barely tolerate her. Somehow she doubted Bellatrix would be sympathetic to all her romantic troubles.

“You should try somewhere not as close to the forest.” Bellatrix pressed, keeping a tight reign on her temper at the mention of Hermione dating. It reminded her of McLaggen and the way Weasley was always staring at her when the girl wasn’t looking.

“I can’t find anywhere else! McLaggen is following me everywhere,” Hermione groaned, mostly to herself. “I have tried the owlery, the clock tower, the library even the pitch and Cormac still manages to find me. I swear I’m going to hex him if he asks me one more time about going to his house for winter break.” She didn’t notice Black’s hands tightening into fists or her clenched jaw. “I should really just let Viktor come and jinx him.”

“As exciting as your love life is,” Bellatrix growled barely able to restrain the jealousy she felt burning a hole in her stomach at the mention of yet another rival, this one perhaps not so unwelcome it seemed, “its not reason enough to be so near the forest.”

Hermione glared at her, no one seemed to understand just how much the idiot was bothering her, no one except Krum, but she supposed that was her fault. She hadn’t really explained to anyone but Viktor and she admitted to herself she only told him because he wasn’t around, he couldn’t cause any drama so far away, couldn’t cause any problems that could potentially make it back to Peter. She was becoming quickly aware just how much hearing about Cormac pissed Peter off.

“I’m not changing my mind. Maybe a night of detention will remind you I don’t make idle threats.” Bellatrix matched her glare but her jaw was still clenched in anger.

Hermione turned away, angry that she had somehow stepped right into another detention with so few days left before the break, as if she didn’t already have enough to stress over.

“Fine.” She made move to stand, intent on getting away from the dark haired witch but a hand reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her down, bent at the waist, to stare at dark eyes.

“Keep away from the forest, I’m more than serious about this. No more treks, even out to Hagrid’s cabin, without friends or boyfriends.” She spit the word out as if it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Hermione pulled away sharply, needing the space as her mind was filled with the kiss that hadn’t actually happened. She desperately needed to get a handle on her attraction to the infuriating woman. “I will, I can’t afford any more detentions.” She made to head back to the castle but suddenly stopped and turned, her hard gaze softening with worry as she glanced from the woman to the forest and back. Her teeth nibbled at her bottom lip as her eyes danced around warily. “C-come with me. Back to the castle.”
For a moment she thought Bellatrix wouldn’t comply, would be stubborn and send her back alone left to worry about her. But after a few tense seconds that seemed to last forever the teacher climbed to her feet. “Alright.”

Hermione let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Somehow finding courage enough to say her next words to a woman she believed disliked her. “If I can’t be near the forest neither can you. That…that creature had been after both of us but I think I was an after thought, it wanted you, it named you. I...you can’t…” She wrapped her arms around her stomach and rocked slightly on the balls of her feet as she fought off the panic clawing at her mind at the thought of Bellatrix being hurt, possibly killed.

Warm hands startled her as Black reached out and pulled her close. “Breath. Feel the rise and fall of my chest and breath, Granger.” Hermione did as she told her. Her hands leaving her stomach to grasp the witch's robes. The hazy panic faded after a few steadying breaths, feeling the witch alive and breathing beneath her hands helped.

“I’m okay.” She muttered against her chest after a few minutes. She leaned back, unwilling to release her grasp on the teacher and grateful Black hadn’t yet pushed her away. “Promise me you won’t go into the forest alone either.” She didn’t give any reason for the demand, there wasn’t anything she could say. Her heart stuttered in her chest as she waited for Bellatrix’s response.

“If you don’t I won’t.” Black said after a few minutes of intense staring. Her arms flexed against Hermione's back, pulling her closer for just a second before she pushed the girl back and away from her carefully. “We should return to the castle before it gets too dark.”

~H~

The weeks had passed too quickly. Before she could even process it she was packing her bags and getting ready to board the train headed home for the holidays. She knew it had come so quickly because she was dreading it. She hadn’t even told Harry and Ron that she wouldn’t be joining their Christmas party this year, that there was no point owling her about it. She should have, she knew it would irk Peter to have owls swooping in but she needed that small bit to remind her she had friends and he didn’t have complete control over her. Not yet anyways.

Her eyes landed on the small journal Bellatrix had given her so many months ago. She had yet to even open it’s pages and start on the essay. It wasn’t like her to put things off but something about the book seemed….life changing. Every time she reached for it she felt as if her life was going to change, as if perhaps every small bit of control she had worked so hard for would spiral out of reach. It was foreboding.

She reached out and stroked the front. The elegant script of a name long wore off, only the indent where the quill had roughly sketched the name was left. She ran her finger along it, trying to make out a name.

She sighed heavily, her efforts in vain, and tossed the book into her bag on top of her clothes.
She zipped her small bag up and slung it over her shoulder just as Ginny came into the dorm room in a rush. “I haven’t packed at all!” Hermione cringed for her, they only had twenty minutes before they were due at the train station and it was at least a five minute ride. Ginny always packed a lot, it typically took her forever to decide what to bring home for the break.

“I’ve just finished. I’ll meet you downstairs with the boys in ten?” Ginny nodded hurriedly as she rushed about. Hermione would have offered to help but Ginny was so particular she knew she would have refused.

Harry and Ron it seemed had packed, both boys had a small bag resting at their feet while they played a quick game of chess while they waited for the girls to finish up.

Ron glanced up at Hermione and smiled brightly, “Ready?” She nodded, setting her bag beside theirs and taking a seat next to Harry. “Mom said she has Sterling loads of presents if you want to bring her to the party this year. Dad said he could pick you guys up in the car if you want. He’s been itching for an excuse to drive it.” He chuckled lightly but she could see the hope blazing in his eyes. She wanted to go she really did but she knew she wasn’t going to make it.

“I’ll have to see what my step dad has planned but if he says it’s okay that sounds good.” She flinched when his smile widened. She should have told him the truth she knew, but she didn’t want to answer all the questions and she didn’t want to lie. She didn’t want them worrying or trying to come set her free from a magical hating tyrant, something she was sure they were bound to try if she ever confided in them.

She watched them finish up their game just as Ginny came flying down the stairs, red faced and huffing, her bag nearly brimming with everything she was taking home for the holidays.

“Really Gin?” Ron grumbled at his sister as he tossed his board and pieces into his own duffle. “It’s only two weeks.”

“It’s a girl thing Ronald.” She fumed at him. His eyes went pointedly down toward the other three bags, mainly towards Hermione's. Ginny ignored it and Harry only chuckled slightly before taking his girlfriend’s luggage out of her hands. He slung both his and her bags up over each shoulder and jerked his chin toward the portrait.”

“We should go, I don’t fancy having to trek into Hogsmeade to apparate, I think mum and dad will kill us if we try to do it from so far away.”

Hermione agreed. They had passed their test but she still worried about them doing side along and she had forced them both to keep a small vial of dittany on hand at all times if they planned to be travelling that way. Thankfully they had both agreed, if only to keep her from nagging.

“Shame we can’t though, we could shop a little before having to be home.” Ginny told Hermione wistfully.
“Maybe, one day when they have more practice.”

Ron grinned back at them as they boarded the stairs, his hand reaching out to grasp the rail in front of Hermione in case she stumbled, it was a completely involuntary reflex on his part but she found herself frowning over it all the same.

“We’ll be out of school by then, we can come pick you two up and do whatever, it’ll be awesome.” Ginny snorted at her brother’s enthusiasm.

“Long distances are supposed to be harder. They take more concentration.” Ron waved her concerns off. His optimism irked her nerves a bit and she knew she was being a little unfair. She was worried about going home, not some distant argument about letting her friend apparate her to go shopping. She took a deep breath and settled herself.

They walked the rest of the way in idle chatter. Ginny and Ron carried on about their parents Christmas party and Harry gushed about presents he had ordered for his baby brother. For the most part Hermione remained silent. She answered questions and put in enough effort to the conversation so the other teens didn’t notice her lack of attention.

She couldn’t help it, with each footstep away from the castle she felt as if something were crushing her chest. As if her magic were clawing at her skin. It was taking most of her concentration not to hyperventilate right there. She knew it had to be because she was going home to him once again. That had to be why her magic felt so out of control. But she had gone home ever Holliday for three years at least. She had never felt so suffocated, so unhinged, as she did now. Everything felt muffled, like she was wading through something thick and heavy. Something trying to keep her from leaving.

“Hey, Hermione?” Ron reached out and grasped her shoulder effectively pulling her from the feeling. He nodded toward the carriage where the others were gazing down at her with a mix of curiosity and concern.

“Sorry, I was thinking about all the homework I’m going to have to do over the break.” Ginny groaned as they all settled back down, making room for her to clamor up with Ron following close behind.

“Did you have to remind me. I’ve still got two essays to do and I don’t want to even think about those until after Christmas.” Hermione smiled softly, grateful they believed her distraction was as simple as that. She glanced over Harry’s shoulder back at the castle. She was going to miss it. Two weeks were going to drag by.

~B~
Bellatrix paced around the school like a caged leopard. She had watched the last carriage leave the school grounds heading into Hogsmeade. She had watched Hermione covertly until she got to the pickup and had nearly lost control of herself. Had nearly said damn it all and went after her, to do what she didn’t know. Drag her back? Beg her to stay?

The thought of being without her for two weeks was unsettling. A heavy weight that seemed to settle across her chest and refused to leave. She hated the holidays. No detentions to help settle her chaotic mind. Nothing to distract her from the nagging voices and dark seductive swirls of magic threatening to spill from her.

Even Pomfrey’s bitter swill was starting to lose its effectiveness. She wondered if it was because she had been bonded for so long now. There was nothing in her family’s journals about what could happen if the bond was left unchecked, if it was neither accepted or destroyed. She was playing with fire and she knew it.

The only light she had to look forward to was that Hermione would perhaps be at Molly’s party. She could relax, get a breath of fresh air before the girl once again left and she was forced back to her cold and lonely life at the castle.

She frowned, turned to sit on a cold stone archway nestled into a frosted window. She wasn’t alone, she had friends and family although they all drove her crazy half the time. It just….wasn’t the same. Not really. She wanted what Molly and Lily had. She wanted….her own family. She had her sisters but….now they had husbands and children, loyalties had shifted, albeit only slightly. She wanted someone to come home to. She wanted it to be Hermione.

She wondered what exactly Hermione wanted. Sometimes there were times she caught the girl staring at her. Something deep and heavy in her eyes but what it was she could never tell.

Her long fingers reached up to brush against her own soft lips, remembering the feeling and the taste of the girl. She was nearly incoherent but she knew the kiss had been real. Did Hermione kiss back? She couldn’t recall. Perhaps the look she sometimes levelled her way was desire….longing maybe. She would give up anything for it to be true but she couldn’t kid herself.

“Bellatrix,” She jumped at the sound of Snape’s voice, so lost in her own thoughts she hadn’t heard his measured approach. “Are you alright? Have you need of anything?” She frowned, wondering just how devastated she must have looked for him to be staring at her with such concern.

“No.” She flinched internally. She hadn’t meant for her tone to be so clipped. “I'm fine, Severus. Just tired.”

He hummed thoughtfully but whether he believed her or not he made no move to carry on. He merely stepped back as she stood, his hands tucked deeply into the pockets of his muted black robes.
“I had…been meaning to speak with you. Something I have been concerned about over the last few weeks especially.” She tensed, her dark eyes narrowing.

“Then spit it out.” She berated herself for the rush of irritation she felt when he didn’t respond to her harsh tone.

“The Granger girl…” She barely restrained a growl, her fingernails dug into her palm and she itched to pull out her new wand, for what she didn’t quite know but she was sure she wasn’t going to like where his concern was heading. “That night you two were attacked, you kissed her before you lost consciousness do you remember?”

She could deny it but what good would it do, she was sure his line of questioning was brought on by him seeing her touching her lips. And the truth was she did remember, nearly vividly despite her fragile state at the time.

Her eyes held his for a few seconds and she sighed. He had obviously kept a close eye on her since then, she could see he already suspected her feelings denying them would do her no good. Surprisingly her anger melted away, replaced by a bone deep weariness she couldn’t shake.

“I remember, Severus.” She sighed heavily and turned back to the window just as rain began pelting down against it. She let the rhythmic tap soothe her back into a balanced state of mind.

“Did you know what you were doing?” The question seemed of the utmost importance to him. His eyes hard and calculated.

“Not at the time. I….thought I was dreaming.”

“Of Granger?” She nodded. “Do you often dream of the girl, so often you would mistake her for a dream in real life. Even given the circumstances it is very unprofessional and downright dangerous for a relationship such as that to develop and Granger seemed most upset about the kiss-“

Her patience waned and she snapped at him. “Yes. Is it so wrong for me to want to kiss the one I’m bonded to Severus? Do you have something to say in judgment of my mistake? Some kind of punishment you think I deserve?”

He stared at her in shock for a moment as she collected herself, cursing at her inability to keep her cool and ultimately spilling her most guarded secret. A secret that was already becoming too widely known.

But she couldn’t bare thinking about what he had seen on Hermione’s face after her impromptu kiss. Had the girl truly been upset? Disgusted? She berated herself, of course she was. Bellatrix had never been much more than a bitch to her, why shouldn’t she be disgusted the teacher had kissed her?
“I didn’t know.” Snape finally said, gently and reverently.

“How could you, I chose not to tell you.” He nodded but said nothing else. He didn’t know what to say, he knew the Blacks. If her father had been alive he could have only imagined the horrors Bella would have gone through. “I would appreciate it if you kept it between us. Not even she knows.”

His mouth fell open in shock, his dark eyes wide as he shuffled uncomfortably on his feet. “She….you are suffering this bond but do you not have any intention of fulfilling it? Bellatrix I have seen the affects of those under bonds it is not pretty no one has ever lasted so long, not in the Black line surely, you know this.” She did, but how he knew she couldn’t fathom.

She brushed off his concern as quickly as she brushed off his pitying gaze. “I am Bellatrix Black. I will do what I must. Do not interfere.” She turned away, stalking back to her quarters as quick as possible without appearing as if she was running.

~H~

She couldn’t wait to see Sterling. The usual bubbling feeling of anxiety and excitement running through her settled heavier in her stomach as the train inched it’s way towards the station.

No one would be there to wait for her, she knew this. Her Grandparents couldn’t have come to pick her up and Salt was always working, not that she minded. Normally she took a cab, today however she had no money. Not even a knut in her case, which meant she couldn’t take the night bus either.

She watched as the station slowly blocked out the low lying sun and found herself wishing she could apparate. She had been forbidden from taking the exam, Dumbledore had explained the risks of high emotional stress and reluctantly she had agreed that at the time of the tests she was in no mental position to attempt it. She knew the theory and the basics but she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to focus enough to ever apparate safely home, she would be too afraid to appear in front of her stepfather. She comforted herself with the knowledge she could somehow learn later, when she had places to travel to besides home and school.

“Finally,” Harry groaned as the train completed it’s stop and the whistle sounded, signaling them all that it was now safe to depart. “My legs are asleep.” He stretched out as far as he could while standing up before reaching into the overhead and passing out everyone’s luggage. Once again he slung his and Ginny’s over a shoulder and Hermione couldn’t help the small smile over how chivalrous her best friend was.

“Uh….want me to carry yours?” She glanced over at Ron in surprise.

“Oh…no I…mine isn’t nearly as heavy as Ginny’s, not even the trunk.” He smiled sheepishly and shrugged as his sister complained loudly about being unappreciated and how hard it was to look nice for her man without choices. Hermione quietly bet she had packed two outfits for every day
they would be away. It sounded a bit like something her boisterous friend would do.

“Do you want us to apparate you home Hermione?” Ron asked as they maneuvered their way through the crowded hall to the platform.

She wished she could have accepted the offer, even though she didn’t care for the boys to try and travel so far. On their way homes she knew they stopped once and collected themselves before apparating again, it increased the risk of minor splinching but it decreased the risk of a major one and it helped them practice and grow more confident with each success. But taking her home would mean a fairly good trip, not nearly as far as their own homes, but there wouldn’t be anywhere they could stop and take stock of themselves. Her home was nestled in a muggle community and the risk of exposure was just too high. Not to mention the sitter she knew was keeping an eye on Sterling until Peter returned home.

“No…I know you could do it.” She told Ron as his face flushed irritably, they all knew she usually took a muggle cab home or the bus. “But there isn’t anywhere close you could truly apparate too and there is supposed to be a sitter with Sterling today.” The redhead grumbled irritably but he didn’t try an argue that he could still do it and not be caught.

“Alright. But we are gonna miss you.” Harry set down the bags as they finally squeezed their way to a secluded area of the platform. He reached out and hugged her close, she couldn’t help the tears that spring into her eyes at the brotherly embrace. She managed to wipe them casually as he pulled away before Ginny had launched herself into her vacant arms.

“I love you! Stay safe okay and I’ll see you at the party.” She ignored the flash of guilt that burned in her chest at the words and managed a watery smile.

“I’ll do my best.” She promised. She turned to Ron, expecting another hug, his usual awkward one, but the boy fidgeted on his feet for a moment and opened his mouth to say something before closing it tightly and glancing over her shoulder with a bright blush. She frowned at his strange behavior but before she could say anything a woman’s voice drew her attention from behind her.

As she turned she missed Harry giving his friend a consoling look and Ginny rolling her eyes at her brother’s floundering attempt to ask Hermione out. Harry had been coaching him up all week and Ginny had been enjoying his embarrassment but she was rather tired of the moping every summer because he still hasn’t done it. What Hermione's response would be Ginny wasn’t sure, she knew Hermione felt something for Bellatrix Black but even she was unaware of what it was exactly and she didn’t have even the smallest hint of what Hermione could possibly feel for her brother. The thoughts brought a frown to her own face as she turned her attention back to the brunette. Hermione didn’t talk a lot about romance, or her feelings. Ginny was going to have to change that, it was an important part of being gal pals after all, she had read that in a magazine once.

Hermione would have been glad she missed the roller coaster of emotions behind her but the sight of the auror calling out her name confused her a bit, considering they were hardly even acquaintances. “Ah…hello?” She recognized her but couldn’t recall her name, nor did she have any
idea why the woman would be shouting her name and coming towards her with clear intent. “Oh, sorry I’m Tonks. We met—“

“Yes I remember.” She was quick to cut her off, glancing purposefully toward the others. Moody had made it clear to them not to tell anyone surely the auror would remember that.

“Right. Well….” She stressed the word out and glanced toward the other curious teens. “Well Ron’s mum and my mum were talking about you, about the party the other day and they were talking about picking you up in the car because you couldn’t apparate yet and I thought maybe you would need a ride from the station too since no one seemed to think about that.” It took Hermione a few seconds for her brain to catch up with the rushed sentence.

“Uh….Tonks you came all the way here just to take a stranger home because our parents were talking about her?” Ginny’s brow furrowed in confusion, she was sure she was missing something and she had no idea when the two other women had even met. It certainly hadn’t been enough of a meeting for Hermione to mention it.

“Well….yeah…I just got my driver’s license and this was the best excuse I could come up with to use it.” She couldn’t very well add she was ridiculously curious about Hermione Granger. Thankfully she was spared trying to answer any more questions by Ron’s indignant shout.

“Hey! No fair, I’ve been dying to learn how to drive but no one will teach me.” It wasn’t a common thing in a pure wizarding household. Hermione knew how, though she didn’t have a car, and Tonks’ father had been a muggle born so he knew how and taught her. Ginny had no interest in driving so it hadn’t bothered her that their parents hadn’t been willing to teach them, their own car had been magically modified. It not only flew but it drove itself and had anti-muggle jinxes on it so they wouldn’t ever be bothered by the police. She didn’t need to know how to drive.

“Maybe Molly will let dad show you how.” She glanced at Hermione. “I am a good driver but I don’t think I’m qualified to teach you how.” He grumbled a bit about the unfairness of it all but he did seem rather excited that he might get what he wanted after all.

“Harry my boy!” The group turned as yet another adult headed toward them. This time Harry’s messy headed father, he was beaming at them all and shot Tonks a curious stare. The dark brown haired woman raised her hands in exasperation, her hair turning red at the ends and surprising no one but Hermione.

“I just wanted to offer Granger a ride home.” She defended herself, completely aware she really had no business on the platform.

He frowned but didn’t say anything else about her defensive exclamation. “Right. So you ready Harry?”

Ginny elbowed her boyfriend good-naturedly. “Still not gonna tell me?” He grinned but shook his
head, giving her a quick kiss goodbye and a wave to everyone else before he and his father took off.

“Well since Tonks is gonna take you home I guess we will see you later.” Ron shuffled a bit again, clearly he had something to say but for whatever reason he was holding back. It didn’t sit well with Hermione. But she couldn’t force whatever it was out of him so she let it drop, for now. She really hoped it wasn’t anything to do with his girlfriend, there was only so much of Lavender she could take.

“I suppose I’ll see you two later then.” Her coffee colored eyes fell back on the nervous woman beside her. Honestly she wasn’t sure she wanted to go anywhere with the woman, she didn’t know her. She wasn’t about to tell them that though, they would probably insist on riding with her and then probably staying for a while and that would open up a whole new can of problems for her.

“So….” She started when everyone else had disappeared. “Why exactly did you come to get me? We don’t really know each other.”

“Bellatrix is my aunt.” The student struggle not to let her surprise at that information show on her face. In any case she still didn’t see what it had to do with her. “Well they are all friends you know. Harry and Ron's moms, mine and Aunt Bella. They talk about you sometimes so I was a bit curious. And I didn’t think it was fair when they were talking about how you always took a cab home because your father is a muggle.”

“Step..” She hadn’t meant to correct her, she was not opening her family Dynamics up for conversation. Luckily Tonks waved for her to follow and left it alone.

“I’m gonna admit I was kind of curious about you. We haven’t met even though your cousins' best friend.” She chuckled a bit. “I never go to Molly’s party I always have to work, I'm going this year but…well I couldn’t wait.” Hermione made a noncommittal sound to show she was listening. Truthfully she wasn’t sure what to say, she wasn’t really so interesting that someone would want to meet her.

Tonks surprised her by shucking off her cloak before they passed the barrier. “Dads a muggle born, I spend quiet a bit of time in the muggle world for work and pleasure.” She winked at Hermione and held out a hand, offering to take her luggage. The brunette shrugged her off, not willing to have her asking questions about the charms she had on the trunk. It wasn’t illegal and she might not have said anything but Hermione had learned to keep things to herself, even the smallest slip up meant trouble out in the non magical world. And it seemed like nearly everything managed to get back to her stepfather. “Ready then? I parked a little ways away.”

