The Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions

by Boo_82

Summary

After the war Draco and Hermione were among the few seventh year students to accept McGonagall's invitation to return to Hogwarts. An unexpected bond was formed between former enemies over a few chance collaborations in Potions class and secret nighttime Patronus lessons. Seven years later a compliance visit brings Hermione back to Malfoy Manor and old memories resurface.
Music: Another Story, Nicholas Hooper (Harry Potter And The Order Of The Phoenix)


"Are you sure we don't have to come with you?" Ron asked for the umpteenth time, worriedly eyeing his girlfriend. He sat tilting on his chair, sipping his tea as he reached for another piece of toast. "Harry can easily make this an Auror-required mission, you know."

Hermione sighed and put her cutlery aside with a determined gesture. "Yes Ron, I'm absolutely sure. Nothing's going to happen to me and besides I'm not alone. I have my inspectors with me and they are trained by your actual Aurors to deal with problematic situations. Besides -" She frowned. "Do I have to remind you you don't even work in the Auror office anymore?"

For weeks Ron had been trying to talk her into this and he simply refused to let it go. He didn't understand, though. Not really. This was why she had declined to be escorted by Harry's department over and over.

Her remark received a faint mumble in agreement from the bespectacled young man next to her and she shot him grateful smile. He didn't notice though since he was currently hiding behind The Daily Prophet. Probably from Ron's annihilating look. It was clear as daylight that Ron had expected more support from his friend on this. But Harry actually seemed to agree with Hermione, though he was careful enough not to let himself drawn into their discussion.

"Still, I don't like it," Ron grumbled as he sat back in his creaking chair and folded his arms before his chest in a displeased manner. But Hermione only shook her head at this and brought her dishes to the sink. Mrs. Weasley's bewitched dishwashing brushes immediately set to work. She gave Ron a quick peck on the cheek.

"That's your problem. Get your cloak, Harry. We have to get going."

In a matter of seconds the two of them arrived at the Ministry of Magic, emerging from one of the enormous Atrium fireplaces. It was six weeks until Christmas and during the night the Ministry house-elves had adorned the stern reception area with dozens of festive Christmas trees. Hermione waved her goodbyes to Harry and began to feel her way through the masses of civil servants heading for the lifts. It took her several minutes before she reached the lift that would take her to the fourth level and she suppressed a relieved sigh as the doors closed.

After completing her education at Hogwarts almost seven years ago, Hermione had enrolled in the Ministry of Magic's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures thus finding a way of, as Ron always put it so encouragingly, getting paid for her loony obsession with house-elves. The way the wizarding world kept house-elves was slavery and if it were up to Hermione the practice would have been abolished yesterday. But having learned from her experiences in school, she also knew that things often took time to change, even if they shouldn't, and so she
decided to start sowing some of the seeds from her position in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Within a year, she had managed to cause quite a lot of disturbance in the once so sleepy office, by initiating several projects aiming to improve the lives of house-elves and raise awareness about their position.

The latest development was something she'd been working on for two years - the establishment of the Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions, which was something she had copied from the Muggle world. The inspectorate was to supervise and uphold the sharpened regulations on the treatment of house-elves. Regulations that had been drafted by Hermione herself.

Once the Minister had indulgently approved of her little project, she had started to select and train the inspectors making sure that they would receive a thorough training in defensive charms by both Aurors and Hit Wizards. Though Ron seemed to take a different view Hermione was actually well aware of the dangerous situations the inspectors might come across while performing their duties. After all, most house-elves worked for the wealthy, old, Pureblood wizarding families whose ties with the Dark Side during the war had been a given. That's why she had decided to accompany them in the first place.

It wasn't that Hermione did not appreciate Ron's worries about her safety but it stung that he seemed to think she needed protection after all they'd been through. At least Harry trusted her ability to deal with problems if and when they might occur. She had tried to explain to Ron that the presence of Aurors during the inspections would only bring damage to the support for the new inspectorate. But if he chose not to accept that, she wasn't going to fight him over it.

Murky daylight coming in from the enchanted window welcomed Hermione when she stepped into her small office and with a flick of her wand she put on the lights while several scrolls appeared on her clean desk. Within moments she was emerged in her work and Ron and his objections were forgotten.

It seemed that only minutes had passed when Hermione looked up from a proposition she'd been writing at the sound of knocking on the opened door. Standing in the doorway was a bespectacled man with unwieldy dark hair whose line of work normally didn't bring him to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Hermione smiled and put down her quill. "Harry. What can I do for you?"

Her smile faltered when she noticed the contemplating look in his green eyes as he stepped into her office and awkwardly sat down in the uncomfortable chair opposite her simple desk. Apparently he didn't know where to begin.

"You know I'm fully supportive of what you do, don't you?" He finally asked without so much of an introduction. He didn't seem to expect a response.

Hermione's smile slowly disappeared. Inconspicuously, she drew in her breath as she braced herself for the confrontation she'd already expected to come. Seeing the look on his face she knew that he was serious about this.

Harry adjusted his characteristic National Health glasses and gave her penetrating stare. "Having grown up in the Muggle-world like you I think I understand better than Ron what you're trying to achieve here with the house-elves."

Hermione nodded in agreement. Every primary school pupil in the Muggle world had learned about anti-discrimination and equal rights.
"But," he added, "I also think Ron's right to worry about you."

Hermione pressed her lips together in a stubborn way Harry was well familiar with. She wasn't going to change her mind on this.

"I know what I'm asking of myself, Harry, but I'm not changing my mind on this. The inspectors need my guidance with this," she replied a bit sternly hoping this would end the discussion but Harry wasn't so easily put off.

He leaned in.

"Listen, Hermione," he said on a low voice, ignoring her words. "Are you sure you want to do this? What you're asking of yourself?"

His bespectacled green eyes looked hard at her and Hermione realised that he saw through her, having always been the more observant one between Ron and him. Ron had merely been worried about 'those filthy Death Eaters families' she had to encounter and to be honest, she had been secretly glad that was all he seemed to fuss about. Harry however knew. And he wasn't prepared to let her go without serious reconsideration.

She swallowed back a lump and lowered her gaze.

"I've been back to Hogwarts, Harry, and that was for a whole year. I think I can manage this one too," she replied with a slight tremble in her voice as she finally touched upon much deeper motives underlying her resolve to go. Her gaze met his in a silent plea for understanding.

For a few moments in which silence descended upon the small office Harry held her gaze, gauging her until he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Hermione let go of a breath she didn't know she had been holding as she inconspicuously wiped away a stray tear that had formed in the corner of her eye.

Harry didn't show it if he'd noticed but instead untangled himself from the office chair and went to stand by the enchanted office window, hands in his pockets as he looked outside with a dark expression on his face.

"Then do you know what you're asking of them, of him, Hermione?" He argued gravely. "Their situation is already precarious as it is and your plans might as well bring more damage to them than it will do to you. You know they can't refuse Hermione Granger even if they want to. Are you prepared to bear responsibility for that too?"

Hermione stilled. Not one moment had it occurred to her - the risks her plans might hold for him and his family. All she had been thinking about was the inspectorate and herself when she should have taken this into account as well.

Harry was especially protective of the family he owed his life to and he was right to be.

Suddenly Hermione's resolve, which had been solid as a rock, slipped away like sand through her fingers. Ashamed, she bowed her head and her voice sounded a bit choked when she promised, "I... I will keep that mind."

For a moment Harry was silent. Then he gave a heartfelt sigh and turned around. And as Hermione looked up at him pleadingly, she registered the sadness in his eyes.

"Let me do this, Harry. Please. I need this."
The day of the first round of inspections Hermione got up before everyone else, discovering that the landscape around the Burrow glistened with freshly fallen snow under the disappearing moon. The first snow of the season.

Quietly, she got dressed in warm wool robes and put on a scarf with the emblem of the Ministry embroidered on it. *Ignorantia juris neminem excusat*, read the bronze motto surrounding the letter M resting on her chest. Ignorance of the law excuses no one. A motto appropriate for the task ahead, Hermione thought fleetingly as she plodded through the freshly fallen snow toward the Apparition shed.

She had already Apparated to her first destination before a hesitant light at the eastern sky announced the new winter's day.

Hermione was well pleased. All morning she had accompanied the new inspectors and all had gone well. Even though old, pureblood wizarding families like the Notts and the Puceys naturally hadn't welcomed the inspectors with open arms they hadn't thwarted them in any way either. The fear for Hermione Granger still ran deep within those families who had supported Voldemort in the past.

The state of the once great houses had filled Hermione with slight melancholy. So many family members had been sent off to Azkaban and the estates and manors had become quiet and rundown. The empty places on the walls told a silent story of forced sale of family heirlooms in order to work up the severe reparation payments while the goblins at Gringotts had often frozen the bank accounts of the few who were left behind.

It felt like a relief to be able to leave behind the downcast Pucey Estate and Apparate to Diagon Alley for lunch.

But as the young inspectors chatted away cheerfully Hermione only fumbled with her sandwich. A growing tension had nestled inside her stomach and as she tried not to look at the clock every five seconds she wondered if it was true what she'd told Harry the other day. Was she really ready for this? Months of preparation had taken her to this moment and she had defended her resolve before Harry for dear life. But now that it had come her courage rapidly seemed to seep away with every second on the clock ticking away.

Trying to distract herself she focused on the conversation between the two youthful inspectors and found out that they were discussing the dilapidated states of the estates they'd come across this morning. Sharper than she'd intended Hermione reminded them of their position of confidence and the rest of the lunch was finished in silence.

"What house is next on the list, Miss Granger?" One of the inspectors asked when they stood outside and Hermione, feeling a bit guilty towards the crestfallen inspectors did her best to give them an apologetic smile.

She looked up to the sky knowing she didn't have to check to know. Betraying nothing of the feelings raging inside of her she responded evenly, "Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire."

Following the end of the Second Wizarding War Headmistress McGonagall had invited all last year's seventh-year students to return to Hogwarts and complete their education. Only a handful accepted. Their numbers had not nearly been able to fill the gaping hole the war had left in the student body.
One of them was Hermione.

While Ron and Harry had already been accepted into the rigorous Auror training programme naturally there had been no need for them to go back to Hogwarts. Hermione however, had no desire chasing dark wizards for the rest of her career and much to the amusement of Ron and Harry she’d also professed to feeling dissatisfied with not having completed her education at Hogwarts. Ginny had eagerly welcomed her decision though. The prospect of going back alone had offered little attraction to the last Weasley to return to Hogwarts this year.

Hermione had thoroughly enjoyed the train ride and and had smilingly watched the Sorting Ceremony. Now she watched with a tender smile as the first years sat down at their house-table bashfully and gingerly looked at her. It filled her with deep gratitude. This was what they’d defeated Voldemort for - life was resuming its course in freedom.

She looked up when the Headmistress asked for a moment of silence for those who had fallen and announced that some of last year's seventh years would be returning as eighth years this year. A surprised whispering went through the Great Hall.

With a single gesture Professor McGonagall silenced the students.

"As I call your names would all of you eight years stand up for a moment?" She asked with her characteristic shaky voice, her friendly tone softening her stern Scottish accent.

"From Gryffindor House: Hermione Granger."

To this day Hermione remembered the thunderous applause she received from the other students when she rose from her bench. She smiled awkwardly as she noticed that even the teachers applauded. Headmistress McGonagall sent her a warm smile before she went on announcing the other eight years to return to Hogwarts this year.

It appeared that she had been the only Gryffindor to return and there were none from Hufflepuff. However Hermione was joined by as much as four Ravenclaws and they exchanged knowing smiles, simply grateful to see each other again.

In the mean time the Headmistress called the last name on her list.

"And from Slytherin House: Draco Malfoy."

The warm applause for the Ravenclaws suddenly died away and a shock went through the assembled students as all gazes, including Hermione's, were drawn to the Slytherin Table.

On the other side of the Great Hall a blond young man slowly got up and straightened to his full length. Draco Malfoy.

If he noticed the tumult in response to his presence he didn't show it. Standing tall in his black school robes, he kept his gaze fixed on a random point behind the Head Table, his sharp features a stony mask. He was just standing there, waiting resignedly for McGonagall's permission to sit down again.

Hermione was just as shocked as the other students to see him rise to his feet at the Slytherin Table. Of all the former seventh years she'd never expected him to accept the McGonagall's invitation. But here he was, Draco Malfoy, her former nemesis with whom she, Harry and Ron shared so much history. His gaze fleetingly crossed hers but he showed no sign of recognition as they sat down.
During the Start-of-Term Feast Hermione’s gaze sometimes wandered off to the Slytherin Table but Malfoy kept his eyes down for the remainder of the evening, ignoring the many furtive looks in his direction. He refrained from interacting with fellow Slytherins as well. The moment dinner ended he’d already disappeared before Hermione and Ginny had untangled themselves from their bench.

As classes began Hermione noticed that, devoid of his perpetual bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle and without Parkinson hanging off his arm, Malfoy seemed lost and almost lonely.

Everybody knew of his family’s betrayal of the Dark Lord and how they had had a narrow escape from imprisonment in Azkaban. Which was why Malfoy's housemates treated him with the utmost caution. They seemed to loathe him and his family who had once belonged to Voldemort's inner circle.

His commanding presence kept them from coming at him though so they settled for simply ignoring him instead while the rest of the school avoided him like the Death Eater they still held him for.

It seemed to leave him cold though, Hermione noticed as she stole a glance at him once in a while. Something had changed about him that she couldn’t quite put a finger on, but which had began to fascinate her enormously, much to her own chagrin.

Perhaps it was his presentable appearance, the Slytherin tie perfectly tied, in contrast to its former pubescent sloppiness.

Perhaps it was the way he kept to himself like never before, his scowls and disdain replaced by a stony indifference to his surroundings.

He had stopped picking fights with her, lowering his gaze whenever they met in the school corridors.

Hermione also noticed that he was sitting alone for most of the time during class, the school desk being almost too small for his long limbs as he was taking notes like it was the only thing left for him to do.

It probably was.

Chapter End Notes

This Dramione fic takes place seven years after the ending of DH. Naturally, it's not epilogue compliant. In this story, Hermione has created a labour inspection for house-elves following her old wish to make life better for them. But accompanying the new inspectors she trained, also means that she will be stepping by Malfoy Manor and meet again with Draco Malfoy.

The italic parts are flashbacks. The story will follow the course of a supervision cycle.

This story is rated M for adult themes that isn't as graphic as explicit-rated content. See Fanlore.org for more information.

I hope you'll enjoy this story and please, feel free to review!
More than six years had passed since Hermione had been standing on the exact same spot before the wrought-iron gate barring the entrance to the grand estate. It felt like yesterday that she'd seen the white peacocks strutting around on the unforbidding hedges bordering the approach to the magnificent manor. Back then it had been spring. Now the white birds almost seemed to disappear against the white snow that covered the formal gardens.

"Wow." The young inspectors were clearly impressed. "White peacocks."

A bitter smile ghosted around Hermione's lips at seeing the stately country-house again. She felt a bit relieved that Malfoy Manor seemed to have escaped the fate of the estates they'd inspected this morning. Nonetheless a shiver ran down her spine at the grim sight of the manor rising above the long drive. Hermione took in a shaky breath. She reminded herself that there was nothing left to be afraid of anymore. She couldn't back down now. Not now that she was so close.

'Courage, Hermione', the witch mentally steeled herself and pressed a trembling hand to her pounding heart. It was time. More than time. Quietly she followed her two inspectors and felt herself temporarily reduce to smoke as they passed through the gate.

_Halloween arrived bringing wind and rain lashing the leaded windows of the ancient castle. Around that time Ginny had gone down with the flu and failed to attend Potions class. Hastily Professor Slughorn decided to partner Hermione up with Draco Malfoy for the full duration of the double period Potions class._

_The grinning jack o' lanterns floating through the classroom seemed to mock Hermione's dismay as she watched Malfoy untangle himself from his school desk and turn around. For the second time this school year their gazes met._

_Malfoy had a wary look in his eyes but to Hermione's astonishment he didn't object to the Professor's decision. Instead he gave a curt nod and gathered his books. The normally boisterous group of seventh years Gryffindors and Slytherins grew painfully quiet as ten pairs of eyes followed Malfoy cross the classroom and sit down next to Hermione._

_The narrow school desk was far too small for two adults. It was an awfully awkward moment when Malfoy sat down and his left arm and leg were pressed against Hermione's right side with no chance of escaping the touch of his limbs or the warmth of his body. She even caught the faint smell of soap on him. Hermione couldn't suppress her body growing rigid at Malfoy's sudden proximity. If the Slytherin noticed her reaction to his closeness he didn't show it because he kept his eyes fixed to the blackboard._

_The only one who seemed to be satisfied with the situation was Professor Slughorn, judging by his complacent smile._

_Several moments passed by in which neither of them moved, until Hermione drew in a shaky breath and opened her Potions book. Her voice held only a slight tremble when she quietly started to read the instructions of a difficult potion they were supposed to brew today. Much to her relief Malfoy_
took this as a cue to reach for his silver knife and start following her directions on the preparation of the ingredients.

A few very tense minutes followed in which the seventh year NEWT-class watched with bated breaths as their eighth year classmates quietly got started on their potion. But whatever reaction they were waiting for, it failed to occur and finally they lost interest. The buzzing in the classroom returned as the other students opened their textbooks too.

It all went right over Hermione and Malfoy's heads though, as they had settled in a quiet collaboration in which Hermione read the instructions on a hushed tone and Malfoy skilfully cut and bruised the ingredients, adding them to the substance Hermione stirred the way the book described.

It was when their Potion had assumed the silvery colour it was supposed to have that Hermione was surprised to realise that Malfoy was good at Potions. Though she had never thought him to be dimwitted, not like his gorilla-like friends at least, Professor Snape's favouritism towards Malfoy had always clouded her judgment on his behalf. Somehow, seeing his actual talent at the subject eased a little of the bitterness she had always felt about that.

Hermione read the next instruction when she suddenly came to a pause and frowned. The instructions told them to add a bit of aconite to the potion.

"This can't be right," Hermione let slip the remark and to her surprise Malfoy unexpectedly added, "It will counteract the effects of the thorn-apple."

Hermione was baffled. She barely managed to whisper "Precisely," as she watched him getting up from their desk.

With open mouth she followed him as he asked the Potions Professor for some yew instead, speechless by his both expert and civil reply.

Upon his return Malfoy folded himself in the school desk again before neatly cutting the yew into small portions and adding it to the brew. Then he sat back, waiting impassively for Hermione to finish the stirring.

Silently, Hermione acquitted herself of the task while looking at him from the corner of her eye. They had just been working together for more than an hour in what had been an almost companionable silence as if it had been the most natural thing in the world for them to do. Inconspicuously she studied his sharp profile and marvelled at the change in him.

Gone was the angry, frustrated boy she'd known. As always since she'd first seen him in the Great Hall he was sitting perfectly still, his cool grey eyes fixed on the steaming cauldron before him. He had an unreadable expression in his eyes as he waited patiently for the Professor to come over and assess their potion. Hermione couldn't help but feeling intrigued by the blond Slytherin.

Finally, Malfoy seemed to notice her stare because his face darkened. He must be aware of the eyes following him with suspicious scrutiny everywhere he went since he'd arrived at Hogwarts. It had been an experience Harry had been all too familiar with, often at Malfoy's doing. But Hermione held no grudge and the way he accepted her gauging look without comment only piqued her curiosity.

Hesitantly, she put down her wand.

"What has brought you back to Hogwarts, Malfoy?"
The tentative question broke the carefully maintained silence between them and lingered in the air long after the quiet sound had dissolved in the collective noise of a NEWT-class.

Malfoy flinched slightly at her words and a parrying expression momentarily passed over his features, before he had drawled coldly, "I wasn't aware that I'm not entitled to complete my education, Granger."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"That's not what I meant..." she started to defend herself until she cut herself off. "Forget it."

That was right. His sharp words reminded her of whom she was talking to, drawing the line between them.

Swallowing her disappointment Hermione looked up at the small cellar window above, suddenly painfully remembered of the uncomfortable position she was in right now. Had the desk almost been too small for him alone, together they were trapped in it. In a vain attempt to avoid him, Hermione aimlessly started to pile up some books, hoping for Potions class to be over soon.

That was why she didn't see the quick glance he shot her as doubt or perhaps even insecurity flashed across his face.

Hermione placed the last book on the pile when she heard his voice, close to her ear.

"Anything to get away from home."

It was a soft reply, almost too soft to catch and when Hermione turned her head in shock he was already staring stoically at the dusty blackboard again.

"Wh... what?" She asked hesitantly, not sure if she'd heard it right. Had he really answered her question in honest? In some sort of confession even?

His face set at her confused response.

"You heard me," he said curtly and got up.

Their potion won twenty points for each of their Houses.

The walk down the straight approach felt like the longest walk in Hermione's life as each step took her closer towards the house where it had all happened. This time a clear blue sky and a watery sun softened the grim manor's appearance, making it somewhat easier for Hermione to control her nervousness.

When they'd finally reached the impressive front doors they didn't open under the influence of house-elf magic as Hermione had expected but instead swung open at the hand of a wizard appearing in the doorway.

Something stirred in her stomach as Hermione recognised Draco Malfoy, looking down on the inspectors with a reserved gaze in his steel grey eyes. His family had probably wanted to make a good impression on the inspectors by answering the door themselves.

The Slytherin had changed little since his Hogwarts days. In the past seven years his sharp features had matured of course, making him even more handsome today and his shoulders had broadened some more. His short light blond hair, still parted at the side, gleamed in the sun. He seemed to
have abandoned his usual black attire though, wearing a pale grey polo neck that complimented his eyes instead. It softened his otherwise impervious appearance.

Standing tall in the doorway, Malfoy resignedly listened to the inspectors explaining their business with the Malfoy family and she wasn't sure if he'd noticed her until his cool gaze came to rest on her. Something flickered in his eyes that Hermione couldn't quite place and disappeared almost the same instant she'd noticed it.

"Granger," he addressed her a bit stiffly. "I didn't know you would be honouring us with your presence."

"I'm accompanying the inspectors on their first round of compliance visits," Hermione replied formally, a wary expression in her eyes.

For a moment they watched each other in silence until Malfoy stepped aside.

"How very… diligent of you," he commented tonelessly and let her in.

Winter came to Hogwarts early that year. Already in November the grounds were covered with thick layers of snow and the Quidditch match in the blizzard between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor led to Ginny's hospitalisation after an unfortunate accident with Bludgers.

Recalling the excellent quality of their last potion Professor Slughorn once again instructed Malfoy to take Ginny's place in Hermione's desk, gloating over the unexpected windfall.

Hermione hadn't spoken with Malfoy since but for an occasional acknowledgement in the library. Hermione had grown accustomed to his presence there as he'd apparently discovered that the peaceful atmosphere was in fact very fruitful for things like studying instead of sneaking away with Pansy Parkinson. He seemed to prefer the militantly maintained silence in the library over the Slytherin Common Room. A flee from his housemates, no doubt.

Her gaze trailed toward the eighth year Slytherin who was sitting alone in his desk at the front. Seemingly unaware of Ginny's absence he'd taken a seat in his usual spot but she noticed that he had yet to unpack his bag. Normally he would already have done so. When Professor Slughorn called his name he merely picked up his satchel and crossed the classroom with a few long strides.

With glistening eyes the Professor instructed them to brew potion number 164 and sauntered off.

Hermione felt a bit helpless when she once again found herself squeezed into the small desk with Malfoy, a tin cauldron in front of them. The Slytherin hadn't moved, apparently waiting for her to pick up her book just like the last time they had worked together. Hesitantly, she did so.

The brew looked rather difficult to make and Hermione sighed subconsciously, when she was startled by the sound of a low whistling next to her.

Malfoy was leaning in slightly, one eyebrow raised as he studied the textbook in her hands.

"That potion is worth more than ten galleons a litre on Diagon Alley," he mumbled and Hermione had looked from the textbook to the cauldron sitting in their desk.

"But this cauldron contains…"

"Nearly ten litres," Malfoy finished her sentence for her.
Despite themselves their eyes had locked in silent understanding before they went to work with a fleeting smile on their faces.

When Hermione entered Malfoy Manor's magnificent hallway she was immediately jolted back in time. Suddenly, it felt like yesterday that she'd been dragged across the exclusive marble floor, up the grand staircase and past the elegant family portraits in the corridor. With a heavy heart she let her eyes wander across the lavishly decorated entrance with the imposing fireplace across from the front door. Only the rich seasonal flower bouquets were new to the scenery and added a delicate scent to the overwhelmingly luxurious atmosphere.

Hermione felt Malfoy's eyes burn in her back as she took a few hesitant steps forward and let down her hood. She swallowed, knowing that the grand staircase led to the drawing room she feared the most and wanted to see again more than anything in the world. Bellatrix LeStrange's cackling laugh echoed through her head and she closed her eyes, trying to fight back the dark memories that tried to overtake her senses. The majestic sound of the front door closing snapped her back to reality.

Light footsteps approached her and then she heard Malfoy say to the inspectors, "If you'll follow me, the kitchen is this way."

Turning around Hermione met with a wary gaze in piercing, grey eyes before he let the way to the kitchen with brisk strides.

The final Potions class before the Christmas holidays Ginny with permission failed to attend to train for the upcoming match instead.

Arriving alone Hermione sat down at her desk and looked at the door expectantly. When Malfoy entered the classroom he edged his way through their classmates towards his desk as usual but then he turned around and caught Hermione's gaze. She nodded in acknowledgement and a moment later the Slytherin had slid into the desk with to her.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye.

"Training?" Malfoy inquired simply as his gaze flitted restlessly towards the window.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed with a sideways look, grabbing her Potions book in the process. The game between Gryffindor and Slytherin was due next Saturday.

When Professor Slughorn entered his classroom his full face lit up in delight at spotting his two eighth year students sharing a desk again. Rubbing his hands he sauntered over and instructed them to brew potion number 257.

He'd already turned to leave when Hermione's clear voice called him back.

"Erm, Professor…?"

The Professor looked over his shoulder as Malfoy turned his head watchfully.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione seemed to have given him a bit of a start but a hesitant smile now formed on his thin lips as Hermione smiled up at him sweetly.
"Might I suggest another potion for Malfoy and myself to brew? Something more... challenging?"

Reluctantly Malfoy followed their exchange. He wasn't sure what Hermione was playing at and if he wanted to have a part in it.

Warily he watched as Hermione handed her Potions book to their Professor, pointing out a page. The Professor picked it up with interest when he suddenly turned a fantastic shade of purple, shoved the book back and had took to his heels with a curt nod.

His eyebrows raised in mild surprise Malfoy leaned forward to examine the book himself. Underneath the names of each of the Potions Granger had written down the expected profit in galleons. The highest amount was written underneath the potion she had suggested to Professor Slughorn.

A muffled snicker involuntarily escaped him and Hermione looked up to see Malfoy biting back his laughter, his eyes glistening with sincere admiration.

And for once, she was glad with her bushy hair to hide her fierce blush.

Malfoy Manor was in possession of an enormous kitchen. It wasn't as big as the ones at Hogwarts, but still huge.

Despite their best efforts to maintain a professional attitude the inspectors still gaped at the magnificent stoves, the marble floors and the gigantic rough-wooden workbench at the centre. Its short table-legs were specially fashioned to the height of house-elves. Small windows placed high up the walls betrayed the kitchen's location near the cellar.

When the inspectors entered the kitchen four house-elves were already lined up before the workbench. Each one was dressed in spotless, white pillow-cases. Their ears bobbed a little as they stretched their fragile necks to look up at the visitors with big, true-hearted eyes.

Hermione watched as Malfoy quickly descended the three steps down to the kitchen, taking a back seat as he leaned against the banister, arms crossed before his chest. He seemed a bit nervous though his gaze didn't betray anything.

A small smile tugged at her lips.

Good, he should be nervous. His family's reputation on house-elf treatment, wasn't a particularly good one, after all. She had to admit though that the first impression exceeded her expectations. The pearly white pillow-cases, the entire kitchen having been made at level with the house-elves - what she'd seen so far was the best of all the houses they'd inspected thus far and she had to admit she was surprised.

In the mean time the inspectors had been waving their wands while muttering a charm and two long scrolls appeared with a pop. The parchment was crammed with difficult looking flow charts to follow.

"Those are your making?" Malfoy mumbled at Hermione as the inspectors asked the house-elves for their names, his gaze fixed on the parchment floating in the air.

"I'd say yes," he established dryly before Hermione could respond. "Those forms look like the inspectors needed at least three years of training just to understand them."

From the corner of her eye Hermione cast him a searching look but he didn't seem to mean any
"Only three months," she admitted. "Along with other training."

The two of them then silently watched as the inspectors moved from questioning the house-elves to inspecting the kitchen equipment. Charmed tape-measures whirled around table-legs and kitchen units while the Ministry workers wandered around, pulling open drawers to inspect. Their white gloves went past almost every part of the kitchen, examining its safety until they turned around and nodded at Hermione.

"Mr. Malfoy, could you show us the house-elves' dorms, please?" Said the male inspector and Hermione felt that the person beside her straightened up, distancing himself from her.

"Follow me," he said curtly.

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Christmas was the most beautiful time of the year at Hogwarts, starting when Hagrid dragged gigantic spruces into the castle and Professor Flitwick decorated them with delicate glass and silver ornaments. Downy snowflakes whirled down the enchanted ceiling and students took the opportunity to go skating on the Black Lake before the Hogwarts train would take them home for Christmas.

Hermione had spent all morning packing her trunk and on her way to the Entrance Hall decided to take a look at the Great Hall to see the result of Professor Flitwick's work.

Though she had not intended for it to happen tears flowed down her cheeks with gratitude at the sight of the Christmas trees lined up in the Great Hall which had been restored to its former glory.

She flinched when a big, white handkerchief was put in her hands.

"I know," a shaky voice with a Scottish accent said quietly.

The normally so reserved Headmistress then pulled Hermione into a quick hug and smiled. "Off you go know, Miss Granger. The train won't wait."

Hermione gave Professor McGonagall a watery smile and, donning her cloak, she headed for the doors when she'd noticed the blond man, apparently frozen in his steps, staring at her from the Entrance Hall with a grave look on his face.

Malfoy.

His gaze was focused intently on her wet cheeks but when their eyes met he flinched and retreated quickly into the shadows.

Hermione followed him with mixed feelings. She felt caught by Malfoy of all people but she’d also noticed that he had still been in his school robes. He would not be going home for the holidays, that much was clear.

It wasn't until Hermione stepped into the carriages that would bring her to the Entrance Gate when he reappeared outside, his silhouette sharp in the light from the hallway.

A pang of pity shot through Hermione's stomach as she watched his lonely figure, the Slytherin scarf wrapped loosely around his neck. On impulse she opened the small carriage window and leaned outside.
When their eyes met he held her gaze until the carriage had set into motion. The last thing she saw of him was his black cloak billowing in the cold winter wind.

It was easy to forget about Malfoy in the warm Christmas atmosphere at the Burrow, where her parents had arrived just before their daughter. But when the first presents were unpacked and Hermione sat on the windowsill of Ginny's bedroom to watch the snow fall to the sound of Ginny's even breathing, her thoughts trailed back to Malfoy. And she caught herself wondering how his evening had been, celebrating his Christmas Eve at school, probably ignored by the few teachers and students who'd stayed behind too. The atmosphere at home must have been very tight, if he preferred that above going home for Christmas.

A resolve formed inside her and quietly Hermione reached for her wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Since Ron and Harry had to work during the days between Christmas and New Years Eve, Hermione had decided to go back to Hogwarts early. That way, she would be able to study for the upcoming NEWTs and give Ginny some time with her mother. Her return was a quiet one.

When Hermione entered the Great Hall for dinner a small Slytherin, two Hufflepuffs, a fourth year from Gryffindor Hermione had recognised as Dennis Creevey and a Ravenclaw second year all sat at the one House Table left, as was tradition with Christmas.

And sitting a bit to the side was Draco Malfoy.

After some hesitation Hermione sat down between the eighth year Slytherin and the Ravenclaw, bridging the gap between Malfoy and the other students.

It earned her surprised gazes from the younger students but Hermione only greeted them politely and then turned to meet with a pair of cool, grey eyes acknowledging her presence.

After a moment in which none of them said anything Malfoy broke the silence.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Granger."

A smile formed on Hermione's lips at the subtle but sincere gratitude in his quiet reply.

Outside the wind howled around the castle as their golden plates were filled with steaming food.

And over at the Head Table the Headmistress allowed herself an indulgent smile.
Regarding Proportionate Working Hours

Music: Lily's Theme, Alexandre Desplat (Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows Pt. II)

"The house-elves' bedrooms are located in the attic. I expect all inspectors to remember that this is a private home as we cross the corridors to reach them."

Back in the entrance hall Malfoy had turned around before the broad staircase and he looked at Hermione with a dark face. Ignoring the inspector hastily assuring him of their discretion he held Hermione's gaze and she froze under his intense look. It was then that she realised that Malfoy understood. Like Harry, he understood why she'd come to Malfoy Manor. She felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as he silently pleaded with her to reconsider.

The sound of light footsteps broke the heavy silence and Hermione felt relieved when Malfoy averted his eyes. Following his gaze upstairs Hermione noticed the stately, blonde woman who had appeared there. She was looking down on the inspectors with cool, blue eyes. For a moment their gazes met but if Narcissa Malfoy recognised Hermione, her reserved features betrayed nothing.

"It's only the Ministry inspectors, mother. I'm seeing them to the house-elves dorms now," Malfoy drawled, his tone subtly dismissing Mrs. Malfoy.

"Very well. I leave you to it then," Narcissa responded tonelessly.

Malfoy went up the stairs with fast steps and Hermione, along with her inspectors, followed reluctantly. She'd been alarmed by his gaze more than she cared to admit and suddenly her heart pounded in her chest as she ascended the marble steps.

Hermione didn't notice when Narcissa took her ringed hand from the banister and disappeared.

With all students gone during the days between Christmas and New Years Eve a wonderful peace and quiet descended upon the grounds of Hogwarts. On her first day back Hermione did some studying and wandered around the high bookcases in the library. It felt nice having Hogwarts almost completely to herself and the quiet corridors provided her with new room to think.

Sitting by the cackling fire in the Gryffindor Common Room with a book had became a bliss too as she was suddenly able to nestle on one of the shapeless sofas without anyone disturbing her.

The following evening Hermione felt like going on a nighttime stroll through the castle. As an eighth year student she wasn't bound to the bedtime curfew for younger students and she liked the idea of wandering through the dimly lit corridors at the sound of her own footsteps.

Having no particular route in mind she walked through the maze of corridors, merely following where her feet were taking her. Her unhurried footsteps echoed through the grand corridors as the flickering flames of the torches engorged her shadow on the walls.

Outside the stars made place for another scurry when Hermione rounded a corner and started to ascend a broad staircase in the middle of the corridor which would ultimately lead her to the Ravenclaw Tower.
It was then that a silhouette unexpectedly appeared from the shadows and Hermione let out a startled gasp.

"Malfoy!"

Across from her someone had come to a sudden halt and mumbling something under his breath, the Slytherin bent down to pick up the towel he’d dropped on the floor.

He looked different, Hermione noticed. His hair was moist and messy and he was wearing only a pair of trousers and a white oxford with the collar buttons left undone, accenting his lean figure. No tie, no jumper, no robes. A small drop of water fell from a strand of his blond hair from where it ran down his pale neckline until it disappeared below his neckline.

Something fluttered in her stomach but before Hermione could acknowledge what it was it occurred to her that the Prefects’ Bathroom wasn’t far from where they’d run into each other.

Malfoy stole a quick glance at Hermione when he straightened up and his face darkened when he saw her staring at him.

"Are you on patrol, Granger?" He asked sharply. Clearly he felt caught by the Gryffindor.

Hermione blinked and immediately lowered her gaze. "No, I am not. I was just... taking a walk. Enjoying the silence..."

She didn’t know why included the last words but to her surprise Malfoy gave an understanding nod. Perhaps this was why he’d been out here tonight, too.

Her eyes were drawn back to the informal state of his hair. Somehow it suited him, she found until she realised her train of thoughts and hastily averted her thoughts someplace safer.

"Do you still use the Prefects' Bathroom?"

Malfoy’s gaze trailed from his towel to Hermione. Hadn't that been obvious?

"As a matter of fact, I do," he said slowly. "Since technically I still am a Prefect..."

After some hesitation he added in a rare moment of candour, "I'm not allowed to give and take points to and from the other students and impose punishments, though."

Hermione’s eyebrows raised in surprise and her reaction almost instantly made a shadow pass over his features. Biting his lip in regret he decided he’d already said too much, nodded curtly and continued on his way.

With slight disappointment Hermione watched him go, smelling the scent of soap from the Prefects’ Bathroom on him as he brushed past her. His blond hair lit up in the silver moonlight as he bowed his head to watch his steps but then he suddenly stopped and looked over his shoulder.

Hermione held her breath.

"So... A Patronus, huh?" His gruff voice held a hint of admiration and something else she couldn't pinpoint.

Hermione’s face lit up. Apparently her Christmas greeting had meant more to him than she’d thought.

"Yes... if done correctly, they can deliver messages from the caster." She shifted her weight. "A
Patronus is unique to the witch or wizard conjuring it and isn't hindered by physical obstacles. It's the perfect form of trustworthy communication."

Malfoy nodded thoughtfully at this.

"It's an otter," he established.

Hermione tilted her head. "My favourite animal."

For a moment they held each other's gazes. Only the sound of a drop of water falling into a puddle somewhere broke the silence between them.

"I wonder..." Malfoy then mumbled, seemingly to himself.

But the moment the words had left his lips he shook his head dismissively. "Never mind."

He turned to leave and Hermione bit her lip. Somehow she wasn't prepared to let him leave just yet.

"I wonder what your Patronus would look like."

Her clear voice suddenly echoed through the quiet corridor and the Slytherin froze in his steps.

"Leave it, Granger," he snarled, but it didn't sound convincing. He hesitated, still not moving from his spot as he subconsciously clenched his towel. And Hermione knew she'd struck the right chord.

The Malfoy standing right before her was different from the one she'd known for the past seven years. Over a few coincidental collaborations at Potions class Hermione had come to know him as a calm, somewhat reserved, young man who seemed to have renounced his old ways, sobered from the believes he'd grown up with.

He wasn't asking for but still he sought another chance. A chance she felt he deserved.

He still hadn't left, held back by something stronger than his will to push on.

Finally he opened his mouth.

"What do you think?"

It was the first civil question he'd ever asked her and his gaze was tense as his grey eyes held hers. It was the longest he'd ever looked at her. Despite himself he obviously cared for her answer.

For a moment a smile ghosted over Hermione's lips as she thought his question over.

"A dragon."

A scoff involuntarily escaped him.

"A dragon," he repeated sarcastically. Who was she thinking that he was? Some hero like Potter?

"And why is that?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Because of your name, I guess," she responded mechanically and Malfoy nodded bitterly. Of course. His name.
"Does it have to be that way?"

He gave Hermione a searching look which made something flutter in her stomach.

"No. The animal form mostly depends on your own preferences or characteristics. They can even shift shape with dramatic changes in the owner's life."

She lowered her gaze thinking about Tonks and Lupin and her heart wrenched. Malfoy's voice snapped her from her thoughts. He sounded tentative and hesitant, but his question made her heart skip a beat.

"Can you teach me?"

Though she had been there before, Hermione couldn't help but admire the elegance of Malfoy Manor's stately corridors. Crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings decorated with elaborate stucco work guided them on their way as their feet sunk away in expensive, Persian rugs that covered the gleaming parquet. She noticed that paintings were missing on the walls too. In this case it seemed to have to do more with closing chapters though.

As the Ministry officials quietly followed Malfoy to the attic each new floor lost in grandeur what it gained in simplicity until finally the blond young man opened a plain wooden door at the end of the dimly lit corridor.

It revealed a spiral staircase to what Hermione suspected to be one of the Manor's characteristic six towers.

Without ceremony Malfoy went ahead and the three inspectors followed on the narrow, rough-wooden stairs.

Just when Hermione grew dizzy as the endless winding never seemed to end Malfoy's muffled voice sounded. "We're here."

