Hours ago they were scattered throughout the night sky, shining beautifully out of reach, but when Hermione's feet landed roughly against pavement, there was nothing but the lonesome midnight plum and navy shades stretching out above her.

She pulled her hand back from Allegra, who had been squeezing her fingers tightly like she was afraid she would lose Hermione in the apparition process.

She added distance from Mr. and Mrs. Zabini, taking slow footsteps forward. In front of her was a giant, white gate. It was the only thing visible in the darkness as it extended miles in opposite directions. Every rail on the gate was twisted in eccentric detail, rising high at a peak that reminded her of Victorian buildings her father had taught her all about. At the center divide of the gates, a large, silver eagle spread its wings, every feather glittering o purple light as she souinted at it.

When she reached to touch one of those silver feathers, the eagle let out a loud, echoing squawk and fluttered its wings. The impressive, white gates parted to expose a stunning and impossible manor behind its distance.

"Blood magic," Allegra came to stand on Hermione's le . "Or rather it recognizes your blood. I still am unsure as to which made the enchantment succeed."

"It is still amazing magic, amore" Deon told his wife from the background. Hermione turned to look behind her sti shoulder, watching as the man once again lingered in the back with that twisted, sad look in his green eyes. Occasionally they sparkled with something gentle when he did look at Allegra, but mostly his gaze was set on remorse.

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"It opens only for the three of us—well, four of us now," she continued, o ering Hermione a smile. "We first thought about having the gates open for all Vivaldis and Zabinis, but that poses a security problem within itself. It took me longer than I would like to admit, but I eventually figured out the components of your DNA to add you to the enchantment."

Hermione wanted to ask exactly how their original families posed threats to them, but her mouth remained in a tight line. Instead, she forced herself to give Allegra a forced nod, signaling that she had indeed heard every proud word she had said. Of course, blood magic was an incredibly complex form of magic, and her (traitorous) brilliant mind also had dozens of questions for the woman regarding her experiments with it, but she stopped herself from doing so. Instead, she took a step to the right, away from Allegra's hand gently touching her back to motion her forward.

At the end of a long, pebbled pathway with forest surroundings was the entrance of pureblood society. That was how Hermione saw it when she had to tilt her head back, taking in as much as she could of the enormous house before her.

At first glance, the manor was completely impressive on its own. It stretched out for miles, getting lost in the shadow of the midnight forest surrounding it. The white windows of the building were rimmed in silver, arching in eccentric, detailed twirling peaks. There were also two towers centering at the front of the manor, and Hermione allowed herself to wonder if they used them to study the sky, or to look out at the land they owned with pride in their chests. When they stopped at the large, oval doors made of smooth marble,

Hermione longed for the small home that belonged to the Grangers. They never needed towers of silver, floating chandeliers lighting up the entrance, or an entire estate to make their house a home. What was inside-their love, their comfort, their kindness was what was truly valuable.

Light poured out from inside the manor, blinding Hermione as she was welcomed in. She let herself grow dizzy by it, wishing with all her might she might pass out and wake up to a reality that was all hers just a few hours back. Of course, she knew that would not be the case no matter how continuously she prayed for it every single second. So she held on to her silence like it was her skin, feigning focus on every little (expensive) trinket Allegra pointed out on the way further inside her manor.

A er the story Deon and Allegra Zabini went to tell was finished, and Hermione had somehow been pressured to believe it, to go with them, she had cried endlessly when Mrs. Granger had walked upstairs with her to finish packing the trunk she was almost done with to take to Hogwarts. The brunette woman had suggested to pack more things, most of her belongings, but Hermione had refused. She didn't want to take all of her stu , she wanted the room to hold most of her precious items because it would be like she would be back. She promisedshe'd be back. However, Mrs. Granger had just given her a sad, tearful smile and not said a single word about such vow. It broke Hermione's heart to believe that maybe Mrs. Granger thought that was the final time they would ever see one another. a

It had taken fi een minutes, a er her trunk had been filled with all her things, when the two Granger females-one legit and the other apparently a fraud-went back downstairs to where the Zabinis sat waiting. The man had said something about sending her belongings there, but Hermione hadn't bothered to listen to him when she'd turned to the door. She had been expecting her father, Richard Granger, to march through the door, but in those three minutes she stared silently at the door he never came.