Tonks didn’t bother trying to help Hermione load the trunk once they arrived to her car, she had figured out quiet quickly not only was the girl quiet but she was independent to a fault. And stubborn, she smiled secretly to herself as she watched Hermione gently close the boot of her car and climb into the passenger side. She was a good match for Bella, Tonks had already figured out that much.
“Where to?”

Hermione listed off her address and turned her attention to the window. She tried to keep up with the woman’s idle chatter but her focus was on how to get the auror to leave before Peter Salt made it home to find a magical person having tea in his living room. He wouldn’t blow up then, no, Peter was ever hospitable and charming, but after the woman left Hermione would be sure to feel the pain of her unintended defiance. She needed to avoid that at all costs.

“So what’s your plans after you finish school?” Tonks didn’t miss the girl’s flinch but she wasn’t sure if it was because Hermione had been half paying attention or if it was because of something else.

“College.” Which had actually always been her plan and hopefully still could be if she could somehow manage to convince Peter it was necessary. She had kept up with all the required muggle classes over the years, cramming full years into her short summer months. The workload had kept her sane and given her a purpose when things were bordering hopeless.

“Muggle college?” She didn’t miss the surprise in the changeling’s voice. She wasn’t offended, most witches or wizards never even attempted to integrate back into muggle society, not even the ones born there.

“Yes, there is quiet a bit I would like to study, medicine or teaching. I think there is a lot the magical community could learn from muggle medicine and vice versa. Herbology and pharmacology aren’t too different. Even potions could be used to better help the muggles….although some things would obviously have to be changed and experimented with.” Namely every magical plant and element they used but she was sure proper substitutes could be found for medicinal droughts. It was interesting to think about anyways.

“My mother is a healer, it may be something she would be willing to experiment with you.” And it might keep Hermione around for Bellatrix to visit if she was too stubborn to do anything. Not a permanent solution, but a decent enough start.

“I think I’ll need to get a background in pharmacology before I go experimenting.” Tonks merely hummed in response. “Turn here.” Hermione frowned as her home came into view. A simple cookie cutter house her father had bought when her mother was pregnant. It was kept up to the strict block code, grass and hedges neat, exteriors clean and free of unnecessary clutter like toys and gardening equipment. They hired someone to do all that, with the money her parents left for her in their wills no doubt. That wasn’t what caused her to frown though. The two extra cars cluttering up the drive way were the problems. It seemed Sterling’s grandparents had chosen to visit today of all days, and if she recognized the blue SUV like she was sure she did the babysitter who kept Sterling during the school year had also arrived.

Her fingernails dug into her palm as she instructed Tonks to let her out just off the driveway. At least the presence of so many muggle gave her an excuse to send the woman away without appearing too rude.
She couldn’t stop the auror from helping her unload her trunk this time but she was grateful the woman said nothing about the lightness of it’s content. She slung her duffle up over her shoulder and grabbed the trunk after it was set down. The street was rather busy and she couldn’t afford the trunk to go careening down the small hill, it had all the Christmas presents her friends had gotten for Sterling inside.

Tonks gazed down at her curiously as she closed the boot with a thump. “Why didn’t you just pack your clothes in your trunk?” she wouldn’t admit it but the fact that Hermione had brought her trunk as well as a bag had confused her since she first saw the girl at the platform.

Hermione grimaced. “My sister’s Christmas presents are in here, the wrapping from Fred and George’s are….very sparkly. It would have gotten everywhere.” That elicited a small chuckle from Tonks. “I’m sorry, I would invite you in,” If the other woman knew she was lying she didn’t let on, “but my sister’s grandparents seem to be here and…well they are muggles and have no idea…..”

“It’s okay. I’ll see you at Molly’s party.” Hermione wanted to ask why it was so important she see her at all but she didn’t know if she would like the answer. She didn’t want to add anymore stress to herself and on the off chance the blasted woman wanted something else from her…well she just wasn’t too interested in knowing. She wouldn’t be going to the party anyways.

“Okay….uh….see you later then.” She shuffled awkwardly toward her home, forcing herself not to look back as she heard the car door shut and Tonks take off down the street.

~H~

She made her way up the drive and let herself into what had once been her parents home. It had been filled with laughter and Christmas music when she had come home those first few years for Christmas break. The death of her father changed all that. This time though she opened the door to the sound of a child’s laughter and the heavenly scent of spiced apple and Garland.

She set her stuff down by the door and followed the sounds until she found Sterling and her sitter, Ms. Swift, dancing around a tall Christmas tree as they decorated it with ornaments and candy canes. She couldn’t help the smile it brought to her face and she had to admit it was a pleasant change to come home to Sterling rather than an empty house.

“Did you guys save me anything?” Swift turned toward her voice and beamed at the girl, she nudged Sterling with her hand and pointed toward her sister. Hermione knew she would never get tired of seeing her bright eyes light up at the sight of her. Sterling made her feel like the most important person in the world.

“Mione!” The small bundle of energy and black curls launched herself into open arms, giggling and chatting excitedly about all the decorations she had helped put up and the supper they had warming in the stove.

Hermione smiled, signing as she spoke to the little girl. “That’s great Sterling. Do you think you can finish helping Ms. Swift while I go and get the presents to place under the tree.” Her sea green
eyes lit up at the prospect of presents and she wiggled until Hermione set her back down.

She nodded to the sitter before heading back to the entry way for her trunk. She hadn’t seen Peter’s parents yet but she knew they were somewhere. They rarely ever visited and clearly they hadn’t made an attempt for Sterling’s sake or they would have been helping her decorate instead of leaving it all up to Ms. Swift.

They weren’t as bad as their son, they had never struck or even raised their voice to either of the girls. And they did seem to love Sterling to distraction even if they didn’t visit very often. It was their complacency that irked Hermione, though. And their inability to see what their son was. True he was charming and well loved by nearly everyone he met but Hermione had written to them. She had explained everything, from the abuse to the neglect of Sterling as a baby. Instead of offering help or trying to figure out if she was telling the truth the Salts had sent her a scathing reply back….and they had told Peter what she had told them.

It was probably one of the worst beatings he had ever given her. But it was the disappointment and the realization that no one was going to help her that hurt the most. The ministry’s hands were tied by their own laws when it came to Sterling and the most Dumbledore could do for her was to send Hagrid to intimidate her stepfather into letting her return to school every semester if she needed it. If she had thought the muggle government wouldn’t split them up Hermione would have gone to them but the risk wasn’t worth it. If he got Sterling back Hermione would never see the girl again. He would make sure of that.

“Mione!” She turned back around, slinging her bag over her shoulder as Harry had done while she pulled the trunk behind her. “We got to put the star up, Mimi said you should do it.” She smiled and nodded, happy that the nickname Sterling had started for her permanent sitter at the beginning of her term had stuck. Ms. Swift was more of a grandparent than Sterling had ever had and she was one of the few people who believed Hermione when the girl had broken down and told her what was going on. She did her best to take care of the girl and see to Hermione any chance she got. She had been a friend and colleague of her father….back before he passed.

“Come on!” Hermione chuckled at the little girl's enthusiasm.

“Alright, alright already, I’m coming.”

~H~

The topper had been snuggly fit into it’s place and they were putting the last of the presents under the tree when Sterling’s grandparents came into the den.

“Nana look!” Sterling signed quickly as she spoke. “We finished the tree and I didn’t eat any of the garland.”

The elder Salt woman chuckled, her eyes softening as they slid from Hermione to her grandchild. “It’s Garland,” She carefully signed and spoke the word so Sterling could learn the correct way. However Hermione felt about her she would never say the woman didn’t care for Sterling, she had been one of the only ones to learn sign language with Hermione and encouraged the girls.
independence when it came to her language skills.

“It’s very pretty. You girls did a good job.” She nodded tightly to Hermione. They were always polite and courteous in front of Sterling. And truthfully they were never really ugly to the girl even when Sterling was gone. But they never made an attempt to get to know her, never asked anything personal and her grandfather from time to time would comment about how lucky she was Peter kept her from losing her home and was kind enough to take her in after her parents death.

Sterling beamed, completely unaware of the tense undertones. Ms. Swift gave her a soft understanding smile and turned to collect her bag off the couch. “I’m afraid I have to be going, dear.” She bent down and kisses Sterling’s cheek, signing clumsily that she would see the girl after the holidays. “Just drop her off before you go to the train station, I’ll get everything I need later, she still has a few winter outfits at the house.” Hermione smiled, appreciating the fact that she wouldn’t need to pack Sterling and her own bags. It was always hectic when she was returning for term, mainly because she was always fighting with Peter so she could return.

“Thank you. You’re a godsend, honestly.” The brunette flashed an appreciative smile and tried not to focus on the way the two Salt’s frowned. Hermione had no idea what was going through their minds and honestly she couldn’t find the energy to care too much.

Richard walked the woman to the door as Sterling went back to fussing over the tree, she was arranging all the presents just right and making sure she liked where every ornament was located, she was so fussy it was absolutely adorable. Hermione and Louise moved to sit on the couch so they could watch her. But where Hermione was content to sit in silence the older woman evidently wasn’t.

She eyed the girl curiously and not without a little disapproval. “I heard you’ve been causing a fuss at that school. Something about a boy.” Hermione grimaced, knowing whatever she said in defense of herself the older woman wasn’t bound to believe her. How they found out, or rather what they had been told, she had no idea.

“A misunderstanding.” She told her simply. Not wishing to embellish any further and hoping to avoid and awkward and tense conversation.

She hummed thoughtfully. “You are a pretty little thing but you shouldn’t be so loose with your body. Whether you like it or not Sterling looks up to you as an older sister and you should set a better example.”

Hermione bit her tongue as she forced herself to remain impartial to the woman’s incorrect assumptions. “I assure you I do the best I can to be a good example for my sister. She’s the most important person in my life. She comes before anything and anybody.” Her dark eyes settled on the woman’s green. She saw something stir, perhaps shock, Hermione wasn’t sure what lies Peter had told them about her nor did she care. In the end they would believe whatever they wanted to believe just like everyone else and she had no doubt one day Peter Salt would be the death of her. She idly wondered if they would believe her then. If they would think back to her desperate plea
for help and feel shame or guilt. If they would even care. She wondered if he would be caught or if people would still believe him to be a loving caring father who took in a difficult and lying stepdaughter.

~H~

By some small miracle Peter wasn’t so bad when he got home, it probably had a lot to do with the fact his parents were still there, sitting in the living room watching cartoons with their grandchild.

He was all smiles and jolly Christmas spirit, so happy to have his step daughter home for the holidays. It was positively sickening to watch and Hermione found herself searching for an excuse to retire to her room. She knew she had to make her escape while his parents were there if she wanted to get to sleep in any kind of peace.

“I’m sorry, I think I’m going to head on up to bed. Tired from the trip.” She smiled at Sterling, not waiting for anyone to protest and standing up, with a quick kiss to Sterling’s forehead she turned to head toward the stairs.

“Hermione,” She barely restrained a flinch as Peter’s voice called out to her. “Put your phone in my room. That’s the punishment for the foolishness you and that boy pulled during the semester.”

She nodded but didn’t turn around. She didn’t have a phone. It was just an easy reminder she wasn’t to keep her wand. It was to be stored in his bedroom in a safe only he had the combination for. If he ever suspected she could unlock it easily with wandless magic he didn’t let on.

She heard him and his father start talking about young women being promiscuous with their bodies and how Hermione was probably a lost cause if he couldn’t discipline her right. She tuned them out when Richard started telling Peter about the benefits of public school and having her closer so he could keep a better eye on her.

She quickly stowed her wand in the safe beside Peter’s bed. She didn’t linger. She hated being inside the master bedroom. When she was a child she loved her mother’s decorations, they were light and fun. The perfect mix between her two parents and a flamboyant display of their love for her and her accomplishments.

Now everything was dark, dark woods and dark clothes and the window had long been covered to keep out the light. Once a childish rendition of her family hung in it’s frame, dangling from a string, perfectly placed to catch the mid-afternoon light and cast it playfully about the room. A stained glass she had done at the library as a child. With the help of the librarian and a professional who had come to teach the class she had painstakingly chosen every color, had watched in awe as the glassworker had cut, shaped, and placed every piece exactly as Hermione had requested. It had been her most prized accomplishment as a child. The first Christmas present she had presented to her parents of her very own making, she had made sure to keep it delicately wrapped and hidden until they opened it under the tree. It was crude, even under the hand of the professional, but it was of her own mind, her own imagination and her parents had fawned over it more than anything else they had been given that
It had been the only thing that survived her mother’s drastic change of temperament after her father’s death. Sometimes Hermione would walk by her room, just after Peter moved in, and see the woman reaching out to touch it. Tears streaming from her eyes as she was bathed it the soft red and blues as the sun set. She always wanted to go in, to hug her mother, comfort her somehow… but by then it was too late. The bond they had was broken and she never managed to bring herself to cross the threshold and comfort the woman who no longer gave her an ounce of care.

When she died Peter had tossed it. She had found it split in half resting in the kitchen rubbish like the trash he considered it. She didn’t know why but she had taken the pieces out, contemplated fixing them before she had ultimately placed them back where she found them.

Her childhood was over, it was never coming back. Memories of it had soured for her and while she kept her photo journal she didn’t want any other keepsake of something she would never have again, of something her mother had given up on.

She forced her thoughts away, back to the here and now as she grabbed her toiletries from the duffle deposited on her bed and rushed through a quick shower. If she hurried she hoped Peter would have nothing else to say to her that night. Perhaps he would let her rest the entire night before he started up the usual nightmare of being trapped in his company.

She didn’t bother to blow dry her hair, not willing to chance the time it would take. She brushed it out and pulled on long, ill fitting, pajamas before silently padding into her room and shutting the door.

It had a lock but she was too afraid to use it. She had no doubt in her mind that if her stepfather wanted inside a lock wasn’t about to stop him. And she could ill afford to anger him. Two weeks with him was enough without him furious with her.

Her eyes scanned the room, she knew he had gone through the things she had left behind. There wasn’t much, a few old books she no longer needed a photo of her father and mother before they had her and a few loose items of clothing she no longer wore was all that she left behind. There were no childish knickknacks and much like the stain glass she had long lost any childhood sentimental objects.

Her eyes landed back on the bed, on the journal poking out of her bag. It was the only book she had brought. Her homework had already been completed and she’d had no reason to burden herself with any others. For whatever reason though she was reluctant to search through the pages of this one.

She picked it up again and stared down at the cover. She knew she should get a start on it, she had so long to complete her assignment but Bellatrix had stressed the sooner she finished the better. What was holding her back she didn’t know but a strange ominous feeling settled over her like a dark cloud every time she thought about it.

She climbed up into the bed, leaning up against the wall as she opens the heavy parchment pages. She half expected something to happen, some cruel joke or curse set on it by some malicious Black
to reach out and suck her into it’s pages. It wouldn’t be the first cursed book she had gotten her hands on after all.

But nothing did happen. The pages were old and crinkled in protest as she turned them, but they didn’t reach out to suck her in and there was no pain to be had as she tried to make out the elegant scrawl.

~B~

Bella plucked at her woolen sweater, Molly had knitted it for her last year for Christmas and despite all her blustering that she wasn’t a Weasley and it shouldn’t have a giant green W on it she was very fond of it. The black material suited her perfectly and the elegant green stitching showed how much care and love the Wesley Matriarch had put in it’s design.

She scolded herself for tugging on the fabric and forced herself to rise from chair.

She was hiding out in her office. There wasn’t much else for her to do and her own rooms felt far too lonely. Her plan had been to finish up lesson plans for the next term, grade a few papers and make sure everyone was progressing nicely for their end of term tests. Unfortunately her mind had other ideas and refused to allow her the concentration required to do anything. Her thoughts kept drifting back to the conversation she’d had with her niece. She wondered if she had told her mother about the baby yet or if she had spoken to the wolf….

It wasn’t a problem she could solve for her. But it didn’t mean she didn’t hurt for her niece.

An owl startled her, a sudden slamming against her window, as it face planted into the glass. She pulled herself over and opened it, noting the poor creature dumped about half it’s body weight worth of snow onto her floor as it shook its self and hopped closer to the small fire to warm his wings. She waved her hand and cleared the snow away without a word as she opened the letter addressed to her in the chicken scratch scrawl of Ronald Weasley, who was no doubt messaging her at the behest of his mother.

She frowned as she read over the contents. Another invitation to Lily’s Christmas party, as if she had forgotten. Both Lily and Molly threw one every year and she typically attended at least one. Andy and Tonks were all off work and would be there as well so she supposed it was there way of making sure she remembered, she supposed it didn’t matter which one she went to as both of them had mentioned they would likely go to both as well.

She grabbed a piece of scrap parchment and scribbled her reply down, she would be there, it would make a decent enough distraction and she had no doubt there would be wine. She let Errol rest a few more minutes before she attached the paper to his leg and all but slung him back out into the night sky.

~H~
The sound of the door being pushed open woke her from her fitful rest. The journal had slid from her hands to her lap as she had dozed and she quickly tucked it under her pillow before the lights could be switched on and Peter catch her with it. But the lights didn’t come on. Instead soft, but quick, padding feet made their way to her bed and small hands reached up to pull herself atop The ruffled blanket.

“Mione, can I sleep in here?”

The girl smiled softly and in answer lifted the small child over herself and placed her between her own body and the wall. It was late, and if she listened she could hear the blissful sound of her stepfather snoring like a freight train from just across the hall. It was doubtful he would bother her tonight and she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to rest peacefully with the baby in her arms.

“Can you do the magic?” Sterling asked her after a moment.

Hermione carefully lifted her hand, the light of the full moon sifting through her window cast enough light to allow her to make shadows dance across her wall. It had started out as a distraction when Sterling was small, like a mobile. But as she got older they became more complex, and with the promise to keep it a secret between the two Hermione had began turning them into bedtime stories with words on the walls that the little girl could read without having to move her attention back and forth to understand.

She left the shadows form into their usual shapes. They had a hero, a woman with wild black curly hair, a young princess and always some awful monster. It was always the same, Sterling content with it as a child is content with a fairy tale, completely unaware of the desperate wish Hermione had for the story to have been true. For some noble hero to come and save her. “Love you, Mione.” The soft sleepy voice tugged at her heart as she let the shadows fade back into the darkness of the night.

“I love you too, Sterling.” She turned herself into the girl, breathed in the comforting smell of her watermelon shampoo and finally faded back into a comfortable sleep.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is heavy in the violence. It's the last ~H~ after Bellatrix wakes Lily (vague so not to spoil too much). Also there is an element of attempted rape so here is the warning. I did this chapter so that it will be possible to skip the last part and not miss the story or accidentally stumble on reading it even when you didn't want to.

Hermione sighed heavily as she sank into the warm salt bath. Everything hurt, head to toes, and without her glamour in place her body looked like a road map of abuse. Some old scars….some new bruises from just the few days she had been back. The only place left untouched was her face, Peter may pull her hair from time to time when she wasn’t quick enough but he never left marks where he thought someone would see. If he struck her face it was with an open hand and the evidence was typically gone in an hour at the most.

She rubbed at a particularly nasty handprint he'd left high on her arm. A reminder that she didn’t get to read her own mail. He hadn’t been happy about another letter from Cormac. He had already told her to stay away from the boy and he didn’t care for her excuses on the matter. She grimaced as she felt around the yellow and purple marks, she could make out where nearly everyone of his fingers had landed when he'd jerked her. It wasn’t the worse he had ever done but it was the worst bruise she had at the moment.

She leaned her head back against the cold porcelain and groaned. She hated her life. The only good thing about it at the moment was Sterling. If she ever lost her…what would she be? What would she have to keep her going if not for the beautiful little girl she had just put to bed?

She knew she was more than just Sterling's caretaker, she was a brilliant student and no doubt could have looked forward to a wonderful career at whatever she chose in the magical world. Unfortunately she just couldn’t see an out for her that didn’t involve leaving Sterling behind. Bellatrix had given her the best chance, her only chance, if she could finish the assignment and get a job, any job, in the ministry perhaps she could remain with a foot in the magical world and still stay with Sterling. She could handle the abuse, she could handle whatever he threw at her so long as she had Sterling.

She would give up Hogwarts, she would give up her friends and she would give up magic.

But she would not ever give up Sterling. She would die first.

~B~

The soft sounds of muggle Christmas music filled the small, but well packed, home of Lily and James Potter. Laughter echoed around the walls and children were running everywhere while their parents tried to keep up and the unattached and childless laughed on in merriment.

Wine was flowing and everyone was finding both the Christmas Spirit and the looseness alcohol helped bring about any occasion. Few were outright drunk though, except perhaps an uncle four times removed on Sirius's side. In any case everyone seemed to be having a good time, everyone except Bellatrix. She was being relentlessly perused by some blonde woman who had no idea what
subtleties were. The dark witch assumed she was too drunk to properly understand and hoped if she disappeared the woman would get the hint.

She moved gracefully through the people, left the woman behind in seconds and carefully slipped into the only room, besides the bedrooms, that she knew would be empty. The den. She was grateful to see a fire already lit, it bathed the room in warm reds and yellows allowing her to feel a little more at ease than she had amidst the mix of family, friends and strangers.

She settled heavily on the sofa facing the fire, she shucked her boots and tucked her jean clad legs under her. This was what she enjoyed, if only she had thought to bring a book to distract herself from the noise she heard on the other side of the door. She tucked a rebellious curl back behind her ear and for the first time that night let a small smile grace her lips. She felt more at ease alone with her thoughts than she had all night.

She barely got the thought out when she heard the door click open and closed. A quiet ‘muffliato’ was whispered and she knew her peace would be shattered. Whatever the damn woman intended it wouldn’t go well for her and whatever she expected when she cast that charm was far from Bella’s own mind. There was nothing she cared for less than someone who would not take a hint.

“There you are.” She didn’t bother to hide her hiss of displeasure as the blonde took a seat far too close to her on the couch. “I thought we’d never get a chance to talk alone but this is a lucky break.” A small hand rested on Bellatrix’s thigh, she raised a dark eyebrow at the solid gold band nestled on the woman's ring finger. Blue eyes followed her gaze but if anything it made the woman smile wider. “Oh honey he don’t mind, as long as it’s a woman.” She tried to lean in closer, years ago Bellatrix might have taken her up on what she was so blatantly offering.