After the long climb up the narrow staircase Hermione and the inspectors were surprised to discover they'd entered a spacious attic. Wooded pillars divided the attic like a honeycomb, lit by the fading light coming in through a few small dormers. A few strategically placed skylights provided a beautiful view on the intricate structure of roof-beams carrying the pointed roof.

Hermione was the first to notice the two small doors in the far end of the attic. She nodded to the inspectors and with a slightly stiff wave Malfoy invited them to check upon them.

The inspectors wandered off leaving Hermione and Malfoy alone at the stair gate.

As their quiet voices died away in the distance Hermione took a peek at Malfoy, trying to read his gaze.

Downstairs he'd caught her off guard by the perceptiveness which had been behind his silent warning.

And as she'd followed him through more corridors than she could count, her senses dulled by a familiar aching in her chest Harry's words to her at the Ministry had repeated themselves over and over again. 'Do you know what you're asking from them, from him? Are you prepared to bear responsibility for that, too?'

However it had not been reproach Hermione had seen in Malfoy's sharp gaze, only anxiety and
pain before Narcissa Malfoy's appearance had broken the spell between them. Perhaps she'd done it on purpose.

The former Slytherin hadn't looked at Hermione since and now they found themselves alone in a dusky attic doing their best to avoid each other's gazes.

"So," Hermione finally broke the silence. "How have you been?"

There was a certain melancholy quality to her words to which he lowered his guard a bit. "It's been… manageable."

He sounded infinitely weary but when Hermione stole a glance at his sharp profile his expression betrayed nothing.

A surge of sympathy went through her as Hermione tried to picture his life. Stuck between the world that didn't know how to treat these Death Eaters involuntarily turned good and an embittered family who had yet to accept their role in the end of the Second Wizarding War.

"I see that you've realised your dream," Malfoy changed the subject, feeling Hermione's scrutiny. "How does Weasley feel about it?"

He didn't entirely succeed in keeping his habitual disdain for Ron from his voice. And perhaps there was something else Hermione couldn't pinpoint but by then it was overpowered by prickly indignation.

It was clear that Malfoy hadn't been completely oblivious toward the dynamics between the three Gryffindors during their Hogwarts days. He had noticed that Ron hadn't been all that enthusiastic about the SPEW and it stung.

"He feels that I should have taken Aurors with me on these compliance visits," she replied rather sharply and immediately regretted it when he instantly withdrew into himself, having been put in his place. The place of the untrustworthy Death Eater.

Disappointment flashed over his face before the mask of impassiveness returned and he lowered his gaze.

Hermione's heart wrenched in regret the moment her words died away. After all, it wasn't Malfoy's fault that she and Ron always seemed to be disagreeing with one another these days.

Suddenly she felt not one jot better than their classmates during their repeated final year at Hogwarts.

"I'm sorry," she apologised. Her eyes dejectedly followed the small dust particles dancing in the last daylight. "He doesn't understand…"

She bowed her head to hide the tears that suddenly pricked behind her eyes.

"Harry does, though. He's worried about me."

"Granger…"

Hermione looked up and for the first time since they had arrived in the attic Malfoy's grey eyes turned to meet hers. The cold, disappointed look from before was replaced by something akin to sadness.
"I can't say I disagree with Potter," he said quietly.

During the holidays dinner was even more of a feast at Hogwarts. The Great Hall shimmered with the lights of the many ornately decorated Christmas trees as Malfoy sat down across from Hermione at the single House Table.

Their gazes crossed fleetingly over the grilled chicken but none of the other students saw the acknowledgement hidden in their cursory looks.

Eventually Hermione inconspicuously left the Great Hall after finishing her desert and Malfoy followed at a short distance.

No one but Professor McGonagall noticed something odd about the eighth years retreating at such an early hour as she watched them go with a thoughtful look in her eyes. She had no time to dwell on it though, as Professor Slughorn distracted her with a doting elaboration on the combined values of his two most talented students.

Malfoy obviously wasn't pleased to find himself in the dusky Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. After a long, silent walk through the castle's quiet corridors he'd understood that this was where Hermione was taking him and his grey eyes had darkened as Hermione sat down atop one of the school desks at the front.

She was dressed in snug Muggle jeans and a colourful, knitted jumper with a large H on the front surrounded by books. Malfoy was still in his school robes.

Reluctantly Malfoy followed the Gryffindor to the front. He hadn't been in this classroom since he'd dropped the subject in his sixth year and the look on his face betrayed it brought back memories of a past lifetime, he was loathe to be reminded of.

"Patrolling isn't really necessary during holidays, you know," he drawled sarcastically as he leaned against another desk to conceal his uneasiness. They had just spent a good part of the last hour crossing empty corridors to reach the classroom that was located farthest away from the Great Hall.

But Hermione only shook her head dismissively.

"This classroom is the most suitable place for practice."

Malfoy shifted his weight and she cast him a gauging look. "You don't like it here, don't you?"

His gaze darkened. Why did she have to be so observant?

"No," he admitted curtly.

"Good."

This wasn't exactly the reply he'd expected and involuntarily he raised an eyebrow.

"It will make things even more realistic," Hermione explained patiently. "Now, what do you know about the subject?"

Malfoy relaxed somewhat as he'd given her a short recap of what he'd found in the library and Hermione was pleased, glad that he had taken some time to prepare himself. He really was serious about this.
"Very good. Then you also know that finding your happy memory will be the most difficult part," she instructed him as she took position before him.

"It has to be a very strong one, one that touches you to the very core of your being. Memories of winning the Quidditch Cup won't be enough," she added meaningfully.

Malfoy’s face fell but Hermione ignored his dismay as she drew her wand.

"I will show you how to perform the spell once, then you'll have to do it yourself." She sounded eerily like Professor McGonagall.

Without ceremony Hermione turned around, slid into a stance and called, "Expecto Patronum!"

A sparkling otter jumped from her wand and began to swim around the astonished Malfoy. It looked like a flowing silver ribbon taking on the form of a river animal as it lovingly curled itself around Hermione before dissolving into a glittering mist. Suddenly only cold and darkness were left behind.

A small smile ghosted over Hermione's lips when she saw Malfoy's expression. He was deeply impressed.

She slid out of stance.

"All right." Hermione positioned herself before him. "First, we need you to find a happy memory."

Encouragingly she looked up at him with her warm caramel eyes.

"Now, close your eyes," she told him but instead of doing so he glanced nervously at her wand as he subconsciously clenched his own. Growing rigid he struggled not to step back

For a moment Hermione frowned non-understandingly when she suddenly realised that the athletic man towering over her smaller form was afraid of her. Despite himself and despite his wish to learn the Patronus spell from her, the close proximity of an armed member of the Golden Trio apparently still unnerved him.

Hermione's face darkened. The very idea that someone, even if it was Malfoy, could be scared of her, revolted her.

"Close your eyes," she snapped at him and he flinched in response. However, he still obeyed, his senses piquing.

Hermione looked at the Slytherin. His eyelids were trembling as the knuckles of his fingers clenching his wand turned white. He managed to keep his eyes closed though and Hermione's anger made way for regret.

She realised she demanded a great deal of trust from someone who never had any reason to trust anyone beside his parents, especially not Harry Potter and his friends.

Tentatively Hermione placed her hand on Malfoy’s forearm as she said gently, "Please, Malfoy. Relax. It will help. I promise."

Upon feeling her touch he stiffened but after a while he allowed his tight muscles to slacken as she still had done nothing to hurt him. Involuntarily he let out a vulnerable sigh.

It was a strange realisation for Hermione that this was the first time she touched Malfoy of her
own free will, without punching him in the face. The situation of them standing there in the dark and empty classroom seemed so surreal that she didn't notice that her hand was still resting on Malfoy's arm until she felt his muscles relaxing through his jumper.

Something unnerving stirred in her stomach at the intimate feeling and hastily she withdrew her hand.

All the while his eyes had remained closed, giving him an oddly serene expression.

"You're doing great," she praised him warmly while his last wariness ebbed away. "Now, find a happy memory. A good one."

This time Hermione waited patiently, giving Malfoy the time he needed. She watched as he lowered his guard and allowed himself to search through his most valuable memories. Probably childhood memories. Memories too precious to share with any of his harsh, ruthless friends.

Eventually Malfoy nodded and Hermione went to stand behind him, lightly touching his arms and legs to correct his stance until it was perfect. She was relieved that he let her without tensing up.

She smiled and tried not to pay attention to the fresh scent of soap from the Prefects' Bathroom reaching her nose as it evoked memories of him leaving that very bathroom.

"All right," she said as she stepped back from him. "Now hold on to that memory, open your eyes and raise your wand. Then say the words. Loudly."

At his first try a hesitant trail of light shot from his wand which for a second floated in the air before it disappeared in the darkness.

Clearly disappointed with himself Malfoy frowned and slid out of stance but he stilled when he noticed the expression on Hermione's face. She was practically beaming at him with shining caramel eyes.

"That was marvellous! Especially for the first time."

Baffled, he looked at his wand. That the small puff of light could cause this kind of enthusiasm was beyond his comprehension.

"I think you've chosen a good memory." She shot him a brilliant smile to which he bit his lip self-consciously. "Now try again!"

Obviously grateful that she didn't pry about his memory Malfoy slid into a stance again and called, "Expecto Patronum!"

Again a silver string of light left the wand but Hermione expected as much. A lot of the members of the DA had done much longer over creating even the slightest puff of light.

Malfoy however was indeed been a very talented wizard. His will to excel was still there but it was tempered by a newfound patience which provided him with a calm focus on the task ahead.

Glowing with pride Hermione let him continue practicing until the silver light only emerged as vapour.

And when they left the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom there was an unusual peacefulness in Malfoy's expression.

For the first in a long period of time he had accomplished something of his own.
The inspectors were simply thrilled with the house-elves' dorms and they insisted Hermione should see them as well. With a surprised look at Malfoy she followed the young witch and wizard to the back of the attic.

Behind the two low doors she'd seen from afar she discovered two simple but clean rooms, each containing two small beds neatly made with spotless linen and warm woollen blankets. In between the beds were dormers which could be opened for fresh air.

The stunned expression on Hermione's face drew a rare smile to Malfoy's lips. As the inspectors unrolled twenty-four inches of form he only had eyes for his former classmate looking around in silent disbelief.

"I hope this meets your approval," he mumbled and got the full blast of Hermione's brilliant smile.

"Are you pulling my leg? It looks like you've actually read the requirements."

Dumbfounded by her enthusiasm Malfoy quickly averted his gaze.

"Well, it took me enough to persuade those elves to leave the kitchen-sink," he muttered under his breath and Hermione's smile turned into an amused smirk. But she decided not to comment on it, instead she gave the modest room another appreciative glance.

"I think these rooms are at least at par with those at Hogwarts."

Contently, she ran her hand over a blanket.

Meanwhile the inspectors had finished their work and declared they'd seen enough. One of them continued to announce that they needed to speak with the house-elves to conclude the inspection. That conversation would have to take place in the absence of Mr. Malfoy.

Malfoy nodded coolly.

"If you'll return to the kitchen, the house-elves will still be there," he informed the inspectors. "I'll tell my parents not to enter during the remainder of your visit."

The inspectors searched Hermione's gaze and she nodded encouragingly.

"Go ahead. I trust you'll do just fine."

She smiled weakly and the inspectors began on the long way back to the kitchen.

"So, you do?" Malfoy asked bitingly when the inspectors were out of ear shot. But Hermione only looked to the ground, avoiding his sharp gaze.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she countered his doubtful words. "The last couple of times they had this conversation with house-elves, all went well."

Malfoy gave her a hard stare but then turned to leave as well. He had his parents to inform.

Quietly, Hermione followed him through the attic darkening at the evening approach.

"So, since you asked about Ron before..." she pushed the conversation into a safer direction, "how's Pansy doing?"

Malfoy shot her a look.
"I wasn't asking about him, Granger…" he almost snapped, "but to answer your question - I wouldn't know. I haven't seen her in a while."

Hermione's eyebrows raised in honest surprise. Pansy Parkinson had been his girlfriend for most of their years at Hogwarts. And though Hermione had never understood what the reasonably handsome and popular Draco Malfoy had seen in the pug-faced girl, she had been convinced that the two would eventually get married. Just like she and Ron would.

Her face fell when she thought about that. Apparently life didn't always agree with one's expectations.

"What happened?"

Malfoy didn't answer right away. A shadow passed over his face.

"Our views on… life didn't necessarily correspond with one another anymore," he then replied diplomatically.

Hermione only nodded. She thought she understood. Pansy had never, not once, shown any sign of having changed her views after the defeat of Voldemort, while the course of events during the war had sobered Malfoy to the extent that they were now standing here, in a dusky attic, having a normal conversation. It was something that pleased her more than she wanted to admit to herself.

Malfoy caught her gaze.

"I'm seeing Astoria Greengrass now," he added casually.

The wind was knocked out of Hermione. She blanched. But almost immediately she regained her composure and when she finally repeated the name, her voice only betrayed proper confusion.

"Daphne's younger sister," he helped her remember as Hermione nodded vaguely, careful to avoid his searching gaze.

"Oh, right."

Of course Draco Malfoy wouldn't have stayed single for long, Hermione acknowledged with cold logic that masked a fierce bitterness underneath. And what she remembered of Daphne Greengrass, a Slytherin girl from their year, she imagined that her sister would be perfect for him - a fairly intelligent and nice-looking girl from an old, Pureblood family that had refrained from siding with the Dark Lord overmuch.

Silence descended on them as they were standing across from each other in the attic. They had completely forgotten about their intention to leave the attic while the light continued to fade around them.

Hermione was pulled from her thoughts when Malfoy casually reached out and took a slip of the Ministry scarf between his fingers. It was an intimate gesture but Hermione felt that she didn't mind. With an unreadable look in his eyes he scrutinised the bronze, heavily embroidered emblem on the knitted wool and then let go.

"Why have you come back, Granger?" He then asked quietly, his cool voice sounding subdued in the quiet atmosphere.

Oddly enough he repeated the first civil question she had asked him more than six years ago as his eyes rested on her searchingly.
There was a hint of melancholy to his voice and Hermione felt that he was still seeking for her to abandon her resolution. He was worried about her.

Hermione looked away.

"You know why," she responded softly. She didn't see the pained expressing passing over his face as he looked down on her gleaming curls.

"Potter is right, you know?" He whispered and it almost sounded as if he were teasing her.

Hermione swallowed. "I heard you say it."

"Then why won't you listen to us?"

Never before had Hermione heard Draco Malfoy refer to himself and Harry Potter as 'us.' The world really had changed.

"Because…” she stammered, her voice breaking, "because I need this. I need to see that room again. I… I need to see it at daytime. So I can finally put my nightmares to rest…”

Malfoy flinched and took a step back. A look of absolute guilt darkened his features.

"Please." Hermione's voice trembled. "I won't force you to show me that drawing room. After all, it's your house and this must be hard for you too. All I can do is ask."

Their eyes locked in mutual pain as memories that should have been forgotten washed over them with brutal force.

"You're right. This is hard for me too," Malfoy said hoarsely. "I have to live with the fact that I was there when she… used the curse on you and I did nothing."

A single tear rolled down Hermione's cheek as she kept looking at him with glistening, caramel eyes and he clenched his fists.

Then he abruptly turned around.

"I trust the inspectors will be busy for a while interrogating my house-elves," he said coldly and his reserved voice sounded almost rough in a desperate attempt to control his emotions. "In the mean time, I'll show you the drawing room."

*It was a wonderful experience for Hermione to spend the day before the cackling fire in the Gryffindor Tower snuggled up on the worn sofa, her feet tugged underneath her as she was reading a book worth her own body weight. She only started out of her bliss once as Dennis Creevey took a picture of the girl his brother had adored the most. Blinking blindly against the pages, Hermione concluded he must have picked up photography as a hobby after his brother's death. And as the still small boy took off happily with his camera she was secretly glad she wouldn't meet with Malfoy until after Dennis Creevey's bed time curfew.*

*That night Hermione had already been waiting for Malfoy for quite some time, seated on her regular school desk, when the sound of hasty footsteps broke the somewhat ominous silence. Then Malfoy entered the classroom, drawing his wand as he walked down the aisle with long strides. The wand pointed to the ground as he approached the Gryffindor, his silhouette casting long shadows on the cabinets filled with grimy artefacts.*
He was clearly upset about something.

"The first year needed some attendance," Malfoy curtly explained the reason he was late.

Hermione had already noticed his absence at dinner that evening and then she remembered the first year Slytherin boy who was the only one of his year to stay at Hogwarts over Christmas.

Her gaze darkened. The Slytherin first year had come from a family of fanatical Death Eaters who had all died in the war or ended up in Azkaban. She had already been wondering how much hatred was already instilled in him after rumours had spread about his behaviour in class.

Hermione studied Malfoy's drawn face. Something about the boy's situation seemed to have touched him personally.

"Did he miss them?" She asked softly and met with a blank look.

"Who?"

"His family."

The Slytherin shook his head dismissively. He had never been one to divulge himself to others, especially not to Gryffindors.

"Among other things," he endorsed.

"How is he now?" Hermione caught his tired gaze and despite himself Malfoy sighed.

"He's asleep. There's no one else staying behind over Christmas who can look after him. I just hope..."

Abruptly, he cut himself off and looked away.

"I'm sure you did all right, Malfoy."

Hermione's voice suddenly resounded close by and to Malfoy's surprise she'd come off her school desk and stood still before him, a reassuring look in her eyes as she replied to what he'd left unsaid.

For a moment he held her gaze and Hermione felt herself being drawn in by his grey eyes in which a rare storm of feelings raged. Involuntarily she lifted her hand to comfort him but when he felt her touch on his arm, he stepped back.

"It's late," Malfoy said with a small edge to his voice. "We'd better get started."

By the end of the lesson Malfoy succeeded in solidifying the string of light.
When they reached the door to the drawing room Malfoy stopped and bowed his head, his hand resting on the elegant door handle.

"You can still change your mind, Granger."

"I know," Hermione quietly acknowledged him, registering the tension in his voice. He still hadn't opened the door.

"But you won't."

"No."

An involuntary sigh escaped him and the tremble she heard broke Hermione's heart. This was as much of an agony for him as it was for her. Feeling his inner turmoil she reached out and tentatively placed her hand on his.

Malfoy stiffened at the unexpected contact but didn't let go of the door handle. Instead he gave Hermione a sharp look.

"I take it that I can't persuade you?"

"No, I'm sorry."

Hermione's eyes didn't avert and as they stood there in the corridor both of their hands resting on the door handle she saw the guilt in his eyes. Silently she waited for him to overcome the urge to keep the door closed, a bitter smile curling up the corners of her mouth when she saw him struggle.

Finally, he nodded curtly and pushed down the door handle.

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If one of the few students staying at Hogwarts over Christmas had been allowed to stay up after hours they might have seen the young man and woman, both a bit too old to be attending Hogwarts, wandering the quiet corridors after bedtime curfew. There was something natural about the way the Gryffindor and the Slytherin walked side by side, their dark figures casting long shadows on the mighty walls as torches, ignited at their quiet approach, guided their way.

When they finally reached the classroom the sound of the heavy doors closing behind them still echoed through the empty space. Like they always did, Malfoy positioned himself in the back of the classroom, while Hermione quietly sat down on her desk and pulled her winter cloak closer around her. It was unpleasantly chilly in the unheated classroom but Malfoy didn't seem to notice the cold.

Folding her hands underneath her chin Hermione studied him as he resumed his practice of the Patronus Charm, closely watching his movements and the way he closed his eyes before each attempt, his features showing concentration and unbelievable willpower. His determination fascinated her and she was anxious to know what progress he would be making tonight.
This third night of practice saw a promising start. The first two times Malfoy called the incantation the familiar ribbon of light appeared but the third time he suddenly managed to enlarge the puff of light and make it a perfect, glowing orb.

The moment this happened he froze in shock and Hermione straightened up, her eyes glistening with anticipation.

A drop of sweat rolled down his temple as Malfoy managed to maintain the ball of light for a minute before it petered out. The development invigorated Malfoy. Pursing his lips the Slytherin immediately raised his wand and called determinedly, "Expecto Patronum!"

Another glowing orb shot from his wand, even brighter than the first one.

Hermione regarded his efforts with silent admiration. In less than two nights Malfoy had managed to produce an actual start to a full bodied Patronus. He'd been offered a chance and he had seized it with both hands.

Meanwhile, Malfoy was struggling to keep the glowing orb going but finally he had to admit defeat. It would be the last time that evening he would succeed in creating one. The classroom grew dark as the orb disappeared, but he had made fantastic progress again.

Hermione beamed at him and felt a little bit warmer when he responded with a small smile in return.

Purple.

The colour that marked her nightmares and haunted her waking hours. The colour which she had avoided to wear ever since. The colour she'd wilfully sought out to confront today.

Hermione felt a little dizzy as she watched Malfoy finally opening the door. From what seemed like a enormous distance she heard him say something about his mother having redecorated the room, after... It sounded like an apology and she vaguely wondered what he was apologising for.

It seemed as if she was floating when Hermione followed Malfoy inside. The pounding of blood in her ears was the only link between her and her numb body. Her breathing picked up pace as she was finally able to take in her surroundings.

At least three times a week she'd been haunted by nightmares about this room where the torture had taken place and now she'd gone back. Back to the source of her constant agony, hoping to finally put these demons to rest.

But she didn't recognise it.

Disoriented, Hermione turned around as a fierce tremble raked trough her body. The colour surrounding her was a gentle light blue. In her memory the sight of an enormous black marble fireplace had anchored itself but when her eyes looked for it, trying to find something familiar in this unfamiliar surroundings, it was replaced by a much more delicate white one.

Hermione stumbled back and her eyes went up. The large chandelier that used to hang from the ceiling was gone.

Of course Hermione knew that Dobby had destroyed the drawing room while freeing the people held prison in the secret room below. However she had somehow expected the Malfoy family to be this conservative that they would have restored the room to its former state.
Feeling completely unhinged, Hermione spun around and around, looking for anything, something that would have survived the destruction. Instead the room seemed to lose form as panic engulfed her. She didn't notice that tears had begun streaming down her cheeks.

A small sound turned her attention to the window behind which the darkness of early evening seemed as bottomless as the hole in her heart. Her breathing had started to come in ragged in- and exhales as she focused her bleary eyes on the silhouette of someone standing next to the silk curtains. He looked at her with a sombre look on his face.

Vaguely she remembered that he had been standing there six years ago, in exactly the same spot.

Draco Malfoy.

The memory struck Hermione with the power of a lightning bolt.

The breaches of her conscience shattered with unexpected force. Then the floodgates of her mind were opened.

She was hit violently by excruciating memories that she'd managed to keep locked away for six long years, only to seep through while she were sleeping. Excruciating pain echoed through her body, just like the sound of someone laughing maniacally.

Horrified, Hermione stumbled back as the world began to spin around her. The shock was too violent, too big for her to handle. Consciousness started to slip through her fingers.

"No," Hermione whispered, knowing that she was fighting a lost battle. She felt her eyeballs roll backwards.

The last thing she saw was the figure by the window rushing toward her. And as her eyelids fell shut she heard the echo of his voice calling, "Hermione!"

Then everything went dark.

---

New Year's Eve had arrive and the enchanted ceiling of Hogwarts was already preluding the celebrations at midnight with brilliant fireworks. The two oldest students, however, weren't there to witness it. This would the last evening they could practice and Hermione wanted to have an early start, even before bedtime curfew.

Over the past couple of days Malfoy had been working unbelievably hard, finally succeeding in both maintaining and enlarging the glowing orb, but up until now a corporeal Patronus had remained beyond his reach.

After the third time he'd seen the orb he'd so desperately been trying to solidify, disappearing, he growled in frustration, wiping glistening sweat from his forehead.

"This is very advanced magic, Malfoy, and we have had very little time to practice," Hermione stressed from the school desk. She was already wearing the elegant witch robes meant for the festivities later that evening. "You're already a much faster learner than most of the others."

It was hardly an encouragement as well as a simple statement of the facts.

Malfoy only grimaced in disbelief before he slid into stance with renewed vigour. At an impressive pace he produced another series of glowing orbs, each one smaller than the last one until he lowered his wand wearily.
Trying to catch his breath Malfoy leaned against the dusty blackboard and looked at Hermione with glazed eyes.

She saw that he slowly started to realise that there was no use in continuing. He was simply too tired. All these evenings practicing had drawn heavily on his energy.

With a grimace he lifted his wand for the last time and summoned his memory. "Expecto Patronum!"

Immediately the classroom was set in a soft glow caused by the well known orb. Malfoy stared at it intently, obviously hoping to see it take any form until he jerked down his wand and put his hands before his eyes. With a choked sound he slumped down to the ground as a pained growl escaped him.

"I can't do it. It just won't work. What was I thinking?"

His voice, rough from anguish, echoed through the empty classroom.

"What-was-I-thinking?" He repeated through clenched teeth as he curled his hands into fists and pressed them against his bowed head.

Hermione watched in sadness as Malfoy's wand clashed down on the ground.

Malfoy looked broken. A paragon of defeat.

Even in the old days Hermione had never seen him lose control like this. Harry had once told her about the time he'd walked in on Malfoy crying. It wasn't until now she could imagine what the Slytherin would have looked like. The sight broke her heart.

He had been so determined, so motivated to learn. She had seen the self-loathing in his eyes each time he'd failed to create a corporeal Patronus. And now he seemed to have lost all hope of ever mastering the skill.

Hermione felt disappointed too. She had so hoped that he would have succeeded, but at the same she'd known that the goal they'd set had been extremely difficult to achieve.

She folded her arms before her chest and heaved a sigh.

"Perhaps you should reconsider your happy memory."

Malfoy's head jerked up.

That's impossible!" He lashed out at her, his face contorted with anger.

"Why?" Hermione demanded, ignoring his bitter words. "Perhaps if you'll allow yourself to reconsider, there's another memory that might..."

"No!" He snarled at her. His normally cool eyes were blazing with fury and sparkles shot from his wand. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Granger!"

Hermione fell silent and bowed her head.

"I guess not."

Malfoy only stared at her, his rage slowly leaving his features as he saw Hermione's defeated reaction. Finally, he closed his eyes and heaved a bitter sigh. Hermione didn't notice the remorse
on his face as he too looked down at the ground.

"I have no other memory that works as good as this one," he confessed softly, his hoarse voice laced with a sour tone. This part of the charm had still made him feel uncomfortably vulnerable.

Hermione nodded somewhat dejectedly - she had expected as much.

"Perhaps, we'll find a way to practice next semester," she tried, but her voice betrayed her doubt. The day after tomorrow the school would flock with students again and it would be simply impossible to meet up with Malfoy without anyone noticing it. They both didn't feel like that to happen.

There was nothing to it. They had tried but in the end they had to acknowledge that attempting to teach Malfoy the Patronus spell in merely four days had been too ambitious of a plan.

Sadness wrenched Hermione's heart as Malfoy rose to his feet in a surprising dignified manner given his current state and turned away from her. Fixing his eyes on the windows he withdrew into himself. He clearly needed to be alone to come to terms with his disappointment.

Hermione bit her lip, withstanding the urge to go him. The best thing she could do right now was also the hardest thing.

Quietly, she slid down the school desk and crossed the classroom. Upon reaching the door she cast a last look at the Slytherin. Malfoy's silhouette stood out against the cold moonlight. What she saw was the unapproachable statue of a disappointed young man, gazing inwardly, who saw yet another failure added to the collection.

Then the door closed behind her.

"… wake up! … Hear me? Wake up, Hermione!"

The peaceful surroundings gently cushioning Hermione was roughly disturbed by an anguished voice, urgently calling out to her.

"Hermione… Wake up!"

She groaned softly reluctant to obey the demanding voice and return from the soothing nothing.

Vaguely she wondered why the familiar voice called her Hermione. The person she knew who belonged to that voice would never call her by her first name, but instead would use...

"Granger!"

That was it. Granger.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open and stared into a pair of grey ones very close by that raged with worry, fury, relief and something she couldn't quite pin down. Captivated, she kept her gaze focused on those eyes as she slowly became aware of her surroundings.

Then she noticed that the person belonging to those eyes held her in his arms and kept her half upright with her head leaning against his upper arm.

"Please, Hermione. Say something if you can hear me. Are you awake?"

There was that name again. Hermione. The blond man holding her in his arms must be really
worried about her. Otherwise he would have never let her come so close to him. She could almost touch his face.

Hermione opened her mouth with difficulty.

"You're not wearing black," she whispered the first thing that came to mind.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise at her answer but then his face lit up with relief. A small smirk momentarily tugged at his mouth.

"Does that bother you?" He asked softly and Hermione thought she noticed a hint of amusement in his voice.

For a moment, she only took in the sight of his eyes looking down on her with something resembling tenderness until she had to close hers. Suddenly she felt exhausted. She shook her head against his arm.

"No, you look less scary this way."

Vaguely, Hermione registered that his grip on her tightened at her response. Then his warm hand gently cupped her cheek bringing her head up to rest on his shoulder.

Before she drifted to sleep she heard him say in a strange voice, "I'm glad."

To celebrate the transition of the old year into the new one the teachers had prepared a brilliant fireworks for the students to watch on the Fourth Floor Balcony preceded by a lavish dinner. They had spared no expense to make the celebration a memorable one for the students.

Hermione silently picked at her meal that evening, unable to work up interest for the festive dinner the house elves had produced, and not participating in the excited chatter around her. Malfoy hadn't shown up for dinner and although she wasn't surprise the fact that his seat next to her remained empty didn't do much to improve her mood. While pushing around her food on the gold platter she found herself studying the small Slytherin boy sitting next to the two Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuff. Whatever it was that had the boy so upset a couple of days ago, Malfoy must have done a good job of reassuring him. He seemed satisfied and happy as he chatted with the other students. It was scant comfort.

About a quarter to twelve the small group of teachers and students headed for the balcony with Hermione quietly lugging behind. Within those fifteen minutes fireworks would be ushering in the first virgin year following Voldemort's defeat. But Hermione couldn't bring herself to care. When she arrived outside she chose a place near the parapet and stared at the grounds below where Hagrid had placed hundreds of torches that flickered in the icy wind.

As snow clung to her curls and eyelashes Hermione disheartened thoughts once again drifted to Malfoy. If only he had succeeded creating a corporeal Patronus this would have confirmed his new allegiance to the Light Side. But despite his spectacular progress he hadn't and Hermione couldn't help but feel she had failed not only him but all the loved ones she had lost during the war, by failing to show Malfoy the light.

Malfoy was definitely a very talented wizard but mastering the art of casting a full-bodied Patronus in such a short amount of time was something that hadn't even been asked from Harry to accomplish. Nevertheless Hermione had wanted him to succeed nearly as bad as he did as his strive to master the spell had also become hers.
Pulling her scarf more tightly around her Hermione watched as the gleeful teachers prepared themselves to start their show. At that moment a school-owl landed before Hermione and stuck out his paw to her.

Baffled, Hermione blinked, wondering why she would be receiving a message at this time, but the owl was really looking at her so she detached the small note and carefully unfolded it. Then her eyes widened and she took a few steps backwards.

The teachers didn't notice that one of their students had quietly left the balcony.

As the old year held its breath and the new one had yet to arrive with triumphant bangs and brilliant streaks of fire, Hermione opened the door to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

"I'm here," she called quietly. Her voice echoed through the dark classroom. "You wanted to show me something?"

Before the blackboard the blond Slytherin turned around. Malfoy only looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes that caused something to flutter in her stomach. Then he gave a small nod.

It was her cue to sit down at her usual spot by the blackboard. The Slytherin closed his eyes in a way which strangely enough suggested defeat and as outside the night sky exploded in radiant colours he called, "Expecto Patronum!"

Hermione didn't know what to expect at hearing the familiar incantation she'd heard him repeat so many times but it was certainly not the glowing animal bursting from Malfoy's wand. She almost fell from her desk when suddenly a small animal jumped across the classroom.

Openmouthedly she stared at the Patronus - because that's what it was. An actual, corporeal Patronus cast by Draco Malfoy.

Her gaze was dripping with disbelief when she followed the Patronus agile movements. Had it been merely hours ago that she had left Malfoy in this classroom, facing utter despair as he finally had to acknowledge he hadn't been able to master the spell over the holidays?

Euphoria washed over her. She jumped from the desk.

"You did it! You actually did it!"

Perhaps Malfoy thought that she would fling her arms around his neck because he stepped back and nodded in an uncharacteristically shy way.

Hermione's excitement sobered a little and she began to study the Patronus as it jumped around them with striking flexibility.

"This is brilliant. This is absolutely brilliant..." she whispered in pure admiration. "But exactly what species is it...?"

Her eyebrows furrowed as she contemplated the Patronus' small, lithe body, the thick tail and the slender snout.

Then her eyes widened. "It's a..."

"A ferret. I know," Malfoy cut her off, adding bitterly, "Rather ironic, don't you think?"
His sharp gaze betrayed that he braced himself for Hermione's reaction to his Patronus, which had taken the form of the animal Barty Crouch Jr. had turned him into during his fourth year.

But Hermione would never think of mocking him. Instead she reached out at the ferret-shaped Patronus.

"Actually, it fits you," was her gentle opinion. "A ferret is an agile and resourceful predator and a brilliant Seeker."

The Patronus sat up and curiously sniffed her hand. The corners of Hermione's mouth curled up in a wistful smile.

"It's also related to the otter."

The Slytherin didn't get the time to ponder why she had included this specific piece of information because his Patronus suddenly climbed up Hermione's arm towards her shoulders and sniffed her cheek. Hermione giggled softly.

"Oh look, I think he likes me."

Malfoy, however, was completely mortified, looking on in horror as his Patronus curled itself around her neck affectionately and rested its small head underneath her chin. He raised his wand to extinguish the silver ferret but suddenly found himself unable to do so when Hermione's eyes lit up.

Inconspicuously, Malfoy stepped back into the shadows and a longing expression appeared on his features as he watched Hermione tenderly caressing the Patronus' lithe body.

Finally, he managed to whisper, "Finite Incantatum."

Hermione didn't notice the tremble in his voice and said gently, "That was wonderful, Malfoy. Well done."

Her heart skipped a beat when a small smile formed on his lips.

"Thank you, Granger. For teaching me."

Hermione drifted from calm seas of darkness to restless whirlwinds of memories blending together purple and light blue drawing rooms driving her completely mad.

Her only anchor was the silhouette of a young man standing behind the curtains to which she clung for dear life.

Sometimes she managed to escape the clutches of her memories and graze the surface of her consciousness.

One time she felt how strong arms gently lowered her down on a soft bed and covered her with a downy duvet. Then she'd felt how smooth fingers brushed a string of hair from her face, the warm hand lingering on her cheek longer than necessary, before she sunk into deeper levels of unconsciousness again.

Another time she heard muffled voices speaking in agitated pitches. Hermione recognised the slight drawl in the male voice but she also heard an affected voice belonging to a woman. Before she was able to understand what they were arguing about she sunk back into oblivion again.
The next thing she noticed was someone gently shaking her shoulder.

"Wake up, Hermione," a voice sounded close to her ear. "You have to go."

Her eyes shot open and she looked straight into a pair of grey eyes raging with worry, scrutinising her anxiously. As it appeared she was lying in bed and Malfoy was leaning over her with his hands placed next to her on both of her sides, his face mere inches from hers. Her breath hitched.

"Why?" She whispered in response, the first thing she said, and he pulled back a little. An odd pang of disappointment shot through her stomach.

"Because your inspectors are waiting for you and it's almost evening. You're expected home soon." Malfoy said without his usual sneer. Instead his voice only conveyed worry and perhaps something else too. Was it regret?

Hermione's fuzzy mind tried to process this information as Malfoy straightened up and much to her relief sat down at her bedside. Somehow she couldn't bear the idea that he would leave her now. He showed no intention of doing that however. Instead he kept watching her closely.

"Where am I?" She finally asked, looking around in the luxuriant bedroom she didn't recognise.

"In one of the guest rooms. Your male inspector and I have carried you here, after you fainted," Malfoy replied evenly and Hermione gasped in dismay.

She had been so sure that she could cope with confronting the drawing room of her nightmares. But she had been wrong. She had collapsed and had put Draco Malfoy, whose steps were watched like a hawk because of his past, in a very difficult situation. Ashamed, she turned her head away and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'm sorry. I can understand if you're mad with me," she said softly.

For a moment Malfoy seemed confused. Then he shook his head.

"I'm mad with myself," he said a bit grimly. "I should have never let you go into that drawing room again."

That had probably been what the fight in the hallway had been about, Hermione guessed. She could understand Mrs. Malfoy's dismay with the situation and realising this only added to the regret she already felt.

"Do you think you feel well enough to sit up?"

Hermione nodded wordlessly and Malfoy leaned forward. Trustingly she put her head on his shoulder and subconsciously inhaled his scent as he pulled her up. It slightly resembled the soap from the Prefect's bathroom she'd smelled on him before, only more subtle. Somehow it had a calming effect on her.

"Here, drink this. It will make you feel better."

He reached out toward the bedside table and picked up a glass filled with some potion. Obediently Hermione took the glass from him and drank. A warm feeling spread through her stomach.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, looking at her intently.

Taken aback by the fierce look in his eyes Hermione lowered her gaze as a blush rushed to her
cheeks.

"Better," she exaggerated it, trying to suppress the dizziness coming up again.

Malfoy seemed to believe her, because he nodded. "Good. You have some colour returning to your face too."

He got up but when he turned around Hermione grabbed his forearm. "Wait. You didn't contact Ron or Harry, didn't you?"

Malfoy looked down on her hand holding him and some extra colour was added to the blush on Hermione's cheeks as she hastily let go of him.

"No. I'd rather Side-Along Apparate you to your house, than have Weasley standing at my door," he replied a bit coldly.

He seemed to contemplate the idea for a moment because a bitter smile appeared on his features before he straightened up.

"Your inspectors are waiting for you in the library. You've trained them well, I must say. They wouldn't hear of leaving you behind."

Hermione smiled weakly and tried to get up. Her legs trembled when she pushed them out of bed and was too wobbly to notice that Malfoy had taken her elbows to support her.

When she finally stood a triumphant smile formed on her lips but then a white, blinding pain shot through her head and she winced. "Ow!"

"Careful now. It will pass," she heard Malfoy say from somewhere above her as she lowered her aching head.

He was right. The warm potion in her stomach had already started to clear her head and strengthen her muscles. The spinning feeling subsided and Hermione looked up at Malfoy with a shaky smile.

"I think I'm all right now. Please, don't bother with bringing me home. I should be fine and I have my inspectors..."

"No," Malfoy responded simply. "You're not all right. The potion I gave you merely provides you with just enough strength to be able to Side-Along Disapparate. We're not allowed to keep anything stronger in the house."

Hermione's face darkened at his words but he disregarded it as he continued, "You're exhausted because you've passed out and while that happened in my house, I won't just let you go off alone with your inspectors."

Hermione closed her eyes and nodded, too tired to argue. She felt horribly guilty for the situation she'd put him in.

"You're becoming a real Gryffindor, Malfoy," she whispered, "for going through all this trouble for me."

"Please!" He scoffed but his eyes betrayed his amusement as he replaced his hands from her elbows to her shoulders, turning her toward the door.

"The Apparition Room is not too far away," he apologised.
Easter would arrive soon at Hogwarts and again Ginny failed to attend class, this time for try-outs with the Holyhead Harpies. The Potions classroom was littered with painted eggs and roaming yellow chicks, giving the gloomy place an oddly cheerful look, when Hermione entered the classroom and started to unpack her bag. There was a strange feeling of anticipation as she waited for class to commence.

This was the first time Ginny skipped Potions class since the holidays and Hermione hadn't spoken to Malfoy since the Patronus lessons had ended. They had returned to their own lives, which had always been worlds apart and the lessons had become a distant memory, almost like a dream that had never really happened.

Whenever they would run into each other they merely nodded in polite greeting and Hermione soon began to realise she'd missed talking to him.

One time during Charms class Ginny had whispered behind her hand, "Why are you staring at Malfoy, Hermione?"

Hermione shot up with a start. "Am I?"