When Mister Zabini had made a passive comment that the moment to leave had arrived, Hermione had turned to her mother and gripped her tight. She had begged the woman to let her stay, not caring that the other strangers could hear her, but the woman had just hugged her and just chuckled so ly. And before Hermione unwillingly took the hands of Mister and Mrs. Zabini for a side-long apparition, Mrs. Granger had confidently told the girl that she would love and enjoy everything that was awaiting for her.

The woman had clearly been wrong.

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A stinging sensation was felt behind her eyes, but she didn't get a chance to let those tears out when a door was opened and she was asked to step inside. In that moment Hermione noticed that they had somehow made it to one of the levels upstairs of the mansion and that the door that was opened was the only one in fact in that

spacious hallway.

Once inside, Hermione distinctly heard a quick spell and then lights went o all around. This room was grand and extensive. The first thing she noticed was the walls: the majority composing up the room were purple, a vibrant kind that was printed with leafy designs, and the others were white to collect light and hold it. A purple wall straight ahead of where she stood by the entrance of the door held two giant windows, but whatever was on the other side wasn't seen by the almost completely drawn curtains that flowed beautifully, like

a lavender wash of silk. The next thing she noticed was the massive bed towards the furthest end of the center of the room. The bedding was two shades of purple darker than the walls, but it also held white. The sheets were thick and clearly made of expensive material, and they bared curious detailing that made patterns of their own. There were also far more pillows on that bed that she'd ever thought were necessary for one person. Surrounding the great bed was four tall, white, marbled postings; one in every corner. The material hanging and connecting the postings together from above were that shade of lavender that the curtains of the windows were. The curtains of the canopy were tied open by vibrant purple ropes with little crystals dangling from their ends; reminding her a bit of an Arabian night for some reason.

"It's a bit...purple," she heard Allegra Zabini say behind her in a controlled whisper, "but I hope you like it. It's...It's my favorite color and I thought that maybe it'd be yours too."

Hermione didn't respond anything to the women because in that moment she stepped further in, her treacherous, curious mind ordered her feet to move and explore a little further into the room. Also, her favorite color waspurple, but she didn't want to give the woman something to be happy about when she couldn't find anything to be so herself.

She turned slightly in an angle and she noticed that one of the walls was not in that purple and white color scheme the Zabinis had going on for her. And as she approached it carefully she noticed that it couldn't really be considered a wall, it was thousands of falling stars dripping down in lines from the edge of the ceiling to the edge of the ground. ď

She had a thing for astronomy, Hermione did. She liked constellations, planets, and the galaxies. Though she wasn't a ditzy dreamer, she could appreciate the fact that everything in the sky and everything light-years away had their own story; their own true tales and held so much knowledge. đ

Quickly turning away from that scenery of stars, because she felt the stinging behind her eyes once more, she noticed that the enormous bedroom had two doors in the furthest right and ending walls.

"The one at the end is your bathroom," the woman spoke again. "And the one on the right is where your sitting room will be."

Hermione had been about to take a step towards the door at the right side but she stopped. She really didn't want to see anymore. She didn't want to keep being flashed with all these illustrious things and marvelous decor. She wanted her old bedroom, the one with four walls, a small bed, and her self-made collage of photographs of the people she loved and moments that mattered to her.

"I'm sure you're well up past your usual hours." Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle spin away so she could face the direction of the exit of the bedroom. For a quick second she allowed herself the chance to look up and find the staggering eyes of Deon Zabini. "We'll let you sleep now."

The elegant woman took so step towards them. There was a gentle smile stretching her full lips and a kind gaze in her honey-colored eyes. "If you need anything, tesoro our wing is two below this one, on the west end. Don't hesitate to come looking for us." ď

"We know it's been overwhelming and we don't want to keep adding distress," the dark-skinned man said again in a low tone. "Sleep now." A er a gentle squeeze to her shoulder, he dropped his hand, gave her a dim smile and walked several steps away from her.