Not now though, not when she had something better, even if it was only a dream in her head at the moment.

“I mind. And even if you weren’t wearing someone else’s ring I wouldn’t be interested.” She leaned away, her dark eyes boring into the other woman’s.

“Oh come on….I promise not to ask for more in the morning.” A pink tongue swiped across red lips as she leaned in closer, Bellatrix could smell the fruity alcohol on her breath as she spoke. “I promise it’ll be worth it.”

She pulled away, completely unaffected by her attempt at seduction. “I am not available.” She stressed the words, put danger in her tone and still the woman didn’t seem to take the hint. “If you can't keep your hands to yourself, I will hex you. I am not interested.” Her dark eyes narrowed on the blue ones staring back at her. She reached out and removed the hand on her thigh, she squeezed the wrist in her hand until the woman winced before she let go.

“Well that must not have went well.” Bella turned in surprise and leveled a sharp glare at her two best friends, they had been sneaky coming through the door as the woman left, the both of them held their hands up in truce. “That was all Sirius, he thought you needed to loosen up.” Lily chuckled as they both moved to join her on the couch.

“I’ll kill him later.” She promised, a small smile gracing her face at the payback she would get to enact.

“He’s worried about you. So are we.” Molly told her. “You’ve been getting more and more
secluded as the years go by, Bella. And to be honest you were never than much of an open book to begin with.” The last was mentioned on a huff and Bellatrix couldn’t help the small smile tugging at her lips. Molly did love gossip, even if she never shared it with anyone and she knew it annoyed the witch that Bella was so tight-lipped about her problems. “When was the last time you even had a date?” Molly demanded, not caring for the smirk at all.

Bellatrix couldn’t remember, but she was ever the jokester. “Well that woman wasn’t exactly offering a date and I haven’t much felt like screwing where my godson’s open their Christmas presents so I’m afraid it didn’t pan out. Maybe it’ll work out better at yours.”

Molly’s mouth opened and closed before she smacked the laughing woman and gave her the best disappointed mothering glare she could manage. It only made Bella laugh all the harder. “Be serious Bella. We can help. Whatever it is now has gone on for a while and quiet frankly we are tired of watching you suffer.” Lily's voice was quiet putting a damper on the small mirth she had just felt. It was very clear her friends weren’t going to let her change the subject. They were not letting her get away without a proper explanation.

A sigh fell from her lips and she pulled her wand out to relight the dwindling fire, afterwards she twirled the wand in her hand, a nervous habit she had never been able to kick. “I wish you wouldn’t worry. I’m handling it.”

Lily frowned thoughtfully and moved to sit in her husband’s favorite chair. A dark red wing back settled in front of the fireplace, it practically swallowed her tiny frame but it allowed her to face Bellatrix, to watch the expressions cross her face and make sure she wasn’t trying to hide behind snark and humor. She knew Bellatrix well but the woman was a fairly good actress. “It’s our job to worry, that’s what friends do when someone is acting off. We want to help; we want to see you happy and we will do anything we can if you just say the words.”

Bella sighed again and shifted, letting her feet hit the floor and instead leaning her body slightly against the arm of the couch. She pulled a throw pillow to her chest and tried to fight the weight of her emotions. No one had ever been there for her before. At least no one outside of her sisters and niece. It was both comforting and terrifying. They expected honesty, they were willing to listen with nothing, no shared blood, forcing them to care.

She knew it was time to come clean; she could definitely use their support and heaven knew everyone was finding out on their own anyways. Merlin help her if either of her friends found out without her being the one to tell them. She would never hear the end of it. It was better to just say it, rip it off like a band aid.

"I've been bonded." Molly gasped and collapsed on the couch beside her, her hand reaching out to settle on her thigh in support.

"I- I never would have believed it was real." Molly shook her head in disbelief, short red hair going everywhere as she struggled to figure out what she could do for her friend now.

“IT’s rare, but it's not a fairy tale.”

"Wait what does that mean?” Lily asked carefully. Her muggle heritage hadn’t spared her from purebloods prejudices but this she would not have ever heard a pureblood speak of. They swept it under the rug, choosing instead to pretend like it never happened. Like a fairy tale meant to explain how bad muggleborns were.

“IT’s a type of magic, think of it like partners.... like-like a symbiotic relationship. My magic and the magic of my bond works together. The bond makes us stronger, both equal. Even if she were the weakest witch in the world she would be at least as strong as I am as long as I was acceptable to
the bond. I can choose to cut her off from my magic but there is a price for me. It’s painful and it makes my own magic wild and harder to control."

"Isn’t that dangerous, Bella you work at a school." Lily wasn’t accusing her of anything just genuinely concerned.

"Yes, Dumbledore knows and there are potions that help. It’s worse for a Black. There is some kind of curse on the witches and wizards who bond from our line. Most choose to kill their bond, but that has its own consequences. It brings about insanity. It’s not very accepted in pureblood circles to accept a bond though."

"Why?" In Lily’s world she couldn’t imagine where murder was a better option than sharing your magic, she would think people would jump at it actually since it made them stronger. And of course it was ridiculous but pureblood fascists weren't going to change just because they were wrong.

"Bonds only happen between a lesser blood and a pureblood. You can imagine how the purebloods think. Lesser bloods binding themselves to their proud families, making themselves as powerful as those born with magic. It was an abomination to them. Thankfully it’s rare."

"So you were bound….to a muggleborn or a halfborn but not a pureblood?"

Bella shook her head; this was perhaps the hardest part. Telling them who it was, unfortunately it had to be done. "A student….a sixth year now."

Molly groaned and looked pleadingly at Bella, "Not Ginny?" Bella smiled wickedly, taking what little fun she could in light of the difficult topic, she did so love making the redhead squirm a bit. Molly slapped her leg playfully. "You're cruel." She said as Bella wagged her eyebrows playfully.

"No, I haven’t been bonded to any of your children, or Harry."
"You can bind to another woman….I would have thought….you know well, women can't produce children together." Lily blushed. It was a rare sight so Bella let herself revel in it just a bit.

"It's all about the magic. Doesn't matter that she's a girl or a student. I was bound to her the moment we were in the same vicinity. She was only eleven years old.” Molly patted her leg reassuringly. She seemed to be accepting it far better than Bella had expected her too, better than Lily at least.

"Eleven?!"

Bella laughed, at the outrage on her friend's face. “It’s not an attraction thing. It’s all about magic. I'm just the vessel. I don't have to love the girl I don't even have to want to have anything to do with her. Eventually love typically happens, either friendship or romance, at least according to the successful stories. It's so rare there isn't a lot known about it.”

"That and the fact fanatic purebloods usually end up killing their binds and going insane because they can't stand the thought of dirtying their perfect lineage."

Bella growled. "I'm not going to let that happen." Molly held her hand up in mollification.

"Not what I meant." Bella focused on getting control again. "Yes sorry. It's not been easy. There are voices that beat at my mind when I'm not around her; they try to get me to act on every bad thought or desire I've ever had. It's gotten worse over the past seven years."

Lily jumped. "Seven…. but you said. OH MY GOD. It's Hermione!" Bella leaned forward and
covered the witch’s mouth, glaring threateningly at her. She knew the guys were close by, both their husbands, her cousin and the children. The party was winding down and eventually they would all go out for there traditional Quidditch match. They would come inside and find them first like always, to ask for spectators and a referee. She did not need them overhearing this.

"I forget you're too smart for your own good. You can't tell the others and you can't tell her." Both the reds nodded so Bella moved back onto her couch.

"Why don't you tell her?"

"Because she doesn't deserve to be shackled to me, and she would be eventually. There is a brand that happens, no one knows what triggers it just that it’s a permanent fixture on the skin…. like a muggle tattoo. A permanent fixture for everyone to see and recognize. It’ll make her a Target for anyone wanting to get to me. I can't afford to let her get close enough for that to happen. And if she decides I'm not what she wants and I've been branded I'm not sure I won't become the most dangerous dark witch since Le Fey. I'm not sure I can let her go if I've accepted…Merlin I don’t know if I can let her go now.” The last was barely said, a mere whisper she wasn’t even sure if the other two heard her.

"Doesn't the bond work both ways?” It was Molly who asked surprising Bella. She'd never thought about it before.

"It doesn't seem too. I hope it doesn't. No kid deserves to go through feeling like they are losing their mind. Especially not her, and the original rush of power….well I was older I knew my limits. When we met for the first time it was like those limits were gone all of a sudden, I thought I was going to blow up the Great Hall… You can’t imagine how terrifying that was. I don’t want her to have to go through that."

Molly looked at her friend thoughtfully, “You’re in love with her. Whether you want to admit it or not, Bella.” The dark witch scowled but once again couldn’t deny it. It irked her that everyone seemed to know her well enough now to guess her innermost turmoil. “I want to be happy for you, but I’m hurting for you. I don’t want to see you go through this but if ever I thought there was a woman out there for you it would have been someone like Hermione. I just might not have thought it was Hermione.” She smiled sadly.

“She is so young, she deserves a normal childhood. She deserves to be able to do whatever she wants, get married and have children or run for minister….she can’t do that if she has to stay around the castle with me for the rest of her life.”

“It sounds like you never plan to tell her. Bella I think…I think Hermione is old enough, she is of age yes but also she’s…more mature than most her age. She should at least be given all the facts before you decide what is best for her on your own.” Molly nodded her agreement as Lily made her way over to squeeze in beside them on the couch, she looped Bellatrix in a one arm hug, Molly quickly did the same from her side.

“I’m not strong enough to be that selfless, Lil. I'm going to tell her, Dumbledore asked me to wait another year,” She couldn’t help the words fell bitterly from her lips. “After that I will do my best to allow her to choose what she thinks is best. But in case I’m not strong enough…” She hesitated, knowing she had to tell someone and also knowing they wouldn’t like her ultimate decision. “If I’m not strong enough to let her leave and I don’t think I will be…I think I’ll be dangerous. I—"

“No. I know where you’re going with this Bellatrix Black, no one is going to kill you.” Lily’s arms tightened around her.
“You may not have a choice, I’m far more powerful than I ever was when I dueled Moody. I have a will and everything is ready, it’s an option. One I need to consider. The year she took off of school left me very unstable, I tried to resign but Dumbledore refused to hear it,”

Molly interrupted. “Good, you are the best blasted teacher there.”

That drew a grin from the Slytherin, “I’ll be sure to pass that on the Minerva shall I?”

Neither of them laughed at her attempt to lighten the tension. “Don’t give up without trying Bella, please.” Lily snuggled into her side, her breath hot against her throat and tears burning as they fell onto exposed skin.

“I’m not. I’m hoping we can figure something out, something that works for both of us.” Bella wrapped an arm around the red head’s waist and held her close, a rare display of affection usually reserved for her siblings.

“She could love you too.” Molly told her thoughtfully, a little more reserved with her own feelings on the matter. “Ginny is always whispering about it with Luna, I honestly hadn’t ever given it much thought, they started it their fifth year and I figured it was just girls being girls.”

Bellatrix couldn’t help the way her heart leapt at the idea but it was quickly squashed, as if a bucket of cold water had settled on her as she remembered Snape’s words.

“I don’t think I’m going to wish for miracles Molly.” She smiled thinly, “I’ll settle for friendship, if she can get over my gruff attitude and the way I’ve always treated her.” She grimaced. “Hermione tends to surprise people, and I think she may surprise you too.”

A knock on the door surprised them just before Harry and Sirius entered, the two men shot the woman exasperated glances. “It’s Quidditch time, stop with all the women talk and come watch the men at work.” Sirius smiled widely, placing Harry conveniently in front of him when he caught his cousin’s annoyed gaze.

“Hey! I fly circles around you…you…you mangy mutt.” Ginny stuck her head in and seemed to catch onto the tense and depressing undercurrents far better than the two men. Bellatrix clamored to her feet and drug the others with her, she didn’t need the second biggest gossip in the family to catch wind of anything interesting. The women in the Weasley family were like dogs with bones.

“I do believe that was a challenge, dear cousin.” She grinned wickedly at him. “And I suggest you run, I am not very happy with the bimbo you tried to set me up with.”

He grimaced, hands still clutching his godson tightly on the shoulders for protection. “She was a very classy lady-“

“You met her at the Leaky Cauldron.” Not the epitome of class….Sirius winced at Harry’s revealing words. “She bartends right?”

“Ah,” Bellatrix was still twirling her wand in her hand and she was advancing slowly on the shaggy haired man. “You get free drinks to introduce her to your lovely cousin?” He gulped instead of answering, her smile widened and Harry managed to slip a little to the side. She loved knowing where his loyalties rested but she didn’t want it to be so easy.

“Cousin.” He whimpered nervously at the sweet way she was speaking now. “Run.”

~H~
Dark….too dark. Her enemies were waiting within and she knew it. Still she had gone, knowing she might never come back out. It was just something she had to do, there was something in the forest she needed, something important. Something she couldn’t live without.

Leaves crackled and twigs broke under her foot. Never mind she was a master Hunter, never mind that she was doing her best to remain quiet.

Even the shadows were working against her. She followed the canopy, trying to use the vast tree tops as cover, but no sooner than she would step into the darkness than an unfelt wind would rush through the boughs and move the limbs, illuminating her figure in the pale light of a full moon.

Still she didn’t let it deter her. If she was meant to die that day it would not be said she lacked courage. She would run when needed, charge ahead when she could but she would never give up. Not until her dying breath would she give up.

A quick snap of a limb gave her pause. It hadn’t been her and whatever creature had caused it had been heavy, had moved clumsily. It gave her cause to worry. She hadn’t heard anything stalking her as she followed the trail, whatever had moved had gotten impatient….or wanted her to know it was there. Wanted to smell her fear.

She unsheathed her weapon, a small piece of metal, too small to even be called a proper sword. It was all she had. Her sister had given it to her on a visit, insisted she had embedded it with a protective spell. At the time it had fascinated her, magic was a foreign concept in her household and she had already heard wild tales of her sister’s famous and mischievous magic. She hoped her sister had been truthful as she held the weapon out to ward off the growing darkness. She prayed to every god she remembered that Morgaine hadn’t been pulling her leg when she said it would protect her.

“You are a pretty little thing aren’t you!” She gasped and spun, only to face nothing. Her sword wavered in the air, almost shimmering as the moonlight lit her up once again. “Over here dear.” She turned once again but still there was nothing. The man, if indeed it was a man, moved far too quickly to be human.

She felt a cold sweat trickle down her back and gulped nervously.

“W-what do you want?” She moved so she could place her back at a tree. She wasn’t well versed in the art of sword play, she doubted she would be able to defend herself against anything truly dangerous, her best chance would be to wound it and run.

“Not much at all, lovely. Just your life, you can’t say it’s worth all that much. The life of a peasant.” She shivered at the way it so callously calculated her worth, the way it didn’t seem to believe she would be missed.

“No, I’ll not die today.” All bravado but what else could she have told it. It laughed regardless, manically and high pitched, hurting her ears and causing the birds sleeping in the tree tops to squall and fly off.

She felt it lunge, felt the disturbance in the darkness. She trusted her instincts, brought the tip of the sword up to where she believed it was coming and shouted the words her sister had instructed her to use in the event of danger.

“Protego Maxima!” Half of her had expected it to be one of Morgaine's tricks. It wasn’t. A jet of white light surrounded her, the creature, for it surely wasn’t human, was illuminated as it slammed into he barrier, howling it’s rage.

She didn’t waste time to see if she could do it again, the shimmering white shield was already
fading and she took off around the creature, terrified of the rotting mass of flesh she had seen and
the sharp wolfish face that had stared back at her.
She didn't know how long she had ran, she was out of breath, her lungs ached and her leg muscles
burned in protest as she tried to flee whatever was chasing her. How close it truly was she didn't
know, she hadn't the courage to turn and look. She could hear it and feel it though; it couldn't have
been more than three steps behind her. Sometimes she felt its long fingers reach for her head only
to slide through the ends of her hair and graze her scalp with its claws.

She could hear it whispering to her but she couldn't make out what it was saying except that it was
hungry. She didn't want to be its lunch, she ran faster. Occasionally she would make a sharp turn
trying to throw it off her trail, unfortunately such turns left her blind to the high roots and she
tripped crashing to the leaf covered forest floor.

Her pursuer cackled in glee but she still couldn't see anything in the shadows of the trees. She
called for help, any help. She called for….for Bella.

It was as if the woman dominated her mind, how could she have forgotten she was in the woods
looking for her. She had lost her, the creature had attacked her she had heard her call out….she had
to….to get her knights….no…what?

She shook her head, forced her mind clear to focus only on what was important. On the woman she
needed to find.
“Bella!” The sword in her hand….she glanced down but it wasn’t a sword it was only her wand. It
didn’t matter it was a weapon and she could use it far better than the piece of metal she had been
given…

Her mind folded in confusion, had she been given a sword? The cackling grew louder, closer. Now
she could make out words. It was saying it had Bellatrix Black. It would kill her! Take her magic
for itself and live for years.

“No!” She struggled back to her feet, slammed into trees as the voice retreated. She followed
blindly, calling out for the silent witch she knew had to be somewhere nearby. She had been right
behind her!

Hadin’t she?

“Bellatrix! Bella!” The darkness was suffocating. Clinging to her, pulling at her. Swallowing her
words, muting her voice. She just knew the professor couldn’t hear her. “Lumos Maxima!
Professor! Bella!” Her heart bear an irregular pattern in her chest, her lungs felt inadequate, barely
able to suck in air to continue calling much less chase after the creature that now had better prey to
devour.

She fell to her knees gasping and hurting, trying her best to call out to the dark headed woman. To
plead for the creature to take her instead.

Suddenly something was shaking her hard, she felt hands clinging to her arms but she looked down
into the dim light and saw nothing. The bruising grip was still there, she cried out, struggling
against the invisible bonds.

“No! Let me go….Bellatrix!”

She awoke as something slapped her face, hard. Her body was covered in a cold sweat and she was
shaking from the lingering fear. She took in deep gulps of breath and tried to focus her eyes in the
dark bedroom. She was almost relieved...She was home, not in any woods….
But she still wasn’t safe from monsters.

~B~

Bellatrix.... Bella .... No! Let me go.... Bellatrix!

“Hermione!” Bellatrix tried to launch herself off the couch, her consciousness not quiet caught up with her sleep addled mind. She ended up in a tangled mess on the floor, her feet tangled up in the blanket Lily had placed on her after she’d passed out on the couch. “Damn it!” She pushed the blankets aside and drew her knees up to her chest. It took several deep breaths before she felt stable enough to climb to her feet.

She wanted to see Hermione. The need was overwhelming. Stronger than she could ever remember it being before.

“Bella are you alright?” hands landed on her shoulder as her friend came rushing in, probably lured from her own bed at Bellatrix’s scream. She glanced over at Lily, concern pulling at the laugh lines on her face making her friend look far older than she was.

“No….I mean….I don’t know what I mean. I need…” She tried to focus her breathing, slow down and get control of herself. She could feel the magic licking at her skin, wild, hot and dangerous. If she wasn’t careful she could hurt her friend. Or the children.

“Bella?” Lily sounded uneasy, she could feel the magic in the air too. She had never seen Bellatrix so close to losing control.

“I need Hermione. I-“ She didn’t know where the girl lived but Lily did. Her eyes sought green ones, desperation glinting like madness. “Please.”

Lily nodded, she wasn’t sure what was going on but Bellatrix Black did not beg and Lily Potter was not going to make her. “Let me get James and tell Molly. Arthur can watch the children.”

~H~

Last ~H~

Peter was above her, she couldn’t see him in the pitch black but she could smell the alcohol on his hot breath as it caressed her face. So strong it made her stomach churn with each exhale. She could also feel him. His grip on her shoulders was painfully bruising and his knee pressed her stomach into the mattress.

She couldn’t breath right, not with his weight pressed so heavily on her, but she didn’t dare try to speak. Not when she had no idea what he wanted or what he planned to do to her.

“You know-“ He finally spoke, a hand sweeping up from her arm to grasp at her chin as she tried to turn her head away from the smell. “I raised you, gave you- gave….a roof over your head.” His words were slurred but Hermione had a sinking feeling he wasn’t as drunk as she would have hoped. It was easier to manage him when he was too plastered to catch her. “I tried- tried to discipline,” he stumbled over the word, frustrating himself and putting more weight on Hermione as he leaned in until a breath separated them. She cried out as his knee dug harder into her stomach but he didn’t lift it, she doubted he cared.

“I tried with you I really did. I let you go to the freak school. Parade the shit around in my house.” She wished she could tell him if wasn’t his house, wish she was brave enough to risk the abuse she knew would come from the defiance. “And now you’ve turned into some kind of whore.” She
flinched as he spit the word out against her face, his fingers still clasping her chin too tightly for her to move.

“First the boy, then the sport player what’s his name….now…now I find you screaming out a woman’s name. Have you fucked all the boys in the school and now you have to change it up.” His voice was steadily rising. She blinked the tears away, her eyes having adjusted enough in the pale light to make out his features. He was livid. Whatever had set him off had caused him to dip, quiet possibly, beyond reason. She had never been more afraid of him than she was in that very moment.

“I haven’t been meeting all your needs is that it?” He adjusted himself on the bed, his knee falling to the mattress beside her as he brought the other up on the bed so he cage her with his body. “A father should do more than discipline? That’s fine with me, if this is what it takes I'm happy to help keep you in line.”

Her mind struggled to keep up with what he was saying, refusing to believe what she was hearing, what he was implying. She made to utter a word, any word, when his lips clashes harshly against hers, all teeth and pain. She jerked her face out of his grasp the taste of iron heavy on her tongue.

“No- No!” She shoved him off, finding strength in desperation and sending him sprawling across the floor. She wasn’t crazy, she didn’t stick around to watch him get up. She knew if he hadn’t moved his knee for a better position over her she would never have gotten him off. She wasn’t going to give him another go at it. She wasn’t just going to let him take her innocence. She flew out of the bed and down the hall. She wouldn’t make it into his room and to the safe in time. Her wand was a lost cause. A useless weapon. Already she could hear his curses trailing after her. His bare feet pounding on the floor right behind her. She aimed toward the stairs. If she could only make it out and to the front door she could probably run to Ms. Swift’s, she could return for Sterling and get the hell out. At least for the rest of the night.

Unfortunately luck had never been on her side. He couldn’t catch her true but he didn’t exactly need to get his hands fully on her to slow her down. He nearly caught her at the stairs and used just a little of his momentum to shove her down them. She didn’t have the time to catch herself and her breath flew out on a broken gasp as she felt one of her ribs crack as she tumbled down them.