Just like in all of the classes he attended the eighth year Slytherin was sitting alone in a desk at the front, but opposite from where Professor Flitwick, oblivious to his distracted students, was busy explaining a charm to them. And indeed she'd been watching Malfoy as he was taking notes of the Professor's instructions. Ginny nodded meaningfully.

"Yes, you are. Leave the poor man alone, Hermione. Don't bully him, he's done nothing wrong to you," Ginny spoke jokingly and Hermione rolled her eyes at her, glad that she misinterpreted her stare.

Because there was no use denying it. Hermione knew that her gaze often wandered to Malfoy during classes. His serious expression and the dedication he showed when performing the instructed magic, brought back memories of those intangible days around Christmas when they had wandered the hallways of Hogwarts at night and practiced advanced magic in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

She started to hope for another opportunity to be partnered up with Malfoy during Potions class.

Come Easter, her silent wish was finally granted.

Hermione's heart made a strange leap in her chest when Malfoy's tall figure appeared in the doorway and he immediately headed for her desk. As he sat down next to her she couldn't suppress an amused grin. News travelled fast.

Hermione stole a sideways look at him. Malfoy's normally stony features actually held a hint of interest as he put out his wand next to hers and cast a quick glance at her.

"Granger."

"Malfoy," she smiled and to her surprise he swiftly returned it.

And as she reached for her textbook a ridiculous thought crossed her mind, that maybe he'd been looking forward to this moment as well, which made her happier than she was prepared to admit.

Patiently, the Gryffindor and the Slytherin waited for Professor Slughorn to come over and give instructions on an alternative potion to brew. However, the Professor pointedly ignored them as he instructed his NEWT-students and then opened The Daily Prophet.
When after several minutes the Professor hadn't even begun to look in their direction, Malfoy drawled on a low voice, "You scared him off, Granger."

"Apparently," Hermione snorted, shaking her head in amusement as she reached for her textbook. "Well then... shall we make the choice for the Professor, then?"

Within a few minutes they had picked a potion which sounded to both of their liking and quietly they’d fallen into their working routine.

Quickly thereafter, the liquid gained a brilliant magenta colour and they sat back in their narrow school desk, waiting for Professor Slughorn to muster his courage and collect his precious potion.

It was a peaceful moment in which neither of them said anything. Having grown accustomed to the feeling of their limbs touching they had stopped trying pulling back from the other a long time ago.

From the corner of her eye Hermione studied the Slytherin's profile - the light blond hair falling over his forehead, his sharp, aloof features, the slender, aristocratic hands resting patiently in his lap as he sat perfectly still next to her. True to his position among their classmates he didn't try to engage in a conversation with her and Hermione knew that she had to start, but after all these weeks of barely acknowledging each other this suddenly seemed extremely difficult.

As Hermione tried to find a way to begin she noticed that he sometimes cast a wistful glance at the small cellar window near the arched ceiling, from where faint sounds of voices calling drifted into the classroom.

"Malfoy..." Hermione started hesitantly but cut herself off when Professor Slughorn finally decided to inch closer. Disappointed, she sat back in their desk.

It was then that the small window above the eighth years crashed into thousands of pieces. A screeching sound penetrated Hermione’s ears and automatically she cowered when suddenly she felt the weight of a body shielding her from the razor sharp splinters showering down on her.

As Hermione gasped for air a pair of strong arms were holding her tightly against a warm chest and the scent of bath soap from the Prefects' Bathroom reached her nose. Her eyes shot open and immediately she recognised the heavily embroidered, green and silver emblem of a snake on a black background.

Her heart began to race in her chest, knowing that it was Malfoy who held her in a tight embrace, keeping her from harm.

"Can't breathe..." Hermione finally choked.

Immediately, the iron grip on her shoulders lessened and she was pulled to her feet quickly. Then Malfoy shook the glass splinters from his robes and out of his blond hair. Somewhere in the otherwise dead quiet classroom someone whistled.

Malfoy's expression darkened in embarrassment but then something distracted him. His eyes widened.

Before Hermione was able to say something, he mouthed at her, 'wait.'

As a panic broke out among their classmates for a reason Hermione had yet to discover that Malfoy had already left their desk and was moving through the group of seventh-years with astounding agility. Lightly, he jumped on another desk and then swiftly grabbed something from the air.
Wide-eyed, Hermione watched as Malfoy turned around on the desk, holding in his hand a winged, golden ball fighting to escape his determined grasp.

The cause of all the trouble. A golden Snitch. The class fell silent at seeing the hated Slytherin's spectacular actions, apart from a few impressed whispers.

But Malfoy ignored them and stepped from the desk with an unintentional elegant movement. Leisurly he strolled back to where Hermione was sitting at her desk, put his hand on the table and bowed over. Expertly he closed the golden ball's wings.

"And Slytherin wins the game!" He smirked teasingly, his gaze challenging.

His eyes were glistening as vividly as during that magical moment when he'd finally cast a full bodied Patronus and an involuntary shiver ran down Hermione's spine.

Though the Quidditch Captains had been given permission by the Headmistress to select eighth years for their teams, for obvious reasons Slytherin had started the season with another, lesser talented Seeker than Malfoy and Hermione suddenly realised that Malfoy missed playing Quidditch. It was perhaps his only passion and he was good at it.

A sad smile appeared on her lips as she slightly tilted her head, her curls falling over her shoulder.

"Thank you," she said simply, "for shielding me just now."

Malfoy's smirk faltered and he straightened up, nodding curtly. Then he started to pack his bag.

A lost feeling came over Hermione as the class around them had done the same, whispering among themselves.

"Malfoy..."

He looked up, a blank expression in his eyes.

"Well done. You really are a good Seeker," Hermione added quietly and for a moment she saw in his softening expression the recognition she'd been looking for for the past double hour of Potions, mixed with feelings of pain and regret.

That was the moment Professor Slughorn sauntered over to him and gasped in dismay.

"Oh no! My beautiful potion! It's completely spoiled!"

When Malfoy opened the door of the guest room two very worried faces belonging to her inspectors appeared in Hermione's view. "Miss Granger! Are you all right? What happened?"

Hermione instinctively grabbed Malfoy's arm as she collected her whirling thoughts.

"I passed out," she said simply. "Draco and I were talking about our Hogwarts days, when I fainted. Perhaps I should have finished my sandwich during lunch."

She didn't dare to look up at the blond man supporting her but she had felt his body flinch at her mentioning of his first name.

He didn't comment on it though and she let out a breath of relief, inwardly wondering why she had done it anyway. She wasn't sure. Partly it seemed because she wanted to reassure the inspectors of Malfoy's good intentions, partly because it seemed right somehow.
The inspectors looked at each other doubtfully but to Hermione's silent gratitude Malfoy prevented further questions as he said tersely, "The Apparition Room is right ahead. Please, follow me."

The Apparition Room was a small room, a closet really, at the end of the hallway. It had white plastered walls and no windows.

Hermione tried suppressing a new wave of dizziness threatening to wash over her again as Hermione entered the small room. She held her hand clasped around Malfoy's arm as his other hand rested on her shoulder, stabilising her.

Having accepted that the inspectors weren't about to leave their colleague behind, Malfoy instructed them curtly as the female inspector closed the door. "We're Disapparating to the Burrow. From there, you can go wherever you see fit."

His gaze softened somewhat when he turned to Hermione and added on a low voice, "I think it's best you hold onto me entirely, so we won't risk you letting go of my arm and get Splinched."

"I'd rather not," Hermione agreed tiredly. After a moment of hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his shoulder. Shyly she pressed herself against his body. Colour rushed to her cheeks when she felt his breath hitch slightly. She hoped he didn't feel how her heartbeat quickened in response to his closeness.

Then he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her tightly against him.

Stars appeared behind Hermione's eyes and it felt as if the world disappeared around them. The only thing remaining was the feeling of Malfoy's arms holding her and the warmth of his body supporting hers. Blood pounded in her ears as Hermione realised it felt safe, it felt right. And it was terribly unnerving.

Her eyes closed involuntarily when he lightly rested his chin on the crown of her head and with a forceful jerk, they Disapparated from Malfoy Manor.

Summer arrived at Hogwarts bringing hot days and warm, lazy nights and the NEWT-students were soon expected to be reduced to mere shadows of themselves as they were studying for the most important exams in their lives.

The last match of the Quidditch season, Gryffindor against Ravenclaw, would take place next Saturday. And when she arrived at Potions class from Ancient Runes Hermione found out that Malfoy had already taken place in her desk.

Her face lit up at the sight. She'd been hoping for one last double hour of Potions with Malfoy and perhaps he felt that way too. Pausing in her steps, Hermione took a moment to watch him. He was reading notes with a concentrated expression on his face as the sun lit up his blond hair.

A smile appeared on Hermione's lips. Most students were not expecting an instruction this close to examination week but Malfoy clearly was prepared for them to brew Professor Slughorn one last potion.

Quietly, Hermione sat down next to Malfoy and the hot summer air brushed her skin through the open window above them.

"I was thinking that we may give Professor Slughorn a parting-gift," he said without looking up. "Since our last potion didn't work out for him."
His even voice held a slight hint of amusement and something else she couldn’t quite pinpoint. Was it regret?

Hermione looked at the tin cauldron in front of them, feeling sad. As their final year had been drawing to an end and their NEWT-examinations would commence soon the time was inevitably coming closer in which they would be going their separate ways. This would be their last collaboration over Potions class and the last time she could enjoy his quiet intelligence and calm attentiveness.

Hermione felt the tears prick behind her eyes as she nodded wordlessly and took her Potions textbook from her bag.

"That would be a good idea," she agreed a bit hoarsely.

Professor Slughorn didn’t enter the classroom until after the Gryffindor and the Slytherin had already started preparing ingredients for their potion. He had been a little late, expecting his NEWT-students to be in an exuberant and not too productive mood.

Therefore, he was surprised to see his eighth year students bowed over a steaming cauldron. The sight of those two young adults stuck in their cramped school desk had become his favourite over the year and, despite himself, a hopeful expression lit up his face.

It was then that Hermione and Malfoy suddenly looked up and smirked at him.

Hastily, Professor Slughorn averted his gaze and hurried over to his desk, disappearing behind his newspaper.

Almost two hours later, Hermione quietly read the last instruction and watched as Malfoy efficiently brushed the nightshade from his silver knife and into the cauldron. The brew in the cauldron started to whirl around in a glistening vapour, like it had done all those times before.

"So," Malfoy asked tentatively as they stared into the cauldron, their heads mere inches from each other, "what are you going to do, when you leave Hogwarts?"

Startled, Hermione looked up. She wasn’t expecting a question, let alone such a personal one, from him. She wasn’t sure though if he was interested to hear her plans for the future. For a moment she hesitated. She hadn’t told anyone about her ambitions yet and she expected Malfoy to be the least understanding of all. But she had never been one to avoid a question.

"I’ve been wanting to work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, to improve the lives of house-elves," she confessed softly, bracing herself for his reaction.

But whatever snide reaction she expected, it didn’t come. Instead he only nodded dejectedly and Hermione asked gingerly, "And you?"

The breath he let out resembled a silent sigh when he replied, "I don’t know. Return to Wiltshire, I guess."

It didn’t sounded too happy and Hermione remembered what he’d said earlier that year. 'Anything to get away from home.'

She realised that he probably envied her for being able to pursue her own career. And being one third of the Golden Trio her perspectives were expected to be brilliant. She had the world at her feet whereas he wasn’t expected to work for a living, what with his father still being the wealthiest
wizard in all western Europe. For him there was no escaping the surely tense and embittered atmosphere of home.

Malfoy's voice then pulled her from her thoughts. "Listen, Granger. Since this probably will be the last time we'll ever speak to each other, I'll say this now."

He drew in a shallow breath as he kept his eyes trained on the magenta brew in the cauldron. He wasn't used to putting himself in a vulnerable position.

"I want to thank you. Despite the things I've done to you and your friends before, you were the only one in school to be civil with me this year and even help me... I... I appreciate that. You've made this year bearable for me."

He cast a bitter look at the seventh year Gryffindor and Slytherin students who were busy biding their time with talking and laughing. Hermione followed his gaze.

"I have no reason to treat you the way they do," she responded softly. "You saved us and your mother saved Harry and for that I'm forever grateful."

Her honest reply made Malfoy's features harden.

"Saved you..." he repeated whisperingly and his grey eyes filled with anguish.

It evoked memories of pain Hermione was not prepared to think about right now. She looked up at the ceiling, fighting against tears welling up.

"We haven't always been easy on you too, Malfoy," she said on a low voice to prevent it from turning hoarse.

"Well, that's absolutely true," Malfoy sneered in his familiar way but it didn't sound convincing.

They fell silent as the sound of the boisterous class around them screeched in their ears. Their heads bowed dejectedly they waited for Professor Slughorn to collect his potion, knowing that this was the last time they would be crammed in the small school desk together, their arms and legs pressed against the other's.

When the Potions teacher finally found their desk they simultaneously rose to their feet and for the last time their eyes met. In Draco's Hermione read the same regret she was feeling.

He extended his hand. "Good luck on your exams, Granger."

Carefully, she placed her hand in his and he shook it slowly.

"You too, Malfoy. It's been nice working with you."

Long after his hand had let go of hers she felt the gentle touch of his fingers folded around hers as each of them had gone their separate ways - Hermione to the Gryffindor Tower and Malfoy to the Slytherin Dungeon. Worlds apart. They graduated with an Outstanding for their Potions NEWT.

At the graduation ceremony Malfoy stiffly accepted his diploma scroll, accompanied by a meagre applause from the audience. He'd finished second only behind her. She hoped that he noticed that her applause for him was sincere as he returned to his seat next to her on the front row.

The Malfoys left as soon as the ceremony had ended, not staying for the graduation banquet. With a melancholy gaze Hermione watched them go but before they disappeared into the Entrance Hall
Malfoy turned around and it seemed like he nodded to her ever so slightly. The next moment he was gone.

The Burrow was already shrouded in darkness when the two inspectors, Malfoy and Hermione arrived at the Weasley family home. Hermione recognised the smell of freshly prepared food coming from the kitchen.

"You can let go now, Granger," she heard Malfoy's voice from above. "We've arrived at the Burrow."

He sounded a bit worried. Hermione struggled to open one eye and discovered that she was still clinging to Malfoy like a life-buoy. Flustered she dropped her hands and the back of his expensive jacket fell from her fingers crumpled as she stepped back.

"Sorry," she mumbled and swayed a bit. Immediately his hands shot out to support her.

"Thanks." Her embarrassment couldn't be any bigger.

"You should say something to the inspectors. They're waiting to hear that it's all right for them to go home," Malfoy encouraged her under his breath and nodded inconspicuously at some point behind her.

With difficulty Hermione turned around and did her best to produce a reassuring smile.

A few moments later the inspectors Disapparated with a light pop after they'd cast a last doubtful look at Malfoy.

He didn't seem to care though as he kept his gaze trained on Hermione. Worry simmered in his eyes when she bowed her head, her face pale.

"I can take you to the fence. Do you think you'll manage from there?"

Hermione grimaced and nodded. Obviously Malfoy didn't want to get caught carrying a half unconscious Granger to the Burrow. And he was right.

She looked up at him. His hair looked almost silver in the light of the waning moon. Something in his eyes softened his expression as he scrutinised her clammy face thoughtfully. His gaze reminded her of their time at Hogwarts when fate and Professor Slughorn had crammed them in a small desk at Potions class and something fluttered in her stomach.

"Malfoy," she started weakly without knowing what she wanted to say to him. The only thing she knew was that he would disappear the moment they would reach the Weasleys' disorderly front yard across from the woods shielding them from sight. And she was strangely reluctant for that moment to come.

"Yes?" His gaze was mostly unreadable but for a slight hint of interest.

"Thank you for letting me see the drawing room again. I may not seem like it, but I really am very glad that you did."

Malfoy nodded silently though Hermione sensed that he didn't completely agree with her.

"I hope you'll get rid of those nightmares, now."

His gaze, full of regret, showed what he had left unspoken.
Hermione swallowed. During their repeated seventh year at Hogwarts he had somewhat lowered his guard for her and had shown her a different side of him. She had been surprised to discover that he was an intelligent, somewhat sensitive person with an unusual perceptiveness for the world around him. Someone who against his Slytherin nature had placed himself between her and danger two times now. Someone who unknowingly had become the centre of her silent fascination during that final year at the wizarding school.

"I hope so too," Hermione whispered tiredly. She really wanted to remember Malfoy in another way than in her frightful dreams of night.

Something stronger than herself made her stand on her tiptoes and put her hand on his chest. An expression of surprise passed over his reserved features but he didn't step back.

Then she closed her eyes and pressed a gentle kiss on his cheek.

Her lips were met with smoothly shaven skin and in spite of the the cold of the winter-air having cooled down the silky texture a jolt of electricity shot through her core at the feeling.

The moment Hermione's lips touched him his breath hitched and his hands momentarily tightened around her elbows but when he spoke his voice was even. "You have to go, or you will pass out again."

He was right. Hermione couldn't do more than to nod mutely and they crossed the last distance the crooked house. They stopped at the fence and Malfoy made sure she had a tight hold on the worn wood before he turned to leave. He seemed reluctant to go though, lingering at the fence.

"This is goodbye then, I guess?" He said, his back turned to Hermione.

Had it been six years since their last Potions class together? It suddenly felt like yesterday as regret once again wrenched Hermione's heart. This time however... She swallowed.

"Well, actually there's something called repeat compliance visit," she said softly, her voice barely more than a whisper.

He stilled and then turned his head slightly to the side, looking down at the ground.

"Repeat visit?" He said sharply. "When…?"

"It's a surprise visit." Hermione shook her head. "I can't say when."

"And I suppose you won't participate in this... repeat compliance visit?" Something in his tone of voice suggested that he wished for her to confirm the opposite.

"I… I don't know. I haven't thought about it yet," Hermione said truthfully. She had wanted to make that decision upon the inspectors' progress.

Malfoy nodded.

"I'll wait for that moment to come, then," he said and walked away with long strides. Moments later Hermione heard the light pop of Draco Malfoy Disapparating and she stumbled through the door of the Burrow, straight into the arms of a startled Molly Weasley.
Draco lay sprawled on the downy duvet, eyes wide as he stared at the elaborate silk canopy crowning his four-poster bed. In the darkness of night the silk had adopted a vague muddy grey, but he knew that in broad daylight the canopy would return to its original navy blue colour.

It wouldn't be long before that very daylight would actually appear as it hesitantly began to peek through the brocade curtains. Sleep never had been further away from him than now, though.

After he had safely returned Granger to her home at the Weasleys Draco had evaded his disgruntled mother who had wanted to waylay him outside the Apparition Room and hastened to his room. He had barely been able to keep himself from running. Upon closing the double doors behind him, he had leaned against the panelled wood and squeezed his eyes shut with a groan.

Inside of him raging emotions had completely overtaken his carefully composed impassiveness.

It had taken him various minutes before he managed to straighten up, pull off his jacket and throw it across the foot of his bed, while violently shaking his head to get rid of the memory of holding Granger in his arms. He couldn't help though that despite himself his hand had gone to where her lips had touched his cheek as he'd sat down on his bed, staring into the distance.

After they had left Hogwarts he had been positive their paths would never cross again, save for a few chance encounters here and there. About a year ago however, his family had received a letter from the Ministry informing all families in possession of registered house-elves about new regulations to improve on the living and labour conditions of house-elves.

Draco remembered that his father had angrily smacked the letter on the table, at what he saw as yet another attack on wizarding privileges but Draco had only bowed his head to hide his smirk as one name had crossed his mind.

Granger.

He hadn't spoken to her in seven years but it was nice to see that she had actually achieved the goals she had confided him in before anyone else.

Due to Potter's weighty intercession on their case it only took the Wizengamot a couple of weeks to acquit Draco and his father from any charges. The day the Wizengamot passed judgment on the accused Death Eaters Draco motionlessly underwent the public reading of the sentence and even felt slightly disappointed with the outcome when the Minister of Magic's final, delivering words sank in. He was free.

In the gallery behind him his unemotional mother openly burst into tears, which vaguely surprised him. He avoided to look at his father's triumphant smile as the crowd in the gallery was inflamed with anger. Little did they know that this outrage only reflected his own conflicted feelings on the outcome of the trial.

As Draco left the dock their reactions sharply reminded him of the fact that his acquittal merely served to accommodate to Potter's sense of justice. His own feelings of guilt about his previous support of the Dark Lord were inconsequential. Other than that, the favourable sentence burdened him with an obligation much heavier than any assignment the Dark Lord could ever have placed
on him - to make good use of the chance offered to him by a society which had morally condemned
him.

Three days later Pansy Parkinson unexpectedly showed up at the Manor, congratulating him with
a false, enthusiastic smile on her face. Draco was surprised to see her as he hadn't heard from her
since his family had fallen out of favour with the Dark Lord. Reluctantly he let her in.

His mother seemed glad enough to see Pansy again. Draco knew his parents were struggling with
their part in the Dark Lord's demise and their isolated position in society because of it. But Draco
only felt grateful that the three of them had survived the war and lived in relative peace. The last
thing he needed was a visit from Pansy rambling about the horrid treatment of her Pureblood
family since Potter had defeated the Dark Lord. Silently, he drank his tea and formed his decision.

When Pansy finally left he had politely but determinedly asked her not to visit again. She didn't take
it well but it made no odds to him.

It was halfway the rainy August that followed a searing hot July that the letter from Hogwarts
arrived, inviting Mr. Draco Malfoy to return to school and complete his education. All last year's
seventh year students had received the same offer.

Lucius was sceptical, even offended by the idea that his son was to return to 'that' school again.

But Draco silently looked down on the familiar emerald green writing, signed by Headmistress
Minerva McGonagall, as he considered the possibility. Though he was surprised to receive the
unexpected letter he found the idea of returning to Hogwarts for one last year rather appealing.

Ever since the ending of the war he had been going through the days without any goal or purpose
and he had never felt so utterly lost and out of place. The downcast atmosphere at the Manor he
could only escape during a walk through the gardens or on a broomstick ride across the county.
Which he had been doing a lot lately.

Reluctantly and following a lot of pressure from Potter, his family had been rewarded with an
Order of Merlin, Second Class for their important role in the Dark Lord's defeat. They remained
social outcasts though. On both sides of the former parties. It had only been their obvious wealth
and standing which had driven Pansy back to his doorstep.

Draco knew that his decision had already been made the instant that he'd noticed the familiar
envelope between the other mail on the silver platter.

There would be a real possibility that he was going to be ignored in school as much as he was on
his rare visits to Diagon Alley but he didn't care. He felt that he needed the familiar surroundings,
the structure, to accomplish something by himself.

"I'm going," he simply stated.

His parents didn't try to stop him.

His year at Hogwarts had flown by and much too soon to his liking he'd been standing next to
Professor McGonagall receiving his diploma scroll. Now the time really had come to try and pick
up his life again from the scattered pieces left after the end of the war.

While at Hogwarts he'd had a legitimate postponement of this confrontation with his post-war life,
but he'd always known that on the other side of the school year the black hole awaited him. He
was still having nightmares of the time when the entire Death Eater community had shrouded
Malfoy Manor in darkness equalising a flock of Dementors having commandeered his house. The paralysing fear they’d spread around had only been broken when the Golden Trio had been brought in.

After his return home he had ventured on a few visits to Flourish and Blotts and on one of those visits he had met with Astoria Greengrass. He remembered her as the younger sister of one his Slytherin classmates. She was someone whose proverbial Slytherin cunningness mostly consisted of her using her charms to get her way. The thing he liked the most about her was that she loved books.

Draco had a talent for Occlumency. The ability to compartmentalise his mind had been a merciful skill to shut down the horrible memories and help him through the day. Nevertheless there were no mental walls high enough to shut down Granger's agonising screams echoing in his dreams as the torture of her by his aunt was played before his mind’s eye, time and time again.

There was a reason he hadn't proposed to Astoria yet. He didn't want her to be confronted with his nightly sufferings.

As Draco had expected only very few former seventh year students had returned to Hogwarts. He was not surprised that the majority of them were Ravenclaws.

It felt wonderful to be back in the familiar surroundings of Hogwarts. The castle had been restored to its former glory, though a few walls had been left a ruin as a reminder of what had transpired there.

Few people had noticed his presence up until the Start-of-Term-Feast but to Draco's dismay the Headmistress chose to welcome them by calling each of their names and Draco had no choice but to stand up as well. As expected the warm applause for the Ravenclaws had changed into sharp hisses when he straightened to his full length. Looking at the Head Table he tried to ignore their reaction, knowing that he had to get used to it if he wanted to survive the year.

However there was also another reason he kept his eyes fixed to the Head Table. As he was standing there, the object of whispered indignation, he felt the eyes of one person burning in his back. Obviously, she hadn't noticed his presence before on the train to Hogwarts.

Upon their return to school, the Headmistress had maintained in function those of the eighth years who had been Prefects before so Draco had reluctantly joined the Prefects' meeting on the Hogwarts train. Taking position in a far corner of the compartment he kept himself at the background, wishing for it to be over soon. He had been slightly disappointed that his situation wasn't even special enough for McGonagall to break with tradition and remove him from his position.

It was then that he had seen those familiar brown curls cascading down on delicate shoulders and the caramel eyes looking past him. The red and gold insignia on her school robes had identified the young woman as a Gryffindor.

It was Hermione Granger.

Her presence in the compartment had knocked the breath out of him and an agonising emotion, which had been slumbering inside of him for a long time, had hit him with unexpected force. Guilt. Absolute, bottomless guilt toward the Gryffindor girl who had suffered so much at the hands of his aunt Bellatrix in his own home.
Just when he'd thought that in escaping to Hogwarts he could put some distance between himself and this dark part of his memories, Granger's presence on the Hogwarts train reminded him of the very things he was seeking to forget about - all the wrong doings he'd seen and put up with and did nothing about, almost leading to the destruction of her and her friends.

Gritting his teeth, he'd withdrawn in the corner of the compartment. Of course, he should have known that she would return to Hogwarts, too. That girl's inner Ravenclaw would never have put up with not having completed her formal education.

Almost all evening he'd felt her eyes on him and he'd been tempted to look up and see if she was as shocked to see him as he'd been to see her. But chances were that he would also be seeing hurt and pain in her gaze and he knew that he couldn't face that. Not again. The remainder of dinner he kept his gaze down and disappeared to the Slytherin Dormitories upon the first chance.

He had missed seeing Granger on a daily basis after their graduation. Draco wasn't afraid to admit it.

Their collaborations at Potions class had helped keeping the loneliness at bay and the memories of the Patronus lessons over the holidays were more precious to him than he would ever confide anyone in. As it had turned out she of all people in school had held no grudge against him. In fact, by the time the lessons had begun they had long been past the figments of the heroine or the traitor other people held them for as they had silently acknowledged the scars that had been brought to the other's soul.

It had been only after his return to the Manor that Draco had started to realise the major influence Granger had had on his state of mind. Because of her he could look at himself in the mirror again.

Though Draco had known that after graduation day they would most likely never speak again it wasn't difficult to keep track of her life. Her picture would often show up in The Daily Prophet, whether it was as a Ministry official in the serious section of the newspaper or on the gossip pages whenever she attended a ball with Potter and the Weasley family. Sometimes Draco attended those balls himself but the situation never allowed for more than a polite nod at each other from the other side of the room.

Draco sighed, pinching his nose as today's events replayed before his mind's eye.

Granger had returned to Malfoy Manor to see the drawing room. The moment he had recognised her he had known.

He'd briefly wondered if the House-Elves Labour Inspection, or whatever it was called, was only a cover, a front, to be able to gain access to the former Death Eaters' house. But as the inspectors had quietly discussing the task at hand, he had acknowledged this Slytherin way of thinking would never crossed her righteous Gryffindor's mind. Granger always put her heart into everything and improving the lives of house elves would have been her most important goal.

That these inspections would also lead her to Malfoy Manor would merely have been... a convenient chance.

Draco considered it a relief that neither Potter nor the Weasel seemed to have cared enough to join Granger at Hogwarts and happily settled into the school's daily routine, finding in his studies the peace and quiet he had been longing for so desperately for the last few months.
A day after his arrival at Hogwarts, Draco was summoned to the Headmistress' office, to discuss his duties as a Prefect. He wasn't surprised - he'd already expected as much.

With her piercing, stern gaze, Professor McGonagall had scrutinised the impeccable appearance and polite expression of the young man quietly standing before her.

The impression she got from the eighth year Slytherin seemed to please her.

Her old features softened somewhat when she said sharply, but not unfriendly, "I will come to the point straight away, Mr. Malfoy. As you have noticed all of the eighth-year students returning to Hogwarts who have been Prefects before have been maintained in function for the upcoming school year. And although your behaviour as a Prefect in the past has shown severe disdain for the function, in the whole existence of the school it has never occurred that a Prefect, not even Voldemort..."

The Headmistress paused for a moment but Malfoy forced himself not to flinch.

"... has been removed from his or her position. I'm not willing to break with tradition, especially not considering your part in defeating Voldemort."

This time he did flinch. He was still touchy about that.

"However," Professor McGonagall continued sternly, "most of the students, or their parents for that matter, will not understand the delicacy of the matter. Therefore, I have decided that while you'll remain a Prefect in name, with the privileges that come with the title, you will not be allowed to give and take points from the other students and impose punishments."

Feeling that nothing he could say would change her mind and remove him from his position like he wished, Malfoy nodded quietly. "I understand, Professor McGonagall."

His reply earned him a knowing gaze from the Headmistress over the rim of her small glasses. It wasn't until he had already reached the winding stairs that she called him back, an encouraging smile lighting up her stern features.

"I really am very glad with your return to Hogwarts, Mr. Malfoy. I hope you'll have a good year. Good luck."

"Draco?"

A muffled voice, accompanied by a polite knock pulled Draco from his thoughts and he noticed the morning sun peeking through the curtains. Outside, the birds had started twittering hours ago. Suppressing a groan, he raked his hand over his face, sat up straight and swung his legs over the bed. The door opened soundlessly.

"How was your night, dear?"

He blinked against the angry light that suddenly came in when his mother determinedly opened the curtains. Outside, the birds had started twittering hours ago. Suppressing a groan, he raked his hand over his face, sat up straight and swung his legs over the bed. The door opened soundlessly.

"How was your night, dear?"

He blinked against the angry light that suddenly came in when his mother determinedly opened the curtains. Through the slits of his eyes tearing up, he saw her elegant, statuesque silhouette against the blinding light around her. It made her look unearthly, ethereal and her blonde hair seemed to glow as she bent over, putting a hand to his shoulder. Over the course of the war her features had lost some of its haughtiness, leaving only beauty.

In her blue eyes shone he detected a hint of worry. She knew about his nightmares.
"I'm all right, mother, only a bit tired. I didn't get much sleep tonight," he toned down his insomniac state of the night past.

A shadow passed over his mother's face at his words.

"It's that girl, isn't it?" Narcissa's voice grew slightly colder when she spoke. "You shouldn't have accompanied her home, Draco, she isn't your respon—"

"She was, mother, we've been through this yesterday," he responded sharply, ignoring the headache coming up. "Or would you rather have had Weasley at your door?"

Narcissa remained silent. She knew her son was right. It could severely threaten their precarious situation if the Malfoy family was to be suspected of bringing any harm to Hermione Granger.

"I suppose not."

Narcissa shot her son a piercing look, which he avoided, afraid of what she might see in his. Giving his shoulder a light squeeze she turned to leave when Draco said to the floor, "She will come back, you know. A repeat visit, she called it."

The words had escaped is mouth before he knew it.

Narcissa stiffened but her reaction wasn't anything like he would expect.

"Well," she said dryly, "you'll have something to look forward to, then."

Draco's eyes widened but before he could respond, his mother had already closed the door behind her.

_During his repeated year at Hogwarts Draco spent very little time in the Slytherin Common Room, where conversations died down and eyes warily followed him whenever he took a seat at what used to be his favourite hang-out place on the Chesterfield sofas by the roaring fire. He rather went to the library, instead. The quiet atmosphere in there provided him with a break from the suspicious scrutiny with which he was being followed by the other students. The books didn't judge him._

_The first time he went to the library was after Professor Slughorn had teamed him up with Granger in Potions Class. He'd been looking around in search of a good place to sit, when his eyes crossed a pair of familiar, caramel ones. Sitting across from the entrance was Hermione Granger, looking at him from under her eyelashes. She hastily looked down when his gaze intercepted hers._

_Draco's face darkened. He'd noticed that she'd been taking peeks at him before and while he wanted nothing more than avoid the Gryffindor whose mere presence reminded him of events he didn't want to remember, she apparently couldn't just leave him alone like the other students._

_However, during Potions class Draco hadn't sensed with Granger any of the fear, loathing or disgust he'd been feeling with everyone else in school. Of course she'd been wary of him as fate had unexpectedly squeezed her into a school desk with Draco Malfoy, but he had been surprised to notice that she of all people didn't seem to judge him._

_During the war, Draco had resolutely distanced himself from the destructive ideology he had been born and raised in, sobered by the horrifying experience of the Dark Lord and his minions_
sponging off of his family. It had been a period of time in which he had seen the absolute worst humans could possibly be capable of. But he didn't entertained any illusions about how he could possibly begin to apologise to Granger for what had transpired over the past seven years, so he chose to avert his gaze every time he ran into the Gryffindor instead.

Therefore, it was to his absolute horror that Professor Slughorn then ordered him to collaborate with Granger for a full double period of Potions. As he'd picked up his books he'd silently wondered how he was to survive the upcoming two hours, knowing that ignoring the Gryffindor wasn't an option this time.

With his heart in his boots, he had sat down next to Granger, the expression on her face betraying that she too wasn't convinced about Professor Slughorn's decision.

They had started making preparations in an extremely tense atmosphere until he'd realised that he actually enjoyed working with Granger. She was skilled, efficient and talented at Potions and to his astonishment she seemed to feel the same way about him too. The occasion had led to their first civil conversation ever.

It had been after they'd finished their task in what had become an almost companionable atmosphere, when she'd broken the silence with this unexpected question. At first he had been wary and defensive, but when she'd withdrawn he'd realised that Granger's lack of hostility toward him was a merciful relief from the way the other students treated him. As he'd fixed his gaze on the cauldron before him he'd wondered how it was that Granger apparently didn't share the other students' loathing of him though she was entitled to.

When Granger had started to pile up her books with a downcast expression on her face Draco had acknowledged that it was because she had been there. Because she, like no one else at school, had been involved with the fall of the Dark Lord. She knew what it was that had made him do the things he had done, either in favour of the Dark Lord or in Potter's. Two sides, same battle.

Granger had looked quite shocked when he'd suddenly replied to her question in honest. The answer he'd refused to repeat. But Draco knew she'd had understood him and when his gaze crossed hers in the library he felt that there was still an opening.

With an inconspicuous nod they acknowledged each other's presence in the library and Draco chose to sit down not too far from Granger's book filled desk.

It was the start of his return to the library on a daily basis, not only for studying, but also for simply being in the presence of the one person in school who didn't loathe his very being.
Four weeks quietly passed by and as the house-elves brought out the Christmas decoration at Malfoy Manor Draco got emerged in assessing the grant applications for the family charity foundation.

He was glad that he had something to do while waiting for the inspection results to arrive.

Draco spent his Christmas Eve in the Great Hall alongside the few other students who would be staying at school over the holidays. Sitting at the corner of the table he quietly ate his elaborate dinner, fixing his gaze on the Christmas tree opposite the table. He didn't try to take part in the other students' cheerful chatter. The sparkling decoration reminded him of Granger's glistening tears when he'd seen her in the Great Hall this afternoon.

Granger had been looking at the trees being decorated with such a peculiar look on her face that he couldn't help but stop in his tracks and watch as she'd accepted a handkerchief from the Headmistress. Never before had he seen such sorrow on her delicate features. His stomach had wrenched with guilt and suddenly he'd felt a strong urge to walk up to the Gryffindor and wrap his arms around her as tight as he could. The sensation had cut off his breath as he'd stumbled back into the shadows of the Entrance Hallway. He still didn't know if she'd seen the shock on his face when she'd turned around and looked in his direction. He hoped not.

But it had been this very feeling which, despite his reluctance, had driven him to the castle entrance and watch her leave for the holidays. His eyes had followed her as she'd petted the Thestrals and stepped into the carriage, her red and gold scarf billowing in the cutting wind. This time he hadn't concealed his presence when she'd looked over her shoulder and caught his gaze. For a short spell their eyes had locked in a mutual recognition of each other's hurting amidst their boisterous, younger classmates. Despite the cold a warm feeling of gratitude had spread through him.

His step had been much lighter when his feet had carried him back to the Slytherin Common Room and back to his book.

Draco had preferred not to emphasise the new charity's ties to his family. Therefore the foundation was neutrally named Wiltshire Wizarding Foundation. His strategy worked.

With a disposable budget the size of a small country's GNP the fund had gained a respectable position in the wizarding world over the course of six years. As chairman Draco was gaining influence in the wizarding world like his father before but this time based on totally different values. When choosing the beneficiaries he preferred small projects over large, conspicuous ones and often requested to remain anonymous. It had done some good to the dark reputation of the Malfoy family.

Even more important was that the work, which had initially only been meant to help him through
the day, had started to grow on him. Much to his father's surprise Draco had declined to enlist an assistant as he found the applications an interesting read, if not slightly amusing at times. The proposals, ridiculous as they were sometimes, showed that the wizarding world was recuperating and that notion was of such importance to him that he would happily make an annual donation to the Broomstick Association's activities to support Broomstick riders in the Middle East.

Draco left the Great Hall as soon as they'd finished dessert, glad to be able to return to his book and the blissful quiet in the Slytherin dormitory. That was if he was allowed the precious time because the sound of hastened footsteps following him reached his ears as he briskly walked down the Viaduct Entrance and into the Dungeon Corridor. His face darkened when he understood that he was being followed by the small first year that had stayed at school during the holidays too. The boy was trying to keep up with the eighth-year's long strides, complying with the rules with following his Prefect back to the Slytherin Dungeon.

The situation made Draco feel quite uncomfortable. Over the past months he'd gotten used to being ignored and avoided all the time and he certainly wasn't looking for a revival of his responsibilities as a Prefect. But the first year was following him nonetheless.

Upon entering the Slytherin Common Room he immediately headed for the dorms like he'd been planning on doing, loosening his tie along the way. His book was waiting for him.

However, he was stopped by a soft, hesitant voice, calling out to him. Apparently the Common Room wasn't as quiet as Draco had expected.

"Look... there's Christmas presents underneath the tree..."

The words lingered in the air as Draco closed his eyes and sighed soundlessly. Slowly he turned around and finally acknowledged the first year he'd been trying to shake off. The boy was standing in the middle of the Slytherin Common Room, looking frail and small in the grim, dimly lit space. He looked up at his Prefect with an odd mix of anxiety and hope on his face.

Draco was taken aback. With the unexpected address the first year had broken with the Slytherins' silent rule of not speaking to the eighth year student in their midst. The boy had said something to Draco Malfoy. Something about Christmas presents.

Draco didn't know what to do, lingering on the staircase as something withheld him from simply ignoring the little boy and continue on his way up to the dormitories. He actually felt for the small first year, whose name had slipped him, that he was so unfortunate to have been left behind with the despised Draco Malfoy.

Draco had some inkling as to why this was.

The boy came from a fanatical family of Death Eaters he'd personally known. Most members had died or ended up in Azkaban. The little boy had been placed under custody of the Ministry and had entered Hogwarts this September. Though he was a rather sweet-natured boy the ideas he'd been taught to believe in had already caused problems in his class, Draco had understood while overhearing other Slytherins talking.

It was something Draco definitely wanted to steer clear from, but now the same first year had been
looking up at him, the only Slytherin Prefect left as his implied question hung in the air.

Draco hesitated. His book was waiting for him and he didn't feel like playing happy Christmas time. Especially not with a boy who was the every embodiment of the past he'd turned his back on.

But as he looked at the first year Draco only saw a child longing for some semblance of a Christmas. With a hollow feeling inside he recognised the loneliness which had driven the boy to address the eighth year the other Slytherins had taught him to avoid. Which for that reason alone was in fact a rather brave thing to do.