Mrs. Zabini smiled too and took a step forward, her arms going up, but her husband caught the le one and pulled her back carefully. The smile on the woman's face disappeared almost completely and what was le of it was sort of heartbreaking that the a ectionate side of Hermione was tempted to walk to her and embrace her. But Hermione just wasn't ready for contact and sweet words, the man had known that so he'd halted his wife.

"Good Night," the woman said in a whisper.

And just like that, Hermione watched Mister and Mrs. Zabini exit the giant room and close the door behind them. In that moment she dropped to her knees and started sobbing for everything around her that wasn't hers and what she knew of. Sleep be damned. ď

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Sometime, maybe a little well a er five in the morning, Hermione had picked herself up from the floor of her new room and dragged herself to the bed. She'd only done it because she was afraid that if any of the Zabinis opened the door and saw her curled into a ball, eyes red from crying, that they'd deem her pathetic and immaturethough she strongly believed she had every right to be crying her heart out if she so desired. Another part of her wanted to stay in the ball for them to stumble upon, so they could see what they did to her, but she knew that her muggle-mother would've never been pleased if she knew she did something to purposely hurt another person. đ And even though she had climbed onto that great bed, even though she had slipped underneath the silk sheets, she did not fall asleep once. She just laid on the right corner of the bed, looking up at the white ceiling, hands folded at the center of her chest, and did nothing. It wasn't long a er until small shreds of light started popping in through the small gaps that the curtains of her window had le open, but again, she hadn't moved or done anything. a

Ten minutes ago, a er she found that her eyes were dry and sore, she stopped crying and blinked away from the constant view of the ceiling. She looked around, and courtesy of the light from outside, she found other little trinkets in the room to explore. For example, she noticed the nightstand beside her: itself was made of white marble with metallic knobs, and on the surface there was five small, crystal, cylinder vases with opaque endings and thick, rimmed rings in the middle to add some sort of dent to it. And inside of the vases were purple flowers she knew as Million Bells, all with their long stems.

Another thing she noticed, and that her traitorous mind had almost convinced her to stand up and see, was the outrageous bookcase that took two of the furthest walls hostage. She counted from the bed and found that there was fi een rows of books on each, and each and every one of them contained thick books with interesting titles. For a brief moment, she betrayed herself by wondering if she was going to have to ask for a ladder to reach the highest level when she worked her way up to it.

As she berated herself for even thinking, even if for a millisecond, that she was going to stay here and enjoy her time by reading, she missed ack ound that echoed around her n

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"Good Morning, young Mistress."	a

"Ahh!" Hermione screamed when a little creature appeared out of thin air, startling her out of her thoughts as its giant eyes blinked at her.

"Ahh!"

At the copied, high-pitched shriek that the creature gave, Hermione jumped out of the bed and put her hands up in surrender so it would stop screaming too. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she squeaked to the houseelf who looked terribly frightened. "Shh. I'm sorry. It's just...you surprised me."

Immediately the house-elf stopped screaming and looked at its shoulder, where the young girl had placed her hand there to steady the creature down. She looked back up at the girl and saw that a small, apologetic smile was on her pretty face. That calmed the creature instantly. "Forgive Button for scaring you, Mistress." It patted Hermione's hand on its shoulder a ectionately. a

Though the house-elf looked calmed and at ease, Hermione did not. "Don't call me that," she told Button, sounding almost rude and aggravated. "I'm not your mistress. I'm Hermione; call me that." "Button cannot!" The house-elf looked outraged again. "Button must never calls the masters anything else! What woulds they say?!"

"It doesn't matter what they say, I'm not your master," she said patiently at it. Though she was still a strong advocate of equal rights for all magicals species, human or not, Hermione had long learned especially from Kreature—that not all house-elves wanted to be freed. And by the look of this particular house-elf she knew it enjoyed being at the Zabini mansion.

The house-elf was small and lanky like all others, but she had a bit of a glow about her. She wore a little dress that reminded Hermione of those flowery things that would usually come attached to the dolls she would see little girls play with when she instead had her nose shoved in a book. She didn't wear shoes, but the creature had a little bonnet on her head instead. It had giant, aqua-colored eyes; and they were currently gaping at her. a

"Button must asks the young mistress for forgiveness because Button cannot follow that order." It bowed at the girl before her. "Button has been assigned to be the young mistress' house-elf since masters found out that the young mistress would be coming home."