He slowed now, a triumphant look spreading across his face as she writhed on the floor bellow him. She grasped her side and tried to roll, tried to get to her feet but all she managed was to clamor to her hands and knees. A large hand reached out for her hair, grasping and tugging until she cried out and leaned back to escape the pain. He bent over her, breath hot against her cheek as he inhaled sharply.

“You always smell so good.” She couldn’t turn her head with his hand pulling her hair. She was at his mercy and he knew it just as she did. Her ribs protested with every move, white hot pain with every breath, her scalp burned under his hand. He had never gone this far before and it was very evident he had no intention of stopping.

“P-please don’t do this.” He only laughed. Adrenaline had helped sober him, he was thoroughly enjoying himself now. He moved around, letting go of her hair in favor of tugging her up to her feet. He pulled her shaking body flush against his own, laughing at the fear and disgust he found on her already marked face.

“I’m going to fix you. You won’t be chasing any more of those boys when I’m done with you, damn sure won’t be going after no woman. You’ll know what a real man is and you’ll forget about running off to the freak world.”

“No!” She didn’t try to pull away, instead she shoved herself into him. It surprised him enough to
knock him off balance and give her a chance to run for freedom. It was short lived his hands clamped down on her waist and threw her bodily into the kitchen door.

She crashed through, landed hard against the small table before sprawling out on the cold kitchen floor. Her head bounced off the tile with a loud crack and she reached up dazedly to feel the warm blood flowing from a gash on her forehead.

The sight of blood never bothered her stepfather before and it didn’t give him pause now. He followed right after her, reached down to grasp at the fabric of her shirt, uncaring as the light fabric ripped under his hands. He stood straddling her waist as he pulled her up to face him, her eyes could barely keep him in focus her head ached so much.

“This is your life from now on. Vacations. Between terms. Anytime you come home you will be a mother, a daughter or a wife. Your going to be whatever I want you to be because I rule this house.” He shook her violently making her shirt rip all the more, his dark gaze traveled down to the exposed skin and his fury turned into lust. He settled himself over her waist, easing his tall frame until he was seated there, keeping her easily in place with his weight while letting his hands free, uncaring as her head snapped back to the floor when he released his hold on her shirt.

“Please don’t.” He laughed…..until a small body landed against his back.

“Lego, Mione!”

Tiny hands hit and little bare legs kicked out at her father. It did not amuse him. Peter wasn’t about to let his child interrupt what he was considering a good night.

“Get off!” He grabbed a wrist, uncaring of the tiny cry of pain, and slung the child away toward the cabinets. She slid across the floor on her Disney silk PJs and slammed hard into the wood.

The small cry of pain enraged Hermione. Enough to give her back some of the fight she had lost in the scuffle. He had never laid his hands on Sterling.

The glass China cabinets shook with her rage, chairs fell over and the lights flickered. She knew it was wild magic, something that rarely happened in adults. She also knew she was the cause, her anger at seeing Sterling so mistreated had finally snapped something inside of her. If only she could control it. If only she could get him off of her.

It turned out she needn’t have tried. While she knew she was the cause for the chaotic happenings in the kitchen Peter had no idea. He was looking at his child now with a mixture of fury and disgust.

“No. I won’t be having two in my house.” He climbed from Hermione easily enough and fumbled for the first knife he could get his hands on. Sterling cowered away from him as he approached but Hermione latched onto his leg causing him to pause just long enough to kick her ribs again.

She coughed up blood as the bones crunched beneath his foot but it had been enough. Sterling had taken off out the kitchen door, hopefully to hide until he regained his senses. With her gone he only had the student to focus on.

This time Hermione didn’t try to fight, the longer he focused on her the less likely he was to go and hunt for Sterling.
Lily couldn't figure out which house was Hermione's. Not from the outside. She had only ever apparated into the home, her destination had been Hermione instead of the address and she had apparated straight in front of the girl. Unfortunately that had seemed to terrify her poor step father and Hermione had politely asked them not to do it again. She wanted to respect the girl's wishes but she couldn't figure out which door to knock on and Bellatrix as growing more and more restless as she tried to decide. She didn't want to wake the wrong family up as it was rather late in the evening and even though Bellatrix felt something was wrong neither of them had any concrete proof and nothing looked off in any of the homes from the view outside on the street.

"Find it." Bellatrix hissed impatiently. "Or get me inside. I don't care which, Lily." Impatience made her sound angry, frustration pulled at every fiber of her being and her body physically shook with the effort it was taking to keep from charging ahead without her friend. She could apparate to Hermione herself if she hadn't been afraid to splinch herself with her unfocused magic. It was already taking everything she could to keep reign over her own panic and keep the nervous magic building up inside her from leveling the block.

She wanted to rest her eyes on Hermione and she wanted it now. The uneasy feeling had increased every moment they delayed with the foolishness Lily had put her through. Bellatrix didn't give a shit if she frightened Hermione's father by apparating. If she had asked them not to. She would apparate into his bloody bath if it meant she could see Hermione faster.

"I…they all look alike. Damn it." Lily was sure it was one of the houses in front of them. She hadn't anticipated they would all looked alike from the outside. Cookie cutter homes. Perhaps she had expected a mail box with 'Granger' on the front. Bella didn't care. Lily needed to find the house. Now.

"Then just-" Bella was about to suggest they simply apparate inside, at least one of them and then they can let the other in. A commotion behind them caught her attention and she turned just in time to see a small child the size of a house elf rush out into the cold snow clad only in her pajamas and bare feet. "What the hell?"

The child ran to the end of the driveway and stopped at the mailbox. Bellatrix and Lily had both stopped to stare, shock and confusion keeping them in place for the moment. The little girl glanced up toward them, tears falling from her eyes, illuminated by the dim street lamp a few feet away. "What the hell?"

At first she only stared at them. Sniffled a bit. But with a sudden stifled cry she ran full sprint toward Bellatrix who clasped her small body in surprise as she slammed into her knees.

Wide, tear filled green eyes stared up at her in a mix of fear, confusion, and oddly hope. She didn't say anything just fist her little hands in Bella's robes and tugged desperately. The witch put up no resistance. She let the girl pull her toward the open door and trusted Lilly to follow. If they had been looking for sign that Bellatrix's feelings were right….this was likely it.

Bellatrix clasped the child on the shoulder when she led them through the open doorway. They could hear a voice from further in, past the dark hallway. A man. He was screaming and cursing, his voice harsh and out of breath. Whatever he was doing was physical and if Bellatrix was going to be forced to fight she didn't want a small child to see.

She pulled her back, silently pointed for her to stay by the door and held a finger up to her lips to signal for both of her companions to stay silent. The little girl sucked her lip between her teeth and
fisted her hands in her own top in distress but nodded quietly.

Bella slid her wand from her sleeve, Lily did the same, casting a low yielded lumos for them to move by. The girl didn't seem surprised by the magic, something Bellatrix tried to put out of her mind as she moved quietly through the hallways toward the voice.

The closer she got the louder the voices in her mind beat at her. Almost desperate in their constant whispering. Some on about the child, some about the house, the man's voice, the dream. But they all seemed to converge on one thought as she pushed a door open to reveal the kitchen.

Save Hermione. Kill the muggle.

~H~

She was cold. It was probably the only thing she really knew at the moment. It was the only thing she could feel anyways. She knew there should have been pain, both from the earlier abuse and from the knife wounds, shallow and deep cuts her stepfather had painted all over her arms and torso. But, it seemed, she had grown used to the pain. And all that lingered now was the cold. It seeped into her body and she knew eventually it would over take her completely. She didn't have the energy to fight anymore. Sterling was safe, wherever she was hiding, and his attention was now solely on Hermione.

She was sure if she died Peter wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Surely the magical world wouldn't ignore the murder of one of their own, although in her mind she seriously doubted the minister would put too much effort into getting a muggleborn justice. The muggles themselves may be more strict, her grandmother for one wouldn't stop until she had all the answers and she knew Ms. Swift would likely tell the authorities of the abuse when Hermione was no longer around to watch over Sterling. Perhaps her grandparents would do better with her than they had with Peter. She wondered if she would be able to watch from the after life.

She didn't want to die. Not really. She tried to focus on something to keep her grounded, to help her endure until he grew tired and left her alone.

There was only the cold.

She tried to listen to something other than his ranting and raving but the sounds were muted, all collided together as if she were far bellow water. The snippets she did hear didn't make any sense. She could swear she could make out other voices, someone talking, weak and tired but happy all the same.

'My Hero.'

'Maybe one day you can save me.'

'Maybe one day I will.'

The voices echoed like a memory in her mind. Hollow and meaningless except that she wished for nothing more than someone to walk through the door and save her now.

She knew no one would be coming. No one knew she needed help.

Except suddenly the door opened and she recognized the light of the lumos charm immediately.

Someone had come. Someone with magic had actually come to save her. And she knew that mass of curly hair anywhere.
"No."

~B~

"No!" Bellatrix flung a hex at the man sitting atop the bloody body on the floor. He struck the wall, cracking the drywall as his body slammed into it before sliding to the floor with a startled moan. She allowed him a moment to get his bearing, to lean up against the wall and cough up a spatter of blood before she was on him again with another hex.

She had never agreed with the voices, NEVER, but at that particular moment they were urging her, not just to kill but to maim. To torture. And she was all the ready to do it. Crucio slipped from her mouth as if it were the easiest thing she had ever done, as if she did it every day, practiced it, perfected it like an art. His screams for mercy were intoxicating.

The vile muggle couldn't even drop the knife he'd held onto as his body jerked and spasmed. She refused to let him rest, another spell slid from her lips as soon as she ended the first.

Crucio, stinging hexes, slashing hexes, anything painful she could think of was slung as his writhing body without pause until he couldn't even stand to scream any longer.

He had touched what was hers. Had harmed what was hers and he would suffer for it. Suffer as nothing ever had.

Hands pulled at her but she ignored them. She ignored Lily as she tried desperately to stop her. Nearly turned on her when her hands grew more forceful, when they were suddenly joined by James and Molly. When the shouts for her to stop before she killed him infuriated her beyond reason.

"No…" It was weak but the sound stopped Bella's tirade. She stood still, her breath heavy and labored as the hands left her and everyone moved away to turn toward the student.

Hermione had clamored awkwardly to her feet. She stumbled the distance to Bella, intent on keeping the witch from ruining her life and getting sent to Azkaban. Everyone reached out to grab her as she stumbled and Bellatrix spun so quickly no one saw her move.

She held the girl tightly in her arms as they both collapsed to their knees. Hot blood fell from Hermione's forehead and dripped onto Bella's chest. And she groaned as Bella turned on her back, she coughed up blood and grimaced as she brushed it away with the back of her own hand.

"St-" It obviously hurt to speak, it looked like it hurt to breath. Bellatrix had to push aside her rage to focus on what was important to her. As much as she wanted to turn and end the muggles life Hermione came first. It was Bellatrix the girl was clinging to, looking to for answers and she had to be strong.

"Sterling, Prof.-"

"Hush. The girl's fine," Dark eyes glanced up to meet Molly's horrified gaze but brown eyes softened as she nodded, the mothering witch turned back toward the hall and Bellatrix was confident she would take care of the child until everything could be settled here. "We need to see to you." She glanced up toward Lily and James, even Lily seemed to know what she was trying to communicate to her.

With a wave of her wand a silver wisp flew from the room, with any luck it would fetch Andy and she could use her skills to get Hermione in a stable enough condition to be sent to St. Mungo's.
Until she arrived Bellatrix was the most skilled at healing in the room, which wasn't actually saying much.

"This might sting. I'm not very talented with healing." Never the less Hermione sighed softly as the warmth from the healing magic settled on her battered skin.

"How-?" A frustrated sigh fell from her bruised lips as she couldn't finish her sentence. She didn't need to, they all knew what she was trying to ask.

"Hermione…" She leaned down and ghosted her lips against Hermione's forehead, just below her hairline. "I should have gotten here so much sooner…" She should have known from the start. This was her bond. Someone she was supposed to support and protect even if she hadn't been in love with her. She had let so much cloud her judgment. Dumbledore, her fear and feelings. She had failed Hermione and it had cost the girl so much already.

Guilt warred with the anger swirling inside her. Making for a nasty cocktail of emotion, leaving her shaking and her magic unstable. Voices echoing in her mind, urging her to turn and rid the world of the man. Telling her this was her fault. The fact was she had listened to Dumbledore and delayed the inevitable. She had given into her fear and instead of being someone Hermione could come to she was one of her tormentors. She had helped push the girl back home every break, from one abuse to the other.

A bloody hand reached up and touched her cheek, only then did Bellatrix realize tears were falling from her eyes. She bowed her head and hurried it into the girls locks long enough to collect herself.

"I-"

Bellatrix silenced her, pulled back and wiped Hermione's own tears away, she ignored Lily's distressed cry and James' attempt to comfort his wife. She wasn't worried with her friends, they could handle whatever else needed doing, Hermione was her priority. "Not now. We can talk but not now, Hermione. Let me just help you, love. Andy is coming." She wiped a few drops of blood from the girls mouth, a quick swipe of her wand helped clean the already coagulating blood around the cut on her forehead. "Andy will be here soon." She repeated as Hermione let out a nasty hiss as Bellatrix jarred her side.

As if summoned a loud pop echoed through the kitchen. With a startled cry her sister was instantly at her side, pushing her wand away to get to work with her own. Bella glanced up and caught sight of Nymphadora lingering in the back next to James, shock sharp on her face as her hair faded from purple to it's original black.

"I have this, Bella." Light brown eyes held her own for a moment before turning back to her patient. She was no fool, Andy could feel the pain and guilt rolling off her sister but she couldn't deal with that now. A quick check of Hermione's vitals with a wave of her wand told her the girl was more critical than she looked. She had a rib puncturing a lung and a pretty nasty concussion. How she remained awake and semi alert Andy had no idea.

"He did this?" Nymphadora's question was pointed toward James. The man nodded, his eyes sliding to the slumped man who hadn't yet stirred after Bellatrix's attack. He was breathing but they hadn't bothered to check on him, so long as he was unconscious they weren't concerned.

"Lily and Bellatrix found them."

"Her sister ran outside just as we arrived, she didn't have any shoes on and she was terrified." Lily told her quietly, trying not to alarm Hermione.
Nymph clenched her fists, angry at herself for not seeing any kind of signs when she had dropped the girl off. She felt guilty. She had delivered Hermione right to the monster and been completely unaware. She was supposed to be an auror. She was trained to take down monsters and she hadn't even noticed someone so important to her family was suffering at the hands of one.

"I need to get her moved to St. Mungo's." Andy told them her wand working desperately to do what she could to knit the girls skin back together and reduce the risk of splinching.

A sudden laugh drew their attention back to the muggle. He hadn't moved, his chin still rested on his chest, but he was apparently awake and his amusement pissed them all off.

"You can't take her anywhere without my permission." He laughed, drug his head up to smile arrogantly at them.

Hermione moaned quietly, Andy placed a soothing hand on her shoulder as Bellatrix rose. She waved a hand for James to stop, he eyed her wearily, wondering if she may lose control again but he did as she bid and stood by. She fought the urge to curse him and instead gripped her wand, knuckles white with the effort it took her not to kill him as she approached. She leaned over until he could see the madness in her eyes, she hid nothing from him. They were inches apart as her gaze burned into him. Her unarmed hand fisted in his shirt as she jerked him up.

"You have no right to tell me what I can do with that girl." He swallowed thickly, his arrogance falling in the face of her pure rage. He had no desire to be attacked by her again but he was not going to just let her take what he considered his without a fight.

"Y-you'll go to jail. You- your kind can't interfere with muggles." He stuttered on the unfamiliar word but whether it was because of disuse or because Bellatrix terrified him they didn't know.

"She isn't a muggle." Her eyes bore into him, her wand sparkled with the magic she was holding back. "And she is mine." He opened his mouth but she struck him with a mild pustule hex. He hissed as his face broke out in red angry splotches. "What I did to you was just a taste of the pain I could inflict." He swallowed again, struggle half heartedly to get out of her grasp and she let him fall with an oomph against the wall again. "Get him out of here Nymph. Before I kill him anyway. I don't much care what you do with him."

Her niece grimaced. There wasn't a whole lot she could do with him. It was true muggles fell outside their jurisdiction and it was near unheard of for one to put a witch or wizard in the kind of predicament he had put Hermione in.

Still she pulled the man to his feet and struggled with him for a moment before she lost her temper too and placed her wand at his throat. He stilled instantly but the sneer didn't drop from his busted face. He wasn't afraid of Nymph, she didn't look much older than Hermione. A bad judge of character because she was probably the second most dangerous witch in the room. She could probably kill him and get away with it if she had been so inclined. Neat and tidy, they would never even know he was gone. Her aunt would have made a right mess of things but Nymph would be methodical. If only her conscience would allow it.

"If you move too much you will splinch. Now I wouldn't mind that all that much considering what you did to my friend but if you bleed out it will be a lot of paperwork and I hate paperwork." It was all the warning she gave him before they apparated away. Bellatrix found herself hoping Nymph shoved him into a cell at Azkaban. If anyone deserved Dementors it was him.

Bellatrix stared at the spot where they had disappeared for only a second before she once again moved to Hermione's side.
"We need to go now." Andy told her, peering up at her through worried eyes.

Hermione struggled a bit in Andy's grasp making Bella reach down and hold her still with a hand to her shoulder. It was too easy to hold the girl down. She barely had the strength to keep her eyes open and it worried Bellatrix. Most of her injuries had been superficial, only a few deep cuts they had easily healed. But she knew the danger was in what they couldn't see and if her sister was worried she knew it was probably bad.

"I can't….leave. Sterling-" Her protests ended on a wet cough, bright red blood spilled from her lips as she desperately gazed up at Bellatrix.

"I will take care of Sterling."

"Muggle- you can't-"

Bella couldn't have her arguing about it. Her stubbornness and protectiveness would only cause her more pain. She raised her wand and mutter softly, her careful eyes watching every feature of the brunette's face as she slipped into unconsciousness.

"Good idea, might help with the transfer too." Andy checked her vitals one more time and nodded to herself. "I've done all I can, we need to move her now, a few of her injuries are still serious and I can't heal those with just a wand."

Bellatrix gritted her teeth, fighting the desire to go after the man and beat him until her own fists bled. She knew it wouldn't help anything but the desire didn't lessen. If anything it worsened now that Hermione was unconscious. She knew she couldn't apparate in her state of mind, at least not safely with Hermione and Andy. She felt her magic prickle at her skin again, angry….guilty. It wouldn't be safe for her to apparate straight to the hospital either. She hated herself in that moment.

Weak. It's all your fault. Look at our bond!

She shook her head harshly at the voice yelling louder than the rest. Determined to be heard, determined to rant and rave about what she already knew.

"I…can't Andy….I need-" She needed to let loose. Like she had that night in her room. Andy glanced at her in understanding.

"Go Bellatrix. I have her. We will be there when you're ready." With a pop Bellatrix apparated.

Straight to Black Manor.

It was already in disrepair. The ballroom floor had once been a beautiful marble, it had been the envy of many pureblood parties. Now it was cracked and filthy. A tree had fallen through the large dome like roof and grass was growing up through slits in the foundation. Truly Bellatrix didn't care. She was too caught up in her own emotions to care about the house of horrors that had been her prison when she was younger. Perhaps the only reason she had thought of it as a destination at all was because she didn't care what happened to it if she truly lost control.

And losing control was exactly what she was doing. She couldn't stop the voices beating at her mind. The magic inside her was violently clawing it's way to the surface of her skin. With every whisper, ever shout in her head it was growing stronger, more unstable.

Look what our fear caused.

She had no excuses to offer. Only what ifs. Useless what ifs. What if she had been better, kinder,
what if she had paid more attention to her bond instead of herself and her own insecurities.

Our fault.

Should have killed him. Find him. Kill him.

No. Make him suffer.

Liked watching him writhe on the floor in agony.

Mark him as he marked her. Cut him open.

We have a lovely knife collection.

Bellatrix grasped at her head as she fell to her knees. They all spoke at once, demanding dark deeds, relishing in the pain she had already inflicted on him. Relishing the pain they caused her. Her punishment.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Wild magic flew from her wand and cracked the wall, zigzagging up until the ceiling rumbled.

The voices stopped. Only one remained. Louder, stronger than the others.

He hurt her. Over and over. Can you see it. We can see it. Hitting, kicking, punching, scratching, cutting, pulling-

"Stop it." She pulled at her hair. She didn't want to hear any more. She was trying to hold the magic in, trying to calm down. She needed to be with Hermione she didn't need to be on the floor losing control.

He could have raped her.

"No- no no no no no." Her body bent in pain, her wand clattered to the floor and rolled out of reach. It didn't stop the magic escaping her. Her hands landed hard on the marble floor as she clawed at the ground. Darkness covered her, black ruins spread up the exposed skin on her arms.

The grounds shook, the walls cracked and split. Part of her worried she might die as her magic escaped, completely out of her control. Part of her wondered if that was a bad thing.

"No, not now Bellatrix. This power was never meant for you." Hands grasped her arms. Pulled her to her feet as if she were but a child. The effect was instant but exhausting. As if all the magic was pulled from her.

She tried to focus on the woman, confusion pulling at her mind in the sudden absence of the voices. "Calm now. That's it." Bellatrix found herself barely strong enough to hold herself up, she allowed her body to collapse forward into the arms waiting for her, her vision darkening as sleep threatened to over take her. "Sleep. In a few hours you will be strong enough, safe enough, to return to her side." With those words she slipped further into unconsciousness, the magic inside her finally under control once again.

~B~

She awoke confused. It was still dark and she was laying on uneven stone floor. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust and then a few more after the disbelief set in.

Black Manor was in ruins. Worse than before. Before there was a manor, cracks in the walls and
some trees and grass in the building coming through the foundation true. But it still resembled the shell of what it had been, stairs and walls still mostly intact.

But now….it was as if someone had turned back time. The grounds were completely leveled, even the rubble had been reduced to dust. The floor was all that remained of the dilapidated grand structure.

Bellatrix was both in awe and terrified of what she had done, especially since she couldn't remember doing it.

She gingerly reached for her new wand and clamored awkwardly to her feet, nearly falling back as she got tangled up in the mass of robes wrapped around her legs.