Sympathy for the boy eventually made the decision for him. Sighing inwardly, Draco acknowledged that unpacking one present with the first year wouldn't hurt. His book could wait. He nodded curtly and came down the stairs.

In response the boy's lips curled up in a smile and he made a run for the Christmas tree near the enormous fireplace.

Half an hour later the first year had gone to bed a happy child carrying a book about Quidditch teams sent to him by a barely known second cousin, while Draco indifferently put on the new gold watch with the Draco constellation engraved on the silver dial. A gift from his parents.

Draco threw himself on his bed and stared at the green canopy above him with a grave look on his face. Unpacking presents with the first year had painfully reminded him of his lonesome, isolated position in this world where even most of the teachers treated him with some level of caution. He was still a long way from finding a way to give his life meaning again.

His thoughts involuntarily trailed towards Granger. Fate had squeezed them in a desk at Potions Class three times in a row now and he'd been genuinely surprised by her open attitude towards him, though he didn't understand what is was that excited her interest with him. After his initial wariness of her had subsided, he couldn't be bothered with it anymore, though.

A hint of a smile ghosted over his lips when he thought back of the prank she'd played on greedy Professor Slughorn. He'd never thought she would be up such things but she'd surprised him again.

Although he would not admit it to himself he'd started to keep track of the female Weasley's training schedule, looking out for another chance of being partnered up with Granger again.

For a fleeting moment, Draco wondered how her Christmas Eve had been. He knew she would be celebrating Christmas at the Burrow. Her parents would be there too, he'd overheard the female Weasley saying in Transfiguration Class. It was quite amazing what one could find out by just minding one's own business.

He sighed and reached for his book, wishing for this dark two weeks of winter solstice to be over soon, so that he could be immersed in school routine once more. And if he was correct Quidditch practice would prevent Weasley's sister from attending Potions Class again in a week or two.

Suddenly, Draco's expression darkened when he realised the path his thoughts had taken and he opened his book with more vigour than necessary.

"Draco Malfoy."

A voice. A soft, tinkling voice with an ethereal ring to it and it said his name.

Draco shot up straight, pulling out his wand in the process. Then his mouth fell open.
Amidst a sea of shimmering silver light swam a lithe creature, swimming in the air. It had some sort of animal form and as he scrambled up Draco had realised that he was looking at a Patronus. An actual, corporeal Patronus waiting for him to recover from his shock.

It took several moments before he recognised the species. It was an otter.

Draco was mesmerised by the spectacular sight. He had never seen a Patronus before, though he had known that the members of the Order of the Phoenix all could conjure one. Potter had even managed to master the extremely difficult and advanced spell in his third year at Hogwarts. This couldn't be Potter's Patronus, though. Tentatively, he went to sit at the foot of his bed as he kept his eyes trained on the materialised light before him.

"Yes?"

His voice had been a bit hoarse as he responded to the creature. He didn't know that Patronuses could speak, but the otter's tinkling voice made shivers run down his spine.

"I bring word from Hermione Granger," the otter revealed his origins and Draco's eyes widened.

"Granger?" He brought out.

"She wishes you a merry Christmas and hopes you had a nice Christmas Eve."

For a moment, the otter lingered in the air as its words died away, then it disappeared in a glistening mist. Stupefied, Draco kept his gaze fixed on the spot where the otter had last been. His thoughts were a mess of amazement, fear, gratitude and strangely enough... hope as he let himself fall back onto the bed. The reason why was beyond him but amidst the seasonal festivities Granger had thought about him of all people. And not only had she thought about him, she'd also gone to the trouble of sending him a Patronus message.

When he finally picked up his book a smile graced his lips.

Though he generally kept a low profile, as chairman of the Wiltshire Wizarding Foundation Draco regularly received invitations to attend charity events. He sparsely accepted them, choosing only the ones which had something to do with rebuilding the wizarding world after the war. Those were the times when he sometimes encountered Hermione Granger and her friends whose presence alone lifted the prestige of the organising committees.

Draco rarely stayed longer than absolutely necessary, politely awaiting the moment the beneficiaries had finished their speeches of thanks to their contributors without whose donations the new hospital wing or library wouldn't have been realised. The appreciation and the inevitable applause he would accept with a modest nod and a toast. He often felt the curious gazes of the other guests resting on him as he would raise his glass to elegantly return the crowd's attention to the beneficiaries. He considered it progress. Curiosity was better than hostility.

There was one date on the social calendar, however, he had no opportunity of avoiding and which Draco dreaded the most. The First of December. The day of the annual ball of the Order of Merlin. It was the most anticipated social event of the year and featured heavily in the celebrity section of The Daily Prophet. The fame of the invitees, all Order recipients, attracted thousands of wizards and witches to the Diagon Alley Theatre to watch the red carpet entrance. They were willing to wait for hours to see a glimpse of their idols entering the theatre. In the pouring rain of course as the weather never held on the First of December.

During the longest minute of the year, Draco was forced to walk down that red carpet, feeling
completely out of place with the gold medal and purple ribbon of the Order of Merlin Second Class adorning his black dress robes.

While fixing his eyes on the lavishly decorated doors of the theatre on the other end of the red carpet, Draco always tried to ignore the gazes staring at him while he silently cursed Potter for putting him through this social agony. Sometimes he even wondered if Potter had meant to punish him with insisting he'd receive this honour he never asked for.

Each year, his presence at the event ripped open wounds that were too fresh to have even healed properly. And each year he had to face the red carpet and the enormous crowd around it he knew that the medal on his chest reminded people of who he was and what his family was accountable for. At this very instant all his hard work for the family foundation was forgotten and he had to start all over again convincing the wizarding world of his good intentions. Only to see the progress he would make be crushed again the next year. Declining the invitation was not an option though, especially since his parents downright refused to go, so he had no choice but to undergo the humiliation stoically and hope that someday showbizz reporters around the red carpet wouldn't conclude their comments with mentioning his former allegiance to the Dark Lord.

Despite all that, he still received many dreamy sighs from quite a lot of the witches in the crowd as he would walk down the drenched red carpet, spoiling his dress shoes. He considered it mere eyewash. He knew that this social event would put him, Potter and Weasley together in a shared centrefold in Teen Witch Magazine. It was all in the game.

He was never more grateful for arriving at opened doors when he would finally reach the entrance to the theatre. Each year, he had to resist the urge to gulp down the glass of champagne being offered to him before he entered the ballroom. The rest of the evening he simply had to wait until the appropriate time had come for him to leave.

First Class laureates always entered the ballroom after the Third and Second Class laureates and within that group, Potter, Granger and the Weasleys were the last to arrive. From his place assigned to him and the other Second and Third Class laureates, Draco would watch with an impassive expression on his face as the First Class laureates arrived, among which many former members of Dumbledore's Army and members of the Order. The only time his interest was sparked was when Granger entered with the Weasel, preceding Potter and Ginny Weasley.

When The Golden Trio and Ginny Weasley entered the ballroom, the other laureates would bow their heads in respect. They were royalty, kings and queens in a society which had never had such a thing. It was a moment in which Draco would carefully raise his eyes and look up at Granger through his eyelashes.

Each year, she was an ethereal vision of beauty with her curls put up in an intricate design and dressed in a simple yet splendid silk ball gown, that was an ode to her gracious figure. It was the only time of the year she would wear a shade of green to complement the Slytherin green ribbon of her Order medal that rested against her delicate neck and each year the sight of her took his breath away.

Her presence at the ball was the only thing that made this annual agony bearable for him.

One week had passed when the door to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom opened quietly and a hooded figure slipped inside. As usual the classroom was dark and the young man didn't waste any time as he went over to his usual spot before the blackboard immediately. When he threw back his hood the moonlight shining through the windows lit up white blond hair and revealed a troubled gaze. For a moment, the young man looked at the empty desk to his side before
he sighed wearily and pulled out his wand.

Draco had been lying awake all night, his thoughts filled with anger and self-doubt following the grave disappointment he'd faced the day before, until finally he'd jumped out of bed and threw on his dressing gown. It had been the first time since he'd come back to Hogwarts that Draco had gone to sit down on the Chesterfield sofa in the Slytherin Common Room and stare into the dying fire with an empty gaze. He'd felt exhausted.

Seeking to accomplish a corporeal Patronus had quickly become the major purpose of his presence at school. Somehow he'd felt that mastering the advanced piece of light magic would at least partially redeem his actions of the past. And perhaps it would appease the guilt eating his heart as well. Therefore, he had sunken his teeth into it, determined to succeed in the one spell which set apart the Light side from the Dark.

But despite his willingness light magic had mercilessly put him in his place. Draco now knew that no matter how many times he would denounce his old ways as a former follower of the Dark Lord he would never be able to conjure a full-bodied Patronus, the symbol of the good. And no encouraging words from Granger could remedy that.

Groaning softly he'd lowered his head.

"What's the matter, young man? You're waking me up with all this racket."

Draco was pulled from his miserable thoughts by a reproachful voice. He didn't have to turn to know it had been the portrait of the once famous but now long forgotten alchemist that hung on the wall next to the corridor leading to the boys' dormitories.

"It's nothing, you can go back to sleep now," he replied dismissively, getting up. So much for fleeing to the Slytherin Common Room.

The grimy portrait, however, narrowed his eyes. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. No, it's not nothing, young man. I've seen you – had the pleasure of following you through the years as I might add - and this year has been the most interesting of all."

Draco suppressed a sigh. "That's nice, old man. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"No, I'm not yet finished with you, Slytherin Prefect," the old painting cried out indignantly and Draco whispered hastily, "All right, all right, I'm listening. Just don't wake up the other paintings, please."

Pompously, the alchemist in the painting changed position and looked at him as piercingly as he could through the yellowed, cracked veneer.

"You've come a long way, young man, since you first arrived in this Common Room, as small as the first year you've helped facing his past this holiday. The spoiled little brat I saw when you had been sorted into Slytherin has changed into a good man. The other Slytherins are doing you wrong by treating you the way they do."

Now Draco did sigh, giving a weary nod. "Thank you, old man. I appreciate it. Now, if..."

But the man in the portrait leaned forward without listening.

"The portraits know what you're trying to accomplish, young man. And you've almost succeeded. Don't throw it away now, because of some self-doubt. You've changed more than you'll probably even realise."
He paused before adding, "The Gryffindor understands this far better than you do. Now, go to bed and let me sleep."

Abruptly, he turned around and started to make exaggerated snorting sounds to indicate the conversation was over.

Draco was rooted to his spot. His cheeks had coloured deep red upon the portrait's subtle reminder that the nocturnal hours of practice in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom hadn't been as much of a secret as he and Granger had thought it to be. At least the paintings had probably been following his progress and ultimate failure. Time to dwell on that fact he didn't have though as he remembered what else the painting had said.

'You're a good man...'

Draco knew that Granger for some reason seemed to have faith him, but he attributed that feat to her proverbial Gryffindor optimism. But maybe, just maybe... He had been too harsh on himself.

Biting his lip thoughtfully he pulled his dressing gown around him as a new resolve formed in his mind. He shouldn't be giving up just yet. After all, the new year had yet to arrive.

Draco put down the quill with which he had been scribbling on the application before him and looked up. Resting his chin in his hand, he watched as downy snowflakes whirled past the window and piled up in crescent shaped heaps in the windowpanes.

It would be Christmas soon, the most dejected time of year at Malfoy Manor. At least this year he wouldn't have to endure the grave silences at dinner as he was invited to celebrate Christmas with the Greengrasses. Putting aside the assessed application he reached for the following one from the small pile of unopened letters before him. They were all applications. No other letters.

Draco's expression darkened. It had been four weeks since he'd escorted Granger back to the Burrow. The young Malfoy had never been the person to worry about other people very quickly but the memory of Granger falling to the ground in the drawing room still pushed to the forefront of his thoughts. Ever since he'd Disapparated back to Manor he'd been wondering how she was doing - if she was all right. He had cherished no illusions however on receiving any message from her, other than the inspections results. She didn't owe him any information on her wellbeing. After all, he was merely a former follower of the Dark Lord, which made him morally obliged to cater to her every whim. If she chose not to contact him, he simply had to accept and respect that decision. She stood in her right.

Nevertheless, Draco found himself awaiting the mail with more interest than before, all the while trying to ignore that other vivid memory of holding Granger in his arms as she let her head rest against his shoulder. He still could feel her soft breath against his skin. But in unguarded moments like these his eyes would close and he would relive the feeling of her body pressed to his, her arms wrapped around him as if she would never let go again.

"Master Draco."

The squeaky voice harshly pulled him from his thoughts. Draco shot up straight and stared right into a pair of big, steel grey eyes belonging to one of his house-elves. The small creature looked definitely agitated.

"I'm sorry to disturb the Master, but Master said I was to bring him this letter as soon as..."

"This letter?" Draco interrupted the house-elf non-understandingly and the elf nodded hesitantly
as he extended a bony hand holding a large brown envelope.

"It's from the Ministry..." he squeaked.

Half an hour later, Draco found himself back in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, staring at the wall opposite the blackboard.

For a moment, he felt like an idiot, being here again where he'd already accepted defeat hours earlier. And because of what? The ramblings of an old painting? How on earth would he be able to succeed where he hadn't before? But then he clenched his teeth and deciding not to be daunted by his previous failures he slid into a stance.

Determinedly, he spoke the incantation. A perfect glowing orb appeared from his wand. It was larger than all the others he'd conjured before and he managed to keep it going for a minute before it disappeared in the darkness surrounding him.

Hours passed, quietly accounted for by the moon climbing higher in the sky as Draco continued on the path of enlarging the glowing orbs conjured by him. Imperturbably, the celestial body shone down on the Slytherin in his lonely mission as he grew more tired and more desperate with each new attempt to change the glowing orb into something more.

Slowly, he started to realise it was a dead-end situation. Very soon now he would have become too tired to continue.

His face contorted in a pained grimace and he let out a frustrated growl as he raised his wand for what would probably be the last time he would manage to do so. At that moment the moon started to reappear from behind a rare cloud and a single silver beam of light lit up the desk where Granger would normally be sitting, watching his progress.

Up until that moment Draco had tried not to look at the empty desk, focusing on the task ahead. But after hours of practicing he was empty and exhausted. His eyes were drawn toward Granger's desk and he wished she was here with him, looking at him with that blissful expression in her caramel eyes whenever he'd done something right.

Unbeknownst to Draco, his pained expression softened at the memory, while his lips automatically formed the words they'd uttered so many times before.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Immediately, Draco realised his mistake and he wanted to cry out in anger. His distracted, weary thoughts he'd been nowhere near concentrating on his happy memory, but the attempt had already been wasted.

But then his eyes widened in shock.

It had taken a moment to process in his exhausted mind but then he realised that the entire classroom was bathing in a silver light much brighter than the glowing orb had produced before. Before his astonished eyes the light began to condense and took on the form of an animal that turned to look at him.

Draco sharply drew in his breath when he realised what he was looking at. A whole, flawless animal form. A corporeal Patronus.

An ecstatic cry of joy escaped him. He'd done it! Finally, he'd done it. But his excitement was short
lived as the empty desk on the front row reminded him of the shift in memories which had caused the spell to suddenly succeed.

Draco stilled and his features hardened at the realisation. She was his happy memory. Not that single time his parents had taken him to the beach when he was a toddler, not the few times his father had told him stories about their family, but Hermione Granger and the gentle way she'd been looking at him during Patronus lessons. A fierce resentment washed over him at the possible implications of this turn of events, though a small part of him, he wasn't ready to acknowledge at all, already whispered to him that this wasn't the first time his thoughts had been occupied with the Gryffindor girl.

Meanwhile, the Patronus had been jumping around Draco playfully and he focused his attention on the small animal and find out its species. The animal was lithe, smaller than Granger's but almost as agile. Before it disappeared it curled itself around his neck affectionately.

And when the moon disappeared behind the clouds, Draco threw his head back and laughed.

His Patronus was a ferret.

Of course, Lucius Malfoy immediately recognised the seal of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on the parchment in Draco's hands, when his son entered the drawing room where his parents were enjoying their afternoon tea. His eyes widened slightly as Draco closed the door at his leisure and lazily lowered himself on the sofa.

"And...?" Lucius' impatient voice reached a higher pitch, when Draco's silence became too much for him. Draco smirked when he looked up.

"As expected," he stated with slight arrogance, "the inspection outcome is laudatory."

A triumphant smile spread across Lucius' aristocratic features and he rose to pour Draco a glass of Firewhisky. In passing he patted his son on the back, failing to see the hurt his son hid expertly behind a stony expression.

"Well done, Draco. Impeccable as usual, befitting a Malfoy."

Draco tilted his head and smiled smugly as he accepted the crystal glass, taking a large sip.

"Thank you, father. And for what it's worth, the report also mentions that Malfoy Manor along with Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry may serve as an example for the wizarding community."

Lucius' mouth curled in a self-satisfied smile, before he took a sip from his own Firewhisky. "I'm proud of you, my son."

Draco grimaced and gulped down the remainder of his drink, putting down the glass with more force than necessary. Lucius didn't notice.

His mother's sharp eyes however didn't miss his slight slip-up. Avoiding her searching gaze Draco quickly crossed the room and excused himself. He had to get out of the house now. Only when up in the air he had a slight chance of coming to terms with the grave disappointment that the letter had contained nothing more than the inspection outcome.

Thankfully, his mother didn't detain him.
The last, copper rays of sunlight turned Malfoy Manor into a mighty, dark silhouette when Draco returned from a visit to Astoria. Outside the gates he stepped from his Nimbus 2001, ran a hand through his windblown hair and straightened his jacket. He would be in before night would fall over the Manor.

Draco often preferred the longer broomstick ride over a swift Apparition. Up in the air was the only moment when he could enjoy a real sense of freedom. But the visit to Astoria had not been as joyful and carefree as it should have been. A certain restlessness had been plaguing him for the past week and he hadn't been able to shake the feeling off for the visit. His responses had been vague, his mood withdrawn. Finally, he had excused himself, reassuring Astoria that he was fine when she had glanced at him searchingly. He'd felt guilty knowing that the reason for his absent-mindedness was another bookworm who'd recently returned into his life.

Though he didn't have the right to expect her to, he had been subconsciously been looking out to hear from Granger after the inspection visit to Malfoy Manor. He'd placed all of his hope on the inspection outcome but when it arrived and had appeared to contain nothing more but inspection results, it had affected him more than he'd expected. When she'd appeared on his doorstep after so many years he'd realised how much he'd missed talking to her after they'd both gone their separate ways after school. And it hurt, knowing that there would not be a next time.

Draco had considered Owling her and inquire after her wellbeing but had finally decided against it. If a note from him to Hermione Granger fell into the wrong hands she would have to explain herself and that he wanted to avoid at all cost.

The sensation of an invisible power pulling at him dragged him from his downcast thoughts. The Manor wanted him to enter through the gates and face his frozen life again. His mother probably wondered what took him so long. With a sigh he complied, leaving behind nothing but a wisp of smoke.

Draco had not been looking forward to his graduation ceremony. This was partially because knew the effect his family's presence had on people and partially because it would mean the end of the school year and of Potions class with Granger.

Of course his reluctance did nothing to prevent the festive moment from inescapably coming closer until he'd actually found himself standing on the raised platform in the Great Hall waiting for the Headmistress to hand him his diploma scroll. Vaguely, he remembered that Professor McGonagall had been glowing when she shook his hand. His excellent results over the repeated seventh year had made him finish right behind Hermione Granger, which had actually surprised him. Of course Granger had finished top of their year and it had taken all his self-control to bite back a smile. Some things would never change.

At least his accomplishment had earned him a semi-polite applause from the crowd, accompanying him as he'd returned to his seat beside Granger while the Weasel had thrown dark looks at him from the row behind the graduates. Granger's face had been unreadable as she'd been applauding.
for him but somehow he'd felt that she meant it.

His family had left right after the ceremony had ended. At the Great Hall's mighty doors he'd turned around one last time and his eyes had fleetingly met with Granger's. For a moment it had seemed as if he'd seen slight disappointment in her gaze. Convincing himself it had only been his imagination he'd nodded at her ever so slightly.

'Goodbye, Granger,' he'd thought silently, 'have a happy life.'

Now he was home again, a fresh graduate from Hogwarts. He followed his parents to the downstairs drawing room and his father briskly crossed the elegant space to the liquor cabinet to pour himself some Firewhisky as his mother smiled at him sadly.

"No matter what, I'm proud of you Draco, for going back to school and passing your exams with such good results. I hope you've had a good year."

Draco returned the smile behind his father's back and as he loosened his Slytherin tie he excused himself to change out of his school robes for the last time. But his father wasn't prepared to let him go yet.

"I hope it was a good year indeed," he stated bitterly. "Did you actually learn something worthwhile?"

He gave his son a hard stare.

"Lucius," Narcissa started reproachfully but Draco shook his head at her, indicating that it was all right. When he looked his father in the eye his expression showed nothing of the defiance he felt at his father's words.

"Actually, I did, father," he replied calmly, "I learned to cast a Patronus."

The sound of the crystal whisky glass shattering into a thousand pieces accompanied his footsteps as he turned on his heels and his lips curled in a bitter smile.

Granger's visit to Malfoy Manor had revived long buried memories of Patronus lessons and Potions classes with the intelligent Gryffindor. Precious memories. Memories of quiet collaborations at Potions and her teaching him how to conjure a Patronus. They were memories of a delicate trust that had developed between them, based upon a shared interest in learning and silent acceptance of the other, amidst waves of expectations coming from the people surrounding them.

Astoria had only partly been able to fill the void left by Granger when they had finished school.

But then Granger had showed up on his doorstep, seven years later, driven back to the house where she'd been tortured by his aunt, to find closure. Not for the first time Draco's hand went to where her lips had touched his cheek after he'd Apparated her back to the Burrow. The softest of caresses had become the most powerful good memory he had. A memory of Hermione Granger.

His face darkened and with a violent shake of his head he decided to go for a long, nocturnal broomstick ride. He needed the time to clear his mind and ready himself to face his mother who would probably want to know if he had finally proposed to Astoria. Already he could imagine his mother's reproachful gaze at his dissatisfying answer.

It promised to be a long night.
After he’d changed into one of his black suits Draco had decided to go to the Manor’s library, hoping to find some distraction from the downcast atmosphere he had come home to, knowing that from now on there was no chance of escaping it anymore.

It had been mere minutes after he’d settled himself on the sofa with a cup of tea, brought to him by one of the house-elves that the door opened and his father marched in with a grim expression on his face.

"Show me!" Lucius snarled, looking definitely agitated as he gave his only son a hard stare.

Draco had to fight back a lazy smirk he knew would only upset his father even more.

"Show you what, father?" He inquired smoothly.

A feeling of dejectedness and pity washed over Draco as he watched his father struggle to say the word.

"Show me the bloody... Patronus!" He finally hissed.

Draco nodded curtly as he rose to his feet. He’d already expected as much.

"Of course, father."

It was a difficult moment. He had to block out all the anger and frustration beaming from his father and open his mind to the gentle, intimate memory of Granger playing with the ferret Patronus on the night of New Year’s Eve. It had become his chosen memory ever since.

His father never saw Draco’s eyes softening as he spoke the incantation and the ferret jumped from his wand.

Effortlessly, Draco made the Patronus run a few circles around the both of them until he ended the spell.

The silence was deafening.

"A weasel?"

When Lucius finally found his voice again the mocking tone elegantly masked his disgust.

"It's a ferret, father. Not a weasel," Draco sharply corrected him, seeing in his father's cold, piercing eyes the grave disappointment he’d feared to see. Obviously, Lucius had expected to see a more heroic animal for a Malfoy.

"Isn't that the animal that Barty Crouch Jr. turned you into in your fourth year?"

Draco involuntarily he flinched at the memory but nodded slowly. "It is."

He stepped back as he waited for his father to process the information, knowing exactly what his father went through at this moment. A Patronus was known to repel every aspect of the Dark Arts Lucius had ever stood for and believed in. That Draco had wanted to learn this spell was a clear rejection of that path and in extenso of Lucius himself who’d raised his son believing in the rightfulness of said path.

However, Lucius was also a clever man and knew that Draco had to move on in a world that wasn't friendly toward their former views anymore. And despite himself he was proud of his son for succeeding in mastering such an advanced piece of magic.
Giving his father some space Draco walked over to the window that looked out over the rosarium. It promised to be a good year for his mother’s roses.

"So, Patronuses are on the Hogwarts teaching program now?” Lucius then mumbled casually as he was staring holes in Draco’s back.

Draco let out an inaudible sigh, feeling terribly weary all of a sudden. Already his father was struggling to cope and there was one other thing he hadn’t told his father yet.

"They aren’t, father. Granger taught me."

"What?!"

Draco now turned around, a smooth smile plastered on his face.

"It doesn't matter anymore, father. I've finished school and I also happened to learn the Patronus spell while being there. It's time to look to the future, father. If you'll allow me I will establish a Malfoy charity foundation to create a new basis for our family in the wizarding community."

It had been something that he had been turning over in his mind for a while now and he felt now was the time to ask for his father's permission.

Lucius was looking at his son in complete bewilderment. But after what seemed like an eternity to his son he finally nodded and strode out of the library, carrying himself with as much dignity as he was able to muster.

Draco was left standing by the window, a forlorn expression on his face.

"Master... Master Draco..."

Panic... Pain... Agony... It was all Draco could feel. Somewhere in the distance he heard a begging voice cutting through it.

He tried to ignore the voice as he kept his eyes trained on the contorted face of Hermione Granger, looking at him in despair. Why was she looking at him that way? Didn't she know that he couldn't help her, even if he wanted to?

A cackling laugh screeched in his ears and Granger let her head hang, squeezing her eyes shut. She was in pain. Suddenly an excruciating burning went through his left forearm and with a cry of anguish Draco fell down on his knees for her gripping his forearm as the angry red mark underneath his palm turned jet black.

His breathing came in ragged in- and exhales as he desperately reached for the squeaky voice coming from above. Somehow, he knew that he would be safe there. But this time he didn't succeed and panic rose inside of him. He'd done it countless times before. So why couldn't he now?

His labouring breath drowned out all other sounds as the purple drawing room disappeared and then he was surrounded by violent flames escaping from the black marble fireplace. Coughing violently he spun around, looking for a way to escape only to discover the flames were everywhere, scorching him, caging him, guarding him.

He was quickly becoming lightheaded and his vision began to blur when something changed. Big, sturdy columns started to grow from the flames, unfolding arched ceilings like flowers unfolded
their delicate petals. Draco stilled. This part of the nightmare was new but he recognised the Gothic corridor the retreating flames had left behind. He was back at Hogwarts. Hesitantly, he stepped forward and discovered that he was in his school robes again. Murky moonlight shone through grimy, leaded windows and brought out the silhouette of someone else. He narrowed his eyes and he began to discern gleaming curls falling on a Gryffindor scarf.

A blissful feeling of peacefulness settled upon him as the young woman belonging to those curls turned around a smiled at him. It seemed as if he'd done something to please her and his lips curled up in a happy smile.

"Master Draco... Wake up!"

A violent pain exploded in his face and he bolted right up. The hand that hovered above him was gripped in an iron clasp.

He turned around with wide open eyes as a sharp feeling of regret and anger at being pulled from the dream, from her temporarily cut him off from his surroundings. It wasn't until a small, moaning sound reached his ears that he started to come to his senses.

Draco looked down.

He was sitting up straight in bed with cold sweat rolled down his bare chest and clammy sheets were tangled around him from his waist to his feet. The faded Dark Mark on his forearm was glaring at him triumphant as he held in his hand the bony wrist of a house-elf softly moaning as it was hanging several inches from the ground.

Realising what had transpired, Draco immediately got out of bed and put down the house-elf on the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said automatically. "I didn't wake up, didn't I?"

The elf had slapped him in the face like he was told to do in such a situation.

The house-elf nodded silently, looking up at his master with big, shocked eyes. Draco sat down on the bedside and let his head hang in his hands. All of the adrenaline left his body. He was soaking wet and exhausted.

"Did I wake the Mistress?" His hoarse voice was barely more than a whisper.

"No, Master," the elf squeaked reassuringly and he was answered by a deep sigh. "Good."

Draco took his wand from his bedside table and made the sweat disappear from the sheets, untangling them in the process. "Thank you for waking me up, Squeaky. You can go back to sleep now."

The elf nodded and lifted his fingers to leave the room with a single sharp snap, when he hesitated and turned back to his master. Draco now stood by the just opened window, his silk pyjama pants softly billowing in the cool wind. He knew that the young man wouldn't go back to sleep this night.

"Master..."

"Yes, Squeaky..." The Master sounded awfully tired.

"I... Squeaky must tell Master... that Master was talking in his sleep before he woke up."
For a moment there was only silence, until Draco finally spoke. "What... what did I say, Squeaky?"

There was wariness in his voice, fear almost.

"Squeaky hasn't heard the Master say it before... Master said - it's an otter."

Draco's reaction wasn't as surprised as the house-elf would have expected. He only nodded wearily as if he understood the meaning of the random words.

"Thank you, Squeaky."

"Master..."

"Yes Squeaky..."

From his tone of voice the house-elf could tell this was the last time Master would grant him time to speak. "Master also said - if done correctly they can deliver messages from the caster."

Squeaky's big eyes widened when Master stiffened at his words. The shocked expression on Master's face made the house-elf jump a bit. "What?"

With two long strides Draco had reached the house-elf.

"What did you say?"

The sound of his demanding voice was as sharp as the gleam in his eyes.

But his fierce reaction was too much for the shocked house-elf. He blinked in panic.

"I... Squeaky... doesn't remember anymore, Master," he piped with difficulty and he let his ears hang miserably.

Draco calmed down somewhat at the pitiful sight.

"It was only manner of speech, Squeaky," Draco responded on a softer tone, trying to reassure the house-elf. "I do remember what you said..."

The creature had unearthed a very important memory from many years ago, when Draco had received a message like he'd never seen before, from someone he'd never expected to receive one from. A Christmas greeting brought to him by a Patronus when he had spent the remainder of his Christmas Eve alone in the Slytherin dormitories. He had never actually told Granger, but after a very lonely evening, he had basked in the warmth of her message given him by the serene, silver otter. He had never given the event another thought, though, engulfed as he eventually had become in mastering the Patronus spell himself.

But the house-elf's words had reminded him of something else, too. Something Granger had said during the first Patronus lesson. Suddenly her off-handed remark was more important than ever. Restlessly, he looked at the bedroom door. He wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"Do you understand what you said?" Draco informed almost automatically before he would dismiss the house-elf. A last check, because his thoughts were already miles away.

Squeaky hesitantly looked up at his Master.

"About the Patronus?"
He flinched when he suddenly saw Draco's piercing gaze fixed on him. His reply had snapped back Draco's attention to the creature.

"Yes, about the Patronus," the young Master said emphatically. "Listen, Squeaky..."

He knelt down to come at eye level with the small house-elf.

"It's very important that you tell nobody, not even the Mister and the Mistress, about this. Do you think you can do that?"

The house-elf nodded with big, shocked eyes.

"Good. Now return to your dorm and get some sleep."

With a pop the house-elf disappeared to the attic, but Draco didn't even register the sound anymore as he threw some clothes on him and determinedly went to the broom shed.

It was time to get started.

The very first time Draco had attended the ball of the Order of Merlin it had also been the first ball held after the ending of the Second Wizarding War. The Golden Trio and Ginny Weasley would be attending as guests of honour. When they arrived at the ballroom everyone present lowered their gazes in respect for the youngsters who had saved them all. It had been the start of a new tradition.

Standing amidst the Second Class laureates, Draco had found himself staring at the marble floor, waiting for the moment to pass, until a nondescript feeling compelled him to raise his eyes. Making sure to keep his head down, he looked up and stared right into the caramel eyes of Hermione Granger.

A mixture of uneasiness and melancholy spoke from her gaze as she held his gaze. Clearly, she felt unsure of how to react to this token of appreciation and strangely enough she sought reassurance from him of all people. Weasley, smirking proudly, completely failed to see her discomfort.

Without thinking Draco slightly tilted his head and gave her an inconspicuous nod in encouragement. The corners of her mouth lifted in a barely noticeable smile, which changed into an expression of relief when the music started to play. As the crowd started to spread across the ballroom she turned around the small train of her simple but elegant forest green dress gracefully followed her movements.

Long after Draco had left the ball the grateful expression on Granger's face lingered in his memory.

The world was bathed in the blood red glow of the hesitant morning sun when a cloaked figure appeared in a snow covered field and lowered his broomstick. The standing stones of Stonehenge rose up in the distance.

He took down his hood and revealed a concentrated expression on pale, regular features. Closing his eyes he slid into stance and his voice resounded across the valley. A shimmering ferret sprung from his raised wand.

Effortlessly, the young man maintained the jumping Patronus as he allowed himself a slight smile. He hadn't seen the ferret for a while.
Ever since he’d mastered the Patronus spell he had developed a habit to regularly cast one to keep himself in shape. But when he had started seeing Astoria Greengrass over a year ago, this habit slowly started to subside. His happy memory had increasingly started to feel like a betrayal to her who should have absorbed all of his thoughts.

But as he was standing in the field it felt liberating to finally be able to let the image of Hermione Granger take over his thoughts again. He smiled bitterly as he realised that the old memory he never seemed to get rid of when seeing Astoria, today had almost naturally been replaced by another, even happier memory. The moment in the nightly garden at the Burrow when Granger had reached up to him and softly kissed him on the cheek.

Frowning, he went over the few words Granger had used on explaining the technicalities of casting a messenger Patronus to him. This would be the hard part.

Several days passed by, quietly accounted for by the standing stones of Stonehenge announcing the coming of winter solstice as Draco practised the transformation of his Patronus into a messenger. He learned how to make his Patronus convey a few small words, which gradually changed to whole sentences and at the end of the seventh day, the Patronus could retell a complete event.

As he watched the ferret talk to a bare tree a rare smile appeared on Draco's lips. It was a smile of relief and hope. He had found a way to reach Granger.

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This year Astoria's presence by his side had eased the annual torment that was the ball of the Order of Merlin for him. Shyly but proudly, she walked beside him down the red carpet - a classic beauty in her old rose dress, immensely enjoying being able to attend such an important event.

For her Draco even paused in his steps to let the photographer from The Daily Prophet take a picture of them, knowing that it would please her and she was beaming when they entered the theatre. Upon the arrival of the Golden Trio, everyone present inclined their heads in respect and as always Draco carefully raised his eyes. What he saw took his breath away.

Granger looked absolutely stunning in an off-shoulder, Gryffindor red dress, a dream in chiffon and glistening crystals and the first red dress she'd ever worn at the event. Holding her head high she was looking before her in a silent fashion that betrayed practice. With an unreadable expression on her face she waited for the orchestra to set in the first dance, until for the first time since the first ball she slightly turned her head, knowing where to look.

When she found his gaze, Draco was shocked to see an expression of infinite sadness disclosed in the radiant witch's expression and suddenly he noticed the hard line around her lips as Weasley, who was standing beside the most beautiful woman in the room seemed indifferent to her presence.

At that moment, the music started to play and Draco's attention was drawn away by Astoria looking at him questioningly. With a slight bow he invited Astoria to dance but as they whirled around the dance floor he wished that instead of being here he and Granger were squeezed into a school desk and that he could tell her that they would have a whole double period of Potions class ahead of them if she wanted to talk.

"Would you please Owl these letters? That will be it for today, then."

Draco leaned back in his chair, watching as the small house-elf nodded eagerly as its long fingers closed around the many letters meant for the many charities the Malfoy foundation now supported. Its ears flapped in the process.
Draco felt satisfied that he had been able to do all of this work today despite the fact that his thoughts had constantly drifted toward other, more important subjects. He sighed and bowed forward to open a drawer, taking out a familiar brown envelope. The Ministry seal was already broken. By now he almost knew the content by heart.

His eyes immediately went down to the last paragraph, rereading what it said.

*This letter contains my intention to decide favourably upon the discontinuation of inspection visits concerning the elfish labour conditions in the household at issue for at least two years. If you do not agree with the intended decision you can file in a view upon the matter at the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Your motivated view will be considered in the final decision concerning further inspections of the Malfoy household.*

The notice of intention was signed by the Head of the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, on behalf of the Minister of Magic.

"I do not agree," Draco softly murmured to himself before he put away the letter and went downstairs for dinner.

Tonight he would cast a Patronus.

The evening seemed to drag on endlessly as Draco had to sit through a four course meal, trying to appear as normal as he could. Luckily, putting on a mask of impassiveness had become a second nature to him and he could tell his parents noticed nothing of the restlessness he felt. His father dilated on having met with the Minister of Magic today, after having been barred from entering the Ministry for six long years. Somewhere in the back of his head, Draco registered that this was important to his father and also that it might be the result of his hard work for the foundation, but he couldn't care less right now. He could only nod and sometimes mumble something in assent.

Finally, after two long hours, he was able to excuse himself to bed, claiming to be tired from working all day to Owl the replies to the many applications on time. His father narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. He still stuck to the opinion that Draco needed an assistant but his mother didn't seem to suspect anything for a change as she kindly bid him goodnight.

Finally, Draco was able to lock his bedroom door behind him and when he turned around an expression of relief momentarily passing over his face.

With a small, efficient wave he lit the candles as he loosened his tie, took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his light blue oxford, revealing strong arms and an expensive, gold watch with a silver dial, along with a faded mark on the inside of his left forearm he'd learned to ignore.

The expression on his chiselled features was one of deep concentration as he stood still in the middle of the room, performed a quick spell to form a sound bubble around him and then closed his eyes before exhaling deeply.

Draco lifted his wand and relived the tingling sensation of Granger's soft lips caressing his cheek and the small, involuntary sigh against his skin as she'd pulled back.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The bedroom was bathed in a soft silver light, the candles turning pale against the magical glow, when a lithe creature sprung from Draco's wand. Draco straightened up as he maintained the connection with the ferret that went to sit on his hind legs, looking up at him serenely.
He drew in a shallow breath, then meticulously started to instruct his Patronus.

"This is a message for Hermione Granger..."

"Draco Malfoy..."

A small, rather vulnerable sigh escaped him when Draco subconsciously reacted to his name in his sleep. He turned his head and it came to rest against the other side of the ear chair, his body slumped down in the seat. His arm hung limp from the armrest while his hand still loosely held his wand.

After sending off his Patronus he had slowly lowered himself into the nearest chair and made the sound bubble disappear with an absent-minded flick of his wand as he stared at the large, multi-pane window through which the Patronus had jumped into the night.

His head had become strangely empty as he finally had been able to voice the concern he'd been feeling about Granger's wellbeing. His Patronus had listened quietly until he was finished speaking.

"All right, you can go now," Draco had finally concluded his message and the ferret had disappeared.

"Draco Malfoy..."

The tinkling voice ripped through his dreams and forced him to wake up, on another level as painful as a slap in the face from a house-elf. Draco gasped and bolted upright, eyes widened as he reflexively let go of his wand.

The dry sound of wood clashing with wood broke the night silence and for a moment Draco stiffened, waiting for his mother to come knocking on his door to see if he were all right. Nothing happened though and he let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. Then his attention was inescapably drawn to a silvery glow that presented a sight he hadn't seen in a long time.

Before him swam an otter-shaped Patronus.

"Granger," he breathed. His sleep was forgotten.

The otter nodded slowly.

"I come with word from Hermione Granger. She wants to thank you for your message and tell you how glad she was to see your Patronus again."
Long after the otter-shaped Patronus had slowly dissipated in a glittering mist Draco had been staring at the spot where the glowing animal form had been. His heart was still racing in his chest.

Granger had received his message. And not only had she replied to his message her own Patronus had almost immediately returned with her response.

She had actually sounded relieved upon hearing from him.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when this silver light filled my bedroom and a glistening ferret appeared with a message for me," her Patronus had whispered. "How on earth did you manage to have your Patronus convey messages...?"

The clear pride in her message had set his heart alight. It had felt as if they had been back in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom and Granger was beaming at him at the smallest of progress he'd made with the Patronus spell.

He'd almost missed the rest of the message, which had definitely sounded more dejected than before.