Hermione rose an eyebrow. "What'd you mean?"

Button looked up at her young mistress. "Button has been waiting for young mistress for almost seven years." a

The brunette was instantly confused. The Zabinis had said that they had purposely kept their distance from her so people would never connect them, so they wouldn't give themselves away, or become hed to her in case of the possibility that the war would' in favor of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Why, then, was the houseelf saying that she'd been assigned as hers for years now? Were the Zabinis planning to rip her away from the Grangers all this time then? Had they lied to her about their true intentions? a⁴

"Mistress is crying," whispering shakily, Button was about to start tearing up too as she noticed that the girl's eyes filled with tears and then ran down her cheeks. "Don't cry, Mistress. Button must follow orders. Button is happy that Mistress is home."

Hermione looked down at the house-elf, sni ling as her tears didn't stop. "...I'm not home, Button," she said sincerely, all her hurting emotions in it. "And I'm not your mistress...I don't even know who I am."

Button's huge eyes watered as they looked at the girl sadly, she never really did like to see any of her masters sad, but whatever consolation the house-elf could've given the girl was halted when two so knock, knocksresounded o the girl's bedroom door. A moment later, a er the house-elf headed there to open the door, the real Mistress walked in.

The brunette girl wiped her tears immediately with her hands as Mrs. Zabini marched into the room with a small smile. It was possibly around eight in the morning, but the woman already looked gorgeous and ready to start the day. She was wearing long, black trousers that flowed at the ends, exposing the pointy tips of black heels; a silky white shirt that parted in a v-cut moderately and tastefully underneath an elegant black blazer; and a silver chain was draped around her neck, but if it had a pendant, it wasn't seen as it disappeared into her blouse. a

"Good Morning, sweetheart," the woman greeted instantly, coming to a stop a few inches away from the girl. "Did you sleep well?"

Hermione couldn't bring herself to return the woman's smile or answer her question. It would be a bit pointless to even lie to the woman and say that she had slept well, she couldn't see it herself, but she knew her eyes were red from crying, pu y from the lack of sleep, and held purple shades underneath them that proved all of the above correct.

An awkward silence passed through the two, but Mrs. Zabini was quick to not let it extend. Instead, with another small smile thrown at the direction of the girl, she turned on her heels and headed to one of the purple walls of the girl's new bedroom. Silence still loomed for a few more moments as the woman stared at something that Hermione could not see from her spot almost several yards away.

"This portrait is painted in several locations around the house," Mrs. Zabini said in a small voice, her back still facing Hermione. "There's di erent backgrounds in each of them, but it's still beautiful."

Curiosity killed the cat and the girl let her feet move her towards the dark-haired woman. She stood next to her, and she saw what the woman was gazing at with sad, longing eyes. There was a woman painted in a background of pure elegance and art; she had wavy, shoulder-length black hair, slightly tanned skin that was visible from a pearly-colored dress, and her eyes were a toasted honey. The woman in the portrait looked so much like Mrs. Zabini and was equally as beautiful.

"Sienna Vivaldi was her name," Mrs. Zabini whispered as she still gazed at the portrait.

"Your sister?" asked Hermione quietly.

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The woman nodded. "She was killed during the wars in Italy. The De Carlo family, one that the Vivaldis have been feuding with since then the beginning of time, took her hostage; aiming for our family to hand over the control we had over all of Verona..My great-grandfather, however, didn't think that Sienna was worth the trade." ส์ "...That's horrible," the girl breathed, still keeping her eyes focused on the still portrait.

Again, Mrs. Zabini nodded, but this time a humorless laugh came out of her mouth. It was almost as if she was thinking back to something, Hermione concluded. "She was just twenty-two when it happened, just barely out of the clutches of our family...I should've asked her to run away with Deon and I when I had the chance..." There was a pause as the woman cleared her throat, her shoulders sti ening and

then squaring o . "Sienna was incredibly hard-headed, arrogant, and full of family pride. She was a Vivaldi over mostly anything else...But she was mia sorella maggior first, she always said. Despite her bad qualities, she had a lot of good ones."