Her dark eyes searched for something she recognized, anything left of the home that had been her childhood hell. There was nothing. Even the grounds, the flower gardens her mother had loved more than her daughters and the house elf quarters was gone.

She wondered how her sisters would feel about it. She wasn't sure how she felt about it. It held no happy memories for her, but her younger siblings had fair ones together, while she protected them from their crazy parents.

She shook her head and took another quick look around. It didn't much matter. This was her past. Her future was laying on a hospital bed in St. Mungo's and that was where her thoughts needed to be. Before her anger and guilt could take over again she apparated.

~B~

"Miss Black, I've been waiting for you. Madame Tonks has asked for a private room for Mistress Granger and has insisted the Black's would be paying for her stay." Bellatrix sneered at the witch, she did not appreciate being ambushed right when she arrived, before she had even seen her bond. Especially not about something so trivial as money.

"If my sister has stated such then that is what will happen, or has it slipped your mind Andromeda is just as much a Black as I am."

She had to give the woman credit she didn't shy away from her tone. She was probably used to irate patients and annoying family members. Honestly Bellatrix didn't care one way or another so long as she was shown to Hermione's bedside.

"Did you treat Hermione?"

"One of many, she has no guardian present so am I correct in assuming the school sent you in their place." She turned and started leading Bellatrix down a long corridor to where the dark witch knew the more VIP patients stayed. She was glad to see Andy had worked things out in her absence, even though she felt more than inadequate that she had left her sister to take care of the details.

"Assume away."

Her response earned her a quick reproachful glance back but the woman didn't react in any other way to her snark.

"She had a serious concussion, she has been medically induced into a coma to allow the swelling on her brain to heal. Multiple fractured and broken ribs," Bellatrix paled but refused to say anything as the woman listed off Hermione's multitude of injuries. "One rib on her left side punctured the lung and her spleen was ruptured, all easily repaired." Bellatrix was sure she added the last bit only
because she had glanced back and took in the dark woman's expression. In any case her tone softened and she did her best to offer reassurances as she finished listing off everything, both old and new.

"She's right through here. You can stay as long as-"

"I won't be leaving." Her statement only earned a nod before the witch walked off back to wherever she was needed.

She sucked in a deep breath as her hand landed on the cold sterile handle before she forced herself to open the door. Part of her was afraid Hermione would be awake after all, would berate her for how poor she handled their bond, for how much pain she could have saved her. Another part knew she was being illogical. Even though Hermione could very well shift some blame onto Bella she knew the girl wouldn't do it.

In any case she was just how the nurse told her. Deceptively peaceful in the neat twin bed. Her hands no longer sported the many cuts and bruises she noted, although one was currently held in her sisters firm embrace. She pushed down the illogical flare of jealousy and moved toward the bed. Her approach didn't go unnoticed.

Andy turned and looked at her, relief apparent in every feature as she sucked in the sight of her sister. "I was worried about you." She let go of Hermione's hand and stood up motioning for Bellatrix to take her vacated seat. The elder witch did so hesitantly. She had no intention of leaving but she worried about Hermione's reaction if she woke up next to her. Despite everything they had been through together she was under no disillusion that she was the girl's favorite person.

"Did the nurse catch you? I know she was waiting."

"I think she tried to sugar coat it, in the end." She sighed darkly. "I thought, when we got there….I thought it wasn't so bad. The cuts…they were shallow and most of the bruises looked old. But-" She thought about the broken ribs and ruptured spleen and choked up. Hermione had come so close to dying. So very close. It made her sick.

Andy turned away as Bella furiously wiped at the tears falling from her dark eyes. She knew from her childhood her sister hated showing weakness, she wouldn't appreciate Andy seeing her tears now.

"She will be alright now though, we got to her in time."

Bella shook her head. She didn't want to have the same conversations over and over again. She hadn't got there in time. She should have been there years ago.

"Where- where is the little girl?" She finally reached for Hermione's hand, nearly letting go at the coolness. "I told her I would take care of her but-"

"Molly and Lily will bring her back, she fell asleep while we were waiting on you and they decided to take a walk with her."

"I don't know if either of them have any more family. I know Hermione's mother passed but the child….I don't know anything about her."

Andy nodded. "Nymph said she was going to speak to the minister, I'll contact Minerva about Hermione and find out if she knows about any other relatives."

"What if there isn't anyone." She floundered. Wondering how she could help Hermione then. What
could she do? Should she try and raise Sterling? No one was going to allow Hermione to take custody of a child, not with her in school. And she was muggle. That opened another whole can of problems for the girls.

"You could raise her. You're good with children Bella."

"Not my own, I can give my nieces and nephews back to their parents, I don't have to worry about screwing them up. I have godchildren for a reason." She had never wanted to be a parent. The Black's were a cursed lot. She had never wanted that for a child.

"You wouldn't be alone," Molly told her softly as she and Lily both walked through the door. "Lord knows I'm an expert in raising little ones by now."

Bella's panic lightened as her eyes landing on the child snuggled into Lily's neck. She was so small, probably traumatized. Bellatrix knew what witnessing something like that could do to a child, she had been the child once upon a time. But no one had helped her. She didn't know if she could help Sterling and she wasn't sure how to be a parent. The only thing she knew for sure as she took in the gentle rise and fall of Sterling's chest, was that she was never letting the child return to her father. And she would do anything and everything in her power to keep the sisters together.

"Well, if you let us help too much you might be raising Gryffindors..."Lily smiled brightly at Bellatrix's death glare.

"Andy will just have to help then."

Andy smiled, grateful her sister's friends had arrived and were already helping to pull her from her depression. "I will do my utmost but uh....Nymph went into Hufflepuff remember."

"Ugh, I'm surrounded by the enemy."

They all smiled a bit before Bella shifted her attention back to Hermione. She knew the girl was in an induced sleep but she was slightly unnerved that she hadn't moved except to breathe, even with all the noise they were making.

"She's getting the best care, Bella, she will be okay." Lily moved forward and passed the sleeping toddler into a terrified Bella's lap.

"No- Lil-"

"She's been asking about you. She won't talk, and she doesn't respond if we try and talk to her but she was tugging on her hair and we got it eventually. She's really taken to you."

Bella's eyes fell to the toddler in her lap. She knew her name but that was it, she didn't know what the kid liked, when her bed time was, whether she was a picky eater or even if she sucked her thumb. She reached out and squeezed Hermione's hand.

"You got to wake up soon, love." She doubted anyone else heard but she was sure Hermione stirred slightly.

~B~

It was day two of being cooped up at St. Mungo's and Bella was going stir crazy. She had allowed Molly to take over Sterling's care until she and Hermione left the hospital but that left her little to do and a lot to worry over until the girl woke up.
It had become quickly apparent the girl couldn't hear, at first it had seemed as though she was ignoring everyone, perhaps traumatized by the events she had witnessed. But when she had gotten frustrated enough she had told them very Hermione like, very matter of factly, that if they were talking to her she couldn't hear a word they were saying and they needed to do the snaps and let her see their lips.

None of them had any idea what the snaps were. Sterling had demonstrated by snapping her middle finger and thumb together but none of them could figure out how that was supposed to get her attention if she couldn't hear the sound to begin with. She had grown tired of trying to explain it to them as she didn't know how it worked but it obviously wasn't working for them. Tapping her on the shoulder was just as easy and Molly had every confidence in using her magic if there was an emergency.

They figured out rather quickly, though, that Sterling loved Bellatrix. She was her hero and when at the hospital she didn't like to stray too far from the witch's side and only ever went with Molly without a tantrum if Harry or Ron appeared. They had dubbed themselves her favorite Uncles and enjoyed trying to take her mind off of whatever she had been through. Bellatrix had thought it best to keep the specifics away from the students but she couldn't have stopped them visiting short of tossing them all into Azkaban. They were there frequently but she was grateful to find herself mostly on her own.

She had to admit taking care of an unconscious person was more work than she had originally expected. Nurses were in and out checking vitals and tending to whatever needs an unconscious Hermione had. Bellatrix felt rather useless sitting there holding the girl's hand when she wasn't even awake to realize it.

Still, no matter how superfluous she felt her role was, she refused to leave. Hermione was taken off the potions keeping her asleep after the first night and the nurses had promised her the girl would wake when her body was ready. She was afraid to even go to the toilet for fear the girl would wake alone.

She would alternate between holding her hand and reading a book or sitting at the window overlooking the elegant courtyard. She believed the bubbly day nurse when she said Hermione had the best room in the building but it still felt like a hospital room. It was lonely, cold and stark. The view was nice but she couldn't enjoy it, not with everything weighing so heavily on her.

It was when she was standing at the window that she heard raised voices from the corridor. They were getting closer and she could distinctly hear Lily, Sirius and the Minister arguing. She turned expectantly and moved slightly closer to the bed. Whatever the dimwitted minister wanted she couldn't imagine it would fair well, she couldn't stand the man.

"Minister I don't think-" Bellatrix nearly growled at the idiot man as he burst into the room, completely fine with ignoring both decent protocol requiring him to knock and her friend trying to caution him. She was only slightly placated at the surprised look on his face when he saw her. She imagined she looked rough. Sleeping in a chair beside a hospital bed for two days did that to people.

"What can I help you with, Minister?" She bared her teeth at him in a menacing smile and he grimaced. His eyes trailed around him to the pink, plump of a woman following after him like a devoted lap dog. His undersecretary if she cared to remember. She didn't care for her either.

"I-I," Sirius shot his cousin a dramatic eye roll, their esteemed minister always developed a stutter around the head of the Black household. They used to laugh about it when he first started, now it was just annoying.
"Spit it out." His stuttering got even worse and the pink puffball, whose name she didn't care to remember, shot out some strange piping sound that everyone collectively ignored.

"I…well I heard, that is to say I heard about Miss Granger. Terrible. She's doing well?" The well ended on a high note but she chose to ignore it, nodding as politely as she could manage. "R-right. I was afraid this would happen…when she wouldn't leave-" He trailed off at the furious expression that crossed Bella's face. Everyone else stared at him in shock, everyone but the puffball.

"You knew?" He seemed to cower in on himself as the room darkened and magic sparked from her very fingertips. "You knew about this and did nothing?"

"We tried!" He couldn't seem to get the rest of what he wanted to say out instead he looked pleadingly to his bored undersecretary. She didn't seem to be paying quiet enough attention to who exactly she was speaking too, that or she had never seen Bellatrix Black in person and really was very confused about why her adorable Fudge was acting like a stuttering fool.

"Alternate arrangements were made for Miss Granger in another wizarding household. She refused, she wanted her muggle sister with her and our laws forbid us from acting on muggle behalf." If Bella hadn't already known, Umbridge's tone explained how she felt about muggles.

Bellatrix contained her anger, though she wanted to hex the two idiot officials. Of course Hermione wasn't going to leave her sister. She was being beaten, and Merlin only knows what else. She wouldn't leave that little girl at that man's mercy.

"Minister I suggest you leave." She turned her back on them, trusting Lily and Sirius to see them out.

"We need the muggle child." Dark eyes narrowed but she didn't give away just how angry she was, not yet anyways.

"For what purpose?" Sirius glared at the small woman, she didn't seem impressed.

"She is to be taken to an orphanage until her father can collect her, or her grandparents can be reached. Her father received quiet a bit of trauma from this ordeal but has already asked about the safe return of his children."

Bellatrix spun around, "Ordeal? He beat my….she nearly fucking died! If I could do it all over again I'd probably kill him."

Fudge stuttered, his face turning white. He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at the sweat pouring down his wrinkly forehead. His eyes desperately tried to warn his companion to keep her mouth shut while they could still leave with all the pieces they came with. She seemed just as content to ignore him.

"You? You are the one who put him in such a sorry condition? I hope you know there will be charges. He can account for at least one crucio and it will be days before he is fit to retake custody of his children."

Lily and Sirius both shouted their protests, both for the pending charges and that either girl be potentially placed back into his care.

"Minister, I will make sure you never receive another knut from anyone if you place either of those girls back in his care." He swallowed and shook his head quickly, terrified of Bellatrix and knowing she wouldn't give idle threats. If she truly pulled her financial support he would likely never see office again. "I will kill him first, this is not an idle threat. I do not take well to people
hurting those I love."

Her words burst in a small exhale as a painful burning sensation wrapped up her left arm. She showed no other signs of pain but she knew what it was, she had branded, what she had done or why it had happened then she didn't know. But she knew without a shadow of a doubt that if she lifted her sleeve she would find dark ink spreading up her arm, marking her as a bond. She knew Hermione would have something similar now, considerably smaller until the girl completed the terms for her own brand.

"D-don't worry about it. I'll take care of it….b-but what am I to do with the muggle? There isn't a magic family willing and our laws-"

"Minister! You can't give in to blackmail. She is to be tried and imprisoned for her crimes!"

Sirius laughed darkly. "I would very much like to see who exactly draws the short straw on bringing my dear cousin in."

Lily hummed from the doorway, amused herself. "I don't suppose they will be getting many volunteers to take Bellatrix Black in." She smiled toothily at her husband's best friend.

"B-Black?" Bellatrix felt an odd satisfaction as the woman paled but she didn't care for the glint in her eyes. "Still….laws are laws. Crucio is an unforgivable-" She trailed off.

The magic in the air was palpable. Bellatrix had kept her temper as best she could through everything when all she wanted to do was murder the two self righteous idiots. Neither of them cared for Hermione or Sterling, they didn't truly care if the man took them back. Fudge just wanted the whole business washed away where he didn't have to deal with it any more and he was thoroughly upset that Bellatrix Black was involved. He was terrified of her.

But Umbridge. A slight brush against her non existent shields let Bella know everything she needed to about the woman. She craved power and she didn't care how she had to get it. She hated muggles and muggleborns because she was a half-blood. She wanted Hermione and Sterling placed back in their father's care. She enjoyed seeing a muggleborn so beaten, put in their place.

"Bellatrix…you might want to take a deep breath, love." Lily's attention shifted nervously to Sirius, even the minister and his lackey seemed to understand something had snapped within the oldest Black. She looked positively frightful. Her entire eye had dilated until there was nothing but black. It was fixed firmly on the two she perceived to be a threat to her bond. Lily was afraid she would snap at any second and she was afraid she didn't exactly know how to calm her down, she had never seen her so angry.

"The first person to touch that child or my bond with the intentions of returning either of them to that pathetic excuse for a man will wish I only killed them."

Sirius barely managed to keep Fudge upright as he sagged heavily back in fear and shock. A normal Bellatrix Black was dangerous. One bonded….she could destroy their world he had no doubt. Financially…..magically….it didn't matter. He did not want to be on the wrong side of this shit storm. Bonds were dangerous, and if the news spread that someone like Black had been bonded it would start a panic in the purebloods. A panic he could not afford in current political climates.

"I-I will see to it! Paperwork…..I'll do some paperwork! I'll talk to the prime minister! The Queen if I have to!" He nearly clung to Sirius as he tried to flee.
"But minister! The child! Bonds or not she is a muggle. She does not belong in our world."
Umbridge hadn't quiet understood what the fuss was about. She had no knowledge of the danger of
bonds, her father hadn't truly cared enough about her to consider it a dishonor on his family if she
would have been branded, and even as a child he knew she would probably have been appalled
enough for herself to do what was typically required of a pureblood without prompting.

Fudge grasped the plump woman on the shoulder. "Later, woman, we will sort this out later." No
doubt he would involve the Wizengamot, the thought alone nearly made Bellatrix laugh.
Dumbledore was chief warlock she couldn't imagine him sending the two girls back to the muggle.

He had to practically drag the woman out, she was still going on about laws. As if Bellatrix
actually gave a shit about laws. She would burn the ministry down before she saw Hermione and
Sterling back home. The time for waiting was over. Whatever she told the girl, whether she chose
to tell her about the bond and now the brand….no matter what was said between them Hermione
would not be leaving her side, at least not for the two years left of school. Bellatrix couldn't
imagine not being able to see her now, not knowing if she was okay or if…..

She moved back to the bed and sat heavily in the chair that had become her permanent place in the
room. She reached out and stroked the dark hair that feathered Hermione's forehead. She wished
she would hurry and wake.

"Are you alright Bella?"

She didn't bother to turn around to answer her cousin, her eyes never left Hermione's face.

"Bella?"

"I'm not the one in the fucking bed, Sirius."

She regretted her sharp words almost immediately but she didn't turn around to apologize, she
knew he understood they had their fair share of fighting and making up over the years. He
probably knew her better than anyone even if they both liked to pretend they weren't that close. He
was her only ally as a child. The only other person who knew, who understood everything her
parents were putting her through. Just as she knew everything he endured as well.

"Molly was asking if you wanted her to bring Sterling? She thinks the girl should be here when
Hermione wakes up."

Bella swallowed and nodded, not taking her eyes away from the peaceful figure on the bed.

Hermione would want to see the little girl. She would want to know she had been protected, that
Bellatrix had done something right and kept her from going back to her father.

"They said it should be any time now. Sterling can stay with me for the day, I think Hermione
would want to see her."

"We'll be back then. We only came because Nymph said the minister was on his way." Bellatrix
finally chanced a glance at her cousin, he grinned at her tightly.

"We should get some kind of medal I think. We did save his life."

Lily smacked him. "We'll be back within the hour."

They turned to leave when Bellatrix caught Sirius' eye. He nodded and smiled a little easier. "Don't
worry about it, cousin."

There were no words of apology needed for them to understand each other.
Saying the words aloud went against everything they had ever promised each other. Bellatrix Black had swore to never utter the words I'm sorry again. And Sirius would be damned if he ever asked her to.

She waited until the door clicked closed before she pulled up the sleeve of her robes. She had to admit the beautiful scrawl was beautiful. A perfect pattern of roses, leaves and thorns. And it was extensive. She had pulled her sleeve up to her elbow and still she couldn't see the end. She sighed and hid it once again. There would be time to study it later, when she was assured privacy and not worried about sleeping beauty.

She let her eyes trail over Hermione's face. She wondered why she had been so damn terrified of branding to her in the beginning. She didn't feel any different now and if perhaps she had come clean about it all in the beginning they wouldn't be in St. Mungo's and Hermione wouldn't have endured hell. Even if the girl hadn't wanted anything to do with her, hell even if she still didn't want anything to do with her, Bellatrix could at least serve as a deterrent for her step father.

She raked a hand through the tangled mass of her hair. She was tired. She hadn't slept well since Hermione was brought it and she desperately needed a shower and a change of clothes. But all she seemed capable of doing was worrying pointlessly and berating herself for things she couldn't change.

She glanced once more towards the door and back to the bed. An hour they had said. Sterling had to be driven and it would probably take a little longer to get her ready. She could take a nap, just for half and hour. She wouldn't miss the others showing up and she would be awake when Hermione woke.

She leaned over and rested her head against the bed sheets.

Just half an hour.

~B~

She knew she hadn't slept for very long, but the soft familiar voice calling out to her pulled her from her light slumber. She knew she probably looked a mess but she didn't bother trying to fix herself as she turned to look at Dumbledore.

He looked slightly worn, haggard. She didn't think she had ever seen him look so out of sorts in her entire life. His eyes were pale instead of sparkling and his robes were wrinkled and his eyes baggy. Whatever he had been doing sleep hadn't been part of it.

He extended a hand and passed her two sheets of parchment.

"I need you to take a look at these. Both you and Hermione will need to agree upon them."

Bellatrix took the sheets of paper and glanced down at the first one. A contract to make Sterling Salt Bellatrix Black's proper heir. It was as close to adoption as she could get for a witch and a muggle without the actual adoption. It also wouldn't require her father's permission, in the muggle world or the magical one. What it would accomplish she wasn't sure.

"This is suppose to keep Sterling from going back to her father? Even in the muggle society?"

"It might help sway the Wizengamot." He told her quietly. "For the last few years I have been working to get Hermione free of her home with her sister legally in tow. I have yet to sway anyone on the council one way or the other. But we did not know the full extent of-"
Bellatrix felt her anger toward his declaration fall as quickly as it had risen. She couldn't afford to be angry while they were trying to find legal ways to work through their problems. She needed solutions and he was offering the best ones he could. It was difficult but she would deal with her anger with him later, when her bond wasn't still unconscious in a bed and could explain how Dumbledore knew before she did. She would not be asking him, she didn't particularly care about his side of the story, only about how it could potentially benefit her now.

"Finish." She demanded softly, nearly too quiet for him to hear.

"Sterling has been easily dismissed as not our problem. Not a magical child, so the Wizengamot's interest in her was non-existent. I have hope that as an heir to a prominent pureblooded family this fact may yet change in our favor. Many will not be so quick to dismiss her, they may believe that you have seen some kind of prominent magical talent that others have not."

Bellatrix nodded. The wizarding council could pretend all they wanted but she knew more than half had strong pureblood beliefs. They wouldn't particularly care what became of Sterling. She doubted if most of them truly cared what happened to Hermione.

"This will have them rule in favor of taking Sterling from her father? And what? Given into my care?"

"I think you should have a look at the second contract."

She did. And then she gazed up at him in shock. "What is this? How does this help us?"

He sighed heavily. "This was the prime minister of the muggle world's idea. I do believe he was simply being an inconsiderate smartass when he suggested this but as the words came from his mouth he could not retract him when I told him his conditions would be met." Bellatrix was too surprised that this had even been a suggestion to react to Dumbledore's cursing.

"The muggle Prime Minister decided I should marry a seventeen year old witch. That's how he helps us take a muggle child from her abusive father?"

"If the conditions he gave are met he has agreed to a temporary custody arrangement. He simply suggested Hermione be married, he believes a stable family is a home with two parents. If you do not wish to go through with it Hermione has the option still to fight on her own, or to find another to marry." She bit through her lip trying to keep silent. Such arranged marriages weren't as uncommon in their world as it was in the muggle world, but it was still not what Bellatrix had wanted for her bond. "If you both chose to go through with this then you and Hermione will be given temporary custody of Sterling immediately, at least until a muggle trial for him can be set. The decision after will be what befalls the child. I am trying to set it up so that both muggles and the Wizengamot will be present."

Bella shook her head. "I don't care what their decision is she won't be returning into his care. I won't be giving her up either if I'm making her my heir." She glanced down toward Hermione. "I can't say I know what she will decide, Albus. I know she will do what she believes is best for Sterling but this…this is asking a lot of me."