"I feel I must apologise to you. Again," the otter had told him in its tinkling voice. "Especially after all the trouble I've already gotten you into, I feel horrible for not contacting you. I've been feeling so guilty for what had happened in the drawing room, that I was sure you wouldn't want me to bother you again. After all, I had already placed an inexcusable burden on your shoulders when I demanded to see the drawing room and then fainted. I surmised that you would not want to be reminded any further of the past. But I was mistaken. You have the right to know how I'm doing. I'm sorry, Malfoy."

Draco's hand had been clenching his wand as he'd listened to the otter. He hadn't been searching for an apology but knowing how she was doing had a balsaming effect on him. Finally, he'd heard she was fine.

"After you brought me home, I slept for twenty-four hours and when I arrived back at the Ministry, everyone was led to believe I had been prey to influenza. Of course Harry wasn't to be fooled," the otter remarked. "But my speedy recovery was enough to satisfy him."

Draco's face had darkened at this. Perhaps it had been Potter who had advised against contacting him. His expression hardened. The man was far too protective of the Malfoy family to his liking.

The otter had concluded with a compliment on the positive inspection outcome Malfoy Manor had received. His view however would not be taken into account as it hadn't been sent to the right address and it had merely inquired after the physical condition of one of the inspectors.

Then the otter had disappeared.

Its last words had drawn a small smile to Draco's lips. He imagined seeing the amused sparkling in her eyes when she had conveyed this message.

After only a moment of hesitation he'd summoned his own Patronus. There was one last thing he'd
needed to know.

The reply had come just before he'd gone to bed.

"It's better now. Sleep well Malfoy... and thank you for..."

The otter had hesitated as it had begun to disappear. Its last words had been a whispered echo as if it had caught Granger just before it had left.

"Thank you."

And Draco had gone to sleep knowing a window of opportunity was still left open.

The next morning Draco woke up early but well rested, having fallen asleep with the image of Granger's Patronus in mind. As he looked up at the canopy above him he acknowledged he hadn't slept this well for a very long time. He felt calm and peaceful and the pressure behind his eyes was gone. Feeling blissfully relaxed, he turned towards the murky ray of light peeking through the closed curtains. It would soon be dawn.

A rare smile appeared on his features as he jumped out of bed. Suddenly, he felt like going on a quick flight across the estate, which he hadn't done in a long time.

He should be back in time to join his parents for breakfast.

Perhaps his mother noticed his lighter step when Draco entered the sun room, fresh and alert after enjoying his ice cold airborne version of a morning walk and a quick shower.

Narcissa's cool, blue eyes followed her son's energetic movements as he sat down and began to serve himself. She refrained from commenting on it though, leaving Draco be as he engaged in a serious conversation with his father. There were upcoming fiscal benefits for rich wizarding families who donated substantial amounts of galleons for charity, sums which could either be deducted from taxes due or from reparation payments their family turned over each month. He made himself a sandwich as he quietly conferred with his father on which of the possibilities would serve the Malfoy interest best.

Narcissa noticed that the conversation smartened her husband up. A glint of interest appeared in his nowadays dull gaze and he straightened up. He even gave an approving nod when Draco got up from the table and announced it was time to go to work.

As the young man downed the remainder of his tea standing she decided to not let him go off this easily.

"Did you have a good night, dear?" She asked him casually as she caught his gaze.

To her apparent surprise he flashed her a small smile.

"Yes mother, thank you."

He'd already left, before she could ask any further.

The rest of the day Draco spent behind his desk working his way through the remaining applications. His brows were furrowed in concentration as he sometimes underlined sentences, deciding on which of two piles in front of him to put the applications - worth considering and
rejected. The clock ticking was the only sound to break the silence in his study.

To Draco's gratitude the piles before him were growing much faster than he'd expected. It was amazing what a good night's rest could do. Having been able to speak with Granger through their Patronuses had put to rest an inner turmoil that had haunted him ever since he'd dropped her at the Burrow. It felt as if he could finally breathe again.

A slight movement near the window caught his attention and when he looked up his heart skipped a beat. But it had only been a flight of snow whirling down from the sky.

Draco's face set. Having found a means of communicating with Granger had awoken a wistful feeling he was surprised to acknowledge and frankly didn't know if he liked it or not. He was drawn to the idea of continuing the slow, unhurried conversation through their Patronus and for the first time in a very long time he was actually looking forward to something.

The corners of his mouth curled up as he bowed over yet another application letter.

It was decided. Tonight he would cast another Patronus.

Much earlier than he normally did Draco bid his parents good night and went up to his bedroom. Easily, he locked the door, took off his jacket and created a sound bubble in the room.

He smiled when the silver ferret appeared at his command and sat up, waiting for Draco to start talking.

"Granger... I hope I don't startle you. If so, I'm sorry. I just... Would you..." His voice trailed away, unsure how to continue.

Suddenly he felt vulnerable, which was something that didn't sit well with Malfoys. He ran his hand through his hair as he tried to find the right words to say, reminding himself that this was only his Patronus in the room with him.

"I mean, if you wouldn't mind... I would like to ask you if I was to send you a few more Patronuses... to practice?"

The ferret took his silence for a conclusion of his message and graciously jumped onto the windowsill. Draco didn't stop the animal. Lowering his wand he slowly lowered himself in a chair as he watched the Patronus leave his bedroom.

The message wasn't his most eloquent ever, but then again, Draco still felt uncomfortable with asking favours from others. All he could do now was to sit and wait.

Hours later the young Malfoy still sat in the same position in the dark bedroom, with his arms resting on his legs, his Hawthorn wand pointing to the ground. His grey eyes were fixed on the window where his Patronus had disappeared. As the minutes passed by he tried not to give in to the hollow feeling that Granger wouldn't respond to his message, but hope slipped away each time his clock chimed.

"Draco Malfoy?"

It was a familiar tinkling voice that broke the silence in the room and Draco shot up.

Before him swam Granger's Patronus. Just when he had finally lowered his gaze to the ground, the
A wave of excitement surged through him. She had responded!

Draco didn't notice that his face lit up in a bright smile as he drank in the sight of the glowing animal form, pulling up its little snout.

"Hermione thinks that's a very good idea and she's happy to help. Your request reminds her of the old times back in school..."

Draco's smile softened. He'd thought exactly the same thing this afternoon when this idea had occurred to him. And it had worked. The former Gryffindor never denied anyone who sought out her help. The prospect of continuing this conversation with Granger filled his heart with joy and even giddiness.

"So.." The otter started enthusiastically, pulling Draco from his thoughts, "where to start? I always have this problem when starting a letter and a Patronus message isn't very different from a letter, don't you think?"

Amusedly, Draco leaned back in his chair. He could almost hear Granger's thoughtful voice as her Patronus spoke. His eyes glistened as Granger's Patronus started telling about the book she'd been reading. It was a safe subject which he was glad to discuss as he'd also read and enjoyed this particular book.

Among other things, he was pleased to learn she liked the book too.

During the days that followed they developed an unhurried conversation, maintained by their respective Patronuses. They talked about their daily activities and upcoming social events they would both be attending.

As the conversation went on their discussions deepened and turned towards more personal things, starting with the safe subject of their childhood years. They were surprised to discover that when they were about eight or nine years old they had spent the holidays in the same Alpine village in France. Draco and his family had been visiting friends of his parents, while Granger had spent the week skiing.

After her explanation of the art of skiing Draco was ready to admit that this was a far better way of spending the holidays in France than staring out the leaded window of an old castle.

The subject of work unexpectedly offered a glimpse of the things that occupied her mind, the thoughts she had about what she expected of life.

"Basically, working with the Ministry is my only option," the otter stated as it swam before him. "Everywhere else people worship the ground I walk on. Within the Ministry there are a lot of people affiliated with the Order and they don't put me on a pedestal... as much. I've learned to handle it, but I never will grow used to it."

Draco's thoughts went to the annual ball of the Order where every year they all bowed in honour of the Golden Trio. Over the years it had become a customary token of respect but to him it still held a special meaning. He actually felt the need to express his gratitude for their courage to stand up to defeat the darkest threat of all times. Even Weasley.

Granger's reservations about this token of appreciation he completely understood though. She wasn't the type of person that enjoyed being revered.
"It sometimes does come in handy, though," the Patronus added optimistically, pulling him from his thoughts. "It was easier to get permission from the Minister to create the Inspection for Elfish Labour Conditions, because of who I am."

In reply, Draco summoned his own Patronus.

"What are you going to do after the Inspection has come to stand on its own feet? I can imagine that you've reached your main goal after that."

It was a subtle reference to the conversation they'd had seven years ago when they had been squeezed into a school desk together. This idealistic Gryffindor would never stop striving to make a difference in the world from within the Ministry. As if she hadn't already done so.

He picked up his book while waiting for her answer. It was a habit he had developed over the string of nights in which they had been talking to each other this way. Neither one of them had cared to mention that Draco had become really good at creating messenger Patronuses and no longer needed any practice.

For Draco it had become the highlight of his day. The whole day long he was looking forward to that moment he could close the bedroom door behind him and continue their conversation where they had left off the evening before. He liked to think she enjoyed the conversations as much as he did.

When a silver light had filled his bedroom Draco looked up from his book and sat up somewhat. The otter started to speak.

"Sadly, that's not the case. It isn't until house-elves are as free as wizards and goblins. The Inspection is merely a means to improve the lives of house-elves until that day comes..."

The otter was silent for a moment and then continued on a softer tone, "The Minister has asked me to join the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, when my work with the Inspection is done. I'm thinking of accepting his offer."

She was struggling with this. Draco sensed it without her Patronus conveying the actual words. Already at Hogwarts she had been very vocal in her opinions about the treatment of house-elves in the wizarding society. Back then her stance had angered him, and he'd seen it as proof that Muggle-borns did not have a place in the magical community. But since then he had started to see house-elves and their dire position in a new light and nowadays he could understand Granger's moral indignation, even admired her for her tenacity. Dobby had been extremely brave to defy his father like had done, but Draco knew he had been a rare exception. Perhaps in the foreseeable future Granger's efforts would give the house-elves enough courage to stand up for themselves.

He summoned his Patronus.

"I can imagine that working for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement enables you to draft legislation to force families like mine to free their house-elves."

His dry tone elicited a quick amused smile from the otter when it returned. "Well, yes, I suppose."

"What's holding you back then?"

If a Patronus could sigh it would be the soft, melodic sound the otter made when it reappeared in his room.

"I don't know. I guess I find it difficult to leave the inspectorate behind. It feels like a betrayal,
although they have already proven they can handle the task perfectly."

After a moment of consideration Draco instructed his own Patronus.

"You will make the right decision. A little word of advice - don't be afraid to close a chapter when it's ready to be closed. Otherwise, you'll inevitably become embittered by the very thing you'll want to remember fondly."

He had been telling this to himself when he had started adjusting to his life after Hogwarts, but he'd always known that to him it had been a decoy, a way of trying to forget about the emptiness inside. He had been far from ready to be closing the chapter that was Hogwarts when the school year had ended. Instead he felt a longing for it to be reopened ever since he'd held Granger in his arms during that fateful night of the inspection visit. He simply couldn't deny the excitement he now felt during their magically supported conversation.

This time he had to wait longer for her Patronus to appear.

"I haven't yet thought about it this way, but I see you're right... I guess you're speaking from own experience?"

Draco gave a bitter nod at her perceptiveness, something his ferret couldn't convey to her. He knew she would heed his advice though and continue to make a difference in whatever position she would be given in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

He sat up when her Patronus appeared again.

"You know, sometimes I wonder how my life had been hadn't I entered the wizarding world. I would probably have gone to university, earn a degree..."

As the otter dissolved in a gentle glow Draco summoned his own Patronus.

"What's a university?"

The otter reappeared immediately with her answer.

"A university is an institute for academic learning on the highest level, following the completion of a school like Hogwarts. It's something the wizarding world sadly doesn't know. I would probably have continued reading Law at a university if I had stayed in the Muggle world."

Pensively, Draco rested his chin in his hand. He knew next to nothing about the Muggle world she came from. The notion of going to a university actually appealed to him and he understood why Granger regretted the absence of one in the wizarding world.

It struck him that he'd been so accustomed to Muggleborns wanting to live in the wizarding world and the feeling of superiority he'd been brought up with that it had never occurred to him that she would actually miss the world she'd given up when she was admitted to Hogwarts.

"I never thought about it before," he told his Patronus after summoning him. "But now I realise that you've been asked to make a very grave choice when you were only twelve years old. At such a young age you couldn't possibly foresee all of the consequences."

Upon its return the otter said wistfully, "You're right. As a child I was merely excited for coming to know this new and fantastic world. I guess it's a bit like emigrating to another country. And while I've never regretted it you only realise later on that you've left something behind upon entering this new world... But, on a different note..."
The Patronus changed the subject. Granger was curious about his work for the foundation. She wanted to know how he chose the charities to support and what kind of requests he received.

Draco crossed his legs and told her all about it. To amuse her, he included a dry recount of some of the strangest applications he'd ever seen.

When the otter returned with her response he could almost hear her laughter ring through its words.

"But you didn't tell me if you granted those requests."

Smilingly, he summoned his ferret and asked, "Would you have granted them?"

Knowing that he had made her laugh filled him with joy and although his question was half in jest he'd actually been interested.

The reply though turned out a lot more serious than he expected.

"To promote peace, I would support any initiative - even the Witches' Institute organising a world record of house witches singing Celine Malvaria songs..."

Her reply made him lower his gaze as he felt the heartfelt grief in her words but the otter gave him no time for dejectedness.

"There's one thing more, Draco Malfoy," it said as it had looked at him attentively. "Tomorrow, the inspection results will be published in The Daily Prophet. The paper has been very eager for them to be disclosed. Expect the press hounds to arrive at the Manor very soon."

Draco didn't know why the remark made shiver run down his spine but as the otter disappeared he forgot about the foreboding feeling and got up to the curtains for the night.

"You look rather cheerful today."

Draco looked up attentively. It wasn't often that someone used that qualification to describe his mood but judging by Theodore Nott's indulgent smirk his old friend was serious about it.

Draco shot Theodore a sardonic look as he leaned back in the creaking, old chair and took a sip from his wine.

"It's almost Christmas, Nott. Aren't you supposed to be cheerful these days?"

The Leaky Cauldron was filled with witches and wizards taking a break from their Christmas shopping and even through the din in the barroom he could hear the carol singers outside. The pub itself was decorated in an uninspired way with dusty old garlands haphazardly hanging from the decayed balconies. However Tom the bartender seemed very happy with the result of his creative outburst - every once in a while he looked up with a satisfied, crooked grin on his face.

Draco and Theodore shared a small table in the corner of the cafe - their favourite spot when stopping by The Leaky Cauldron. Theodore was still in his work robes, having come straight from work at the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He was a tall man whose build had lost its stringiness over the years and despite his still weak chin, his eyes shone cleverly as he thoughtfully studied Draco.

Unlike the Malfoy family, the Notts had financially been sorely tried after the fall of the Dark Lord and Theodore, who had been shaped for a life of freedom from care, had to start work for a living.
He hadn't been daunted by it, though. He was very happy working as a liaison officer for the Ministry.

"Astoria has invited you to her family's Christmas dinner, hasn't she?" He probed. "No wonder you're smiling all the time."

"Don't waffle, Nott," Draco responded, though he couldn't help the grin from breaking through his normally so impassive features. "But you're right, of course."

The very prospect in fact was leaving him cold but it was better not to delve into details. Not now.

At Hogwarts Draco had actually considered his Slytherin classmate an equal and sometimes somewhat cleverer. They had become close friends when Theodore, unlike so many former Slytherins, didn't turn his back on Draco after the ending of the war, but instead had made a similar choice - to not let himself be fooled this badly ever again. Kindred spirits. Draco took a sip from his drink and threw a sideward glance at the civil servant sitting next to him.

"And what about you?"

Theodore shrugged.

"Oh, the usual. Fancy dinner here, Christmas dance there. I'll be glad to actually be home for Christmas."

For Theodore home was his small flat in a narrow street off Diagon Alley. His father still had some time in Azkaban to spend and the Nott family home had been sold to a distant cousin.

Draco knew what he meant. Christmas always was the busiest time of the year for the liaison officers.

"Any interesting receptions this year?"

"That depends on the food being served. I've got Togo and China this year. Not too bad, I would think."

Theodore smirked and took a sip from his wine.

"So..." he added casually. "Have you already heard the inspection outcome from the Inspection for Elfish Labour Conditions? I hear Malfoy Manor's results have turned out quite good."

Draco let out an amused laugh. His friend had a knack for knowing what was supposed to remain a secret.

"Which you shouldn't have known at all, no less confront me with it," he countered. "Do you need me to remind you of your oath of office?"

"No need. Sound bubbles can do wonders."

Theodore shrugged, before taking another sip of his wine and Draco grimaced. He'd already thought he'd felt a strange sensation suddenly cloaking him a while ago. Theodore never cared enough to let people he was with know he'd placed them under a spell.

"So, are you satisfied with the results?" Theodore asked, naturally ignoring Draco's displeasure.

The first time Draco had met with Theodore after the inspection he didn't even need to tell his friend about what had happened during the inspection. Theodore had of course already known
about Hermione Granger having fallen ill during her visit to Malfoy Manor. But the clever Slytherin hadn't been inclined to believe the official version the inspectors had put forward.

Carefully and without revealing too many details Draco had outlined what really had happened to the supervising inspector, knowing that he could trust Theodore.

Shaking his head, Theodore had advised Draco to request physically stronger inspectors for the next inspection visit.

"I am satisfied with the results. They are very good, indeed," Draco now established. "It's a good thing for the family name to be associated with something positive."

"Don't you mind all the extra work because of this new inspection thing?"

Theodore looked at him searchingly but Draco shook his head.

"It has been rather interesting in fact," he observed. "Though the elves have given me a hard time convincing them it's quite fascinating to see them eventually become more satisfied because of it."

"You are taking this far too seriously, Malfoy." Theodore shook his head. "You've become soft."

"No, I'm just noticing the differences," Draco repudiated. "And they are considerably enhancing the atmosphere in the Manor."

This made Theodore swallow the snide response and settle for a thoughtful nod instead.

For a moment both men remained silent until Theodore said casually, while studying his glass, "Do you know who looks particularly cheerful at the moment, too?"

"Haven't got the faintest. Do enlighten me, please," Draco responded dryly and let his eyes rest on two scrawny and possibly thirsty wizards opening the door and trying to get an enormous Christmas tree through the door, much to the dismay of an agitated Tom. The corners of his mouth curled up and he stretched his legs, before taking a sip from his magically refilled glass.

"Hermione Granger."

Draco put down his glass with a deliberate movement, feeling Theodore's sharp gaze on him. But as Theodore had already expected Draco's face remained unreadable and he turned to look at Theodore with a carefully cultivated expression of non-understanding in his eyes.

"I fail to see why this particular piece of information would be of any interest to me?"

Theodore merely shrugged, a vague smile playing around his thin lips.

"I thought you would be interested."

In response Draco raised his eyebrows in a meaningful way, apparently convinced that Theodore must have lost his mind.

"What gave me away?" He replied jestingly.

Theodore only smirked at him and as they burst out in laughter Draco suppressed a relieved sigh before downing the remainder of his wine.

At that moment Theodore nodded at a point before him and said dryly, "The way you're looking at that picture of her on the wall over there."
Draco choked in his wine. A violent cough ripped through him as the burning liquid exploded in his lungs and nose.

The young Malfoy had become feverishly red but Theodore had a hard time telling it came from the lack of oxygen or something else.

"You're welcome," he replied in advance as he handed Draco a handkerchief. Then he scrutinised his friend as Draco regained his composure and shot him a deadly look.

Theodore's grin widened.

"Care to tell me about it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Draco replied as stiffly as he could with his hoarse voice. It hurt to speak.

Theodore shook his head at this and put down on his glass.

"Pity. I was really interested to know how that poor little inspector had gotten home after she fainted in your house. You conveniently left out that part of the story earlier. Though I'm suspecting that your chivalrous character has something to with it...

When Draco only fixed him with a hard stare he shrugged.

"Very well. Whatever suits you. When you feel ready to tell me, you know where to find me. Though I must say my curiosity has risen to new and very high levels now."

Draco looked positively murderous by now.

"I don't..." he started to repeat himself trying to forget about the fact that once or twice his gaze indeed had been drawn to the young woman on the picture flanking The-Boy-Who-Lived, but Theodore cut him off.

"Yes, yes, I know... Sadly it's time to go or Tracey will kill me. So, the inquiry will have to wait until... Thursday."

Draco allowed himself a wry smile as he and Theodore said good-bye. The civil servant grinned and wrapped his Ministry-scarf tightly around his neck.

"Don't forget to bring that 200 year old Firewhisky you've been bragging about. See you then."

Draco's thoughts trailed back to this conversation with Theodore when his Patronus hopped out of the window as he had been doing for the past two weeks.

Theodore was a very observant person but even he couldn't fathom the ongoing and highly personal conversation between him and Granger through Patronus messages. By now they had reached a level where they were discussing life expectations and hopes and dreams for the future.

It was a shock to Draco to learn that Granger seemed to be as lonely as he was and he'd remembered the forlorn look in her eyes at the ball of the Order of Merlin this year. Had it been only weeks ago that he'd wished for an opportunity to speak with her and tell her that he was there for her if she needed him?

He took in a deep breath and summoned his Patronus.
"Sometimes it helps to talk about it."

"I know," the otter admitted when it appeared before him. Then it blinked and Draco knew this meant that Granger had looked away to compose her thoughts. But then the Patronus had suddenly disappeared.

Immediately Draco summoned his Patronus, cursing himself for having been this blunt.

"I didn't mean to put pressure on you. I only wanted to say that I'm here if you'd want to say more on the subject. In the mean time... Do you also intend to go to the Christmas ball of the Wizards' Service Organisation?"

And the affirmative reply made him go to bed a happy man after all.

The next evening a question popped into Draco's mind when he was about to send away his Patronus with a reply.

"What Patronus does Potter have?"

He added the question on impulse and the ferret jumped away before he could rethink his words.

Surprised, Draco stared at the dark night sky as he wondered where the question had come from. It certainly hadn't been on his mind before.

Many minutes passed and Draco had already began to doubt if he would hear from her again for the night. But then the otter appeared before him.

Perhaps his question had caught her off guard too but she refrained from commenting on it.

Instead the otter's melodious voice answered, "A stag. Harry's Patronus is a stag."

Draco considered this piece of information. A proud animal, he found. And very appropriate for the heroic Gryffindor.

A bitter smile for a moment tugged at his lips when he summoned his own Patronus and the ferret appeared. But as the small animal looked up at him expectantly he remembered what Granger had said to him seven years ago in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. *The ferret is related to the otter."

His features softened. Somehow, it felt right that his Patronus resembled Granger's.

"And the Weasel?"

The otter returned soon with her reply.

"It's Ron Weasley, Malfoy and his Patronus is a Jack Russell terrier."

Draco nodded, ignoring the reprimand. Stubborn, loyal and overly impulsive. Also an animal prone to chase otters. Sounded like the Weasel to him.

He hesitated, reluctant to let go of the subject, to let go of her for tonight, though it was almost time for bed. He summoned his Patronus one last time as he searched his memory for people he expected to possess even slightly interesting Patronuses, but above all - would tempt her to keep on talking.
A memory drifted to the surface and he stilled. Would he...?

Hesitantly he instructed his Patronus. His question therefore sounded strangely subdued.

"What about... Snape?"

Perhaps it was only his imagination but it seemed like the otter arrived later than before with the answer.

"It was a doe."

Draco blinked in surprise, before sending off his Patronus.

"A doe? That doesn't sound much like Snape."

He didn't know what he'd expected but not a deer. The notion actually intrigued him beyond his initial objective to keep Granger talking some while longer. He started to wonder about the circumstances.

Granger's reply however was as mysterious as it was sad.

"He loved her very much."

"Who?"

She had lost him there.

"Lily Evans Potter. Harry's mother. Her Patronus was a doe."

Draco's eyes widened. Potter's mother? Professor Snape, Professor Severus Snape had loved Potter's mother? He sat up in his chair. The young Malfoy had the feeling that he had touched upon something very important. Something he had never understood before.

He began to summon his Patronus to ask Granger about the specifics when the otter already appeared before him.

"It's really a sad story," the animal softly explained. "They knew each other from before their time at Hogwarts. It was Professor Snape who introduced Lily, who was a Muggle born like me, to the magical world and explained to her why she could do such strange things. They were the best of friends even after Snape was sorted into Slytherin and Lily into Gryffindor."

The otter paused for a moment and Draco's heart involuntarily skipped a beat.

"That was," the animal continued, "until Snape got obsessed with the Dark Arts and destroyed their friendship and whatever possible future they might have had together. He turned her down and called her a Mudblood, even when she tried to protect him from Harry's father and Sirius bullying him."

Her quiet words had his head spinning. Suddenly, many things about Potter became clear to him, such as Snape's fierce hatred toward the boy, which had always come in quite handy, but Draco had never really understood. Until now.

He sent off his Patronus for the last time to bid Granger a good night and went to stand by the was so much information in Granger's explanation that he felt the need to think it over.

The former Gryffindor had used only a few words to point out to him that many escalations during
the war had actually resulted from strings that had been woven long before the beginning of that
very war. And he realised how little he still knew about these connections as both his parents and
the Dark Lord had left him in the dark about those things at the time.

As he leaned against the window he also couldn't help but notice a certain awkward similarity
between Snape and Potter's mother and Granger and himself. Hadn't Granger's words sounded a bit
wistful when she told him the story of their estrangement? And hadn't he himself, on a very low
point in his youth, called Granger a Mudblood once?

Draco shook his head as he closed the curtains for the night reminding himself that history often
repeated itself, but never quite the same.

"Mr. Malfoy. Very pleased to find you home. I'd like to congratulate you with Malfoy Manor's
laudatory inspection outcome regarding the house-elves labour inspection it received earlier this
year. Can I ask you a few questions about that?"

Draco grimaced when he heard the eager voice magically sound through the hallway and secretly
thanked Granger for warning him beforehand. Today was the day the inspection results were
published in The Daily Prophet and the newspaper's response was immediate.

He instructed one of the house elves to let the reporter in and take him to his office where he gave
him a cool welcome.

The man was clearly overwhelmed by the splendour of Malfoy Manor as he lowered himself in one
of the elegant armchairs in Draco's study and conjured his questions from his titbit worn robes.
Draco surveyed his movements with resignation but when the man started his questions he
answered them politely.

What his reaction had been when he heard Malfoy Manor had come out on top of the Ministry's
list.

"I wasn't aware of this being a competition," Draco mildly reprimanded the reporter before
underlining that he recognised the importance of the working conditions of house-elves being
improved.

The reporter bowed his head under Draco's cool, grey gaze and went on with his questions. They
were unremarkable and easy to dodge. How the house-elves were doing – good -, how they liked
the new Ministry's nosiness on their behalf – you should ask them –, and the reporter began to
realise he wouldn't be getting any juicy quotes out of Draco this way.

He paused and then changed his tack. "This is a level of meddling in your affairs by the Ministry
you've probably not experienced before. What's your opinion on that?"

Draco stilled and watched the reporter silently, probing the scrawny man's intentions. It was clear
that he was looking for a Pureblood sneer at the Ministry and the Malfoy heir didn't like it. Did this
press hound really think that this transparent question would make him put the fragile reputation of
his family on the line? His face set as he responded with a politically correct, noncommittal
response.

The question was followed but three other fruitless attempts at eliciting an interesting answer from
Draco, until the reporter finally gave up and thanked him for the interview. He let his notes, taken
with a hexed quill, disappear and stood up.

Draco followed his example, glad that it was over. His thoughts trailed to Granger and though the
evening had yet to come he longed to discuss the reporter's visit with her. Caught up in his thoughts Draco returned to his desk and didn't notice when the reporter lingered at the door.

"There's one more thing, Mr. Malfoy. This whole action is an initiative of Hermione Granger, who's famous for striving for equal rights for Magical Creatures. She's one of your former classmates at Hogwarts, isn't she?"

Draco remained standing behind his desk and rested his fingers on the leather blotting mat, his eyes narrowing.

'She's famous for a lot more than just that, you insolent little...' he thought as he looked at the man with disgust. There was no point in denying the obvious though, except -

"I don't see where this is relevant."

Draco's already cold voice turned freezing at the reporter's question but this time the man was not daunted.

"Other families tell that she has been part of the inspection team. Did she visit Malfoy Manor, too?"

He squinted his watery eyes, looking back at the young Malfoy to see his reaction. He got nothing though, as the Malfoy heir's features remained impassive.

"Hermione Granger was part of the inspection team," Draco confirmed formally, "but as I said, I don't see where this is relevant to the subject at hand."

A little vein near his temple started to pulsate and his voice took on a warning tone. "If we're done-"

Anybody else had taken the hint but not this reporter from the Daily Prophet. The prospect of returning to his shabby office at the newspaper without any interesting quote made him bold. And he felt there was something very interesting about this story. He narrowed his eyes.

"I believe this the first time your paths have crossed each other since your repeated seventh year at Hogwarts. I've been told you hung around quite a lot with each other that year even though you were the admitted opponent of Harry Potter during the war."

Draco's eyes flashed with anger and his hands tightened around his desk. Noticing Mr. Malfoy's reaction the reporter smiled. He got something.

"Isn't it so that Hermione Granger and Harry Potter were held hostage in this house by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Was it because of that that she came back?"

Draco clenched his jaw. He was furious and needed all of his restraint to not throw the reporter from his office. This was first class muckraking journalism. The scrawny man was sticking his nose in things he didn't understand. Draco didn't know where his information came from but he did know that he had to get rid of him as soon as possible.

Reeling in his fury Draco straightened to his full height. "I'm sorry. I believe I've answered all of your questions on the inspection to your satisfaction. I can confirm that Hermione Granger was part of the inspection team and I suggest we leave it at that." Menace dripped from his authoritative tone and the accompanying glare could have curdled milk. The scrawny reporter swallowed, knowing it was his cue to leave.
All in all the interview had taken less than half an hour and now Draco stood at the window, looking down on the man walking toward the gate with a dark expression on his face. Then he turned around and determinedly spoke the incantation.

"Expecto Patronum."

"Draco Malfoy."

Draco gasped and shot up straight at the tingling voice jolting him back to reality. Next to the chair in which he'd fallen asleep floated a silver otter, looking at him serenely as it waited for him to recover.

"Hermione," he sighed and raked his hand over his face to clear his thoughts. He took a peek at his watch. Eleven thirty. Almost midnight.

"Hermione is sorry for the late reply to your message. She summoned her Patronus as soon as she got home from work. If she woke you up she hopes you can forgive her."

The animal tilted its little head and looked at Draco expectantly.

"Of course," he mumbled a little curtly. His grey eyes shone with anticipation.

"Hermione wishes to thank you for the message. She says that it's clear that some things will never change for the better, like The Daily Prophet."

Draco's lips curled in a smile but the otter bowed its little head.

"Hermione isn't surprised about the questions asked, though. Her private life has been subject to speculations for a while now."

Underneath the otter's ethereal voice Draco could hear the sadness of her words. He knew what she was talking about. Lately, The Daily Prophet had run quite a lot of features on the possible break up between her and the Weasel.

He hadn't been surprised. From what little information the otter had given him on their relationship Draco had gathered that they were beginning to pay for the intellectual differences between them.

The otter came closer.

"In the end, it seems that we're trying to meet what life expects from us, rather than fulfil our own expectations of life."

The otter sounded incredibly lonely and Draco's face darkened. He had resigned to this realisation a long time ago while working his hopes and dreams around it. Only during his repeated year at Hogwarts he'd felt as if the expectations of the world and his own expectations had aligned.

"Tell me," the otter whispered. "Why do I seek support from someone who's not my friend in any sense of the word, rather than from the one who has known me for years?"

Draco grimaced though he knew that she didn't regret their conversation by messenger Patronus. And it was true. To the outside world they were acquaintances at best.

The otter's voice softened.

"Sleep well, Draco Malfoy. Hermione is sorry to have bothered you with this question."
The next moment the otter had disappeared.

For a moment Draco watched the spot where Granger’s Patronus had floated in the air as he massaged his temples. Then he picked up his wand from the floor and spoke the incantation.

"Tell her... It's because I understand."

The following morning Draco determinedly set course to the kitchen hoping to intercept today's newspaper before it would be sent up. The house-elves looked up in surprise when young Master Draco appeared and took the ironed The Daily Prophet from the silver platter.

His face was tense when he opened the newspaper and scanned the headlines. Then he stilled. His grey eyes had come to rest on the article on page three. A single strand of pale bond hair fell over his forehead as he leaned in to read it. The piece on the Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions.

It was a relatively small article and an old picture of Malfoy Manor crowned the headline: Results First House-Elves Labour Inspection Made Public. A smaller headline underneath it stated: Excellent Reports For Hogwarts And Malfoy Manor.

So far so good, Draco thought as his wary eye caught the inset that contained an official Ministry picture of Granger and a short history of the new inspection.

His eyes sped over the lines and stopped when the journalist introduced the young Mr. Malfoy, heir to the Malfoy fortune and known philanthropist. What followed was a surprisingly faithful account of his answers.

Slowly Draco straightened up and relieved he let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. This was not nearly as bad as he'd feared. Perhaps the journalist had taken his unforgiving attitude as a warning. And rightfully so. He made a movement to close The Daily Prophet when he felt a small tug on his sleeve.

"Young Master Draco, sir. Squeaky has ironed the newspaper for the Mister and Mistress," the house-elf piped. "And Squeaky saw that things are written about Master Draco in the newspaper today."

"You're right, Squeaky, but it's only the interview I gave the other day," Draco responded favourably and turned to leave the kitchen when a leathery hand stopped him.

"Not in the home news section, Master Draco," the house-elf said with more emphasis, his large eyes looking at him pleadingly. "But in the gossip section."

The swearword escaping Draco's lips made the house-elf bow its head in regret. Draco assured the creature that it had done nothing wrong as he hastily opened the gossip section with a foreboding feeling.

Then he paled.

Amidst a loud collection of articles on showbiz wizards and witches he saw an article that made his heart sink. It was introduced by an ominous, underlined headline in chocolate letters: Could It Be Possible...? Underneath was a group photograph during a ball he and Granger both had attended some two years ago.

What followed was a long piece on their troubled past and their repeated seventh year at Hogwarts. The journalist had dug up some former students of Hogwarts who had been willing to state that the
both of them had seemed rather close that year, which hadn't even been possible since the only
times the other students had seen them together had been those few times in Potions Class, when
Ginny Weasley had been unable to attend.

Draco looked at his own picture in dress robes as he stared into the lens seriously, before looking
down on the radiant witch in a beautiful, dark blue dress standing in the row below him. Though
his gaze had been indifferent enough he imagined that readers must see the yearning dripping from
his features.

His horrified gaze came to rest upon the closing sentence of the wretched article: Have Miss
Granger's Good Intentions For The Improvement Of Elfish Labour Conditions Turned Into A
Means Of Getting Back In Touch With Her High School Sweetheart?

Draco scowled as he closed the newspaper in disgust. This was bad. Really, really bad.

He couldn't care less about what people might think after reading this article but it was Granger's
reaction he feared the most. What if she would cut off the hesitantly renewed contact after reading
this? He had left school in acceptance of the knowledge that their hesitant bond had only been
temporary but the moment she'd been back on his doorstep and had asked for his help, he'd realised
how much he'd missed her company. By now he couldn't imagine life without the frequent visits of
her Patronus anymore.

"Master Draco." The house-elf's squeaky voice pulled him from his thoughts. "A letter has
arrived."

He looked up to see the owl jumping from the windowsill and fly away.

"It's from Miss Astoria."

Granger's Patronus arrived only two hours after Astoria's letter, carrying with him the message he
had feared the most. As Draco listened resignedly to its message, looking at the ethereal figure
with an empty gaze, disappointment, fury and sadness raged inside him.

Subconsciously, he clenched his fists as the otter's words sank in.

Of course, he had expected as much. It was only natural. The accusing gaze of the entire world had
come to rest upon Harry Potter's friend who seemed to be cheating on her boyfriend with no other
than their former nemesis.

So, of course it was utterly understandable. She had some serious damage control to do. Protect the
vulnerable, new inspectorate she had created, restore the trust of the world in the brains of the
magical Golden Trio and save her relationship with the moronic redhead.

It couldn't be more clear. For one irrational moment he had hoped that she wouldn't give up on
him, wouldn't care about what impression that press hound had given of them in his poisonous
article, but she did after all.

"Hermione is very sorry about this, but she sees no other way," the Patronus said regretfully.
"Patronuses can be intercepted and it's too much of a risk to stay in contact with everyone watching
her every step. Please do know that it hurts her deeply to do this and that she will miss the silver
ferret more than you'll ever know."

Then the otter disappeared. For a moment, Draco kept staring at where the otter had been floating
before him, an empty look in his eyes, but then his features contorted with anger and grief. Blindly
he grabbed a precious vase within his reach and with a silent cry threw it into the wall.
The sound of porcelain breaking into a thousand pieces was heard throughout the entire Manor.

The days and weeks following the publication of the article in The Daily Prophet passed in a blur for Draco as he had to keep other reporters at bay and appease a furious Astoria. Thankfully, he found some distraction in his work for the foundation, which provided him with some much needed stability in his life.

Meanwhile, a string of new publications fuelled the speculations on the assumed relationship between him and Granger. Each and every article led to new and reproachful glances from his mother. The worst thing was that he had to undergo it, while he had lost contact with Granger.

He often couldn't sleep at night and developed a habit of conjuring a Patronus just to talk to. He would keep the ferret around until he grew tired from performing the advanced magic and imagined sending it off to Granger. Pathetic, but it helped him get some semblance of a night's rest.

And while it hurt him that Granger seemed to have given up on him so easily, he suspected that things would be worse for her. He knew he had the luxury of awaiting the end of the storm in his secluded house in the countryside, his reputation already in shambles as it was, whereas for Granger there was no hiding from the attention nor the judgment.

Knowing that he couldn't contact her to support her, Draco stuck to his daily routine and tried not to think of her. Essentially, this was an impossible task, since the first article was the beginning of an endless stream of follow ups on their suspected relationship. Every day Draco came across old pictures where the two of them coincidentally had been photographed together, most of the time while they had attended some social event with a larger group of people.

They had even managed to dig up pictures from their school days at Hogwarts he didn't even know existed. Such as the blurry picture of their fourth year Yule Ball when Hermione Granger even had Draco Malfoy looking at her wistfully when bad luck had put them together in that blasted choral dance. When his eye fell on it, the image actually struck a melancholy chord. The photographer had captured a moment where her hand had left his to move up to her next dance partner and his gaze had followed her moving away from him instead of focusing on the Hufflepuff girl turning in.

They had looked so young in the picture and she had looked so beautiful. He had been so stupid.

A far more unpleasant surprise were the pictures taken during their repeated year at Hogwarts and of which he hadn't even known of. Of course, during those days he had never taken into account Dennis Creevey, the younger brother of that small Gryffindor who had died in the war.

The boy had still been in school when both he and Granger had returned to Hogwarts for their eighth year and the equally small brother of the photographer had appeared to have stayed behind at school during the holidays too. And apparently he'd taken up photography as a hobby as well. The scrawny Gryffindor had secretly taken a picture of them when they had been on their way to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom for Patronus lessons. He must have been following Granger, whom his brother had adored.

The moment he'd first seen the picture Draco's breath caught for a second. The picture depicted them standing next to each other in one of the corridors close to the Ravenclaw Tower. Mysterious moonlight, filtered by ancient dust, highlighted Granger's pretty face angled toward him, her eyes level with the Slytherin badge on his school robes. They were standing rather close to each other and Draco's hand seemed to be resting on Granger's back as he looked down on her gleaming curls with an expression of infinite peacefulness on his chiselled features. The magical picture had captured the moment when their eyes eventually would meet in quiet understanding.
It was an almost ethereal scene in the stately, historical corridor - a Slytherin and a Gryffindor seeking each other out on neutral grounds. Above the photograph the headline read: Is This Why Hermione Granger Picks Draco Malfoy Over Ronald Weasley?