"My mum always says that behind every person with a cold exterior, a passionate love for others exist there too."

Mrs. Zabini glanced away from the portrait of her deceased sister to stare at the brunette. There was more of a sad glint to her honey eyes, but Hermione didn't see it as she kept her focus on the portrait. "Jennifer Granger always did believe the best in people." The girl nodded to that assessment and said nothing. "I put Sienna's portrait here because I'm hoping you two will get along. She's got her stubborn qualities, but she's so full of wisdom."

Hermione had to bite down on her tongue for a second before she told Mrs. Zabini that her e ort would go in vain because she wasn't planning on staying long, but she thought it over and killed the comment. Instead, a er a long second, she said, "she's beautiful." "She was," Mrs. Zabini agreed. "I've always assumed that you would

look like her for some reason. I took a er her, people always said that; maybe you have too."

"I don't think so," Hermione laughed o handedly, not really paying attention to what she had responded. "I've never been pretty, always just plain."

"You're beautiful now," Mrs. Zabini amended the girl, almost with her first scold. "But I would like to see how you truly look."

A few things happened at once: Hermione blushed at the compliment the elegant woman gave her, she thought that the way she looked was that of what Jennifer Granger had looked in her youth, she felt proud because she always knew that her muggle-mother was beautiful, and then her brown eyes grew wide when Mrs. Zabini had pulled out her wand and pointed it at her face.

"No! Don't!" Hermione shrieked, looking completely appalled. She backed away from the woman like she posed a threat and she was reminded that Button the house-elf was still there when it grabbed one of her hands.

Allegra Zabini lowered her wand immediately. "Forgive me, Hermione, I didn't mean to scare you. I...I just wanted to remove the Glamour Charm I placed on you almost eighteen years ago."

"You don't have a right to!" Hermione yelled at the woman. "You don't have a right to take everything from me! You've already taken my family, don't you dare strip what I have le ! This is who I am!"

The woman's honey-colored eyes looked miserable and hurt instantly. "Her...Hermione, I know that it's all been a lot to process, sweetheart, but I'm not taking anything from you. On the contrary, I'm giving everything back to you. I just...I want you to take your rightful place within this family. I want you to be Aria Sienna Zabini, the little girl I gave birth to." đ

"Well I'm not!" Hermione continued to shout, infuriated tears in her brown eyes. "If you'd wanted that girl you should've raised her yourself and not given her away! You buried Aria Zabini! I'm Hermione Granger!" A broken sob escaped her, shaking her body with misery. "I am not your daughter! I'm Hermione Granger! đ⁵

The woman looked like she had just been slapped across her dazzling face, Button the house-elf looked horrified with tears in her own eyes, but Hermione didn't stay behind to see what happened next. Instead she ran for it, ran away like if she wasn't the courageous Gry indor or the girl who had helped defeat Voldemort. a

She couldn't let her, she couldn't let the unknown woman take the only thing she had le that could remind her of who she was. If she let the woman remove the charm, if her features became that of a Zabini heir, if her features turned elegant and refined like those of pureblood girls, there was no going back—Hermione Jean Granger would truly be dead then. And she couldn't let that happen.

Not knowing where she was, if she'd le her level, if she was in a new one, if she'd climbed the stairs or not, Hermione opened the first door she saw and went through it. She closed it behind her with a loud bang, putting her palms to cover her face and she sobbed as she sunk down to the floor. ď

She just wanted to go home. She wanted to be in the muggle world with her muggle parents; she wanted to be texting Harry, both of them sharing jokes about how mundane that act was when considering a few months back they were on the verge of dying; and she wanted to be counting the hours until it was time to go to King's Cross so she could finally see the ones she loved.

She wanted to go back to the world where she belonged, where she knew who she was. And that's what was wrong with this new story: she didn't know where she belonged or who she was. She was nothing and no one.

"-You know, usually people knock when coming into someone's room."

Dropping her hands from her face, Hermione's watery eyes grew wide with surprise when emerald green ones stared casually at her in return. They were the eyes of Blaise Zabini- of courseAs if everything else wasn't bad enough, she'd gone from being the only child to the sister of a prejudice bastard.

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Continue reading next part □

The stars had disappeared.