He gazed at her sadly. "I will take back what I asked you at the beginning of the year. You have my blessing to tell her whenever you desire, I know," He added quickly knowing she was about to protest. "I know you never needed my permission. I was working toward what I had hoped would have been a better solution, working to reform the Wizengamot to allow Hermione and anyone else like her, rights over non magical relatives. I never expected things to escalate to this point. She vastly underplayed the danger she was in when she approached me and the minister for help."
Bellatrix believed more should have been done. Whether they knew the extent or not but she held her tongue and before she could ask any more of him the door opened and her family and friends walked through, surprised to see Dumbledore but eager to check on Hermione and Bellatrix.

"Wake?" Sterling moved toward the dark headed woman as she tucked the papers carefully into her robes with a pointed look towards the headmaster. She leaned down and picked the child up instead of answering, showed her Hermione still resting peacefully in the bed. "When?"

Sterling's words weren't perfect and she turned her head to see if Bellatrix understood and would answer.

"Soon." She prayed she was right. She couldn't ask Sterling how she felt about becoming her heir the girl would have no idea what that meant. How she would be treated as a non-magical in a pureblooded family. Hermione would, and Bellatrix would go by whatever Hermione decided. She would sign nothing until she talked it over with the girl.

"I will see myself out, even in this room I believe it is getting rather crowded." Dumbledore smiled softly at Sterling and nodded to the others as he made his way out.

"We will revisit this, Albus." He nodded solemnly before taking his exit. Andy waited until Sterling turned back to her sister before she asked Bellatrix what news he had brought.

"I- none of it was easy. None of it can be resolved without Hermione. Apparently the muggles will be more difficult than they should be. Personally I'd like nothing better than to put the fear of magic into them. Force them to make the right decision."

Molly reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "That's not the way though. It may be the most efficient but it would set precedents that could spiral everything we built out of control. It could be like it was in America all those years ago."

Bellatrix blew out a breath in irritation as nuzzled her face in Sterling's dark locks. She knew Molly was right. It was a slippery slope to use magic and threats to get what they wanted from muggles but she would obliviate the entire world before she would let them take either of these girls from her.

"Lets stop with the heavy talk." Andy smiled and tapped Sterling lightly on the shoulder. "Let's eat?"

The child lit up and tugged at Bellatrix's curls. "I heped make it. Shep pie!" She smiled despite her chaotic emotions. How could she not smile at her mini me? She hadn't known her very long and it was true she seemed more open with her than even Molly and Lily but already Sterling had wormed her way into their hearts. A little muggle child they were all desperately trying to save.

~H~

She hurt all over. She didn't want to open her eyes, she was afraid she would wake up on the cold hard floor of her kitchen. She was afraid Bellatrix saving her had only been a dream. Reality was often cruel like that.

It didn't really feel like the kitchen floor though. The bed beneath her was soft, softer than her own at home by a great comparison. It was comforting to know she wasn't really laying on the floor, that more than likely she wasn't even in her own home. Unfortunately she was afraid to check. Afraid to face reality.

As much as she wanted Bellatrix to have saved her she was afraid of the rejection, the humiliation
and the disappointment she knew would be headed her way when she did finally open her eyes.

The ministry wouldn't change their mind on Sterling simply because a muggle beat a muggleborn. They were too afraid of the repercussions the muggle government could send their way. The potential backlash from other magical countries.

Stealing children, were the words Fudge had told her. Part of the excuse he had given her for not being able to do anything for her sister. Of course his next words had been Peter wasn't beating the child anyways and Hermione could always move in with one of her relatives or find a nice wizarding house to take her in.

He was a useless blasted idiot. And he hadn't cared one way or another what happened to Hermione.

The sound of crinkling papers caught her attention, followed by the soft voice of Professor Black. Muttering something about adding clauses and legal issues…it didn't sound like homework and Hermione was sure she wasn't about to wake up in detention having dreamed Christmas Break.

She took a chance and cracked her eyes open. It was a dim, large white room. Bare except for a bland picture on the far wall and the milky white curtains pulled shut behind a rather large window.

Bellatrix was sitting at the small desk tucked into the wall to the right of her. Her back was mostly to her as she leaned sideways in a rather uncomfortable looking chair. She looked far more at ease than Hermione had ever seen and the girl couldn't help but stare.

Dark curls were pulled back in a messy pony tail and she had a regular muggle pen held between her teeth as she made idle marks on a rather formal looking piece of parchment. Her legs were crossed over the chair arm and her back was against the other side. Her feet where bare, it was something simple but Hermione had never seen Bellatrix without her shoes. She was surprised to see her toenails were painted sparkly pink….it seemed rather out of place.

"Oh this is all shit, how is this supposed to work? Fudge you idiot." She set the papers on the desk and scribbled furiously for a few seconds, seemed to mark something out that apparently had offended her a great deal. "Damn ministers. Playing with people's lives." Magic sparked on her fingers as she resumed her relaxed position, she shook them out a few times and tucked the pen back into her mouth with a scowl.

Hermione was too curious to just continue watching but she found her voice hoarse after the short disuse. It took her a minute to find the words and a few more seconds for her to finally get the sound out, scratchy though it was.

"Pr-Professor?"

The dark witch looked positively wild as she jerked around in the chair, eyes wide as the pen fell from between her lips.

"Finally!" She dropped the papers onto the desk and drug the chair closer to Hermione's bed. "Three days you damn stubborn woman. Three days I've been by your side waiting for you to wake up."

Hermione wondered why she suddenly felt like apologizing, it wasn't as if she could help it and she certainly hadn't expected Bellatrix Black of all people to be stay by her side in a hospital.

"Can I have some…water?"
Bellatrix helped her sit up and with a weary glance moved to the door and peered out. Hermione couldn't make out what was being said but Bellatrix came back rather quickly with a small cup of ice water.

"Don't drink it too fast this is all they will give you until morning. You haven't eaten in three days and the potions they gave you might make you sick if you try and eat or drink too much too soon."

She had to help her with the glass, the teen found her muscles had atrophied slightly and until she got more of her strength back even holding the small cup was a bit of a challenge. It didn't help that her body ached as if she had been run over with every move she made.

"That's enough. Feel better?" The teacher set the half empty cup down on the bedside table and retook her seat in the closest chair. She leaned her elbows against Hermione's bed as the girl adjusted herself against the pillows. "I'm sure you want to know about your sister."

Hermione nodded and braced herself for the news.

"We….have some things we need to discuss but I don't want to do it right after you just woke up." Hermione didn't like how ominous that sounded. "Molly is keeping Sterling for now, she….I think she is adapting well being away from-" Bella trailed off and clenched her teeth. "She hasn't asked or said anything about that night. She visits you and she has been rather impatient for you to wake." A small smile graced her face. "She's wanting to be a nurse like Andy now, she's been helping take care of you." Bellatrix pulled the covers back so Hermione could see her own bare feet. "She painted your toes."

Hermione grimaced. She had definitely painted the toes. Very little polish had apparently actually made it onto her toenails. Her toes, however, were a beautiful color of sparkling purples and blues.

"Did she do yours too?" She felt a little cheeky for asking and tried not to blush at the smirk sent her way.

"I did my own thank you." Bellatrix informed her, dropping the blanket back down and tucking it around her legs. "But she did pick out the color." She frowned down at the sparkly pink. "I wanted green." Hermione managed a small laugh. Black was a Slytherin through and through that was for sure.

"Professor, I know you wanted to wait but….tell me the news now. I can't handle…”

Bellatrix nodded and sighed heavily. She picked up the papers and passed them hesitantly to Hermione. "Dumbledore and the muggle prime minister offered this as a solution to your problems." She grimaced. "I think you should probably call me Bellatrix while we're alone, since we are likely to be getting rather close."
"You agreed to this? "Hermione stared up from the parchment, eyes wide with disbelief and focused on the last person she thought would go so far to help her.

"I did. It's still in need of revision," She pointed to a few scrawled notes and mark outs on the document that concerned Sterling. Hermione couldn't see what the witch had scribbled out because the writing had evidently offended the older woman so much she made sure not to leave a single letter. "If you sign this one," She rapped the marriage contract. "It fulfills what the muggle minister asked of you in order for him to grant you emergency custody. Neither you nor Sterling be returned to Salt, and he won't be able to try and force either ministries hand with them cooperating like this. There is going to be a trial for him, but Dumbledore has explained he is working on making it a trial of both muggle and wizards. I am assuming that means some form of veritaserum or a pensieve will be used."

Hermione's hands shook at the thought of everything a trial would bring to light. And if she somehow lost she would be forced to return with Sterling to Peter and even if she won there was no guarantee she would get to keep her sister, not with muggles involved. She turned her head toward the window and tried to compose herself. Bellatrix reached out and tugged her back.

"Nothing will happen to you. He won't touch you ever again." Bellatrix's hand reached out and gently, hesitantly, wiped the tears from Hermione's eyes. She wanted to believe her, there was nothing she wanted to believe more. But once upon a time she had believed Dumbledore would help her and he had returned with news that she could leave Sterling behind or she had to stay and endure it. He'd promised to find a solution, but it had never worked and he had never spoken to her about it again.

This new proposition they were offering was something she could never in her wildest dreams imagine. Getting married….surely the minister couldn't have been serious. If he had been consulted she couldn't see Dumbledore or the minister giving him only half truths. Surely he knew her age and that she was still in school.

And getting married to Bellatrix of all people. It was the strangest turn of events and if she hadn't already been in pain she would have thought she was dreaming.

Still, for Bellatrix to have agreed so readily, to seem perfectly content with the idea of tying herself to a student, one she disliked even…..Hermione couldn't seem to find the motive and that bothered her nearly as much as the pending trial did.

"Why are you willing to do this? To…marry me and take Sterling as an heir?" She pulled away from the hand stroking her cheek. Under any other circumstance she would have relished the feeling, relished the fact that they were getting along and Black seemed to care about her. But she needed real answers instead of pity and she needed to know what Bellatrix wanted, what she got out of the deal except the burden of two more people in her life.

"Hermione I know we haven't always gotten along but-"

"We've never gotten along." Hermione interrupted.

"I know I was hard on you, harder than anyone else but...There was always a reason."

Bellatrix shook her head sending dark curls cascading from her ponytail, she didn't bother trying to fix them, even though they fell in her eyes. Instead she rose from her chair and began rolling up her sleeve,
she extended it toward Hermione, dark eyes attentive as they watched for any sign of comprehension.

Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. She had never seen the tattoo resting on the woman's arm and she had seen Bellatrix enough with a simple shirt on, arms bare. Only just before break she had been unable to drag her eyes away from the creamy unmarked skin.

Now Bellatrix sported the largest, most intricate tattoo she had ever seen. She couldn't even see all of it, it took up all of her arm and climbed just like the rose bush it depicted, up toward her shoulder. It was beautiful, and it pulled at Hermione in a way that made her a little uneasy.

"I-It's beautiful but I don't understand…." She barely caught herself as she reached out to touch, her fingers curled back in on her palm and she leaned back in the bed, nearly pressing herself against the headboard.

"I gave you that assignment hoping you would figure it out but knowing you never would. I knew I would have to tell you one day." Bellatrix reached out and took Hermione's left hand. She turned it over so she could see the small mark between her thumb and forefinger.

The tattoo of a climbing rose. Smaller, so much smaller compared to Bellatrix's, but there just the same. And just as she knew Bella's wasn't a simple tattoo she knew hers wasn't either.

She grew still, eyes wide in shock as she slowly understood what the woman was telling her. As she finally understood what exactly was on Bellatrix's arm. She couldn't believe Ginny had been right, she still refused to believe it even as the dark witch told her so. Even as she saw the proof for herself.

"You're mine, Hermione. My bond. I may not have wanted it but I've learned to accept it. This brand….It will never fade, never go away and it will forever connect us, connect our magic. We will never be able to escape one another, not completely. If I let you leave, if I let you have a normal life I'm condemning myself to misery, quite possibly death." She sucked in a breath at the admission, her mind fighting a hazy panic at the thought of Bellatrix dying, remembering how still she had been in that dream.

"I don't want you to die." She couldn't pull her eyes away from Bella's gaze if she had wanted to. "I don't want you to feel you have to marry me either. I….we could find another way if you would rather….I didn't finish reading about bonds but…." She trailed off, not sure what she could do to help Bellatrix but not wanting her to feel she had to marry her just to keep her alive and to keep herself sane. She felt as if she were holding the witch's life ransomed even though she'd had nothing to do with it.

Fate it seemed had kicked them both in the teeth.

"This is the best way. I know I'm taking a lot from you Hermione. I wanted to be strong enough to give you a normal life, a chance at a husband and children. But if I let you have that you would leave. I can't- I'm not strong enough." Curls fell over her face, hiding her expression from the teenager as she choked out her next words. Words filled with so much pain Hermione nearly cried out.

"If you want to leave you may as well kill me now because I don't think I'll survive either way. And the chance I could hurt someone is far too high a risk for me to take."

"No." She couldn't imagine what that admission had done to the proud woman she always fought with. Bellatrix was not the type of person who needed someone. And even though it was because
of some twisted fate, because of some magic neither one of them could control, she knew the dark witch hated it. Hated that she needed Hermione. She understood now why it always seems like the woman hated her, she very likely did, and there was nothing Hermione could do about it.

Except try to make her life easier.

She understood the woman's decision a little better. Marriage would mean nothing to Bellatrix because she was already shackled to her by something stronger than a piece of paper. It was Bella's life at stake just as it was Hermione's. It seemed Bellatrix was her only option, and it seemed this was the woman's only choice as well.

There was no choice for either of them. No alternative. Hermione would never have had a normal life anyways and Bellatrix was a far better warden than Salt.

Hermione needed her to free her of the man and Bellatrix needed Hermione.

She would never love her, Hermione wasn't stupid enough to believe the opposite, in fact she expected the woman to resent her for the rest of their life. She hoped her love would be enough, that in some small way she could make the teacher happy, that she could repay what she was giving up for her. Or at the very least ease her suffering.

"Okay."

"Sign these then." Bellatrix passed her the pen and watched quietly as Hermione scrawled her name across it. She did the same only seconds later. "All that's left is to give these to the Minister and to ensure the Prime Minister sticks to his word. After this there won't be anyone coming to the door demanding Sterling."

It was peace of mind, she understood that. Sterling wouldn't be going to her grandparents or returning to her father. Hermione was grateful.

"This...marriage..." Bellatrix's gaze seemed to see right through her, it made her nervous. "Its private? I mean...I don't want everyone at school...if we can put off-" She groaned, irritated that she couldn't get her questions out, that she couldn't properly explain her worries and requests.

"No one will know. It won't be made public until we both agree. Sterling being my heir however will be known. And the Wizengamot and the muggles they find to sit in on Salt's trial will likely know as well."

Hermione gave her a weak smile. She was so tired. Her body didn't seem to care that she had slept for days already, that she was impatient to see her sister.

The emotional rollercoaster she had gone down just the past few minutes had sucked up all the energy she felt her body had.

"Hermione-" She struggled to keep her eyes open, unaccustomed to Bellatrix's hesitant tone. "I don't know how to be a parent and I-I'm not a...not a nice person I don't know how to do relationships and this...us...its already so complicated with the bond and now Sterling and a marriage." Bella sat down and pulled her wand out, she twirled it over her knuckles, something Hermione knew she did often when she was thinking about something serious. "I just need you to know I'm not perfect but I will try, try not to be...I'll try not to be like I was. I'll do the best I can with Sterling."

The girl sat in the bed in silence, she felt rather ill although she did her best to conceal the tirade of emotions swirling around inside her. She appreciated Bellatrix trying to get along with her, for
Sterling's sake or just their own it didn't matter. But she was worried about an altogether new problem now.

Her relationship with her sister had always been a more daughter mother type than sibling. Because it was necessary. It wouldn't be necessary now that she had Bellatrix but Hermione found she didn't want things to change. She'd raised Sterling for three years. She knew how to be her mother she wasn't sure she knew how to be just her sister.

But Bellatrix was making Sterling her heir. It only made sense she would take up raising her. She had never known Bellatrix to do anything half way. Sterling wouldn't just be the woman's heir on paper. It didn't matter than she was a muggle child. Her sister would have the best education, manners and anything else Bellatrix could provide to give her a good life. Whatever happened she knew it was best for Sterling.

"I'll help…however I can…" She forced herself to yawn, needing a break from any more emotional revelations. "I'm sorry…I'm barely keeping my eyes open." She slid down in the bed and let her eyes drift.

"Sleep. I'll wake you when the others get here with Sterling. We can talk about anything else later."

~H~

It was after breakfast before Sterling was finally brought in to see her. Andromeda and Molly trailed after the child, all smiles at the little girl's shout of exuberance when she saw her sister finally awake.

"Mommy!" Hermione was too happy to see her to berate her for not enunciating her words. And she didn't care that everyone else had a mild look of surprise on their faces.

She didn't care when Sterling jumped on the bed and jarred her still sore body. All she cared about was holding the little girl close, in her opinion there was nothing better.

"Hermione," She turned her attention toward Bellatrix's sister, now that she had a good look of her she was surprised at how similar they seemed. If Andy's hair had been just a shade or two darker they might have been able to pass as twins. Honestly they probably still could. "I spoke with the doctor. You can leave in just a few hours, once they are sure the potions side affects won't affect you."

She nodded, snuggled into Sterling one last time before she pushed the child back and signed to her. The others watched in fascination as the two spoke without words. They had figured out the child could communicate silently but none of them had been very adept at learning what she tried to teach them. The girl's moved their hands so fast there was no way they could have kept up if they had wanted to.

Sterling let out a sudden laugh and Hermione turned a stern gaze up to the two adults still lingering by the door.

"You….you let her fly? On a broom?!" Molly looked sheepish but Andy sported a smirk so similar to Bellatrix's Hermione found her eyes flickering to the woman beside her. Bellatrix for once looked like she agreed with Hermione.

"Andy! She's too small to be riding brooms what if she had fallen?!” Her sister's words didn't do anything but amuse the younger witch further.
Andy let out a full blown chuckle and threw in a conspiratorial wink at Sterling. "Oh listen to you two, already acting like her overprotective moms. Nymph was with her, she loved it. What are you going to say when she starts dating?" Hermione blushed furiously and Bellatrix only glared at her sister.

"For all intents and purposes, Andromeda, they are her overprotective moms. Or they will be once they file that paperwork and win the case against Salt." Both Molly and Andromeda turned toward the new arrival and stepped away from the open door to let the woman in. Hermione couldn't help but clasp Sterling closer as the stranger walked past them and moved closer to the bed.

"I was hoping to catch you before you left, Ms. Granger. My name is Weiss Kohtalo, I'm going to be making sure everything goes smoothly for you on the muggle side as well as the magical side. I work for the Minister of Magic and the Monarchy. A sort of liaison if you will." The woman reached out with the intent to take Hermione's hand but Bellatrix wrapped her fingers around her slender wrist.

"Khotalo…" Her teeth were bared in warning.

The woman smiled slyly at the Professor but retracted her hand. Hermione could hear Andy and Molly groaning in the background although she had no idea why. She was a little worried though because Black looked positively murderous.

"Let's not do this again." Bellatrix told her, forcefully even as she released her hold on the woman. "I promise not to blow you up again but you have to keep your hands off my bond."

Hermione stared at the witch in confusion. "Blow her up?"

"Yes….it was an unfortunate accident."

The newcomer scoffed. "Black you know it wasn't an accident." Hermione eyed her curiously but she said no more. It was very clear though that Bellatrix didn't like the other woman, although the stranger looked more amused than murderous.

"Okay," Molly stepped between the two women and nodded toward Sterling, who was curiously eying the two. "Enough of the pissing contest. You wanted to talk to Hermione then do it. She's been through enough without you two trying to kill each other over."

Khotalo nodded sheepishly and shifted her attention back to Hermione with an apologetic smile. Bella took her seat next to the bed again but she still looked as if she would hex the woman if she so much as breathed the wrong way.

"I'm supposed to give you a bit of a run down." She nodded toward the papers they had both signed. "May I?" At their nod she picked them up and perused both documents quickly. "You both signed the marriage contract…good….I see you set things up for Hermione in the event of a divorce or death…" Bellatrix only glared at her so Weiss shrugged. "That's fine it's easily amended to the records. You've also added quiet a bit to the heir….ah…I see the pureblood marriage clause pissed you off, that's understandable it's very outdated…Fudge bless his idiotic soul shouldn't have pulled a contract from the Black records." Weiss was muttering to herself about all the changes Bellatrix had made to that particular document, although from what Hermione could hear it seemed she was agreeing with her more than disapproved.

"If it all looks fine you should file it." Came Black's gritted reply. "Honestly Weiss I'd rather not see you longer than I have to,"
"Fine, honestly Black will you ever change?" Hermione grimaced as Bellatrix nearly snapped her wand in irritation. She reached out and hesitantly touched the back on her arm, dark eyes spun around to her and by some miracle the dark witch seemed to settle, albeit only slightly. "Right... interesting." The stranger help up her hands, papers in tow, to signal she wasn't trying to cause trouble when Bella's attention returned to her. "I'm going already. When the trial is worked out I'll contact you. I've been given permission to tell you that Sterling will be filed as your foster child since you followed the muggle Minister's demands."

She shook Molly's hand and waved to Andy as she made her way to the door. She turned back and waved to Sterling too and turned her attention back to the two new legal parents. "For what it's worth I'm sure you'll win. And I'm sure you're going to make amazing parents. I'm pretty sure one of you already is." Her green eyes held Hermione's for a moment, understanding and admiration echoed in their depths before she moved and shut the door behind her.

"I hate that woman."

Molly shook her head and slapped her friend's arm, Bellatrix hissed as the hand landed on her newly branded mark. The skin still tender and burning.

"It's been years." Andy shot Hermione an exasperated look. "It's not too late to back out I can still catch her if you want me to and rip that marriage contract up." She grinned wickedly.

"Not if you want to keep breathing." Bella fixed her sister with a glare and shot one to Hermione for good measure.

"She... didn't seem so bad." Dark brown eyes rounded on her, a hint of suspicion and jealousy contained behind them. "What did she mean you set me up for divorce or death?"

"In the event of a divorce or my death you get a portion of my monetary assets. Legally the properties have to go to my heir, which will be Sterling. And she will inherit the rest of my fortune along with a few more odds and ends I've set out for various... Traitorous relatives." She glared at her sister on the last bit and missed Hermione's downward glance at her own sister.

Hermione wondered if that was an option. If Bellatrix would want a divorce after everything was over. Just because they were bonded and she didn't want the girl to leave didn't mean she warned to stay shackled to her either.