Another one of Dennis Creevey's photograph's was published underneath, depicting Draco and Granger during Potions class with a steaming cauldron in front of them. This picture Draco recognised. It had been taken for the school newspaper but in this particular context the image got a totally different meaning.

The next day, The Daily Prophet reported Weasley and Granger's break-up.

When Draco read those lines he gritted his teeth and had to fight off the urge flaring up inside of him to summon his Patronus and reach out to her. The last thing she needed now was more trouble on her hands, but Merlin, he wanted to seek her out and comfort her so bad. Even apologise to her for unwillingly remaining under the lee of her protecting shadow.

"Master Draco, sir," the house-elf piped up hesitantly, hands wringing nervously to the sound of a bell ringing. "Mr. Malfoy's asking for the newspaper, sir."

The looks his father and mother gave him over breakfast Draco endured with feigned indifference, but when his father had one of the house-elves discard the newspaper in the litter bin he took his wand and cut both pictures from the gossip section.

The days following the publication of the school pictures the newspaper was flooded with letters to the editor from witches arguing whether Granger should either choose him or Weasley. They turned Draco's stomach.

Finally, after weeks of speculation, but finding nothing worthwhile to base their theories upon the press finally grew tired of writing about the supposed relationship between Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger and their attention shifted toward the pregnant lead singer of the Wicked Witches who had betrayed her husband with some professional Quidditch player.

The storm was over.

Five weeks had passed since Malfoy Manor had received the inspection team from the Ministry and as the media storm was dropping, the winds of the weather grew tired too. Instead a freezing cold entered to see off the old year.

It was one week until Christmas.

Finally, the Malfoy family received a notice of decision on the discontinuation of further inspection visits from the Inspection for Elfish Labour Conditions for at least two years. The letter of two pages long confirmed in dry officialese what Draco in his heart had already known - she really wasn't coming back.

The blow had been expected but Draco's hands started to tremble as he stared at the lines with unseeing eyes. His last hope of seeing her again had been crushed. A small, pained groan escaped him as he faced the inevitable.

The excruciating feeling ripping through him now had his ears ringing. He didn't even notice the small popping sound, followed by a dry snap and another pop.

After several minutes his ragged breathing calmed down and a new expression of disgust settled on his features.
"Enough."

His voice sounded strange to his ears as if coming from outside of him, but he had formed his decision. With decisive movements he folded the letter and filed it, his face having become a mask of impassiveness.

Enough was enough.
"I am going to propose to Astoria. It's something I have postponed for far too long now."

Theodore Nott looked up in surprise.

Just before Christmas Draco had redeemed to his promise and visited with his good friends Theodore and Tracey in their small but classy flat off Diagon Alley. Normally, Draco would bask in the peaceful atmosphere in his friends' house but now he seemed tense despite his effort to hide it. The usual drawl in Draco's even voice had masked whatever was going through him right now and his face betrayed nothing.

An expression of concern flashed over Theodore's features and he sat up.

"Are you sure? I mean, I could do something… I do work for the Ministry, remember?"

He didn't even bother to congratulate his friend as was customary in situations in which your best friend tells you he's hopefully going to be engaged to be wed.

Draco's face darkened at the obvious doubt in Theodore's voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Nott," he replied stiffly before taking a gulp from his Firewhisky. "How do you like the Firewhisky?"

Theodore frowned.

"Oh, come on, Malfoy, don't play me like a fool. Like I don't know what has been going on for the past few weeks," Theodore confronted him disapprovingly, ignoring Draco's attempt to change the subject.

This earned him a cold gaze from his friend. "And what exactly might that be?"

Theodore studied Draco. The man hadn't been this impervious since before… long. He had put up a wall around him and nobody was able to get through to him. He shook his head. Someone could.

"She could use a little support, you know. She's all on her own in this."

He had overplayed his hand. Theodore knew it when Draco suddenly put down his glass and got up.

"There's nothing I need from the Ministry nor do I owe the Ministry anything, Nott," he stated icily, his grey eyes having turned to steel mirrors.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go home. I'll see myself out. Merry Christmas, Nott."

The door of the stylish London flat was closed rather forcefully as Theodore took a regretful sip from his Firewhisky.

This was far worse than he'd thought.
As Christmas approached quickly Draco actually welcomed the depressing atmosphere at the Manor as it perfectly fit his own mood. He was grateful that nobody asked him any questions as he tried to forget about Granger. For the second time in his life.

Weather permitting he took long flights over the Wiltshire downlands and valleys. The crisp, open air soothed the aching inside. Up in the air he could pretend that the escaping tears were caused by the nip of winter.

To beguile the time Draco made his mother some new potions so she wouldn't have to go out and buy them. To her surprise he even helped her with coordinating the decorating of seven Christmas trees which were to be placed in several drawing rooms and the dining room. Draco made sure the house-elves got one in the kitchen too. He had stopped summoning his Patronus as he'd securely closed off all of the memories that had made the ferret appear in the past.

A week before Christmas he received a short note from Astoria in which she sent her apologies and explained to him that given the circumstances she would refuse his request to see each other. She had already withdrawn her invitation for her family's Christmas dinner.

A bitter smile passed over Draco's lips as he read her message. He couldn't blame her for doing so. Nonetheless he needed her to comply with his request.

Swiftly, he wrote a short but understanding reply, requesting to please reconsider her decision. When he saw the weak winter sun breaking through the heavy clouds, he decided on impulse to go on a stroll to Owlery and send the letter himself.

He summoned his coat and walked through the kitchen towards the Owlery, ignoring the stares from the house-elves.

The world outside had fallen silent as the freshly fallen snow muffled all sounds but for the soft crackling of snow under Draco's boots. Despite his anxiety, he enjoyed the small walk through the wintery gardens.

Draco gave a low whistle when he approached the elegant, wooden birdhouse, expecting his Barn Owl Escuin to come and meet him. Therefore, he was mildly surprised when the brown bird didn't emerge from the Owlery.

"Escuin?"

Draco entered the aviary and looked around searchingly, seeing only a few family owls and his father's rare Greater Sooty Owl from Australia. There was no sign of Escuin. He lifted his eyebrow, then he shrugged. The bird was probably still out from a night hunting.

Quickly, he sent one of the other owls on its way and upon his return to the house called Squeaky with him.

"Escuin was not in the Owlery today. I'd like you to regularly check the birdhouse for his return."

The house-elf nodded in confirmation and Draco left the kitchen. He didn't notice that Squeaky watched him go with big, slightly frightened eyes as he held his bony hands, wrapped in bandages, protectively to his scrawny body.

Normally, Hermione loved this time of the year - the arrival of first snow, carol singers in a beautifully decorated Diagon Alley, decorating the Christmas tree and cosy family dinners.
This year however she only saw the muddy slush covering the treacherous layer of ice underneath and the Christmas carols were piercing her ears as she turned her eyes away from the brightly shining Christmas trees.

Almost six weeks had passed since Harry had pleaded with her to reconsider her visit to Malfoy Manor. Now, she fiercely wished she had followed his advice as she tried to shut out the eyes turning towards her wherever she came.

A sigh escaped her as she rested her head in her hands and tried to concentrate on the report before her. During this time of the year, Cornish pixies were wreaking havoc on the Muggles in the hills of Cornwall and something had to be done. But to be honest, Hermione couldn't care less. As went for the illegally imported Acromantula eggs.

There was something else occupying her mind. And it had something to do with the awkwardly written note lying next to the report.

The break-up with Ron had been an emotional rollercoaster. Her memories of his anger were blurred by a mist of unshed tears. She had failed to convince him that he was misguided by The Daily Prophet and hadn't been able to prevent their very public break-up. It had been the most humiliating experience in her life. But the worst thing was that she'd also lost someone who had tentatively become one of her best friends over a slow conversation through Patronus messages.

She had wanted to blame The Daily Prophet for what had happened but in her heart she knew that the newspaper had only canalised that what had already been wrong between her and Ron for so long. With the worst possible result.

"Honestly Hermione, there's no possible way that you could have foreseen this to happen. No one in their right mind could. I certainly didn't," Harry had said to her the day that hell had broken loose in The Daily Prophet. "I mean, how can someone draw a supposed love affair out of this?"

He'd pointed at the inspection results in the newspaper.

"I was afraid of some bad publicity if something were to happen to you at Malfoy Manor, but this... It will blow over, Hermione, I'm sure it will."

But it didn't blow over. It only became worse. In the days that followed more and more pictures of her and Malfoy were being published by the newspaper. If the whole situation hadn't been this awful she would have been surprised about how many actually existed. Old classmates were also being drawn out of anonymity to tell the most fantastic and untrue stories about the developing love affair between the former enemies during their repeated year at Hogwarts.

And then this one picture had been published.

The photograph that made the situation finally explode and the mailbox of The Daily Prophet clog up for days. The picture the world had come to know as The Corridor.

Dennis Creevey.

That was the name that shot through Hermione's head the moment she saw the photograph on the front page of the newspaper. The small boy who had been following her around during the holidays with his camera and apparently had managed to do so even after bedtime curfew. Hermione actually admired the way the gentle moonlight cast a silvery glow on her and Malfoy in the photograph. It carried her back to this Christmas holiday seven years ago when they had enjoyed a brief period of peacefulness as she'd taught Malfoy the Patronus spell.
The picture had meant the end of her relationship with Ron.

"You look rather close, though," Harry had hesitantly pointed out, a strange mixture of hurt, mild disgust and amazement lacing his voice, as he held up the day old newspaper. Thank Merlin, he had been willing to listen to her. He had been one the few. His remark had Hermione groan in dismay, though.

"I told you..."

"I know, I know," Harry had interceded, "you only taught him the Patronus spell, because he'd asked you to. It's hard to believe, but I'll try. Still, I don't understand why you've never told us."

He had been silenced when Hermione's eyes had suddenly spat fire.

"And face all this? Don't you think I haven't at least foreseen Ron's reaction? There's no way in which he could have understood it and I would never have taken the risk of telling him. He would have tried to interfere."

Knowing Ron's disgust of Malfoy Harry had had no choice but to agree with her. He wasn't even sure if he himself wouldn't at least have tried to change her mind on this.

He'd leaned back in his uncomfortable office chair as he'd studied the picture of his dear friend and former arch-enemy in the newspaper. They were standing closer to each other than ever before and wore a strange expression of belonging on their faces, which somehow felt right. It had been a very disturbing notion, but he'd known that Hermione couldn't take much anymore.

There was one thing Harry had needed to know, though.

"I know it's none of my business," he'd said slowly, "but I still don't understand why you would have gone to all this trouble for Malfoy."

His voice had become lower as his bespectacled green eyes had rested on Hermione.

But she'd only shaken her head dismissively.

"I'm not considering it a trouble if it means that by helping Malfoy to learn the Patronus spell we'll be taking another step away from hatred and war. Even if it means keeping the lessons a secret from my friends."

Her honest words had touched Harry. He'd slumped back in his office chair and said no more.

Days turned into weeks as Hermione automatically went to work and held her head up high, ignoring the not so very quiet whispers behind her back. Sometimes she ran into Ron who pretended not seeing her. Those were the moments she had to retreat to the bathroom, not being able to keep the tears from flowing.

Her parents had warmly welcomed her back to the parental home and once again she slept in her old girl's room. It actually helped to keep her ground in this madness to go home to a place in the Muggle world each night where nobody knew who Hermione Granger was. The picture of her and Malfoy, extracted from the newspaper Harry had left behind in her office, now rested in her pocket.

Every night she cried herself to sleep.

The worst thing was, that while she should have been thinking of Ron, her guilt toward Malfoy ran
much, much deeper. Her Patronus couldn't possibly have brought across the way her voice had cracked when she had told him that this would be the last time he would be seeing the otter.

Hermione had immediately recognised the ferret Patronus the first time it had unexpectedly appeared in her room. That it had been carrying a message for her had rendered her speechless. How on earth had Malfoy managed to master that skill? Without anyone helping him? The second Patronus he'd sent her had made it clear that he'd remembered something she'd said about messenger Patronuses years ago, but this had only contributed to her admiration for him. He had merely been worried about her wellbeing instead, which had touched her deeply.

She'd sent him a heartfelt reply as she'd cursed herself for letting shame prevent her from contacting him before. It had felt like a betrayal of their burgeoning friendship and she'd been beyond relief he didn't seem to blame her, either for what had transpired in the drawing room or the lack of contact afterwards.

Hermione had been surprised and secretly overjoyed when the messages had continued and changed into a long-distance conversation. Through the Patronus messages Malfoy had opened up to her in a way he'd never done before and finally she'd started to gain an inside in what occupied Malfoy's mind. She'd learned about his interests and his daily activities. She had come to know that the potion he'd given her to help her to her feet had been of his own making. And she came to understand the changes in him years after his transformed attitude had caught her interest at Hogwarts.

The moment the ferret would appear in the room, the glow keeping the darkness at bay, had become the highlight of Hermione's day. Every night she retreated early with a book, only to put it aside when Malfoy's Patronus softly called her name. His quiet interest in her had smartened her up after a long period of only living up to expectations from the outside world. And he'd shared with her personal feelings he wouldn't have entrusted with anyone else.

In return she'd confided in him, imparting her hopes and doubts to him and at his request had told him about her early youth in the Muggle world. He'd offered support when she'd needed it and she hoped she'd done the same.

And then she had betrayed him.

Of course, she had done it to protect him, to shield him from the storm that was unleashed upon her, mindful of Harry's warning words. And while she'd tried to explain her reasons to Malfoy she'd known that in the end to protect him meant to betray him. It hurt her more than she'd thought was possible and while she should have been thinking about Ron, most of the time it had been Malfoy's serious features that had occupied her mind.

About two weeks ago the press had finally lost interest in Hermione's love life as the wizarding world started to prepare for Christmas. The whispering behind her back and the furtive looks following her at work decreased spectacularly and Hermione had finally started to hope for her life returning to normal.

But her whole world collapsed the day she'd seen the personal announcement in The Daily Prophet, giving notice of the engagement between Miss Astoria Greengrass and Mr. Draco Malfoy. The breath was knocked out of her and stars appeared before her eyes as the dry message had sunk in.

She had been saved from utter despair washing over her by a hesitant voice calling her name.

"Miss Granger?"
Hermione's head had shot up and through the mist in her eyes she'd seen that one of her inspectors had been lingering at the door, clearly unsure if it was the right time to disturb Miss Granger.

"Yes. Come in, please," Hermione had hastily acknowledged the younger woman, hoping that she didn't notice her choking voice. "What's the matter?"

"It's… this letter, Miss. It has just arrived by owl. Perhaps, you should read it…" The inspector's voice had trailed away and not until then Hermione had noticed that she had been holding a disheveled piece of parchment in her hand.

Wearily she'd extended her hand and started to decipher the scribbles on it.

Then her eyes had widened.

On the 24th of December it started to snow. From his favourite spot at the window of his study Draco watched the world turning white with a sombre look on his face. The crystalline precipitation had also been falling from the sky the day that Granger had arrived on his doorstep. There also had been snow when she'd been teaching him the Patronus spell.

As soon as Draco realised his train of thoughts he cut them off, a frown on his face. Instead he looked down on the small, leather box in his hand.

Astoria had finally agreed to meet him and the box was empty now. Resignedly, Draco put it in his pocket. He was getting control of his life again.

Draco picked up the book he'd been reading when he was startled by the harsh sound of the magical doorbell ringing through the quiet Manor. With a disgruntled look Draco crossed the room.

Who would dare disturb the peace at the Manor on the 24th of December was beyond him. He could think of no one else but some reporter, seeking to stimulate the dying fire on their fabricated stories about him and Granger.

As he swung open the door to his study he decided he would confront the unwelcome visitor himself. Briskly he crossed the hallway and shook his head to his mother who had emerged from the upstairs drawing room with an equally disturbed expression.

Seeing the irritation on her son's face, Narcissa understood he wasn't expecting anyone and with a gracious nod she closed the door again. He would be taking care of this.

Halfway down the grand staircase Draco noticed that Squeaky had already reached the front door and reached out for the magical horn. His ears bobbed slightly when he looked over his shoulder, saw his Master and flinched at seeing his scowl.

"Master Draco?" He asked with a trembling voice and Draco nodded his consent. He put his hand on the bannister and waited.

"Who is it?" The house-elf squeaked through the magical horn. "Do you have an appointment?"

After a moment of silence an unfamiliar voice replied formally, "This is the Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions. We're here for a surprise compliance visit. Please, open the gate."

The silence in the entrance hall was deafening.
Draco stood rooted to the spot and suddenly his thoughts were a whirling chaos of anger and resentment. They had returned. Despite their favourable decision, they had returned. And through it all a wild, uncontrolled hope ripped through his rage.

Could it be possible...? Had she returned?

He clenched the bannister as he fiercely tried to quash the treacherous hope that threatened to undo all of his efforts to get on with his life. Only vaguely he registered that his house-elf seemed to be petrified for some reason. It was looking at Draco with wide, shocked eyes and his ears bobbed helplessly as he waited for Draco to respond.

Draco's voice was barely more than a whisper when he finally managed to say, "On what grounds?"

After another tense moment the tinny voice responded, "We've received a complaint that needs to be investigated and under article 3.16 of the Law Concerning the Protection of House-Elves you'll have to grant us access, sir."

Draco closed his eyes.

She hadn't initiated this compliance visit and therefore probably would not be joining her inspectors. The brutal disappointment washing over him at the realisation had him resort to Occlumency to compartment his mind and recollect his thoughts.

Whatever the complaint might entail it had to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

His regular features had hardened by a grim expression when he nodded at Squeaky.

Squeaky carefully opened the heavy door and revealed the two young inspectors who had visited the Manor before. Politely, they acknowledged him as he came down the stairs and positioned himself before them.

Draco looked at them with an icy glare in his eyes.

"Two weeks ago I received a final decision from your Department in which was clearly stated that Malfoy Manor wouldn't be included in the inspection schedule for it least two years. Now you return to my house when it's almost Christmas. I would like to know what the meaning is of all this."

The two inspectors flinched slightly under his gaze but then the witch seemed to remember her training and put a brave face on.

"Please know that we're well aware of the unfortunate moment, Mr. Malfoy. But as you know the decision also stated that a surprise visit could be in order in case of a complaint."

Draco frowned and gave her a hard stare.

"A complaint by whom?"

"A house-elf."

Suddenly, a soft moan escaped the little creature next to Draco. As Draco slowly turned his gaze the house-elf let his big ears hang and his shoulders drooped, while it conspicuously avoided to look at its Master. Now Draco noticed the plasters on its leathery hands and finally he understood why his Barn Owl Escuin had gone missing the other day. He groaned inside.
"Squeaky is sorry, Master," the house-elf spoke on the smallest of voices and shrank when Master pinched his nose, sighing wearily.

"You should lead the inspectors to the kitchen, Squeaky. I think they will have a few questions for you to answer. And we should take a look at your hands afterwards."

Why the house-elf had resorted to filing a complaint was beyond him but Draco wanted the inspectors out of his house as soon as possible.

As the inspectors followed the dismayed house-elf to the kitchen, Draco shook his head and went to close the heavy door himself, when he heard the soft voice.

"May I come in?"

It was a lovely voice, soft but not too sweet and the words were spoken hesitantly but it had the effect of someone dropping a house on him. His heart for a moment and everything started to swim before his eyes.

There had been two inspectors. Only two inspectors standing at his door for this wretched surprise visit. He was sure of it. Still, there it was, the voice he'd recognise at all times and which suddenly had his heart hammering in his chest.

Automatically, he reopened the door and looked down on the only person who could elicit such a fierce reaction from him.

"Hermione."

Hermione watched in slight fear as the door reopened and revealed the silhouette of Draco Malfoy. Involuntarily, she held her breath.

Standing tall in the doorway, he looked down on her silently. His chiseled features were tense despite his effort to hide his emotions behind a mask of impassiveness and the piercing gaze in his steel grey eyes seemed to cut right through her. Her first name had escaped his lips almost like a sigh, but now his grey eyes had changed to cold mirrors, reflecting nothing but her own image.

It had cost Hermione all of the courage she could muster to return to the grim and inaccessible Malfoy Manor. Had it been only six weeks ago since she had been standing here at his doorstep? When she'd read the letter by the house-elf Squeaky she didn't hesitate though and had jumped to the opportunity.

"Granger… I didn't know you would be honouring us with your presence," he repeated the words he'd said six weeks ago, but now with a bitter quality to them.

That time she'd reacted indignantly, now she only slightly bowed her hooded head and softly repeated the words she'd said only a minute ago.

"May I come in?"

It was her. It really was her. She was here, looking at him with a worried expression in her caramel eyes and her gleaming curls blew from underneath the hood of the cloak.

Eagerly, he drank in the features he'd missed so much. She was paler than he remembered and a bit drawn from weariness, but still so beautiful.
Then he had heard himself longingly saying her first name and he'd cut himself off immediately.

"Is the inspectorate still not functioning to your satisfaction, Granger?"

Malfy didn't succeed completely in keeping the bitter quality from his voice as he let her in. Hesitantly, she stepped into the grand hallway and vaguely noticed that the enormous vases flanking the staircase now contained a seasonal bouquet with white poinsettias. The entrance staircase was decorated tastefully with enlightened festoons.

Lowering the hood of her cloak she looked him in the eye.

"No."

Malfy's eyes narrowed at her response.

"Then why come back, Granger?"

"Because your house-elf asked me to."

It was an answer Malfy clearly had not expected. Taken aback, he opened and closed his mouth before being able to ask, "He did? Why?"

Hermione chose to ignore that. Instead she asked on an urgent tone, "Can I speak with you in private?"

When he hesitated, she added softly, "Please."

Malfy's eyes flashed from her to the staircase, then he finally nodded curtly.

"Come with me."

Quietly, she followed him expecting him to take her to one of the Manor's drawing rooms. But to her surprise he took her to his own study instead. When he invited her in with a curt hand wave Hermione hesitantly stepped inside. The study took her breath away.

It was a spacious room clad with bookcases reaching up to the ceiling and an enormous desk in the centre. Two small, elegant armchairs and a low table stood underneath a large, multi-pane window, which was partially hidden by a heavily embroidered, brocade curtain.

It was the most beautiful study she'd ever seen.

Draco leaned against his desk, arms folded before his chest in an unyielding pose.

"I would have offered you some tea, but the house-elves are busy as it is…" he commented a bit biting, but fell silent when he took in the sight of Granger slowly walking around in his study, her eyes scanning the mahogany bookcases.

The weak sunlight coming from the window lit up her gleaming curls as she took in the hundreds of books stored in there and Draco could tell she was impressed, but at the moment the books interested him less than the sight of her standing in his study and drinking in the suppressed excitement on her beautiful features, the light in her caramel eyes.

His features softened and he felt some of the bitterness leaving his body.
When she finally approached him he watched her with a troubled gaze. Just when he'd decided to forget about her and go on with his life, she had come back. And now she was looking at him again with those caramel eyes that were the reason he didn't summon his Patronus anymore. She was standing so very close that he only needed to reach out to touch her hair.

Fleetingly, Draco wondered how much time they would have before her inspectors would discover there hadn't appeared any wrongs in the Malfoy household since their last visit, they would take Granger with them and this moment would only seem to be a figment of his cruel imagination.

"You're wearing black again."

He noticed that she was looking at him with a hint of regret and a shiver went through him. It seemed like yesterday that she had been resting in his arms, telling him how she liked that he didn't wear black anymore.

"Does that bother you?"

After his initial confusion about her strange and out of place remark, her whispered words had actually amused him. He had hoped she didn't notice his breathing picking up pace at having her in his arms while her head rested against his shoulder.

She'd shaken her head, her lovely face pale as she'd closed her eyes. "No, you look less scary that way."

The honest answer had made a shiver go down his spine and involuntarily he'd pulled her more tightly against him, before he'd managed to reply.

She had fallen asleep with her head intimately placed against his collarbone, a vague smile playing around her lips.

For a moment he had stayed with her this way on the blue Persian rug, his arms protectively wrapped around her and finally he'd buried his face in her soft curls as he gave in to his feelings of guilt and regret toward her.

He still remembered the soothing, flowery scent of her hair as he'd whispered chokingly, "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm so sorry."

Then he had scooped her up and carried her out of the drawing room to meet the startled inspectors with a grim and determined expression about his mouth.

Resisting the urge to let his fingers slide through her curls Draco forced his thoughts to safer grounds.

"You asked to speak with me," he established matter-of-factly, inviting her to come to business.

Granger gave a small nod, then said softly, "I want to congratulate you on your engagement. I read about it in the newspaper."

Draco merely nodded in acknowledgement, without happiness. He knew she wasn't here to congratulate him.

Then she took a deep breath and bowed her head.
"I... missed seeing your Patronus."

Draco's face darkened at the confession.

"Is there a point to this?" He replied sharply.

Hermione swallowed at his reprimanding words. Malfoy was looking down on her coldly and his pose was guarded. He was completely closed off from her.

Of course. What had she expected? He was protecting himself. Protecting himself against the former Gryffindor, Harry Potter's best friend, who kept barging in on his life only to leave behind a mess every time she did so. And what for? What did she need with him who had been her most bitter enemy at school that she repeatedly disregarded all warnings from Harry?

Distancing herself from him she went to stand by the window and looked down at the garden below her, slumbering in hibernation. As she looked outside she wondered what could have possessed her to decide to come along with the inspectors. In hindsight she hadn't thought this through at all. All she had known until now was that she wanted to grasp the opportunity to speak with Malfoy, to explain to him why she had cut all contact with him. But now that she was here standing in Malfoy's study, she didn't know where to start and her heart sank.

She looked down and her eye fell on the book lying open on the small table before her. A well-thumbed Slytherin bookmark from Malfoy's schooldays divided the pages.

Almost automatically, she leaned forward and picked it up. It had been a long time since she'd seen one of those. Every student at Hogwarts had owned a pair of House bookmarks, handed out to them in their first year. Towards the seventh year however most of the bookmarks were lost in the chaos that was student life.

Hermione softly rubbed her thumb over the Slytherin seal embossed in the thick, dark green parchment. The bookmark reminded her of something. She closed her eyes and tightened her hold on the bookmark as she asked softly, "What did you tell that little Slytherin boy, when you were late for Patronus lessons?"

"Excuse me?"

Malfoy's voice was low, disbelieving, almost threatening and barely concealed anger flashed over his features when he came to stand before her.

"Is that what you came here to ask me? What I said to the boy, back then?" He snarled and one fleeting moment Hermione thought he actually looked... disappointed. Then he grimly shook his head.

"I have no time for this... I think you'd better..."

"That was the question I had wanted to ask you..." Hermione cut him off as she raised her eyes to meet his and drew in a shallow breath. "... before I saw no other way than to stop our conversation..."

Her voice grew a little hoarse, "... to protect you."

"... to protect you."
The words resounded in Draco's ears as she looked at him in a silent plea for understanding. And suddenly he knew he'd been wrong about this the entire time. She had shut down all communication with him, not out of regret, but most probably as a result of some misplaced warning from Potter when The Daily Prophet had started publishing those wretched pictures of them. She had wanted to protect him.

He clenched his teeth as he was painfully reminded of how The Golden Trio must see him - the former Death Eater turned good, in need of their benevolent protection as he hid from the world in his countryside manor. It sickened him to think that she of all people would look upon him like that as well after all that had happened.

"I wasn't aware that I needed protection against anything, Granger," he spat bitterly, trying to bite back the bile from the humiliation and the soaring hurt.

Only vaguely did he register that her expression actually became a little reproachful, as if she'd expected more of him.

"Don't you understand? If someone had intercepted our Patronuses… You would have gotten the blame, entirely."

Draco understood what she silently left out. The blame for her break-up with Ron Weasley.

She bowed her head.

"I didn't want you to be drawn into… this. It would be unfair to you… especially after… I had already burdened you with far too many of my problems and after all you have done for me, it was time for me start acting like a Gryffindor as well and keep you out of harm's way."

Draco waited silently.

"They tried," she continued softly and with tears in her voice. "And while The Daily Prophet did have some blurry pictures, that was all they had. Just imagine if that wouldn't have been the case…"

A silence descended between them and Draco felt his anger flowing off entirely.

She was right. Of course she was right. The level of their communication had been so personal, so vulnerable that he shuddered at the thought of the messages falling into the hands of that rat from The Daily Prophet. And while she and the moronic redhead could do nothing wrong in the eyes of the wizarding world the public eye would probably have turned against him, a former follower of the Dark Lord, for seducing the light of The Golden Trio. She'd taken all of the blame to prevent that.

With a bleeding heart he looked down on her bowed head and saw a lonely tear escape from her eye. He could see how much she'd suffered and he fought the urge to wrap his arms around her. Apparently she had no idea what the visits of her otter had meant to him. The use of the word 'burden' couldn't have been further away from the truth.

Hermione held her breath when Malfoy slowly raised his hand and gently wiped away the salty moist of the tear rolling down her cheek. His fingers lingered on her skin longer than necessary and Hermione shivered at the tender touch, causing even more tears to well up in her eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that, Hermione," he whispered regretfully. "It wasn't worth it. I'm not worth it."
Hermione bowed her head and as she heard her name fall from his lips again, the tears now started to flow over her cheeks freely as relief about his understanding and sadness over the past weeks finally found a way out. Horrified, she turned away to hide them from view.

"I'm sorry," she choked. "It will pass."

It was what Harry had said when the first pictures had started to appear in the newspaper. Such awful times had followed. Bitter tears continued to roll down her cheeks.

Through a mist of tears she noticed that Malfoy drew his wand and whispered forcefully, "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver light suddenly surrounded them. Quietly, he ordered the ferret to go stand guard.

"Hermione."

The coldness had completely disappeared from his voice, now sounding softer than ever before.

"Hermione, please…"

She didn't have it in her to look up at him.

"I'm sorry."

Her heart stopped when she felt warm fingers gently cup her chin and carefully lift it until their eyes met. Blinking away the tears she saw an infinite tenderness in his that took her breath away.

"Don't be ashamed," he said quietly, "I'm glad you came back."

He pulled back his hand, taking a stray curl between his fingers. With a gentle gesture he tucked it behind her ear and allowed his fingers to lace through her hair.

Hermione froze. Then she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

She didn't know if she imagined him whispering her name again but then the world stopped turning when she felt his lips on hers.

It was a fleeting caress, meant to disappear the moment she registered the sensation but Hermione subconsciously parted her lips against his. Malfoy's breath hitched in surprise but then his fingers buried themselves in her hair and as Hermione's heart suddenly raced in her chest he leaned in to deepen the kiss.

At that moment, Malfoy suddenly jerked up his head and stepped back from her. A fierce pang of loss shot through Hermione but then she noticed that the ferret had returned to the study. Something was wrong.

As Malfoy turned towards the Patronus, Hermione let out a trembling breath and mentally she scolded herself. What had she been doing? Whatever Malfoy had done had only been intended to console her. His surprise when she moved closer to him made that much clear. He was engaged to be wed to Astoria Greengrass, for Merlin's sake.

A wave of nausea washed over her at the bitter reminder of that fact but she didn't have time to dwell on it because Malfoy had turned around and shot her a watchful look.

"They're coming up."
Draco sat down behind his desk quickly, trying to compose himself while still feeling Granger's lips on his. He had acted on impulse when he saw her tears, silent witnesses of what she'd gone through the past few weeks.

For him.

He didn't know what he had been thinking when he leaned in for the featherlight caress of her lips but the moment she'd responded to him an incredibly forceful longing had washed over him and he'd leaned in.

He tried not think of what this would mean for his engagement to Astoria.

When he heard the knock on the door Draco quickly glanced at Granger and saw that she'd taken a seat in his arm chair by the window. The last rays of the wintery sun cast a golden glow on her chestnut curls as she looked outside with a melancholy expression on her face. It made her look almost ethereal.

A bitter line hardened Draco's mouth when they knocked again.

"Miss Granger?"

Draco sighed inwardly as he drawled, "Come in."

The door opened and Granger's two inspectors entered the study, looking a bit bashful.

Granger put down the book she'd picked up only seconds ago with an air as if she'd been reading it for the past half hour.

"Yes?"

Draco's gaze followed her as she rose to he feet, secretly admiring her grace as she did so.

"Miss Granger. There has been no wrong doing in the Malfoy household since our last compliance visit. The house-elf has confessed that he merely wanted to see you… and having the final decision, figured this would be the easiest way…"

Despite himself, Draco had to bite back an appreciative smile as the inspectors told their story, still a bit overwhelmed. Clever Squeaky. He remembered giving the letter from the Ministry to the house-elf to file it.

Granger lifted one eyebrow in mild surprise, subconsciously copying the person who sat behind his desk and Draco felt his heart skip a beat at the subtle acknowledgment.

"Did the house-elf also say why?" She asked in a businesslike manner, effortlessly slipping into Ministry official mode. Inwardly, Draco applauded her for that.

The inspectors shook their heads in confusion.

"No, he only stated that he likes Miss Hermione…"

This made Draco narrow his eyes in dismay, recognising the meaning behind the house-elf's use of her first name. The nuance went by unnoticed by the inspectors and Granger though.

"I think it's better that we not make a report of this," Granger said thoughtfully.

"Miss Granger, because of his request he has ironed his hands and then ironed them again because
he isn't allowed to hurt himself anymore," one of the inspectors interjected a bit helplessly. "According to article 7.3…"

"I know of article 7.3," Hermione cut him off and sighed before turning to Draco.

"Mister Malfoy," she addressed him formally. "This is an unfortunate situation. We were called in on Christmas Eve by a house-elf who had no sustainable complaint but has hurt himself in the process. According to the regulations we cannot let that factor pass unnoticed."

Draco nodded thoughtfully.

"I understand. Naturally, I apologise for the inconvenience caused."

His smooth reply was at sharp contrast with the erratic beating of his heart.

"However, since there has been no wrong doing caused by the family and the house-elf has clearly acted outside the vision of the family to see me personally, we can deal with this by giving a first warning to encourage the family to better check on injuries with house-elves caused by themselves."

The inspectors listened silently, while Draco watched Granger explain to him what he already knew. Had it been only minutes ago that he'd felt her lips on his?

"Mister Malfoy, is Malfoy Manor committed to upholding the rules on self-punishments by house-elves and is Malfoy Manor willing to ensure compliance with these rules will be supervised?"

Draco's face was unreadable when he slowly nodded. "I am."

"Then I'd better go down to the kitchen and have a proper meeting with…"

"Squeaky," Draco evenly finished her sentence for her.

"Squeaky," Hermione seriously repeated the odd name, nodding at him before she turned toward the inspectors.

"When your findings appear to be right, I suggest we resolve this the way I just described. Agreed?"

The inspectors opened the door, glad to be able to go home, when the female inspector's eye caught the book Hermione had been reading the moment they had entered the study.

"Miss Granger? Erm, you forget your book."

Hermione slowly turned around, wondering what the inspector was hinting at and her eye fell on the book that had been there on the table when she'd first entered the study. Earlier, she'd been studying the Slytherin bookmark resting on the pages but naturally she'd also noticed the paper pages, the modern typography, the linen binding. This was a Muggle book.

Following worn in rules of expectation and prejudice the young inspector now assumed that this book could only belong to her Muggle born chief.

Helplessly, Hermione turned toward Malfoy and for a moment she thought she saw something sparkle in his otherwise so cool, grey eyes. Unnoticed by the inspectors he nodded and mouthed, 'take it.'
Slowly, Hermione approached the table and picked up his book, making sure to remove the
Slytherin bookmark before closing it carefully.

The house-elf had been terrified but had replied to Hermione's friendly questions anyway as
Malfoy had been looking on with a gloomy expression in his eyes. Without ceremony the
inspectors then announced they'd seen enough and were ready to leave.

On her way out Hermione saw her own regret mirroring in Malfoy's eyes. "Merry Christmas...
Draco," she whispered, then the door closed behind them.

Never before, Draco had felt so lost as now that he had to let Granger go again. Even Squeaky
seemed sad when he snapped his fingers and disappeared from the hallway. Granger's whispered
words had knocked the breath out of him. She'd called him by his first name and it had sounded
wonderful.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

Draco closed his eyes, avoiding to look at the person belonging to that elegant, yet somewhat
disapproving voice.

"I don't know, mother."

Everything had been so clear this morning but now all that remained was an unbearable longing to
stop the supervising inspector from going away and take her in his arms, never to let go.

Finally he met his mother's ice blue eyes. The look he saw in there he didn't expect. She was
staring at him with a knowing, demanding but above all... encouraging gaze.

He straightened up.

Narcissa watched as her son's eyes, resembling his father's so much, filled with a new
determination. He rushed up the stairs with two steps at a time, touching her shoulder in passing.

The sound of his brisk steps echoed through the marble hallway as he hastened towards his study
and Narcissa bowed her head, a melancholy expression on her features.

Half an hour later, Draco dried his quill and took an envelope from the drawer. Then he opened the
window and whistled softly. It wasn't long before his Barn Owl landed on his windowsill.

"I need you to take this note to Theodore, Esuin. And don't leave him alone until he's taken the
envelope," Draco said with emphasis.

The bird blinked his big, yellow eyes, then opened his majestic wings and went on his way to
Draco's probably very smug friend.

Theodore,

Can you get me an invitation to the Ministry? It's important.

Draco
The Ministry of Magic was a quiet place between Christmas and New Year. Most of the employees had taken the week off and that meant a dramatic decrease in the amount of surreptitious glances in Hermione's direction. Which was a bliss for the tormented witch.

Only Malfoy's old friend Theodore Nott whom she knew worked in the Department of International Magical Cooperation gave her an odd look when they'd run into each other in the Level Two corridor. She rather forgot about that moment, realising how close she had been to stopping him and asking him about...

On the 31st of December the Ministry would be closing early but not without the traditional get-together for the employees on which occasion the civil servants would wear something more festive than their normal work robes.

Despite not being in the mood for festivities, Hermione had seen no way of shirking the obligation so she'd decided on wearing the silk work dress in rich purple and with lovely flaring sleeves, her mother had pressed her into buying in this elegant Muggle store in London. Hermione, thinking of her magical wardrobe full of ball gowns and cocktail dresses from the social balls she had visited with Ron, had wanted to refuse, but her mother's encouraging gaze had been too much for her and she had given in. It had been the first purple piece of clothing she'd bought since she'd confronted her nightmares in the drawing room at Malfoy Manor. She considered it progress.

When she had scrutinised her own appearance in the mirror this morning she'd established that the dress suited her well enough, but that her eyes were looking back at her sadly and she was looking rather pale.

With a weary sigh, Hermione looked up from the report on Troll activities, checking the clock for the time. And again her thoughts had wandered off to the moment she had felt Draco Malfoy's lips brushing hers as a feeling of infinite regret and sadness washed over her. It was too late. He deserved his happiness with Astoria Greengrass. And all she was left with was regret over numerous times when she had wanted to kiss him and never did.

Behind her small enchanted office window night fell and streets light were being lit. Outside her office she heard voices of Ministry workers leaving their workplace. The drink would probably be commencing in a minute or so.

Hermione sighed and began to clear her desk. She wished she could laugh as carefree as her colleagues passing by her office. But she'd already lost this ability when Voldemort was still plunging Britain into darkness and now there was a dejectedness added to it that made the sound hurt her ears.

Subconsciously, her thoughts trailed back to another New Year's Eve seven years ago when she'd missed the fireworks at Hogwarts because of an owl landing on the balustrade of the fourth floor terrace carrying a message for her.

There would be no messages this year, only the prospect of finally seeing the fireworks at
Hogwarts this year as she'd received an invitation from Professor McGonagall to celebrate New Year's Eve at Hogwarts. Hermione suspected that the events of the past few weeks had something to do with the invitation but she only felt grateful toward the old woman who was obviously worried about her. In her invitation McGonagall offered the former Gryffindor to come see the fireworks at Hogwarts since, she'd remarked dryly, Miss Granger had not been able to witness the fireworks display seven years ago. The message had drawn a surprised smile to Hermione's lips when she'd read it. Apparently, the teachers had actually noticed the absence of their two oldest students at the fourth floor balcony that New Year's Eve.

She took the files from her desk and began to store them away in the heavy, iron filing cabinet behind her office door.

"Hermione Granger?"