"You said I could leave today." She found Andromeda's eyes leveled on her, something like pity staring back at her. Like she understood everything going on in Hermione's head. She made sure her shields were up before she continued, she didn't need anyone poking around in her mind or memories, especially not these women.

"You can." Andy answered her after a few more beats of silence.

"Where will I be going? I need... I need to get some stuff from my house-"

"No. I'll collect whatever you want." She was nearly angry at the blatant refusal but the way the teacher's teeth clenched and hands fisted on her wand let her know Bellatrix wasn't in the mood to be questioned, and she was so tired of fighting her all the time.

Sterling patted Hermione's cheek. She had been content to let the adults talk, taking comfort with her back pressed up against her sisters front but now she was sure they were talking about going home and she didn't want to. She told her sister so with her hands.

"We just need some clothes and my school stuff. Not to stay." She glanced toward Bellatrix who
nodded her agreement.

"I'll get everything you want and have it taken to Molly's." If the redhead woman was surprised her home was being offered up it didn't show. Hermione hadn't known where they were going exactly but she had expected it to be one of Bellatrix's homes, at least until break was over.

"I'll write a list." She told them quietly, helping Sterling down only for the child to climb over into Bella's lap. The dark witch moved as if she had always had Sterling. Hermione hadn't witnessed the fumbling and awkwardness of the first few days the two were getting acquainted.

Now they looked like mother and daughter, like a real family. Even their looks were so similar it hurt to look at them. She couldn't explain why but watching them filled her with such a profound sense of loss that she had to close her eyes and fight back tears.

"Hermione." She opened them again and carefully took the paper and pen she was being offered.

"If were not going back it'll be a long list." She warned.

"Just write everything. I'll get it all." Bellatrix kissed the top of Sterling's head and watched her bond carefully.

~H~

She had kept her word, Hermione couldn't say otherwise. Bella had collected everything on her list and even included her furniture. Hermione would not have to return to her childhood home for anything. Even the presents had been deposited under the Weasley's tree for Sterling.

The only thing Hermione seemed to be missing since her release from St. Mungo's was the dark witch herself.

She had taken to disappearing when Hermione entered a room, not that she was around that often to begin with, excuses echoed in Hermione's ears every time she caught a glimpse of the woman. It was positively infuriating. What she was doing Hermione had no idea.

Sometimes the woman would pop in for breakfast, spend a little while with Sterling and talk to Molly but then as soon as it looked as if she and Hermione would be alone she vanished. She was cagey in a way Hermione had never seen her before and she couldn't help but believe it was because she was resenting her for their situation.

She knew being bonded wasn't anything new to Bellatrix and she knew their sham of a marriage wasn't anything important to the witch either but she desperately wanted to know what was going to happen after the trial at least, even if Bellatrix didn't want to talk about anything else. If they won would she be moving into the Burrow permanently until graduation? Would she still be living with Sterling or would Bellatrix be taking her in during the holidays and summer? The unknown was killing her.

But until the witch came to her she knew she wouldn't be getting answers so there was nothing she could do but to wait. She had never been good at idly waiting. So instead she buried herself in studying, particularly studying the journal Bellatrix had given to her before the break.

She spent hours a day in her shared room with Ginny pouring over it but as Christmas approached Molly had become insistent she come out of her room. She was currently curled up with it on a couch while she watched Bellatrix and Sterling sitting comfortably near the fireplace. It was one of the rare times the witch hadn't flown off when she was nearby, but she chalked it up to coming in after she was already busy with Sterling.
"You okay?" She glanced up from the old book and nodded silently as Ginny approached. For a moment Ginny only stared at her skeptically before she shoved her feet off the couch and sat down beside her. "Not sure I believe that. Are you sure you're not still hurting from the accident?"

Hermione started to ask what accident she had nearly forgotten the lie they had told her friends. Only the adults knew what had truly happened to her, at her own insistence Harry, Ron and Ginny had been kept in the dark, not even Sterling would talk about what had happened to Hermione.

She put her bare feet in her friend's lap and sighed. Her eyes trailed back to where Bellatrix and Sterling were sitting beside the fire. They were engrossed in a book and oblivious to everyone else as Bellatrix taught the little girl how to read.

Crude hand signs interrupted the girls voice as she tried to correct her pronunciation, Sterling had been trying to teach her signs in response for Bellatrix helping her learn to read. Sterling was already very adept at silent reading, Hermione had taught her as early as possible to help deal with her soundless word. Reading aloud however hadn't been something she had picked up easily, at least not from Hermione. Not being able to hear how best to project the sounds had made such a task too difficult for the short time she got to spend with her young sibling. And Peter had absolutely refused her suggestion of sending her sister to a speech therapist to learn. Of course Hermione had sent her in secret but during the school year there was nothing she could do.

"Something happen with you and Black again?"

Hermione nodded. She might not want to tell Ginny the truth about her home life but she wasn't going to lie about the situation with Bellatrix. And besides eventually the girl would begin to wonder why she never returned home….why Sterling was staying with her mom instead of returning to her father.

"You were right." Ginny tilted her head in confusion before Hermione tapped the journal. Brown eyes slowly widened in shock.

"You're shitting me?" Hermione shook her head.

"She told me herself, after I woke up and she dropped the bomb about us getting married."

Ginny at least had the presence of mind to keep her voice low when she squealed out her excitement at the news. It quickly faded when she realized her friend wasn't as happy as she was.

"Isn't this what you wanted? You've been in love with her for as long as I've known you."

"No. Not like this. I knew I never really stood a chance with her. And the fact that she always hated me….it was easier when I didn't know the reason." She pulled her gaze away from the two figures and turned her tear filled eyes to her friend. "This bond….it chained her to me. She hates it. She's only marrying me for Sterling, because her father isn't capable of raising her." It wasn't the only reason but she knew Bellatrix wouldn't appreciate her giving out details about how hard the bond had evidently been on her. About her speech of dying if Hermione chose to leave. Hermione was just as chained to Bellatrix as she was to her and there was no point in going through those details if she didn't have to. "If she doesn't do this they will separate us, put Sterling in foster care." She sucked in a shaky breath, her eyes once again falling to the dark robes witch on the hearth. "She doesn't love me, Ginny. And I hate that I've put her in this position."

"I don't think you know how Bella feels, have you talked to her?"

"How can I when she can't even bare to be around me for five minutes." Ginny grimaced, she hadn't been the only one to notice Bellatrix avoiding seeing the girl alone, her own mother had said
something to the witch about it. "I have no idea what's going to happen to me after school. Bloody hell I don't even know what's going to happen when the trial for Sterling is over. We have to go and prove to the Wizengamot and a group of muggles that Sterling should be with us. That we can raise her better than he could. What if we lose? What if we win?" She trialed off, ran her hand over her face and climbed to her feet. "I'm sorry. I'm tired. I think I should rest a little more before supper. She turned back to the stairs with the journal in tow without a backwards glance at her worried friend.

Or the woman who felt her distress and turned to watch her go with dark sad eyes.

~~A~~

Block, parry, strike….block, parry, strike. It went on and on. The world dimmed down to the echo of steel against steel, wood slamming into wood. Men shouting and groaning as they struck out across the battlefield….and were struck down. They were not winning this fight. The enemies numbers were too great.

"My Liege!" The rider atop the hill struck out at the last man trying to pull them from the saddle. With a cry the man fell dead onto the damp grass, his blood running down and joining the crimson streams flowing out with the rain.

"My Liege! We are over run! Mages," The young man ran up beside the rider, words frosted on the air as he huffed to catch his breath. "They…they have brought mages."

A curse pulled from the rider's lips, dark as the hour. They were loosing before but against mages the valiant men could do nothing. They would be torn to shreds without even the hope of killing enough to have their enemy scampering back to lick their wounds. Their families would suffer if the barbarians were not stopped here.

"Call for a retreat." Brown eyes searched the field for a General. "Licanus! Licanus!" The man snapped a spear off in his assailant and turned to the sound of the king. "Retreat! Fall back to the village by way of the forest, our enemy has brought mages."

The King could hear them now. Marching with a small band of reinforcements. Clanking of fresh armor coming from behind them on the hill. The men would be destroyed even as they retreated unless someone covered their flank.

A hand reached out and grasped the messenger, practically tossed him toward the woods. "Go! Hold the village, I will face the mages here and catch up."

"My Lord?!"

A boot kicked at the back of his shoulders causing him to stumble. "I order you to go! Now! Get the woman and children to safety." With barely another pause the slender Man took off, following the trail what was left of their army made toward the forest. Thankfully they had given the main army enough cause to stop and lick their wounds, they weren't yet perusing.

The men retreated and the King's enemies surrounded the steed. Mages lined the hills above on either side, the men behind had gathered themselves and blocked the path the army had retreated to. Sickening smiles met the king as a glistening helmet turned to take him the situation. It was grim indeed.

The mages did not attack, they had no need to. Even this king couldn't take on so many men at once.
A horn drew attention to the east, a rider atop a black stallion headed for the king, weapon drawn and a war cry on the beastly man's lips as he charged.

The King raised a steel sword in preparation and charged. If this was to be a battle of rulers the rider was not going to make the enemy wait.

Swords clanged as they met, nearly knocking the golden clad figure from the saddle. The leather had loosened and if the battle between them raged much longer it would be a battle fought against a horseman and foot soldier.

"Surrender, Young King!" The barbarian laughed as his sword swung for a head. "I promise I will make your death swift, only a little painful." His laughter irritated the King more than frightened. This man was responsible for the sacking, the murdering, raping and orphaning of the kingdom's people. The kingdom was suffering this war because of this barbarian's cruelty. It would not go on.

"On my life I will never give in to you." A strike rang true, sliced through the mail protecting a soft abdomen. The vile king hissed triumphantly as the golden figure leaned forward in pain before spurring the horse back around to it's opponent.

"I will take your head and place it on a spike for your people to see!" Their swords met again, the young king's arm ached with the force of it and cracks spread out across the steal of the sword.

The horse spurred as the clang of metal struck again. As the barbarian made a swipe for the mount and the king barely kept his sword from plunging into the unprotected hide.

"No!"

The steel sword, the sword given to the rider by a man who had been as a father, broke nearly to the hilt. The barbarian smile triumphantly and swung his great sword just as the mount spurred. It sliced at the feathers on the King's helmet as the saddle slipped, sending the king sideways on the mount and tangling an armored foot up as the beast launched itself maddeningly toward the Forrest.

It's flight saved the King's life. The saddle breaking was a miracle. But still blood ran from the King's wounds, minor though they were, and if the beast got away it would be no time before the enemy came upon them. Without a weapon there would be no defense.

~H~

She woke with a start, head aching and body covered in a cold sweat. He hand hurt as if she had been clutching something for a long time and her arm ached as if it had been her wielding the sword and fending off the vile man's crushing blows.

A glance out the small window let her know she had slept far longer than she had meant. She had missed putting Sterling to bed and the fact the girl hadn't pitched a fit for her to come left her feeling bereft.

Ginny was curled up in the bed beside hers, mouth agape as she slept. Hermione would have given anything to sleep as peaceful as her friend.

She climbed out of the mismatched comforter Molly had loaned her and set her bare feet on the cold floor. She knew there was no point in staying in bed, she wouldn't able to sit idle and sleep was so far away from her now.

She made sure the door didn't creak as she opened it and was careful not to let it slam and wake
Ginny. She didn't need any comfort or any questions. She didn't need anyone to worry over the fact she hadn't slept well as of late, that her dreams were plagued by someone else's life. That she dreamed of a war so real she could taste it and feel it even after she woke.

The steps squeaked as she trailed down them, the Weasley's home was held up by magic it was no surprise it had a few quaint characteristics, squeaking stairs were just part of it.

She trailed down to the kitchen, quiet as she could be, heading for the sink to get a glass of water. To hopefully wash away the taste of sweat and blood that lingered still from her dream.

Voices caught her attention as she neared the window over looking the sink. Soft voices, from people she couldn't quiet make out in the darkness. She recognized them though, Bellatrix and the woman from the hospital, the woman Bella hadn't seemed to like. To hear them now speaking in the darkness sent a cold chill down her body and her mind spun wild tales about why it was they disliked each other so, and what would make them meet up in the middle of the night.

Under normal circumstances she would never have eaves dropped, she always warned Ginny she would only ever hear things she didn't like if she did. But this time she couldn't help it. Despite the fact she could barely make out the word she found herself moving toward the back door and listening hard through the screen.

"Are you sure about this? You have Black Manor I mean surely-"

"I do not want Hermione there." Bellatrix's voice echoed well on the wind, though she struggled to hear Weiss's reply.

"You filed the paperwork…." She couldn't hear the rest of Bellatrix's word as the wind echoed around her, flowing through the open areas of the Weasley's home. The home itself was enchanted against the elements but it seemed the sound slipped through from time to time.

"I seem to remember we split up because of your ideas about marriage-"

She couldn't hear the rest but Bellatrix's laugh caught the wind and seemed to wrap itself around her. She had never heard the woman laugh so openly toward her, the fact that she could do so with someone she truly claimed to hate…hurt her.

The two obviously had a past, a romantic one if what she was hearing could be believed. She didn't want to hear anymore. She was right about eaves dropping.

~B~

The knock had surprised her, she'd nearly spilled her tea as she turned to see who was behind her at the back door. A scowl graced her face as she took in the sight of Weiss's smiling face.

"It's too late for this shit." She grumbled, but still she made her way over and let the woman in. She had asked for her help after all and it would do no good to let the woman stand out in the cold.

"I've got what you wanted, half muggle land half magical. It was quiet a bit of paperwork I'll have you know, what on Earth do you need it for?"

Bellatrix took the papers Weiss handed her, deeds to the parcels of land they were talking of, hundred of acres near Hogsmeade.

"I want to build a home. For Sterling and Hermione. One where they can have muggles over and still be apart of magic."
Weiss raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to build two homes then?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "Just...maybe a hybrid of the two. Repelling charms only on half of it." She lost herself in thoughts of the planning. It was going to be difficult, the hardest thing anyone had ever likely built in regards to magical enchantments. But Sterling wasn't magical and one day she would go to school, she would make friends, and Bellatrix wanted her to have a place to bring them. A happy place she could enjoy to call home. One that wouldn't just serve as a reminder of what she was not.

"Bellatrix?" The dark witch jerked and turned her attention back to the woman she had almost forgotten. A creak from the house had them both turning their eyes upward, it wasn't any secret that Weiss was here, she wouldn't find her plans ruined if someone as to walk in on them but that didn't mean she wanted them interrupted. Weiss was going to be a major player in Sterling's trial. She had to reconcile with the woman or her own feelings might jeopardize everything Hermione had gone through.

"We should speak outside." She cast a charm over both of them and brushed by the shorter woman, leading her to the edge of the fields where they could speak without being over heard.

"Bella I know we...I know we haven't seen each other in a long while but I assure you I am up to this task, I will do everything I can to ensure Sterling remains safe with you. You don't have to make threats-"

"That's not my intention. I know you are capable. We were friends once."

Weiss huffed, "And despite our ridiculous argument after my graduation we still are." Dark eyes turned toward her in surprise. It hadn't been a ridiculous argument. Bellatrix had always been sure her words had been reprehensible. That she had damaged their friendship beyond repair with her hatred.

"It wasn't so ridiculous as I remember." No...it hadn't been ridiculous at all and her temper had gotten the better of her. In a rare slip she had accidentally injured the witch, albeit only a few scrapes and bruises if she recalled.

"No...maybe not. But I waited for you, I know you never would have apologized," a small laugh fell from the younger woman's lips, "honestly Bella I can't remember a time you ever did apologize." In the dark she didn't see the witch's flinch. "At the party, I waited. I expected it to go like all our other fights...I expected you to show up, say something witty and make me laugh and then go on about our friendship as if we never fought."

"I couldn't." Merlin how she wished that was what happened. Her father had cursed her to the point of exhaustion because Andy had run off with a muggle born. She had barely stopped him from going after her to murder her. Weiss and their friendship had been the last thing on her mind. The party had never even crossed it as she had laid broken on the mansion floor praying to any God for her father to leave her sister be.

"It doesn't matter now, too many years...but...perhaps we can pretend that is what happened." Eyes turned toward her, pleading with her for a friendship she had believed long dead.

"Do you truly want to rekindle a friendship with me, Weiss?" She sighed heavily. "I've changed, perhaps I'm colder than I was."

"Maybe but I think this marriage will thaw you out a bit, certainly the kid will. And forgive me for saying so but your friendship was worth any hardship."
Bella couldn't help the smile that graced her lips, she and Weiss probably got into more trouble than Hermione, Harry and Ron could ever dream of.

"If you'll help me keep Sterling and get this home built I'll try to keep our friendship free of any more hardships."

Weiss grinned, happy to have a chance, even if they both knew it would require more work than just a few words on a dark night. "Bella…I have to ask…are you sure about this? You have Black Manor, I mean surely you could build something there, this is a ridiculous amount of money."

"I do not want Hermione there." She tried to soften her words but she had enough of thinking of that horrid place. "The evil my father carried about seeped into the very foundation. And besides you know I'm loaded, I don't care about the money." Thankfully Weiss let it drop. She remember the rumors of Bellatrix's father and she had no intention of bringing back bad memories.

"Arigh. I don't think it's a bad idea anyways, what your doing for your wife."

Bella's breath caught at the word. Her wife. Her wife and soon her child. A home was the least she could offer them.

"You filed the paperwork then? She's legally my wife?" Relief hit her hard, almost as if she had been subconsciously afraid it had all been a dream, that she would blink and Hermione would be gone. She hadn't seen her much as of late, she was afraid if the girl began asking questions of her she would spill her surprise. Or Hermione would change her mind, but the separation had been rather hard on her and sleepless nights seemed to be the number one symptom.

"Awful happy to be tied down are we?" Bellatrix huffed at the teasing tone. "I seemed to recall we split up because of your ideas on marriage. I seem to recall you saying it was gross as worms, all that kissing and stuff."

Bellatrix threw her head back and laughed. "We were six if I recall correctly. And you wanted me to cut our mud pie cake, there were literal worms involved and I had no desire to kiss you."

"Eh well, feeling has always been mutual, except obviously when I was five. I just wanted to cut a cake and wear a white dress like my sister."

"I'm glad I didn't leave you heartbroken." Bella elbowed her gently as Weiss pretended to be wounded.

"I've been pining after you for so long! How dare you treat my broken heart so cavalier."

Bellatrix chuckled. "I seem to recall you married first."

"Oh…" Weiss pretended to be surprised at the news she had a husband. "I suppose I did. A lovely, handsome man. You two should meet, perhaps you can bring Sterling and Hermione. I have a son a little older than Sterling. He…hasn't shown any signs of magic yet they might get along splendid."

Bellatrix pondered on it for a bit but she wasn't ready yet to share her small family with others, she was already having to share with Molly and Lily and soon she wanted her home finished. She wanted a chance to be a family together before they started showing a family to others. "Maybe… let's work a little more on our own friendship," She grasped Weiss's hand when the woman's eyes turned sad. "It's been a long time, and I did miss you. I was shocked to see you in the hospital acting as if you didn't hate me."
"I never hated you. I- can't say I understood but I never hated you."

Bellatrix nodded. "Give us time, Weiss, and then I think I would be happy for us to come for dinner." She was shocked by the sudden embrace but didn't pull away. Weiss had always been one of her regrets and she was grateful she could finally put it to rest, even if it wasn't all healed it was a start.
It had taken three days. One day for all the money to go through, considering she paid full price with muggle cash for the land she was surprised it hadn't taken longer, another day for Weiss to finalize the contract with both ministries, and one full day and night of building, amazing what a team of talented magicians could do.

It was ten on the fourth day and everything except the furnishings and the enchantments were finished. It was beautiful. Everything had been meticulously chosen, from the marble flooring to the wallpaper. She had even done a few details on the woodwork herself and though some more needed to be done on that front, the home was essentially ready for moving in.

She ran a slender hand over the beautiful cabinets Billy had built for her kitchen. He had been working on them from the moment she said she wanted to build a home, before she even found a suitable spot or spoke to Weiss about it. It had been well worth the wait. They were astonishing and so intricately designed she couldn't help but covet his skill.

She moved around from the kitchen back into the grand marbled hall. She hadn't wanted the home to feel like a pureblood mansion, even though it very nearly had the size of one, but she hadn't been able to deny herself the pleasure of the marble floor. She loved the way her shoes clicked on it when she walked and the cold feeling of it on her bare feet. Something that had never been possible in her own home because it wasn't proper to run around without shoes. She had half a mind to remove her boots now just to feel it on her toes.

She didn't. She continued on, up the spiraling stairs and into the landing. Everything was how she wanted it. How she imagined it. She could almost see Sterling playing upstairs in the small open area beside the stair case. She had already decided that upstairs would be the magical spaces. Muggles wouldn't take notice of it's space and only see a small loft and an office area. For now the bedrooms too would be up there but when Sterling started bringing friends home she would have her own, protected, space downstairs for sleep overs and parties.

She smiled as she looked around, the walls were a stark white but they didn't feel cold, not like the hospital had. Red, green, gold and silver accents were everywhere. From the drapes to small implements in the built in shelves to the grains on the wooden floor.

It was empty. But it already felt like home. Like a home for them.

And it would be a home. Not a manor to be lived in, filled with cold expectations and strict rules of a dated upbringing. Of prejudices that limited learning, love and compassion.

No. She built this with her very hands, helped with nearly every detail, anything she could she did herself. She put every positive feeling she had ever had in it's construction. Every hope she had for the future was embedded in the very walls.

This would be the place she helped Hermione raise Sterling. The place where Sterling would always call home, bring friends to, maybe fall in love one day….

This would be the place Hermione would feel safe…perhaps even the place she would come to find love.
It had to be perfect. She wouldn't let it be anything less.

~G~

Ginny rolled her eyes for probably the fourth time in the span of an hour as her mother prattled on about the decorations and how everything had to be just so. It wasn't their first rodeo. They knew how she got this time every year. The one day of the year when their loving but stern mother turned into a downright Christmas fanatic. She screeched and cursed and rearranged and reorganized everything. And they all knew it didn't really matter where they hung up the decorations because there was a ninety percent chance the crazed woman would come right behind them and change it all up again.

Still it was part of the family tradition and they all helped out. This year it involved Sterling, and even a mending Hermione, although the girl was forbidden from lifting anything heavy and Molly pressed her into a seat any time she so much as thought the girl looked pale.

Ginny was having a swell time teasing her about the special treatment. Hermione only glared back at her and huffed in annoyance as Mrs. Weasley once again pushed her into a wingback chair after witnessing her wince when she reached up to place an ornament on their tree.

"Rest up, dear. Ginevra can handle the rest, can't you?" She glared at her daughter as if daring her to disagree but Ginny simply offered a small smile and nodded her friend's way. Hermione thought for a second Molly was going to argue just for the sake of arguing, despite the fact her daughter was agreeing with her, but then a commotion from outside drug her attention away from the two girls.

Ginny let out a relieved breath when her mother could be heard scolding Fred, George and Ron from outside the kitchen window.

"Thought she would never leave." Ginny chuckled as she took a seat next to Hermione on the chair of the arm. "I love my mother but she is a right menace on the holidays."

Hermione smiled softly but Ginny noticed it didn't even come close to reaching her eyes. "I did notice you were up at the crack of dawn. An interesting feat for you."

Ginny scowled. "We learned to wake up so early because having mom wake you up on this particular day is not pleasant. Fred and George have nothing on mother." She shivered at a memory and shifted her attention back to her quiet friend. She took her in for a moment in silence, really took her in.

When she had first met Hermione in her second year the girl had been happy, loved to learn and even though she would never admit it she loved to go on her adventures with the boys, break the rules and scold them later for not doing their homework.

It had been a long time since she had seen that Hermione. And now that she was truly paying attention, now that she had the mysterious 'accident' rumbling around in her head, she realized something had gone wrong for Hermione a long time ago and they had all been too wrapped up in their own lives to really notice. Hermione was good at hiding. Too good.

"I-" She shifted herself on the chair arm and searched her mind for what she wanted to say. Her gaze lingered on the empty fireplace as she tried to form her chaotic thoughts into some form of apology and support.

Hermione reached up and surprised her by resting a hand on her shoulder. "I know Gin. You and
the boys don't have to say anything. You don't need to know anything. I always knew if I needed you there was nothing that could have stopped you from coming to help me, wands raised and cursed ready." She offered Ginny a weak smile.

"Then why didn't you tell us you needed our help?" It came out more broken than she had intended but thankfully without the judgment and anger that sometimes rolled around in her head when she wondered what her friend had been going through alone. When she tried to figure out why she hadn't trusted them enough to let them know.

"I asked for help. From Dumbledore and the Ministry." Ginny reached up and placed a warm hand over Hermione's cold one. Her eyes wide with surprise. "There was nothing anyone could do."

Ginny wanted to argue. Wanted to rant and rave and ask a million questions about what had happened. Why Hermione was raising Sterling instead of her own father, why he wasn't considered capable? Perhaps in her quiet moment of weakness Hermione might have even answered her. As it was she was once again saved by Bellatrix Black.

The fireplace lit up with green flames and not seconds later dark eyes were boring into where the girl's hands still rested together on Ginny's shoulder. A very irritated Bellatrix cleared her throat and reached out to take Hermione's arm, pulling her unceremoniously from the comfort of the chair and toward the back door. Ginny only watched in stunned silence as she ignore everyone of Hermione's protests and then no sooner having cleared the back door apparated the two of them away.

~B~

"What the hell!" Bellatrix turned down and glared at the hellion glaring up at her. She didn't offer any apologies for what she had just done, although before she had rested eyes on the two girls holding hands she had intended to ask Hermione to accompany her instead of demanding it. "You could have splinched us!"

"We have an appointment." She ground the words out through gritted teeth, aware if she said more she would no doubt trigger an argument between the two. "And I'm not so inept at apparating."

Except for the times she hadn't been able to because her emotions were so chaotic. She grimaced as she realized there had been a real chance she could have injured them with her anger.

"For what?" The young brunet ignored the last quip. She too seemed to want to avoid an argument.

"For Sterling."

Hermione huffed as she trailed behind the woman, Bellatrix hadn't even noticed she was still pulling the girl along by her arm, although her grip had unconsciously eased it's bruising strength for a more gentle pull. "Then shouldn't she be joining us?"

That stopped her for a moment, left her floundering for a response. The thing was Sterling was supposed to be there. The doctor had wanted to check her ears and ask her a few questions. But Bellatrix hadn't thought beyond getting her wife away from the red haired minx long enough to actually stop and think.

Now she felt foolish, which didn't help her temper in the least. Especially not when she remembered Ginny was very happily attached to her godson….the godson who intended to propose to her at the end of the school year is his father could be believed.

"Well she's not." She sighed heavily and rubbed the bridge of her nose with the hand not clamped
to Hermione's arm. "Lets just go. It's just around the corner." She turned and tugged Hermione but the girl jerked out of her grasp.

"You can't just drag me around, Professor." The word stung like a slap in the face. She wanted to say something, her first thought to snap but instead she shook her head and continued down the dark alley she knew housed the magical clinic for children.

Hermione followed her quietly and when Bellatrix glanced back to make sure she was still there the girl was absently rubbing her arm where Bella's fingers had been. She wondered if she had bruised her and the thought had her stomach rolling in protest.

She wanted to apologize. To explain that she hadn't meant to drag her around like some kind of child. But she could never utter those words. Not ever again. Still, Hermione didn't deserve to deal with her jealousy nor did she deserve Bellatrix jerking her around like her stepfather had.

"I didn't mean to-" Hermione nodded stiffly as she followed Bellatrix in through the clinic door. It was as close as Bellatrix could get to saying I'm sorry and even that small admission had her so nauseated she could barely function. She took a deep breath and placed her hand on the small of Hermione's back. "We have to sign in."

The student watched as Bellatrix scratched their names on the lined paper, blushed slightly when she noticed her surname had been changed to Black.

"It's legal now. The papers were turned in to both ministries. You're my wife in both worlds now, Hermione." She let her dark eyes drift over the girl's face. She hadn't expected Hermione to shout for joy and kiss her or anything but the lack of response worried her. It was as if her words meant absolutely nothing to the girl. And if she was being honest with herself she hadn't exactly given her a reason to believe they meant anything to her. She had been so wrapped up in providing a home she had gotten lost as to the reason she needed one.

They would need to talk. She could only imagine how out of sorts the young woman felt. School started just after New year and they had yet to really resolve anything. Hermione didn't even know yet that she had a home, one outside the Burrow. One that belonged to her. They hadn't talked about what to do with Sterling when they both returned to Hogwarts either.

Bella sighed and moved them toward the chairs placed about the waiting room. She kept them away from the other small families and tucked them into the most secluded corner she could. She was already garnishing too much attention by the few who thought they might recognize her. She definitely didn't want anyone eavesdropping on their conversations.

"What kind of appointment is this?" Hermione finally asked, curious because she had never heard of magical doctors outside of St. Mungo's.

"A specialist, for eyes and ears."

Hermione frowned and her eyes burned into Bellatrix's. "Ears?"

Bellatrix felt the edge of her voice more than heard it. She hadn't anticipated what to do if Hermione was against this. She had thought it was a brilliant idea she hated that she was already second guessing herself.

"It's possible, through magic, for Sterling to hear." She tried to keep it as simple as she could. Keep any kind of bias out of her voice.
"Hear…" For a moment she thought she might get away without another argument. Of course when had she ever been right about anything that dealt with Hermione. "What's wrong with the way she is now?" Hermione demanded softly, her eyes bore into the older woman, just daring her to say anything she didn't care for.

Bellatrix only sighed, tired of fighting, and shook her head. "Nothing. And if it isn't possible or neither of you want to try it I will pay for the best schools possible. I will ensure she has the fullest life despite not being able to hear." Bellatrix wanted so bad to turn away from that intense stare. To hide behind anger and self righteousness and tell her wife that this was the best for their daughter because she said it was. But that wasn't the case and that wasn't how she wanted their relationship to work, no matter how strongly she felt about giving Sterling everything she possibly could.

"She was born deaf. What if this isn't something magic can fix?"

"Then that's it. And it's fine." Bellatrix stressed the word. Trying to convey that she would love Sterling regardless. Willing Hermione to believe her, to not get up and leave without at least considering it.

"Don't get her hopes up, Bellatrix." Hermione turned her gaze down toward the ugly carpet, unable to keep the sadness from her voice.

"I won't. We don't have to tell her anything about why she is coming to this doctor. But if it is a choice, can we at least ask her?"

Hermione blew out a harsh breath and laughed coldly. "She's three, do you really think she knows what all this will entail."

Bellatrix paused, forced her immediate response down and thought about it for a moment. She could see Hermione's point of view. Could see the positive and the negative for Sterling if it was possible and she tried to form her response on what would be best for Sterling and not herself.

"No I don't. But we do. And for better or worse Hermione we are her parents now. Hopefully we always will be." The Gryffindor shifted in her seat at the reminder that she now shared the responsibility of her sister. It had been all she wanted, to keep Sterling. And with Molly running her house and practically parenting Sterling lately she had begun to worry that she had lost that right. Bellatrix was firmly telling her she hadn't. Was calling on her to make a decision as a mother, with her.

"Okay, but I want to hear everything about it first, and I want to know if it's possible before we try it. We don't speak to her about it until we know everything we could possibly need to know and how it could affect her."

Bellatrix let out a relieved breath and smiled, Hermione's breath caught at the sight. "Thank you. I know you think this is because I don't want to have a deaf child but-" Hermione raised a hand and cut her off.

"No I- I know. I'm sorry I implied it. If you really had a problem with it I doubt you would be willing to learn sign language for her."

She nodded, unable to meet Hermione's eyes. The truth was she was worried about Sterling's inability to hear but it wasn't because she thought it made her less that the beautiful child she was. She was just afraid she wouldn't be able to properly communicate, to understand and connect. She was something new in Sterling's world do of course the child loved her now but Bella wanted her to love her even in her teen years and beyond. She wanted to do the best she could and provide the
best she could and the only way she really knew how to do that was to show affection through buying things.

"Bella-

"Mrs. Black?" The nurse poked her head through the door and smiled blankly in the direction of the waiting room. Bellatrix waited a second for Hermione to finish her sentence but the girl simply sighed and climbed to her feet, leaving Bella no other course but to follow.

~H~

Hermione walked down the narrow corridor after the woman with Bella close behind. She brought them to a small, but brightly lit room, where they were told to sit and wait and a doctor would be with them shortly. Hermione would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous, she was afraid what it would mean for Sterling. Afraid the other two in her small family would get their hearts set on this only to have it blow up in their faces. She didn't want that kind of heartbreak for them. The kind that stemmed from dashed hopes.

She glanced up as Bellatrix placed and arm on her shoulder. Met those dark eyes head on and swallowed thickly at the uncertainty she saw there.

"Is this okay? I….think now maybe I should have talked with you before I made the appointment."

She hated that the woman was second guessing herself now, that is was her fault. She had nothing to worry about, Hermione really had no reason to truly be angry. Not when Bellatrix had done this out of love for Sterling. Nothing she ever did out of love for Sterling should be a bad thing. Although she had to agree that it would have been better if they had both talked about it before but Bellatrix had told her in the beginning she didn't know anything about parenting. And honestly she was going to have to learn how to share the responsibility herself.

"I…I don't think we are very strong on communication." She admitted softly.

"No." The agreement was simple…and quick.

"And we can't expect to always agree….we don't exactly get along." Bella's jaw flexed as she clenched her teeth at the truth in the statement. "I would have liked to have known about this before hand. But I understand. Just in the future maybe we should both agree to discuss things involving Sterling before we do them."

Bellatrix nodded, running a hand over her face as if she could scrub the stress away.

"We should try and get along too." Bellatrix added, her hand falling from her face and into her lap, "for Sterling’s sake at least."

A knock at the door forced them to break eye contact with the other. Forced their personal conversation back to the back burner as they listened to the doctor explain the ins and outs of the magic procedure.

It was rather simple, similar to a muggle cochlear implant but without surgery or any external contraptions doing the work. In essence it would regrow, or repair, whatever Sterling had that was damaged or missing. Whatever reason she couldn't hear would be fixed. The younger…the better. The only problem Hermione had was the minimum one month down time and the fact that it was likely going to require extensive effort on their part to help her understand the sounds she would be hearing for the very first time.
Hermione was adamant she not even be told about it until summer. Until they could both devote time to her recovery. Bellatrix was worried about the younger the better news and was trying to convince her young wife that Molly and her own personal house elf would be just as capable as them at helping the child through whatever she needed after the procedure. Hermione wasn't budging. It was a hard no, at least until end of year.

In the end they walked out of the office the same way they had entered it.....arguing.

Bellatrix ran her hands through her unruly curls, looking for all the world as if she wanted to pull her own hair out by it's roots. She looked so frustrated Hermione wasn't sure she wouldn't.

"I need to stop by Cissy's, she has a few of my things I need to clear for Rippley to fetch. It's not far from here." Hermione sighed, knowing that ended their debate on future appointments but whether it was in her favor or not she wouldn't know right now.

She decided this once she would follow Bella's lead and let the subject drop. She wasn't willing to let the uncomfortable silence continue though and decided it was the best time to ask about "Rippley?"

"My house elf. My….parent's old house elf anyways. Technically he's employed by me if you must know. Father set him free when I decided to teach at Hogwarts."

"Nice of him."

Bellatrix scoffed as she moved them away from the rapidly crowding street. "No it wasn't. Broke his little heart, it was father's punishment for Rippley's part in raising me to not hate muggleborns."

Hermione's steps faltered and her eyes landed on the back of a curly head in shock. "You were raised by a house elf?" A derisive snort was her answer. "Seriously?"

"For the most part, yes." Bellatrix's tone was exasperated but Hermione couldn't stop asking questions. It was the most she had ever heard the woman speak about her past. And whatever mood had Bella being so forthcoming she was going to take advantage of it while it lasted. Before they fell into another argument anyways.

"And you took him in after?"

"Yes I did. I won't pretend I wasn't still a bigot before I was bonded to you but I do like to think I was at least decent about being fair to my students. That was in no small part thanks to Rippley. My parents taught me pureblood was supreme but he taught me all living things deserved life and respect. That included muggleborns." Their eyes met once again as Bellatrix pulled her to a stop in front of an old iron grate. The witch flipped the birdfeeder next to the side walk upside down for a moment and they both stared at each other in silence as a beautiful Victorian mansion stretched into view.

"I'm surprised your father didn't just kill him." She hadn't truly meant to say the words. And judging by Bella's flinch the witch didn't really want to talk about her father.

"Freedom is a worse fate for a house elf, Hermione." Came the quiet reply. "Dobby," She stopped her, already following her trail of thought, " is an exception. He wants to be free, to be paid. Rippley only ever wanted to be useful...accepted. Being freed was the opposite of his dreams and the cruelest thing my father could do to him."

"Your father-"
"No." Bellatrix forced the word out on a harsh breath. "No, I'm finished talking about my family, pet. Come, we shouldn't make Narcissa wait."

Hermione frowned as she watched the witch float by her, head high and back straight. A telling sign that she was close to breaking down, too close to her own horrible memories. But Hermione didn't know her well enough to see it and instead felt the bitter disappointment that they were once again arguing and Bellatrix was once again a closed book to her.

It had really been a trying day and it was only going on noon now.

She brushed her hair out of her face took one last longing look out toward the muggle streets and wished vaguely that she'd had her wand on her when Bellatrix had taken her from the Burrow. At least then she could leave her wife to her own devices and find her own way back to the Burrow.

"Granger hurry it up." Hermione sighed heavily before she moved to follow the woman into the house.

Her first sight of the inside took her breath away. She had never seen anything so...ostentatiously rich. Everything looked like it cost more than she could make it her lifetime. The marble floors, the high decorated ceiling, especially the vases and various other accents placed around the room. She was terrified to touch anything, even the floor, lest she ruin it.

Bellatrix had no such qualms. She tossed her cloak on an elegant statue of a snake, likely an homage to their Slytherin upbringing, and started yelling out for her sister to 'get her arse down here'.

"Must you be so crass, Bella?"

Hermione spun around at the soft sound of the melodic Malfoy. She had only ever seen the woman in passing, at Diagon Alley, she had never heard her speak before and her voice was both soothing and frightening. Especially paired with the disgusted look she threw Hermione's way.

"I need to get my things marked for Rip." Narcissa waved her hands for Bellatrix to follow her towards the stairs but Bellatrix hesitated, her eyes drifting back towards an awkward Hermione who had retreated slowly towards the door. "She has a wonderful library if your interested."

Oh she was. But if looks could kill the look Narcissa was leveling over her sister's shoulder would have incinerated her. It was painfully clear the blonde wanted her as far away from her home and persons as possible.

"Uh...no thank you. I-" She didn't really have a plausible excuse as to why she was turning down a library, something Bellatrix knew she would practically die to see.

The dark witch turned around and leveled her own glare at her younger sibling, her words turned harsh and cold. "She will be delighted to show you her library won't you, sister?"

Narcissa nodded her head demurely but Hermione wasn't fooled, she would probably pay for whatever slight the blonde believed Bellatrix had given her. She was a big girl though, she could handle petty insults, she had handled Draco's for years after all. She doubted his mother was any more inventive.

"I will take her while you go through your things. Be quick for Merlin's sake. I have company in half an hour." Hermione caught the innuendo even as Bellatrix seemingly ignored it. Narcissa didn't want a filthy mudblood in her home when her company came to call.
It seemed not all Black's had given up their prejudices.

She watched as Bellatrix made her way up the grand stair case and turned to dutifully follow Narcissa as she made her way across the hall.

The home was far larger than it looked on the outside. And it was very clear the Malfoy's spared no expense. She tried her best not to even breath on the expensive looking decorations that littered the hall and let out a haggard breath of relief when the blonde stopped at a set of beautiful ornate double doors. She pushed them open and stepped aside for Hermione to enter.

It took her breath away. There were so many books, and all looked pristine. The fireplace with surrounding wingback chairs looked absolutely divine and she would have given anything to curl up in them with a book and a roaring fire.

She moved past Malfoy, intent on at least looking at the spines since she knew she wouldn't have been welcome touching anything, much less relaxing in the chairs.

She didn't get far before a stinging hex landed on her shoulder. She yelped and spun around, her hand automatically reaching for her wand only to have her paling when she remembered she hadn't had time to grab it. Narcissa smiled wickedly and advanced, backed the girl up into an elegant bookshelf and pressed her hands against the stacks, pinning her in. Her breath, soft peppermint, blew hot on her cheek as she turned her head up to glance at the wand held tight against the books and the blonde's palm.

"You cannot begin to imagine how much I loath you, mudblood." Hermione flinched but said nothing. She had learned the hard way not to antagonize someone when they already held you at a disadvantage. "I could not believe it when Bella told me she married you and adopted that…that damn muggle child."

"That's your niece your talking about now, Malfoy."

Narcissa glared at her and let her wand dip down in her hand to send a sharp stinging hex toward her ribs. Hermione cried out as it struck her still sore body but she couldn't grasp it as close as Narcissa was to her she couldn't move.

"Bellatrix has only done all this to save her own hide. You are nothing to her but a leech." Hermione blanched. "She hated you, she has hated you all these years and you can't tell me her opinion has changed so suddenly just because you were tired of being your father's whore."

Hermione tried to shove her away and only got another hex for it, her hands rested against the woman's abdomen as her words pierced her heart.

"Do you know how often my sister came to me, got drunk and fantasized about killing you. Like they would have in the old days." Narcissa smiled tightly. "Oh she wouldn't do it now, no. But don't think for a single second she honestly wants anything to do with you. Your nothing but a money hungry whore and a burden she feels responsible for. She couldn't get you well and away fast enough, away from her. There is a reason she has left you rotting away with the Weasley's rather than bring you back to the manor you know."

The snippets of conversation she had heard between Bellatrix and Kohtalo flew back to the front of her mind. Bella had said she didn't want Hermione at the mansion, at the Black mansion, and she had never given her a reason why she had left them with Molly instead of taking them back with her. They were married shouldn't she have been with Bella the whole time.
Narcissa laughed coldly. "No mudbloods on sacred ground, love. I can guarantee Bella wouldn't even take you to her home if you begged. You mean nothing to her and as soon as I figure out how to get rid of the bond for her she won't be troubled with your existence any longer." The blonde shoved off the stacks in one smooth motion and left Hermione trembling against the shelves. Her feet echoed loudly as she crossed the room and the door closed so softly it was more nerve wracking than if she had just slammed it shut.

Bellatrix came down a few minutes later, her shoulders were stiff and there was an annoyed glint in her eyes as she jerked her head back towards the doors. "Come on, time to go." She didn't glance back at Hermione as she spun on her heels and headed for the entrance, not even to make sure the muggleborn was following her.

She wondered what the blonde had told Bella Hermione had said. She couldn't think of another reason for Bella's ire. But as she trailed out behind her she couldn't think of any kind of defense that wouldn't cause some sort of argument. She wasn't sure Narcissa hadn't been telling some of the truth and she wasn't sure Bellatrix would take her word over her sister's either.

"I'm ready to go back to the Burrow, Professor." Bellatrix cursed quietly and turned around at the gate to stare at her. Hermione tried not to let her worry show, tried not to give the woman any reason to ask any questions. Whether she was successful or not she would never know. After all Bellatrix knew as much about her as she knew about Bellatrix.

"It's not even been a full hour." The dark witch muttered to her confusion.

"We've been gone quiet a while. It's well after lunch." Hermione protested a little baffled that the woman's anger seems to have melted away when only moments before she looked ready to hex something herself.

"I can feed you if you're hungry."

Hermione shook her head a little too harshly, remembering Narcissa words. How she was nothing but a leech, after Bellatrix's money. She knew it was so far from the truth but she didn't want Bellatrix to ever believe that of her.

"I'm sure Molly has something by now." Bellatrix hummed, almost sounded disappointed. "Please. I- I'm tired and sore and just want to go rest."

Dark eyes scanned her face, and for a moment Hermione thought Bellatrix might continue to argue, but with a heavy sigh she offered her arm out for Hermione to take and they left the mansion gate behind with an audible crack.

Chapter End Notes

I made Narcissa a little nastier, it also will eventually be explained why she is so dang nasty too as I feel it's a little oc of her character. And the doctor visit had to be added. If you have read the old one little Rippley's part will be changing not by much, and not the most important bit, ( no spoilers please if you know what that is.) As always I hope this adds a little more depth to my story and that I'm keeping up with expectations. Please let me know if there is any mistakes that just break it, my word is not agreeing with my drop box right now.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!