Hermione's hand froze midair.

It was a tinkling voice, she would recognise everywhere but had never expected to hear again. Slowly she turned around and noticed the silvery glow in her office.

It couldn't be…

But there it was, the ferret-shaped Patronus, looking up at her with trusting eyes. Hermione drew in a sharp breath.

"Draco," she whispered as her heart leapt up in her chest. "How…"

"I come with word from Draco Malfoy," the ferret told her with its ethereal voice. "He still owes you a message, in answer to your question."

Her question? Hermione blinked in confusion. Then it dawned on her that the ferret-shaped Patronus was referring to the question she had asked Draco during the surprise compliance visit. She had completely forgotten about it but here his Patronus was, fulfilling a promise he had never made.

Hermione went down on her knees and reached out to the Patronus like so many times before. The ferret went to sit on his hind legs and allowed for her to touch the light he was made of. A shaky smile formed on Hermione's lips. She'd missed seeing the small Patronus so much.

"It's New Year's Eve and the Ministry will be closing up early," the Patronus began serenely, "but Draco hopes you still have some time for him to tell you what happened the night he was too late for Patronus lessons."

By habit Draco avoided looking at his own reflection in the mirror as he checked his Slytherin tie and straightened his white oxford, before pulling the anthracite school jumper over his head. A determined expression had settled on his features as he ran a hand through his hair and picked up his wand.

He had been reading all day, leaning against the head of his four-poster as he'd enjoyed the peace and quiet in the Slytherin Dormitories during the holidays. However, now and then he'd been checking the time though. Secretly he'd been looking forward to his next Patronus lesson.

Last night, he'd succeeded in producing a string of light after he'd chosen an early childhood memory of a carefree family day at the beach. He'd been building Malfoy Manor from the sand, with some magical and non-magical help from his father. Perhaps, he'd been five or six years old.
It had been a good day.

Granger had been exhilarated by his accomplishment. He’d looked upon her enthusiasm with confusion as it had been simple enough to conjure this string of light. And he wasn’t interested in casting a string of light - he wanted to create a corporeal Patronus.

Draco couldn’t help feeling awkward around Granger. They had been at each other’s throats for as long as they had been attending Hogwarts and part of him was just downright scared of her. Being a Slytherin he wasn’t afraid to admit it.

Her offer to teach him the Patronus spell he’d accepted almost instantly though. He knew this was the exercise in redemption he’d returned to Hogwarts for. To be able to conjure a full-bodied Patronus would be proof to himself that he wasn’t beyond salvation.

Granger was curious about him. He knew that. It had probably been the main reason for her to offer him her help. He tried not to let himself be bothered about it, though he felt ill at ease being regarded with anything other than hatred or disgust by anyone of The Golden Trio.

But as his wariness of her had subsided he’d become curious about her, too. Curious as to what had made her think of him on Christmas Eve while being with the Weasel’s ever expanding family. Curious as to why she was just as eager for him to succeed in mastering the Patronus spell as he was. Curious about what her expectations of life were, now that she had become a living legend at such a young age. And perhaps the answer could help him find peace with being seen as the face of the Dark Lord’s followers for the rest of his life.

Eventually he’d become curious, genuinely curious about who this talented Muggle-born witch was. But he was still been miles away from asking her.

When he entered the Slytherin Common Room Draco froze to the sound of choked sobs coming from the Chesterfields before the hearth. Narrowing his eyes against the dusky light of the green lampshades he noticed that the small first year had curled up on the sofa. The light of the floor lamp shone down on him as he hiccuped after another heartbroken sob.

Automatically, Draco looked around for other students to take care of this who he knew weren’t there. Then his wistful gaze was drawn toward the door. He longed to go to the Great Hall where Granger would be waiting for him. But as the little boy continued to cry softly, Draco knew that he couldn’t leave him.

Suppressing a sigh, he changed direction and tentatively took a seat at the other side of the sofa.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about it."

The small first year hadn’t noticed that someone had approached him. Startled, he looked up and his brown, watery eyes widened when he noticed that the reserved voice belonged to the withdrawn eighth year who’d also stayed at Hogwarts at Christmas. As always the eighth year was dressed in school robes even during the holidays. His cool eyes rested on the small first year, his face unreadable to the small boy.

"I..." the boy hiccupsed at a loss for words.

The eighth year hadn’t deigned to glance at him since Christmas Eve when he’d been so bold to address him. Never before he dared to talk to the tall young man, discouraged by both the other students and Draco’s aloof attitude, but that night a feeling of loneliness had made him cross those boundaries. To the boy’s astonishment the eighth year had actually agreed and had squatted down
next to him to retrieve a present from underneath the Christmas tree.

The gift the older student had opened had been the only one addressed to him and he had been remarkably unimpressed by it. But he himself had given a whoop of joy at receiving the Quidditch book some distant cousin had sent him. The eighth year had allowed for a moment for him to revel in his new book, then he’d curtly but not unfriendly sent him to bed.

And now the eighth year had quietly sat down with him and invited him to talk about what was bothering him. The first year didn't want to talk about it, especially not to the witch from the Ministry who had become his guardian ever since -. Professor McGonagall had called him to her study too, but he found her stern gaze too frightening - too righteous. But maybe... maybe the eighth year, who had once sided with the Dark Lord too, would understand.

The small boy wiped his grubby face as he sat up. His dark brown hair was a mess. A bit like Potter’s Draco thought fleetingly as he waited for the boy to begin.

"I... miss my mother," the boy started hesitantly, his voice barely a whisper. "She... she's in Azkaban and, and..." his voice cracked and he bowed his head as large tears rolled down his grimy cheeks. "I don't understand. She fought hard for the Dark Lord and she fought good. She's even killed a few members of the Order."

Draco stiffened at those words. Whatever had made the mother end up in Azkaban, he understood it was well deserved. But it was also incomprehensible for a young child brainwashed like this boy. Memories of the harsh prison environment pushed to the front of his mind.

It had been the place where his father and he had awaited their acquittal. Even though the Dementors hadn't been there to guard the facility anymore it had been the worst, most agonising weeks of his life, even taken into account the Dark Lord's occupation of their home. He'd slept on a filthy, flea-infested haystack covered with a smudgy grey sheet and had to relieve himself in the bucket in the corner of his tiny cell. Water had been dripping from the walls and day and night there was the coughing and screaming of other prisoners.

But worst of all had been the thoughts, doubts, fears and feelings of guilt and despair coming at him while he sat in his cell alone, with only the flees to keep him company.

Draco closed his eyes to get rid of the memories. This situation was quickly turning into a confrontation with himself, a merciless mirror showing him what he hadn't been ready to acknowledge - that he still didn't think he was deserving of a second chance.

The boy must have had noticed something about him because the boy was looking at him searchingly.

A shadow passed over Draco's features.

"Where's your father now?" He asked, staring into the dying fire.

To this the boy mercifully averted his gaze.

"Dead."

His voice sounded dull. He had already had been through more than he should have been at his young age.

"I was going to be Death Eater one day too, mum and dad told me, when I would be big enough. And my mother says I can still be when I'll avenge my father on those filthy Mud..." he lowered his
gaze at the scorching look in Draco's steel grey eyes, "Muggle-borns who killed him."

Draco inconspicuously studied the small boy as he talked, a dangerous glint in his dark eyes. His face had remained unreadable but on the inside he felt alarmed. This situation was much, much worse than he'd expected.

Then he realised something. "Do you still have contact with your mother?"

The boy nodded and pointed at a letter lying on the floor Draco hadn't noticed yet. With a guarded look at the boy he picked it up and read it quickly.

It was as he'd already expected. Most of the letter was meant to stir up the boy's feelings of hatred against the world. He had to speak about this with Professor Slughorn, Head of Slytherin House, for sure.

He was shocked by the amount of blind fanaticism and violent narrow-mindedness he read in the letter. And it was threatening to overtake this boy too. As he reread the letter the mention of Hufflepuff House drew his attention. Apparently, the boy had written before that he'd befriended a first year from this amiable house and the mother didn't approve of that.

Draco raised his eyes to the boy as he began to see the boy's tears in a different light. What would be worse than having to miss his mother, would be to be rejected and being put in his place in this harsh letter by the very mother he missed.

Panic rose inside him as he realised that he had to oppose the mother's destructive views on the world. And he understood that the boy's loyalty would make him follow his mother to the end of the world but that at the same time he was craving for a little bit of love and friendship.

Draco realised that he recognised the boy's internal conflict as he felt it, too. And he knew that he had to talk to his parents after this year had ended. He needed to forgive them before they truly could be a family again.

With a bitter smile he conjured the boy a handkerchief which he gratefully took. Draco knew where to begin.

"I hope you're not tired yet, because what I'm going to say to you now will probably take a while. So, blow your nose and I'll tell you about what Slytherin House stands for and the greatest Head our House has ever had - Severus Snape. I owe him my life."

Draco had been exhausted and famished and a throbbing headache had nestled between his temples when he had finally been able to go to Patronus practice. He was slightly too late, but he didn't care. The boy - his name was Andreas, he'd told Draco - had gone to sleep filled with a new awareness, a certainty that his life was worth living the way all children did. Of course, Granger had asked him about what happened but he simply hadn't been able to tell her. He couldn't go through all of that again. Not in one night.

The following day the Headmistress walked by him in the library and gave him one of her rare, small smiles. Then she said quietly, "Thank you, Draco."

It suddenly dawned to him that perhaps this actually was the main purpose of his coming back to Hogwarts, the reason why McGonagall had been grateful for his return - not for his own benefit, but for the good of this boy, to prevent him from following in the footsteps of Draco Malfoy.

Hermione completely stilled as she listened to the longest message the ferret had ever conveyed to
her. And long after the ferret had left in a glowing mist, she remained staring at the wall with tears flowing down her eyes.

Never before had she realised what really had transpired that night when Draco had been too late for Patronus lessons. She had noticed that he had been in a troubled and weary state and that he had succeeded only by will in making the progress he had made, but now she finally understood the vigour with which he had thrown himself on that lesson. He hadn't been merely reassuring and comforting the first year like she'd thought, but he'd endured a harsh confrontation with himself when he had given the small boy a new perspective on his own expense.

Through this one message Draco had taken away what wonder had remained with Hermione about him. Bit by bit the Slytherin had shown her whom he had become after the ending of the war. And as it happened he'd become a person she'd come to like. Very much. And he was lost to her even before she had had the chance of telling him... how she felt about him.

Wiping away the tears she took a step back and reached for her wand, a determined expression on her face. At least she wouldn't leave this message unanswered.

"Hermione."

For the second time on this early evening, Hermione froze, her raised wand pointing in the direction from where the awfully familiar voice came from. Her name was pronounced as an establishment, rather than seeking to alert her and there was a barely noticeable drawl in the reserved, male voice speaking.

"Perhaps you'd better not summon your Patronus in here. People might be alerted. They probably already are, because of mine."

With wide eyes she looked up, a gasp stifled in the back of her throat.

In the doorway stood Draco Malfoy, looking at her thoughtfully. He was dressed in inconspicuous wizard robes, which was an unusual sight, accustomed as Hermione was to his dark suits. The robes made him look even taller.

Hermione was at a loss for words. First to see the ferret-shaped Patronus appear in her office then followed by its caster, overwhelmed her. Her hand trembled as she lowered her wand and stared at him.

She didn't notice that Draco's cool, grey gaze regarded her appreciatively.

"You look beautiful," he remarked on a low voice. "The colour suits you."

Blood rushed to Hermione's cheeks and suddenly she became heavily aware of the snug, Muggle dress she was wearing instead of her work robes.

She shook her head. This was all becoming too confusing. A quick glance at the window learned that the snowfall had intensified with Draco's arrival.

"Draco… What are you doing here?"

Hermione ignored his sincere compliment as he stepped inside her office, taking her question as an invitation to enter.

"I'm here to collect my book," he replied calmly, casting an unreadable glance about her small office. "Knowing you, I figured you've probably already read it. I really want to know the ending."
Hermione needed a moment for his words to sink in, but then she nodded silently, biting the fierce disappointment washing over her. Of course. What other reason could there possibly have been for him to show up in her office on New Year's Eve?

He had allowed for her to take his book, to avoid an awkward situation with her inspectors during the surprise inspection. Naturally he would be wanting it back. Most probably he'd decided to retrieve his book before picking up his friend Theodore Nott to go to one of the many New Year's Eve parties.

Hermione opened a drawer in her desk, taking out a small package carefully wrapped in a piece of cheesecloth.

"I had intended to give it back to you, somehow," she apologised as matter-of-factly as she could manage while taking down the wrapping. She didn't have to open the book to know the elegant script on the endpaper that read 'Draco Malfoy.'

Draco merely nodded. "Of course."

He made no attempt to take the book from her.

Subconsciously, Hermione hugged the book to her body, a tender gesture that elicited a slight widening of Draco's eyes.

"It's a Muggle book," she established, remembering how astonished she had been to find this Muggle book with the Pureblood heir. Especially since she'd mentioned this book in one of her Patronus messages.

"There's a small bookshop in Carkitt Market where they sell Muggle books," Draco informed her cautiously and Hermione nodded understandingly. The bookshop was a solution for wizards and witches who never set foot in the Muggle world.

Draco didn't explain as to why he'd decided to step inside the shop one day, much to the surprise of the shop assistant no doubt. He didn't have to. She understood.

"How do you like it?"

His gaze trailed to her arms holding the book against her stomach protectively and something flickered in his eyes.

"It's a strangely light book to hold, but… it's a good read. The Muggle world possesses some great literature. The story is… recognisable. Even… for me."

Hermione's heart wrenched for him. He was right - she had already read *The Remains of the Day* a long time ago and she knew what he meant.

"The world really has changed, hasn't it?"

Hermione's words were barely more than a whisper as she struggled to keep the sadness from her voice, knowing that he would be gone in a few minutes. She tightened her hold on the book as if this would prevent him from disappearing for good.

"I certainly hope so…" His quiet words were heartfelt, pleading for her to accept the truth in them. Hesitantly he reached out and placed his hands on hers, covering them rather than prying them away. His palms were warm and comforting and Hermione's breath hitched at the sudden contact.
She didn't pull back though and neither did he.

In an attempt to distract herself Hermione asked the first question she could think of. "How... how's Astoria?"

Draco stilled at her question, silently looking down on her chestnut curls. Had it been only weeks ago that she had asked him about Pansy in the attic?

"I don't know," he responded quietly. "We're not together anymore."

Was it only his imagination that she seemed to tense up?

Draco lowered his gaze. It wasn't something he was very proud of, especially after he'd realised that all this time it had been Hermione he had been searching for in Astoria. But Astoria was too good of a person and deserved her happiness, even if that meant that he would be ending up alone.

Hermione's breath had caught at his meaningful words and underneath his hands her own tightened their hold on the book. "Why?"

"I didn't see a possible future for us anymore, after the surprise compliance visit."

A heavy silence descended upon them as Draco's words trailed away. Hermione swallowed. She didn't dare to look up and search his gaze for the confirmation she longed to find in there, afraid to be disappointed.

Awkwardly, she changed the subject.

"I... Thank you. For the message you sent to me before. I was glad... to see your Patronus one last time, but..." her voice faltered for a moment. "I feel bad for asking you about it. I shouldn't have. But somehow, I don't seem to stop doing that, don't I?"

Draco shook his head at this. "You never actually asked me. It's been my own choice to tell you. I found that you had the right to know."

His even voice betrayed no emotions but when Hermione's gaze rose to meet his she noticed that a certain weariness had clouded his eyes. He withdrew his hands from her and a pang of regret shot through Hermione's stomach.

"What you did was very important," she said with emphasis. "I just wish I had taken a closer look at him before. But from what I remember he looked sincerely happy. You probably gave this boy his life back."

His piercing eyes narrowed at this, but when Hermione thought he would resent her words he looked away.

"Once a year I receive a letter from Professor McGonagall telling me how he's doing," he said quietly and Hermione's face lit up.

"Really?"

Draco looked a bit awkward. "This year he has been appointed Head Boy. McGonagall informs me that he's already been accepted into St. Mungo's after graduation. He wants to become a Healer."

A bright smile lit up Hermione's features.
"That's brilliant," she whispered with glistening eyes. "That's absolutely brilliant."

Draco silently watched her. There it was again. The warm smile, the radiant expression.

"It is," he agreed quietly though he wasn't talking about the first year anymore as he gazed at her face heaved up to him.

Draco knew he'd crossed the line when her eyes widened and her lips formed a silent "Oh."

With a bleeding heart he lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't ha…"

He froze when he was silenced abruptly by two delicate fingers placed against his lips.

"Don't… don't say that," she whispered. "Please."

Hermione had become lost in his eyes showing a burning devotion that took her breath away. Gone were the withdrawn attitude, the reserved expression she knew so well. The veil of vigilance was lifted and lay bare emotions she'd only seen flashes of before and which she'd longed to see ever since because they were meant for her.

In response he subconsciously closed his mouth against her fingers, slightly brushing them in the process. A jolt of electricity shot through him in reaction and then he noticed the sharp intake of her breath. She had felt it, too.

Mesmerised, she let her fingers fall from his lips, barely noticing that he took a step closer to her. Only the book in her other hand separated them from each other now.

"I've never told you how I was able to conjure a corporeal Patronus," Draco said on a soft voice as he tenderly put a stray curl behind her ear. "You were right. I had to reconsider my happy memory. It was you, Hermione. You were my happy memory."

Hermione's breath was knocked out of her as her heart started to race in her chest.

"M... me?" She finally brought out as his fingers trailed her cheek and her eyelids fluttered under the sensation. Subconsciously, she angled her face toward him.

Draco almost winced as utter joy and painful longing surged through him at the subtle movement and he leaned in. His lips were a mere inch from hers when he paused.

"I missed you, Hermione," he whispered, finally being able to voice the loss he'd felt since they'd graduated from Hogwarts. "I missed you so much."

"Is this what they mean by lodging an objection to a final decision?" An amused voice interceded.

As if stung, Draco and Hermione broke away from each other.

In the doorway Harry and Theodore had appeared, looking at them with expressions ranging from amusement and mockery in Theodore's case to shock and hesitance in Harry's.

Hermione and Draco blushed a deep crimson.

Draco's thoughts were an incoherent mess and he was screaming inside about the civil servants' bad timing, but still he noticed the distinct smugness in his friend's expression. Even Potter didn't look as flabbergasted as he expected him to, though he didn't seem very pleased either.
"My guess is that there's not much of a dispute left," Theodore added dryly. "Which leaves us with the question…"

"What's going on between the two of you?" Harry interjected, looking at the book in Malfoy's hands which Hermione had been reading during lunch the past couple of days.

Theodore cast a sideward glance at him.

"Not the question I had in mind myself, honestly," he admitted as he pitifully tilted his head. "I was more thinking along the lines of - what in Merlin's name were you thinking for not taking this outside the Ministry? Did you feel like you wanted to get caught?"

Harry shot him a withering look and then turned to Hermione. "Hermione?"

She looked back at him with an expression showing deep confusion but above all a plea for understanding.

When realisation sunk in his eyes widened in shock. But before he could say something Theodore took him by the arm and shook his head at him. "If you'll have some time on your hands, Potter, I would like to discuss a signal I've received this morning concerning a group of Siberian dark wizards coming to England next month. Perhaps this needs some attention from the Auror Department."

For a moment, it looked like Harry would dismiss the former the Slytherin as he shot him a sharp look but then turned around and with a last glance at Hermione, he turned around with a curt nod.

Theodore followed him, but not before nonchalantly twirling his wand in Draco and Hermione's general direction as he turned around, whispering something under his breath. The last thing Hermione heard Harry say to the liaison officer was, "You owe me an explanation, Nott."

Upon their retreat an awkward silence remained in the small office.

Draco closed his eyes. Potter and Theodore had just brutally cut off the most magical moment in his life. A burning regret wrenched his heart as he turned to leave.

But he was held back by a quiet voice.

"Draco..."

Draco looked at Hermione with the closed-off expression she knew so well of him.

"Perhaps I'd better leave," he told her. "I don't want to get you into any more trouble…"

Tears pricked behind Hermione's eyes as she lowered her gaze, knowing that their moment was gone. She swallowed.

"At least you have your book back."

A bitter smile appeared on Draco's features. At this moment he couldn't care less about the book.

"Yes, thank you."

They both flinched when a Ministry worker suddenly passed by the office but to their surprise he didn't even acknowledge their presence. Draco's gaze darkened as he understood that Theodore had put them under a spell again, apparently to repel other curious spectators.
He looked at Hermione standing in her office. She looked so beautiful and so alone. A sharp pain stung his heart and he needed all his restrain to not take her in his arms and Apparate them away from this wretched place.

"Hermione..."

Her gaze met his and he saw that her eyes glistened with tears.

"Could I... Is it all right with you if I were to send you another Patronus tonight?"

The defeated expression on her face momentarily yielded to a watery smile. "I'd like that very much."

His features softened.

"I have to go now, but I'll speak to you soon, then."

He gave her a last wistful look and then he was gone.

For a long moment Hermione kept staring at the doorway as the tears finally flowed down her cheeks. She felt numb, unsure of what just had happened. It had started when Draco had unexpectedly showed up to collect his book and for one blissful moment her tortured heart had revived. But in the end happiness was not given to them. The window of opportunity had closed again and perhaps wouldn't be opening again for a very long time.

Hermione bowed her head and as she leaned against her desk hot tears fell on the floor. When she put her hands on the desk behind her she felt that one of them touched paper. She gasped and looked at the clock through a mist of tears.

Professor McGonagall's invitation! She'd almost forgotten about it. Wiping away her tears with angry movements Hermione shot up and summoned her cloak. If she would leave the Ministry now she might just arrive on time at Hogwarts.

Protected by Theodore's benevolent spell Hermione left the Ministry without anyone seeing her. Outside she drew in the crisp air as she momentarily heaved her face towards the snow falling from the dark night sky.

Then she Disapparated to Scotland.
"Mr. Malfoy, how kind of you to join us on this special day."

"Of course, Professor. The honour is mine. Thank you for inviting me."

From above her small glasses the stern eyes of Headmistress McGonagall looked at her guest as Draco respectfully inclined his head. The Malfoy heir had just arrived for lunch at Hogwarts, looking a bit uncomfortable as he was standing in her office.

A furtive smile stole over her wrinkled features. She was pleased with what she saw. The troubled young boy had grown up to become the thoughtful man before her. Although he had yet to fully accept his role in the post-war wizarding society, Professor McGonagall knew it would be to lead the way in the redemption of those who had supported the Dark Lord. His eighth year at Hogwarts had sown the seeds for the firm and honest character he would need for that and she was grateful to see how beautifully it had come into fruition over the past seven years. Draco Malfoy had become a righteous person. Just like she hoped he would have.

"I really am very pleased you were able to take time out of your schedule on this last day of the year. Mr. Selwyn will be pleasantly surprised to meet with you again before he leaves Hogwarts this summer. He keeps asking about you."

A grimace flashed over Draco's features as he nodded and Professor McGonagall knew he blamed himself for not having agreed to it earlier. He had been avoiding meeting again with Andreas as if he'd been afraid to confront that dark part of his past again. However, over the past few weeks something had happened that had elicited a change of heart with the young Mr. Malfoy and to her surprise he'd accepted when she'd invited him for lunch on the 31st of December.

She had a slight inkling as to what precisely. The quiet sadness she sensed with him had something to do with it.

"Thank you for granting me the opportunity, Professor. I've very much appreciated your keeping me informed about his progress over the years."

The Professor sent her former student an indulgent smile. "Well then, I think it's time we go down to the Great Hall for lunch and meet with Mr. Selwyn."

As was tradition during the holidays the House Tables in the Great Hall had been replaced by one table, long enough to provide room for the two Ravenclaws, two Gryffindors, a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin. For Draco it was a strange experience to sit at the raised Head Table and have a panoramic view of the festively decorated Great Hall.

"I must say, Professor McGonagall, this view alone makes applying for a teaching position at Hogwarts worth considering," Draco said courteously when they took their seats. The Headmistress gave him an amused smile but then his eyes were drawn toward the older student who had remained standing at the House Table below. The student looked at him with a tense expression on his features.
"Mr. Malfoy. Do you remember me?"

A silence suddenly descended on the Great Hall as all gazes were fixed on the seventh year boldly addressing the unexpected guest.

Slowly, Draco got up again. The student, a typical Prefect or Head Boy despite the fact that he wasn't wearing the insignia to show for it, had grown much over the years and his hair was neatly combed now but Draco immediately recognised him.

Hope and fear of disappointment alternated behind the boy's dark gaze until Draco gave a curt nod. "Of course, Andreas Selwyn."

He turned toward the Headmistress.

"Professor McGonagall, by your leave, I would like to have lunch at the students' table. I believe there's some catching up to do."

The boy's face lit up at Draco's words and the Headmistress nodded approvingly. Stared at in marvel by the younger students the blond former Slytherin sat down beside the boy he had once reluctantly but determinedly shown the right path in life to travel.

He only left the moment he was almost too late for his next appointment, in London, at the Ministry. Professor McGonagall had only barely had the opportunity to speak with him before he'd left. But to her satisfaction the young Malfoy had accepted an old woman's advice. Granted he'd looked a bit startled but it didn't keep him from doing the right thing and Disapparate to the Ministry where Theodore Nott would be waiting to direct him to Hermione Granger's office.

"Miss Granger, Hermione. So good to see you back at Hogwarts."

Headmistress McGonagall gave Hermione an uncharacteristically warm hug when she entered the Professor's office.

"Thank you, Professor. It's wonderful to be back again."

Hermione took off her cloak and looked around to see the portraits of former Headmasters looking down on the current one. Professor Dumbledore's portrait was dozing in a comfy chair and she smiled sadly at the sight.

Professor McGonagall threw her a knowing gaze over the rim of her glasses. "My, my, that's a pretty dress you're wearing, my child. Let me look at you."

A bit shyly Hermione looked down. "Orders from the Ministry I'm afraid, Professor. We were not allowed to show up in work robes today."

"Only the better," the Headmistress found and opened the door when a bell magically chimed through the castle. "Shall we go? You're just in time for dinner."

In the Great Hall Hermione was seated at the Head Table between McGonagall and Professor Slughorn. The ceiling above them already lit up with sparks of fireworks against a dark night sky, preluding the festivities of later that evening. A sharp pain stung her heart when she realised that she missed seeing Draco Malfoy in the Great Hall. Seven years ago he had been in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, succeeding in casting his Patronus for the first time. She could only guess what he must be doing right now.
She bowed her head as again she relived the moment that his grey eyes had held hers and he'd told her he missed her. And then Harry and Theodore Nott had to barge in and spoil the precious moment. Suddenly, she fiercely wished it was already time for his Patronus to appear with a message for her, just like he had promised.

She was pulled from her thoughts by Professor Slughorn.

"It's good to see you again, Miss Granger. Good to see you, indeed."

He cast her a meaningful look and she smiled gratefully at the Head of Slytherin House, glad to blink away the tears that threatened to spill.

"It's good to see you too, Professor."

Professor Slughorn raised his eyebrows. "What has it been since you and the Slytherin eighth year graduated? Six years? Seven years? I've never had such a talented couple in my class again. Such a pity."

He sighed and rubbed the expensive brocade spanning his wide belly as Hermione dolefully remembered those double periods of Potions class trapped in a school desk with Draco Malfoy. What wouldn't she give to be in that position one more time and use the time to tell him how much she'd missed him too.

"You know he was here this afternoon, don't you?"

"Who?" Hermione responded automatically, reluctant to let go of the echo of the past.

The old Professor raised his eyebrows. "Well, your Potions partner, of course. Mr. Malfoy."

A shock went through Hermione. She turned to look at the Professor with wide eyes, her heart suddenly racing in her chest, too stunned to correct his assumption that Draco had been her Potions partner during their eighth year when in fact it had been Ginny.

"He was?"

The Professor nodded with a secretive smile. "He was. Here by invitation from the Headmistress. It took her ages to get him here and see the boy over there."

He gave an inconspicuous nod at the House Table below. On the bench sat a seventh year student with dark hair she vaguely remembered from when he had only been a small first year.

She let out a small gasp. "Andreas."

Perhaps the boy had heard her over at the Head Table because he looked up and she met with a pensive gaze in sharp, intelligent eyes. Then he returned to his conversation with the Hufflepuff sitting next to him.

"I see you remember him," Professor Slughorn remarked approvingly. "Splendid. Sadly, Mr. Malfoy had to leave us before dinner. He had another pressing appointment at the Ministry."

Hermione's mouth opened and closed again. Her voice failed her as a fierce disappointment knocked the breath out of her.

"Such a pity you've missed him. It would have been wonderful to have you two brew me a nice little potion again... for old times' sake, of course," Professor Slughorn smiled at her but Hermione
could only nod. She was too overwhelmed by the unexpectedness of the situation.

Picking up the gold fork and knife she began eating the no doubt delicious meal the Hogwarts house-elves had prepared for them without tasting it. If only she had had the presence of mind to invite him to come with her. Then again. He could have had other things to do than visit his old school tonight. It was New Year's Eve after all.

The former Gryffindor didn't notice when Professor Slughorn turned away and started a hushed conversation with Professor Vector.

On her other side Professor McGonagall quietly handed her a bowl with potatoes and gave her a meaningful look.

"It was good to see Mr. Malfoy today. He's come such a long way. To see what he has become... is to see hope for change personified."

Hermione gave her a weak smile, feeling that the Professor had seen her face fall, which of course she wouldn't understand. Because why would Hermione Granger feel this affected by missing an encounter with Draco Malfoy?

This time the Professor passed her a bowl with caramelised chicory as she gave her former student a sideways glance.

"You know, seven years ago, I already noticed that there was something going on with the two of you... something intangible that drove the both of you up to excellence at Potions class - much to the excitement of Professor Slughorn I might add - and which made you decide to teach Mr. Malfoy the Patronus spell."

A small smile played around McGonagall's lips as Hermione flinched.

"You thought this had slipped past the teachers' attention, don't you?"

To Hermione's embarrassment, a blush crept over her cheeks. Suddenly, she understood that the nightly lessons had only taken place because the teachers had allowed it.

"I thought it was important for the both of you," Professor McGonagall elaborated the choice she'd made back then as the corner of her mouth quirked up in a smug little smile. "It seems that I was right."

Hermione averted her gaze to the seventh year Draco had provided support to all those years ago when the little boy had needed it most.

"For the both of us?" She then slowly repeated the Professor's words.

McGonagall hummed in agreement, her lips curling into an indulgent smile. "When you think about it, your motives weren't as different from Mr. Malfoy's, weren't they?"

Hermione's gaze turned pensive as her thoughts trailed back. Nights on end they had spent practicing this one spell and she had been following Draco's every movement, the will to succeed as much hers as it was his.

"I guess not..."

"You found a common ground in your mutual wish to break with the past, to prove that the world had changed for the better."
The Headmistress nodded to the single House Table. "Mr. Selwyn here is proof of what your combined resolves can make possible."

She then caught Hermione's gaze. "I was surprised when Mr. Malfoy suddenly accepted my request for him to meet with Mr. Selwyn when he'd turned down the invitation so many times before. What happened?"

Hermione's first reaction was to say that she wouldn't know. After all, she had no official dealings with Draco Malfoy outside the inspection visits. But looking at her plate she felt that she did know and that she wanted - no, needed - to tell someone.

"I think it has something to do with the Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions inspecting Malfoy Manor," she confessed softly. "For the past seven years I've been having nightmares about the drawing room in Malfoy Manor, where Bellatrix Lestrange used the Cruciatuss Curse on me. I thought that perhaps they could be resolved if I could see that room again."

McGonagall's features darkened and Hermione swallowed.

"Malfoy Manor was included in the first round of compliance visits. So I joined the inspectors and I persuaded Draco to show me the drawing room again, although he begged me not to. I... It didn't go well. I was overwhelmed and Draco had to take me home. After that... He somehow taught himself to create a messenger Patronus. Which was absolutely fantastic. I couldn't believe my eyes when his Patronus appeared in my room and started talking. After that it somehow developed into a continuing conversation through messenger Patronuses until I had to put a stop to it when The Daily Prophet started writing about us."

"Which was a horrible smear campaign by The Daily Prophet. A new low for this so called quality newspaper. I can't imagine what you have been through."

Hermione looked up with tears in her eyes although she tried to put on a brave smile.

McGonagall's stern features softened. "I'm only an old woman with a lot of experience observing her students, Miss Granger, and I don't think I was wrong when I saw this special bond come into existence between you and Mr. Malfoy during your eighth year at Hogwarts. A bond you've clearly renewed over the past couple of weeks. And instead of visiting your old school you should be celebrating the coming of the new year wherever else, as long as it is with him."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"With... Draco?" She repeated as a blush rushed to her cheeks. "I... I don't know..."

"Child..." Hermione then heard Professor McGonagall say next to her. "Put a stop to this situation. Open your eyes."

Less than thirty minutes were left of the old year before the new year would become part of history when the small group of teachers and students, dressed warmly in cloaks and scarfs, spread out over the fourth floor terrace.

Hermione quietly followed the teachers, not participating in the cheerful banter and laughter around her. Just like seven years ago her heart wasn't into it. Instead of looking forward to the upcoming fireworks display all she could think about was the person who would again be missing at the fourth floor balcony tonight. Professor McGonagall was right. When the fireworks would once again be illuminating the castle of Hogwarts she shouldn't be up here to witness it but instead be down there. With him. Seven years ago an owl landing on the balustrade he'd reached out to her.
This time however he would probably be home or at some kind of party with Theodore Nott.

On the grounds below Hagrid put the finishing touch to the large rockets which were about to hit the sky in a few minutes. When the half-giant straightened up he waved at Hermione. She did her best to wave back as cheerful as she could.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat to get everybody's attention. "Students and guests of Hogwarts. Within the next minute we will be going over to the next year. To celebrate this event we have some fireworks prepared for you..."

She fell silent when the fourth floor balcony was suddenly filled with a bright light. Everyone on the balcony turned around and their eyes widened at the spectacle unfolding before them. On the fourth floor balcony a small, glowing animal had appeared, sitting up before Professor McGonagall's guest. Her face had brightened in a tender smile as she was kneeling down before the small animal.

"Hermione, Draco wishes you a happy New Year and he hopes you're having a pleasant evening," the animal then said with a tinkling voice.

The fireworks were completely forgotten. Gasps of surprise went through the small group of students as Hermione Granger petted the small animal form, oblivious to the eyes watching her. Only the Headmistress saw the tears glistening in her eyes in the light of the Patronus. Then the animal form disappeared in a small puff of smoke and some heaved a sigh of disappointment.

Professor McGonagall saw her chance.

"What you just saw, my dear students, was a very advanced piece of magic. Only those with enough magical abilities and belief in the good inside of them can manage to perform - a corporeal Patronus."

A whispering went through the awed group of students. Many of them had heard about Patronuses but very few of them, if any, had ever seen one.

Behind them the Headmistress cast Hermione an encouraging gaze and mouthed smilingly, "Go!"

Then she spread her arms. "Can I have everybody's attention please."

Reluctantly, all eyes were pealed off Hermione and turned towards Hagrid below.

Hermione took a step backwards as a lone bell tolled across the castle grounds. Then brilliant fireworks lit up the dark sky. Streaks of red, blue, green and yellow tumbled around each other, forming balls of sparkling lights to dissipate in gold and silver drops raining down on the Hogwarts terrain.

But Hermione didn't see the beautiful fireworks as she was running down the staircase while drawing her wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

Immediately, her otter appeared and swam along with her.

"Squeaky, this is a message from Hermione Granger. I need to talk to Master Draco. If he's at home, will you let me in?" she asked. "Oh, and one thing: would you mind not telling Master Draco that I'm coming to see him?"

The Patronus disappeared as she ran down dimly lit corridors on her way outside. From there she could Disapparate from the castle grounds. She had a clearance for one night.
When she arrived outside Professor McGonagall's last rocket burst into a quill describing a flaming H in the sky. Hermione smiled at the sight and whispered, "Thank you, Professor."

Then she Disapparated with a light pop.

Malfy Manor was shrouded in darkness when Hermione Apparated before its gates. Hesitantly she reached for the bell but to her surprise she already felt the pull from house beckoning for her to enter through the gate.

Her heart leapt up. This could only mean that the house-elf Squeaky had received her message and Draco must be at home. Once again, she followed the long approach to the stately mansion looming in the distance as in the Muggle villages far away the last fireworks extinguished. The only sounds were made by her footsteps echoing against the high hedge, a feeling of anticipation electrifying her.

When she finally reached the front doors Squeaky was already waiting for her. He had his head popped around the corner and his ears bobbed in the chilly wind.

"Squeaky," Hermione breathed when he let her in. "Thank you so much."

The house-elf looked up at her with big, truehearted eyes as he took her cloak from her. "Squeaky was very happy when he received Miss Hermione's message. The Mister and Mistress aren't at home this New Year's Eve and Squeaky didn't say anything to the Master but Squeaky is sure that the Master would be very pleased if he knew that Miss Hermione was visiting. It always makes him happy when Miss Hermione is visiting."

Hermione went down on her knees, her heart fluttering at the possible implication of the house-elf’s truthful remark.

"You're worried about him, aren't you?" She asked softly.

The house-elf nodded shyly and with a grateful smile Hermione extended her hand. "Will you take me to him?"

Squeaky silently took her hand and snapped his fingers. The following moment Hermione was standing on an antique Persian rug in what she immediately recognised as Draco's study. It was lit only by a crackling fire in the hearth, which Squeaky must have poked up before her arrival.

Squeaky put his leathery finger to his lips and pointed with his other finger at the chair by the window. Hermione quietly followed his direction and her features softened.

In the chair was Draco, vast asleep. His head was inclined toward her, resting against the back of the chair. Sometimes his blond eyelashes fluttered against his cheekbones and his breathing was slow and regular. He looked like an angel dressed in contemporary clothes. Since Hermione had seen him he'd changed out of the robes and he was wearing the white oxford again with a pair of black trousers.

He must have been reading before he'd fallen asleep. Resting limply between his fingers was a book that was in clear danger of falling to the ground. *The Remains Of The Day* Hermione saw. The book he'd to come to fetch this afternoon.

Squeaky raised a hand to shake his Master awake but Hermione stopped him.

"Thank you, Squeaky. Will you let me wake him up instead?" She whispered.
The house-elf looked with big, unsure eyes from his sleeping Master to the Ministry official.

"But... Master often has nightmares and... and Master gets spooked when Squeaky wakes him up..." he whispered back helplessly.

Hermione gave him a sad smile. Apparently, the house-elf had orders to wake Draco up when he was having nightmares and he feared for his Master's reaction. She clearly wasn't the only one suffering from nightmares. However, this wasn't such a moment.

"It's all right, Squeaky. Look, he's not having any nightmares right now," Hermione told him softly. The house-elf bobbed his ears when he saw Draco's calm expression and as Hermione gave Squeaky a reassuring nod the house-elf snapped his fingers with a relieved smile. He disappeared with a light pop.

In the quiet study Hermione crouched down until she was at eye level with the sleeping Malfoy and carefully she took the book from his fingers. She only averted her gaze from his face for a few seconds to establish that he'd reached the final chapter. Clearly he had been reading while waiting for her response to his message, as was his habit.

Mesmerised, Hermione drank in the sight of Draco's sleeping face. There was a peacefulness on his face she'd rarely seen with him. It added a delicate beauty to his regular features which made something flutter in her stomach.

Gently, Hermione put down the book on the low table beside the chair. He barely responded when the weight of the book disappeared from his loose grasp - his eyelids fluttered but he only gave a soft sigh in response.

A tender smile stole over Hermione's features.

"You really are vast asleep," she whispered. "Wake up, Draco."

Lifting her hand she tucked a stray strand of his blond hair behind his ear, her fingers trailing his jawline.

His eyes flew open.

Hermione froze. Her hand hovered midair as she looked straight into a pair of confused grey eyes, staring at her in blank amazement.

"Hermione?" Draco whispered. "How...?"

"Squeaky let me in," Hermione said simply and waited patiently for him to process this and wake up properly.

"Squeaky," he merely repeated, clearly having trouble grasping the unexpected reality of Hermione's presence in his study. He blinked when Hermione gave him a tender smile.

"I thought I'd wish you a happy New Year in person."

Draco had woken up to a dream. He was sure of it. The fogs of sleep must be playing tricks on him because he'd woken up to a sight that took his breath away.

Kneeling before him was Hermione Granger. Lit up only by the fire in the hearth she looked like a witch princess of old in her beautiful purple dress, her curls cascading down her shoulders and with an intense gaze in dark eyes.
For a moment he didn't dare to move, afraid to be woken any time soon, slapped in the face by Squeaky because Master was having a nightmare again and all that he was left with was an empty feeling in his heart.

Except this wasn't a nightmare. And although it certainly felt like one this wasn't a dream either he realised as he lifted his hand and his fingers curled around hers still hovering beside his cheek. Her beautiful eyes brightened in response.

"You're here. You're really here," he whispered as if acknowledging her presence only now. "No Patronus."

"No Patronus. Just me." Hermione swallowed. "If... You'll have me."

Her vulnerable words lingered in the air and Draco's mouth suddenly became dry. Had he heard her correctly? It sounded as if she wasn't ever going to leave again. His heart leapt up but, "Are... are you sure? I mean... You could damage your reputation... With me."

Her eyes flashed with anger at this. For a moment Draco thought he'd said something wrong and his heart missed a beat but then she bowed her head.

"I can only hope you'll want to... after I've caused you so much misery," she whispered and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

"No! Don't ever say that."

Draco sat up straight and he scowled. "Just look at what I have to offer to you."

He yanked up his left sleeve and there, glaring up at Hermione, was the Dark Mark. Resembling a red tattoo, the symbol, though faded, still stood out against his pale skin, covering almost the entire inner part of his forearm.

"There it is. This is who I am. It's a symbol of the very darkness you've been fighting during the war. This I'll always carry with me," Draco spat, pain and disgust dripping from his features as he extended his forearm towards Hermione. "This is why you should never want to be with me."

Hermione stilled. It occurred to her that up until now she'd never seen him with his sleeves rolled up. Even when she'd caught him leaving the Prefects' Bathroom at Hogwarts or during hot days in spring when he'd been reading a book at the waterside of the Great Lake, his sleeves had been down. She'd always attributed this to his impeccable appearance during their final year at Hogwarts. Not until now she really understood why as the faint mark glared at her demandingly, silent proof of choices made in the past.

Gingerly, she folded her small hands around his forearm, her fingers hiding the mark from view. His muscles trembled as his skin warmed up under her tender touch but he didn't pull back.

"This is not who you are, Draco. He may have branded your skin, but that's all he has managed to do. Like Bellatrix has branded mine. He hasn't been able to prevent you choosing light over darkness," she said softly while holding his gaze. "Your Patronus is proof of that."

She looked down on his arm and trailed her fingers across the Dark Mark.

"This is just a scar, inflicted on you because you once chose to follow the path of darkness. But you've changed since then. That's why you're able to cast a Patronus. Your Patronus is the very embodiment of the purest part of yourself. That's who you are now and that's the only thing that matters to me."
Draco silently looked at her, his heartbeat quickening under the touch of her fingertips tracing the Dark Mark. She didn't try to play down his decisions in the past but simply put things into perspective in a way that a wonderful feeling of liberation washed over him. It felt like she'd lifted a weight off his shoulders he'd been carrying with him since the war had started.

He carefully lifted her hand from his arm and laced his fingers through hers as everything inside him screamed for him to hold her and cherish her as much as he could.

It struck him how unbelievably close she was. He only needed to reach out to her to finally kiss those beautiful lips heaved up at him.

He couldn't take it anymore. Lifting his hands he cupped her face and leaned in. The moment her lips brushed his stars exploded behind his closed eyes.

Part of him expected her to back out now and he would even be fine with it if it left him with this wonderful memory but instead an indescribable feeling went through him when her lips parted and she leaned into the kiss, returning the feeling.

He pulled her closer and an absurd feeling of gratitude washed over him when her small hands folded behind his neck and she welcomed him, inviting him to deepen the kiss. A small moan escaped him.

When Draco finally pulled back a little Hermione's half opened lips angled to him sent a jolt of electricity through his core. Leaning in he followed with his lips the trail the tear had made on her cheek. When he reached her jawline he hesitated but Hermione inclined her head ever so slightly, encouraging him to continue. His heart thundered in his chest as he continued further down her throat until he'd reached her collarbone. She let out a soft sigh in response that drove him half mad.

"Hermione," he breathed but fell silent when she wordlessly spread his knees and positioned herself between his legs, while holding his gaze.

The touch of her hips against his thighs made the ground disappear underneath him.

Slowly he slid down from the chair and went down on his knees in a movement of complete and utter surrender.

"I'm yours... I have been since our eighth year at Hogwarts." He swallowed when the truth finally spilled from his lips.

"If... if you'll have me."

Hoarsely, he repeated the words she'd said earlier and an incredible feeling that was impossible to describe washed over him when the most beautiful smile lit up Hermione's face and she nodded wordlessly.

He reached out and pulled her against him.

A surge of want rushed through Hermione's body when her body aligned with his, closing the last distance between them. Furrowing her eyebrows she slid her arms around his neck, burying her fingers in the silky blond hair she'd been longing to touch for so long. The feeling of the thudding beat of his heart finally made Hermione undone. She pulled up his white oxford and slid her hands underneath, losing herself in the smooth texture of his warm, bare skin, which his shirts had been hiding from her for so long.

In response his hold he buried his face in her hair, clearly holding back.
Hermione pressed a single, tender kiss to his neck and she felt that he shuddered.

"Draco, please," she whispered, with these two words asking for so much more than just this.

He looked up and Hermione met with a gaze filled with adoration for her, the look in his eyes answer to her plea. Clothes were discarded and kissing her deeply Draco lowered them down on the ground. Hermione closed her eyes and revelled in the feeling of his body against hers. There was only the press of skin against skin, the touch of his warm lips and irregular breathing on the slopes of her body as their silhouettes merged to one in the light of the glowing embers. Her fingers explored the smooth skin on his back, pulling him closer at the same time. In response his fingers tightened upon her hip and he looked up and sought out her eyes when their bodies reached a measured pace. All that she saw in his grey eyes was complete and utter devotion and it took her breath away. Hermione threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him down to kiss him, her legs wrapping around his lower body in silent response. He tightened his hold on her and the glow of the dying embers gently framed the shudder that went through their bodies as outside gentle whirling snowflakes reclaimed the dark sky from the fireworks that had welcomed the new year.

Hermione had never felt so blissfully complete in her life as now that she was resting in Draco's arms. Her head was nestled near his collarbone and her hand lay sprawled on his well-toned chest. She marvelled at the beauty of him as she enjoyed the feeling of his fingers absentmindedly trailing up and down her upper arm.

"So, it's McGonagall we're to thank for this."

Listening to his quiet voice Hermione smiled and closed her eyes.

"McGonagall, your friend Theodore and a small house-elf named Squeaky," she acknowledged softly, then her eyes flew open when Draco unexpectedly let out a startled groan.

"Oh no, Squeaky."

Draco put his hand before his eyes. "I have to go check on him and make sure he doesn't do anything to himself. Like ironing his hands or things like that."

Quickly, he sat up straight and his features softened when he saw Hermione's look of dismay at him leaving her arms.

"I'm sorry, but since I'm with a Ministry inspector... I have no choice but to adhere to the rules," he said playfully and pressed a tender, regretful kiss to Hermione's lips.

Hermione rolled her eyes at this and propped herself up on one elbow, following him with secret contentment as he reached for his clothes.

"Why would he do that?" She asked, inconspicuously keeping her eyes trained on him while he put on his trousers.

"Because he let you in at his own decision," he said, throwing her an amused look. He'd definitely noticed her stare and to her embarrassment Hermione blushed. "House-elves at Malfoy Manor are strictly forbidden to open the gate to anyone without the family's permission. I've tried to change the rules but both the house-elves and my father are giving me a hard time."

He handed Hermione her dress, stealing an admiring look at her as she got dressed. He was still struggling to grasp this new reality where this beautiful woman had decided to spend the most magical night in his life with him.
When she straightened up, she established, "I think Squeaky has found a work-around for that... And I think him calling me Miss Hermione has something to do with it. Am I right?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. So she'd noticed that little detail after all. He should have known.

"Oh well, a matchmaker for a house-elf is not something I can't handle," he sighed. "I just have to keep him away from other single witches and wizards, I suppose."

Hermione smiled and folded her hands behind his neck, reluctant to let him go even if it would only mean the attic or the kitchen. She felt like she wanted to keep him as close as possible after seven years of living in denial. He seemed to know what she was thinking and put his hands on her waist as he gently kissed the crown of her head.

"You can come with me if you'd like," Draco said tenderly. "I'm sure he'll be alright. And perhaps later today we could step by at Hogwarts and thank Professor McGonagall."

It was the first thing that popped in his mind, hoping to give her a reason to stay with him for a few more hours.

Hermione chuckled. "What a surprise that will be for poor Professor Slughorn. He looked positively devastated at the realisation that he had been this close to locking us up in his classroom yesterday. We could ask if we may brew him one last Potion. For old times' sake."

She was absolutely adorable when looking mischievous like this. Draco couldn't resist. Tucking a curl behind her ear, he leaned in and gave her a lingering kiss. The prospect of spending another few hours in that narrow school desk with her sounded quite endearing to him but he also knew that before that they had to face the inevitable.

Draco took a deep breath.

"I'd say we go after breakfast. And... since I technically still live with my parents, I hope you don't mind they'll be there as well."

Hermione stilled, noticing how he suddenly tensed up. Though the situation practically forced his hand she felt that this was important to him.

"Of course I don't mind," she said warmly and he relaxed visibly.

He kissed her with fierce gratitude. "Thank you."

Hermione closed her eyes in silent bliss. A moment later he withdrew with a happy smile. She had never seen him this radiant before and she loved it.

"Perhaps we should let Professor McGonagall know in advance?"

They both reached for their wands and Draco was the first to effortlessly speak the incantation. He could probably perform the advanced magic in his sleep by now, Hermione acknowledged as pride filled her heart. For a split second, she wondered what memory he was using, knowing very well what would be hers.

Within moments an otter and a ferret tumbled through Draco's study, disappearing quickly upon receiving their messages.

Draco and Hermione had an entire Manor to comb out in search of the house-elf Squeaky.
"Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy. I will admit that I was surprised to see both your Patronuses appearing in my office this morning. But of course you are always welcome at Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall's stern gaze was softened by a smile when she spotted Draco's hand lightly resting on Hermione's back.

"I take it that you heeded my advice, Miss Granger?"

Hermione blushed.

"And you too, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco paled.

The Headmistress smiled indulgently. "So, house-elves have brought you your happiness then."

Their eyes widened and Draco flashed Hermione a gaze she couldn't quite pinpoint but it had already disappeared when Professor McGonagall gave them a last, piercing gaze and spoke, "I think it's time to leave you in Professor Slughorn's good care. You can come in now, Horace."

The way she spoke suggested that the ostentatious Professor had not been asked to wait behind the door to her office. The Head of Slytherin House stumbled into the office, looking particularly guilty, but when he spotted his former students his face lit up. McGonagall cast a small, apologising smile at Draco and Hermione.

"Headmistress, I came as quickly as I could when I heard..." He turned towards his former students. "Do I understand correctly that you've requested to visit the Potions classroom... On New Year's Day?"

He wore an oddly hopeful expression on his face as he looked from one to another. From the corner of her eye Hermione looked at Draco who had difficulty keeping his face straight as his glistening gaze met hers.

"If it's not an inconvenience to you, of course." Draco inclined his head courteously.

The Professor let out a nervous laugh. "No, no. Of course not. Anything for the most talented couple in my NEWT-class for years."

"Off you go then," the Headmistress said encouragingly and her guests felt as if they were students again when they followed the Potions Professor through the door.

It felt strange for Hermione to back wandering though Hogwarts' dusky hallways with Draco Malfoy and as she stole a quick glance at him, he seemed to be as much lost in thought as she was. He turned his head when he felt her gaze on him and the intense look in his grey eyes made her pulse quicken. The Daily Prophet might have tried to sully the delicate memory of the Patronus lessons with their publications, Draco recognised the special atmosphere of these magical few days during the holidays like she did.

While Professor Slughorn proceeded ahead of them, talking incessantly about his current seventh years, Draco silently took Hermione's hand, stroking it lovingly with his thumb as he gave her a small, knowing smile.

They had almost reached the entrance to the Ravenclaw Tower and Professor Slughorn turned around.
"I believe this is where that picture of you was taken, wasn’t it? A beautiful picture if I might say so," the Professor asked jovially, scanning the corridor they’d just entered.

He turned around when a reply failed to come and fell silent.

Mr. Malfoy had slid his arm around Miss Granger's waist and she rested her head against his shoulder as they looked past the old Professor with melancholic, slightly wistful expressions on their features. It had probably been the most magical time in their lives when they had been wandering these corridors at night during the Christmas holidays, oblivious to their young stalker who had taken the now world-famous picture of them. The picture which had changed their lives.

The Professor lowered his gaze, suddenly feeling ashamed for his callousness. Obviously these young people had suffered a lot to reach this point where they could revisit this unassuming corridor at Hogwarts together as a couple. And a couple they very much were, although the Head of Slytherin House understood that he and Professor McGonagall probably were the only ones knowing about this at this moment.

His features softened, the teacher in him feeling a surge of protectiveness go through him. Also, the tradesman in him recognised something very precious when he saw it. The awakening love between his former students was like a fragile new flower still in need of sheltering so it could grow to great importance. And Professor Slughorn knew how to protect his assets.

"Follow me," he said quietly and without any further delay he led them to the Potions classroom.

After two more minutes the Professor opened the door and stepped aside.

Nothing had really changed in the seven years since they’d left Draco noticed as he looked around the classroom. The cabinets filled with cauldrons and ingredients, the high windows above the school desks, the now empty blackboard in front of the desks, all was pretty much as he remembered it.

Professor Slughorn cleared his throat. "Well, as you can see nothing changed in here since you've left Hogwarts. I...

He trailed off when Draco unexpectedly crossed the classroom and resolutely opened a cabinet, taking a cauldron from it. At the same moment Hermione was off to the bookcase and picked the Potions textbook from one of the shelves. As if it were the most normal thing in the world they went to Hermione's old spot at the school desk in the front.

"If you're partial to a certain potion, now it's the time to let us know, Professor," Draco said dryly, a slight drawl in his voice as he took his silver school knife from his jacket in a business-like manner. He'd unearthed the knife from his old school stuff before they left home this morning. Meanwhile, Hermione had opened the text book and looked up attentively.

"We brought some ingredients we thought the school might not have in stock that we can use."

The Professor's eyes began to glisten.

Rubbing his hands he crossed the classroom as well, feeling that this was his lucky day.

A minute later Draco and Hermione found themselves alone in the classroom with a steaming cauldron in front of them. A couple in their late twenties, the wizard dressed in a smart, grey suit and the witch in a Muggle work dress, stuck into a secondary school text book. They were surrounded by ingredients as they took to their old routine with Draco cutting and bruising the ingredients while Hermione read the flawed recipe and stirred. It felt like yesterday that they had
been folded in this desk, finding how much they liked working together in the boisterous classroom.

The only sounds surrounding them today were of their own making as they brewed Professor Slughorn his potion. They actually got excited when they discovered a severe mistake in the recipe that would have ruined the potion had they followed it, discussing alternatives like it hadn't been seven years. When Hermione came up with the idea of using the oil from the calendula flower Draco smiled and gave her a loving peck on the lips before untangling himself from the desk to get the ingredient from the cabinet. From Professor Slughorn's personal inventory they had already been provided with some of the rarer ingredients that weren't to be found in the classroom cabinets. Although the recipe featured in the text book it was listed in a separate section dedicated to notoriously difficult potions.

Much too soon, the potion had taken on a rich burgundy colour and was ready to be poured into several bottles. The potion would no doubt earn Slughorn many gallons on Knockturn Alley. Now all they could do was to sit back and wait for the Professor to return.

"We should start a business in this," Hermione said dryly, her gaze focused on the blackboard at the front and Draco chuckled. It felt wonderful to be sitting here with her in this old school desk again. Casually he reached out and covered her hand resting on her leg. He smiled a little, though Hermione couldn't quite pinpoint whether he was smiling because of her remark or that he simply enjoyed being squeezed in this desk together.

She closed her eyes and she allowed herself to relax in the warmth of his body seeping through the fine fabric of her dress through his right arm and leg. The times when the sensation had unnerved her were long gone. Instead she rested her head on his shoulder and smiled when he wrapped his arm around her, blissfully content to be held by him.

"Are you cold?" He inquired as he pressed a light kiss to her crown.

"No," she said quietly. "You're perfectly warm."

He pulled her a bit closer and with the back of his fingers he lightly caressed her cheek.

"Good."

Unseen by Hermione Draco looked down on her tenderly. What it was that he'd done right in his life to deserve this happiness he didn't know and probably wouldn't know for a long time but to sit here with Hermione in his arms made him the luckiest man in the world.

She seemed to notice his gaze because she lifted her head from his shoulder and smiled at him.

"Caught you," she whispered and closed her eyes when he lightly pressed his lips to hers. Hesitantly his hand went up to her face and his heart leapt up when she did the same. He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, briefly wondering what this would have looked like if they'd been surrounded by their classmates, knowing that this was what he'd wanted to do had he had the courage to do so all those years ago when they had been sharing this school desk at Potions class.

The sound of footsteps outside the classroom jolted them back to reality. Breaking away from each other they immediately sat up straight in their desk.

Hermione felt the pang of loss as the wonderful feeling of just now dissipated. However, in her heart the memory lingered of finally having been able to kiss Draco in their narrow school desk.

"Here we go," Draco said evenly and Hermione idly straightened the textbook on the desk.
She looked up when she heard Draco's hushed voice next to her.

"Do you remember our last Potions class together?"

His voice sounded a bit odd but when Hermione gave Draco a sideways look his unreadable expression betrayed nothing.

"Like it was yesterday," she said on a low voice and her emotional tone made him turn his head, catching her gaze.

"I remember I was thanking you, while what I really wanted to say was this."

The footsteps came closer as Draco leaned and gently whispered in her ear, "I love you Hermione. I love you so much."

His voice sounded hoarse as he finally was able to tell her how he felt.

Hermione stilled and an incredible warmth spread through her as his whispered words sunk in. Not until now she realised how much she had been longing to hear those words falling from his lips.

The footsteps stopped before the classroom door.

"Miss Granger? Mr. Malfoy?"

She didn't have much time left before the Professor would enter the classroom. Determined not to let this moment pass, Hermione bowed her head as she finally allowed the truth to fill her up.

"I love you too," she whispered. "Merlin, I've loved you for so long."

Draco closed his eyes, drinking in her confession as if he would never drink again. He had feared that she wouldn't reciprocate his feelings but her quiet voice now sent a surge of happiness through him. She loved him. Hermione Granger loved him.

And as Professor Slughorn opened the door he pressed a loving kiss to her temple, knowing that he'd finally come home.
It was already late in the afternoon, when the sound of a clear doorbell rang through the modest countryside house, built in a traditional style that was typical for the south-west of England. The two people on the doorstep pulled their cloaks more tightly around them against the cutting, bleak wind as they waited for the owners to open the door, knowing that they were home. They had announced their arrival.

Winter had come late this year. Not until the First of December the driving rain of November had made place for the first hesitant snowflakes. Tonight though a snowstorm would move across England The Daily Prophet had prophesized.

The two visitors drew in a relieved breath when the door to what stood midway between a large cottage and a small country estate opened, revealing a small house-elf, dressed in a colourful knitted jumper, that looked at them with big eyes.

The wizard opened his mouth. "We're... here... bec... becau..."

His attempt failed miserably. The cold had made his jaw become completely numb. But the house-elf kept looking at him with his big eyes, motionlessly awaiting his explanation as he left the visitors standing on the doorstep.

Fortunately, something stirred behind the small house-elf and a quiet voice said, "You can let them in, Squeaky. They have an appointment."

The house-elf obediently opened the door and let the couple into the vestibule, where they shed their snow covered cloaks. Not until then he allowed them through the french doors toward the hallway tiled with rustic brown tiles, where a man and a woman stood, waiting to welcome the visitors.

The man was tall with blond hair and cool, grey eyes. He had his arm wrapped around the slender waist of the woman, whose gleaming, chestnut curls touched his shoulder. In her arms she held a baby.

The woman's attentive gaze softened into a smile when the visitors entered the hall. At seeing their discomfort, she raised her wand and softly spoke an incantation. A blissful warmth chased away the cold from the visitors' bodies.

"That's better, isn't it? I know it's a rather long walk from the main house."

A hesitant smile appeared on the visitors' lips.

"Thank you, Miss Gr... I mean, Mrs. Malfoy," the female visitor said, stammering for a moment as she tasted the strange name on her tongue.

The man next to Mrs. Malfoy raised his eyebrow in mild amusement and she lowered her gaze. She still remembered his cold, unrelenting expression from the first time their paths had crossed, when Mrs. Malfoy had been part of the inspection team. Had it already been two years?

The first compliance visit to Malfoy Manor back then was supposed to be a routine visit but it had
unleashed a storm beyond comparison involving the supposed, hidden relationship between the now married couple. At the time the young witch had never actually noticed if such a thing had been going on, but what she did remember was that there had been something about Malfoy Manor - something the young inspector had failed to understand - which had meant more to Miss Granger than the other inspection locations. But even if the suggested relationship had never existed at that point, it certainly had developed from that moment on.

When Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy had got married during a small, private ceremony in September it was all The Daily Prophet had been writing about for an entire week. They'd been rewarded with a few attractive pictures made by Dennis Creevey, released by the couple themselves. Only the big wedding of Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley this year had drawn more attention.

The young inspector's gaze was drawn to the infant in Mrs. Malfoy's arms, born a few months ago. She was a delicate girl with downy, light blonde hair and caramel eyes looking at her curiously. The young witch's expression softened and she lifted her hand to let the infant grip her finger when her mother smilingly nodded her consent. Much to the inspector's delight Hermione then placed the little girl in her arms, her face turned so that she was still able to see her mother.

"She's beautiful, Miss... Mrs. Malfoy." She gave the child in her arms a tender look, completely forgetting the purpose of her visit as she carefully fondled the girl's cheek. Her words even drew the faintest of smiles appear to Mr. Malfoy's reserved features.

Her male companion, however, cast a non-understanding glance at her and decided to have another try at stating their business.

"We're here to inspect the labour conditions of the house-elf in your residence."

The inspector's gaze rested on Squeaky whose ears bobbed at the attention, not seeing the nostalgic look the Malfoys exchanged at his words. "We've already wound up inspection of the main house and since this house has gained possession of a house-elf since our last inspection visit two years ago..."

"Not possession," Squeaky piped up. "Squeaky is a free elf now and chooses to be here." His long, spiny fingers pointed at his seasonal jumper decorated with silver bells.

A charming smile lit up the young Mrs. Malfoy's features as the young inspectors shamefacedly lowered their gazes. "Squeaky is right. He is here of his own free will and he receives payment for his service for as long as he wishes to be here. As such you can check if his working conditions are in accordance with the law. But please, skip the formalities. The members of my inspectorate are very welcome in our home. I'm glad to see you."

The hospitable words of his wife made the man next to her suddenly come to life. He stepped aside and motioned to a door in the back of the hall. "The kitchen is this way, if you'll follow me..."

With a smile Mrs. Malfoy took over the little girl from the inspector as her colleague set course to the kitchen. The young witch turned to follow him, casting a quick look back over her shoulder when she reached the kitchen door. Mr. Malfoy lightly kissed his wife's temple and caressed the infant's cheek with a tender gesture. "I will be up in a minute," she heard him say softly.

The inspector disappeared into the inviting kitchen with a smile on her features.

"I knew of my son's affection for you when he let slip the remark that you had taught him the
Patronus spell during your last year at Hogwarts," Narcissa Malfoy said plainly as her cool, blue gaze rested on the young witch before her. Her affected voice betrayed neither approval nor disapproval as she came to the point immediately.

In between them sat the silver tea service - silent witness to the first time Narcissa had invited Hermione to tea since Hermione had unexpectedly appeared at the breakfast table on New Year's Day. The atmosphere between the two women was tense, uncomfortable as they'd sat down and looked at each other silently, before Narcissa had lifted the teapot. With an elegant gesture she'd poured Hermione a richly coloured tea, which had now cooled down, the cup remaining untouched.

"I saw it in his eyes. A mother can see such things, even before her son becomes aware of his feelings himself. Of course my husband didn't suspect a thing."

A soft sigh escaped the aristocratic woman as she averted her eyes to the window - a vision of cold beauty, saddened by life experience. Hermione said nothing, giving the older witch a free rein while she waited.

"I had hoped..." Mrs. Malfoy's voice trailed away and only after a few seconds she continued on a quieter, somewhat forlorn tone, "I had hoped that when he met Astoria, that she could make him forget about... his feelings for you. Forget about you."

There was a certain bitterness to her words but they held no reproach and Hermione bowed her head. She knew what Narcissa meant. For seven long years she too had tried to forget about that intangible something that had developed between her and Draco during their eighth year at Hogwarts. It had taken her all these years to come to realise that it had affected Draco as much as it had affected her.

"You didn't want him to get hurt," was the first thing she said, her voice soft.

Narcissa cast her a cautious, sideways look in response. "He had already been hurt. He was the moment you both graduated from Hogwarts. He just didn't realise it. What I saw in his eyes back then, I... tried to ignore it and discourage the occasional times he spoke of you."

Hermione nodded. "I understand. He had to get his life back on track."

"I hated myself for it," the older woman confessed, regal even in her dejectedness. "But I couldn't allow him to be drawn into the swamps of hopelessness my husband and I have been in since..."

Her voice trembled and trailed away again. They were the words of someone with no hope and no direction, a wandering soul whose only remaining goal in life had become to spare her son the same fate.

Hermione's heart wrenched for the older woman as she watched with silent admiration as Narcissa regained control of herself almost immediately.

"We have already taken his childhood from him because of our actions. It's a guilt I'll be carrying with me forever. I couldn't let him lose the rest of his life, too..."

"Because of me," Hermione softly stated what the aristocratic witch had left out discreetly. For Draco she'd been the picture the Golden Trio hanging on walls everywhere, the one woman who was completely out of his reach, because of their past, because of the war, because of what was expected of them in their future lives. On impulse, she leaned forward and put her hand on Mrs. Malfoy's ringed fingers.
"I understand, Mrs. Malfoy. I can only hope that you believe that I love your son... from the moment I came to know who he really is."

Mrs. Malfoy stared at Hermione's hand resting on hers as she understood what Hermione, the light of The Golden Trio, had just confessed to. A faint smile ghosted over her lips as the cool gaze in her eyes retreated to make place for a more tender one.

"It's no matter of believing, my dear. I can see it in your eyes."

Then she rose from her seat and with an elegant movement she bowed forward to press a light kiss to Hermione's forehead. "Thank you, Hermione Granger. For loving back my son."

Hermione carefully put her daughter to bed, making sure that the blanket completely covered her small body. A gentle smile graced her features when the infant turned her head to look at her mother as she took her wand and put the music box in motion. An enchanting, tingling melody began to play while small specks of fairy-shaped light danced across the room. She tenderly fondled her daughter's soft cheek as she watched her caramel eyes, so like hers, closing slowly. Then she sat down in the rocking chair, waiting for Draco to come up.

Her thoughts trailed back to that moment two years ago, when she had been standing at his doorstep with two inexperienced inspectors, the same ones interviewing Squeaky downstairs at the moment. So much had happened since then.

Hermione had taken her time about carefully introducing Draco to the extensive family of Weasleys and Order members in her life. Gingerly Draco entered a world he'd chosen a long time ago but not until now was actually becoming a part of it. With his calm and engaging behaviour he won them over one by one, gradually being accepted even by Ron.

It was Harry who persuaded Ron into giving Malfoy a chance to prove himself. The first time Hermione took Draco with her on a visit to the Burrow Draco asked Ron to show him around the grounds and turned the page with an apology for his behaviour in the past, which Ron reluctantly accepted.

After that Ron asked Hermione to come over to the Burrow alone. That night they were sitting on a bench overlooking the grasslands and Ron was the first to break the awkward silence between them.

"So, Malfoy, right?"

A small smile played around Hermione's lips. "Yeah."

Ron gave her a sideways look. "So, is it true then, what the Prophet wrote about you two?"

Hermione sighed. "No."

"I still can't believe you fell for bloody Malfoy," he then murmured as he looked up at the stars. "But I guess... you could do worse."

Her eyes glistened when she took his hand and squeezed it. "Thank you, Ron. That means the
world to me."

Ginny on the other hand said simply with a big grin, "Told you I caught you staring at him."

The third time Draco visited the Burrow with Hermione, he was asked to bring his broomstick for a game of Quidditch. Draco’s eyes glistened when Ron had made this sudden proposition, his ears turning a little red as if his own words shocked him, which did not go by unnoticed by Hermione. The way his reserved features lit up reminded her of the day a Golden Snitch had barged into the Potions classroom.

And Ron was in for another surprise the moment Draco entered the back garden with his broomstick in his hand.

"Wow, that’s an old one..." Ron commented in surprise, looking at Draco’s broomstick.

Then it dawned on Ron.

"Isn't that your..."

"It's a Nimbus 2001," Draco confirmed helpfully. Ron's gaze trailed to the newest Aeolus in his own model had come out only a month ago and was the latest must-have when it came to racing sticks.

"I haven't been able to play Quidditch since school, so there was no need to replace it for another one. It's a good broomstick," Draco elaborated, correctly guessing Ron's trail of thoughts.

It was an honest, matter-of-factly if not a bit lonely answer as he looked at the older but well-maintained broomstick in his hands.

"Well, it seemed as if the tables have turned, then," Ron commented with a frown.

The young Malfoy only smiled amusedly at the small jab and gestured at the pitch.

"So, what position do I play?"

Ten minutes later they were all up in the air, their activities being followed through the kitchen window by Hermione and Mrs. Weasley. Harry naturally assumed his position as a Seeker and Ron had decided for Draco to become Chaser, despite his Nimbus 2001 being slower than the Aoluses of the other ones. But since Draco wasn't used to getting his hands dirty, so declared Ron, he would be useless as a Beater.

"He's really enjoying himself. It must have been a while since he last played Quidditch," Mrs. Weasley remarked as she summoned a spatula for the batter she was going to make, her sharp eyes not missing the pensive smile ghosting over Hermione’s lips as she watched the rough game. Draco was barely able to dodge a Bludger sent to him by George as he passed Ron the Quaffle, who played the position of rush goalie.

"It's been a while indeed," Hermione agreed. "This means a lot to him."

Mrs. Weasley raised her eyebrows. "Well, if he's going to be part of your life, then he won't be able to escape a game from time to time. The boys can certainly use a fair player, especially since Ginny barely plays with them anymore."

At this Hermione pulled her in a tight, grateful hug. Patting Hermione’s back Mrs. Weasley smiled understandingly and then pushed the bowl with batter in her hands to finish it up.
Being introduced to Hermione's friends and family also meant that Draco got to know a part of his own family he had never met until the day he found himself playing a wizard's chess against his six years old great-nephew at the Burrow. He was astonished to learn that little Teddy was also Potter's godchild.

Draco's aunt Andromeda, his mother's sister, watched as he made sure he lost at the game. Upon leaving, he spontaneously invited them over to the Manor because he felt that it would do his mother good. For a long moment, the older witch studied him before a smile had lit up her embittered features. She had seen the worry in his eyes when he thought of his mother.

"You've become a good boy, Draco," she said quietly. Then she asked little Teddy to say goodbye to his second cousin Draco, to which the child obliged a bit shyly.

It didn't take long before Andromeda came to visit Narcissa and it was with silent gratitude that Draco saw the warm smile return on her face he'd missed seeing for so many years.

Their return to Hogwarts for Andreas Selwyn's graduation ceremony in June had been their first public appearance as a couple. Shortly after Andreas' graduation Hermione accepted a position in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, feeling that her task was done for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. The Inspection on Elfish Labour Conditions had become a well-oiled machine and had gained a respectable position in the wizarding community. It pained her to leave the inspectorate, but she knew she left it in good hands.

Hermione felt proud of the two, now very experienced, inspectors downstairs, assessing the working conditions of the single house-elf her small household counted. A free house-elf, because following Dobby's example, Squeaky had accepted the sock she and Draco had presented him with. She hoped there would soon be many more.

The sound of the music box slowly died away and a subconscious sound of protest rose from the antique cot, though the little girl didn't wake up. Silently Hermione waved her wand and the tingling music, softer this time, once again filled the nursery.

Inevitably, the first of December arrived, the day of the annual ball of the Order of Merlin. It was the first major event in which Hermione and Draco would appear as a couple. After Andreas' graduation ceremony rumours had started to spread again about the possible relationship between Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, fuelled by a few more public appearances they made together under the guise of a common interest in the events they had attended. The annual ball of the Order of Merlin however they had no reason to attend together other than as a couple. The Daily Prophet had been speculating for weeks about the chance of them walking down the red carpet together. So far though, they had only been able to publish a few unconvincing pictures to back their claims and one curt quote from Headmistress McGonagall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: "I do not comment on family and friends attending graduation ceremonies."

On that dreary first of December The Golden Trio would be the last to arrive at the Diagon Alley Theatre as had become tradition. This year however a purple ribbon betrayed the first time presence of a Second Class laureate with conspicuous blond hair among this group of First Class laureates.

As they were waiting for their turn to walk down the red carpet Draco stood behind Hermione, his hand resting lightly on her waist. A slight uneasiness spoke from his sharp features while his gaze followed George and Angelina Weasley walking down the red carpet. He didn't know if it was only
his imagination but the crowd seemed bigger than previous years with more reporters and cameras lining the perimeter.

He turned his head when he felt a light squeeze of his hand and he noticed Hermione looking at him with a reassuring gaze in her caramel eyes. Not for the first time that evening his heart skipped a beat at seeing how beautiful she looked. She was a vision in the slender emerald green dress, dotted with gold stars starting on the back of the strapless bodice and flaring out across the train. Her curls were pulled back in a low chignon, highlighting the beautiful line of her neck as subtle gold makeup made her eyes stand out. Most breathtaking however was the warm smile that actually reached her eyes as he lightly put his hand on her elbow.

Hermione on the other hand never felt more grateful than with him standing next to her as they awaited their turn on the red carpet. Despite the slight discomfort in his otherwise unreadable expression he was standing tall, looking more handsome than ever in his black dress robes. Her heart fluttered when he caught her gaze and his lips had momentarily curled up as he moved closer to her, taking her elbow as he made sure to keep blocking the icy wind with his body.

When they finally got permission to proceed Ron whispered to them, "Will you please hurry up? We're freezing out here."

As soon as they appeared the crowd burst into cheers and for a moment they stopped in surprise at the angry flashlights plunging them in a blinding sea of light. Perplexed, Draco and Hermione looked at each other, a hesitant smile on their lips before they continued on their way down the red carpet amidst loud applause.

It was the first time in all those years that Draco wasn't counting the steps to the gold plated doors of the theatre. Instead he wore a smile for the entire stretch, not even noticing the cheering crowd and the reporters trying to get their attention. He only had eyes for the beautiful woman walking next to him.

Hermione felt as if she were floating next to Draco who lightly supported her as they followed the red carpet down to the theatre. She was overwhelmed by the applause meant for them. Turning her head she caught Draco's loving gaze and on impulse she lightly rested her head on his shoulder, a tender smile on her lips. In response he wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed a small kiss to her crown. A whoop of excitement went through the crowd and camera lights flashed more angrily than before.

Ignoring the shouts for attention from reporters begging for comments they went up the broad stairs of the theatre but just as they were about to enter Draco suddenly recognised one particular reporter dutifully covering the event for The Daily Prophet. It was the man who'd brought the story about them into the world.

The scrawny man's quill was writing furiously as the couple approached the theatre entrance. Draco couldn't suppress an amused smirk as he bowed toward Hermione and whispered in her ear, "I hope you don't mind being the headline of tomorrow's newspaper again."

The warm smile on Hermione's lips told him that she wouldn't. Not this time.

When the reporter looked up he stared right into Draco's steel grey eyes. He flinched but then his eyes started to glisten.

This event had suddenly turned into the scoop of the month.

The following morning a full-page photograph of Draco kissing Hermione's crown was published
The sound of light footsteps on the stairs preceded the moment the door to the nursery opened and a small ray of light crept over the antique cradle before Hermione's husband appeared in the doorway. His sharp features immediately softened when he discerned his wife in the rocking chair. Quietly, he closed the door behind him and went over his daughter in her antique cot.

"Is she already asleep? Did I miss it?" His voice sounded regretful as he looked down on the peacefully sleeping baby girl and extended a hand to caress her small head. Tenderness and fondness had completely replaced the usual reservation in his cool, grey gaze when he drew his wand and renewed the spell that kept the music box going.

Secretly, he liked the peaceful, tinkling music, Hermione knew, her expression softening as she watched her husband's athletic figure bent over the cot. His blond hair lit up in the moonlight coming through the delicate voile curtains.

Over the past two months, this had become her favourite moment of the day - the image of Draco saying goodnight to his daughter took her breath away each night she witnessed it. Sometimes he would whisper something unintelligible, sometimes he would only carefully straighten the embroidered sheets, but he always made sure his little girl would feel his presence.

With an easy movement, Hermione stood and quietly went to stand next to him, resting her head against his shoulder as she put her hands on his stomach.

"She was tired," she whispered in response, a warm feeling spreading through her chest when he curled his hand around hers. "She loves Grandfather Malfoy's stories about all those peculiar family members from the past."

Draco's features softened. "She really does. Although I believe that for now she mostly enjoys sitting on his lap and listening to his voice."

Hermione smiled against his back. Who would have thought that Lucius Malfoy was such a good storyteller? Certainly not Draco, who had been astonished to see the infant lean against her grandfather as the older man raised his eyebrows at his wife Narcissa in mild amusement. It had taken a while for Lucius to warm up to his daughter-in-law, but Hermione had seen the hint of real emotion behind his piercing eyes when he'd asked her why she'd agreed to teaching Draco the Patronus spell and she'd simply answered, "Because I believed in him."

It was enough for the older Pureblood wizard who'd graciously invited Hermione's parents for a visit to the Manor after the announcement of Draco and Hermione's engagement in The Daily Prophet. The birth of his first grandchild had him finally put aside what little doubt towards Hermione had been left. He simply adored his precocious granddaughter.

"Don't you think it's a bit worrying that there are so many of them? Every time he comes up with a new one, even stranger than the previous one," she commented dryly and unnoticed by his wife Draco's lips curled up in a knowing smile.

"Well, the Malfoys are a very old family, so we've had a lot of time to accumulate them." He
turned around in her arms and pulled her in a gentle embrace.

"Is everything going well downstairs?" she asked after a long, peaceful silence.

A dry chuckle rumbled in Draco chest. "As long as Squeaky doesn't submit a complaint again, it's fine with me."

His arms around her tightened as he rested his chin on her crown. "Though I'm grateful that he did, back then."

Hermione smiled in the darkness. "Me too."

And she closed her eyes when he leaned in and sealed her lips with a loving kiss.

Eleven years had passed, when on a warm September evening a soft ticking against the window of the living room made Hermione and Draco look up from their books. An expectant look appeared in their eyes and Hermione quickly stood to open the window.

The small owl entering the living room was their daughter's and Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she took the note from its paw and sent it off to the Owlery. Tomorrow the owl would be ready to undertake the long journey back to Scotland.

After a moment of hesitation, she swiftly opened the envelope.

Meanwhile, Draco had put aside his book as well and studied his wife's features, eyebrow raised eagerly, hoping but failing to read her expression. He only saw how her lips finally curled in a warm smile. It was the smile he loved so much about her.

"And?" Draco finally couldn't contain himself anymore. He quickly came over to Hermione and looked over her shoulder.

Then a smile of his own softened his reserved features. Once again he felt amused by the turns life took. He wrapped his arm around Hermione, brushing a gentle kiss over her lips.

"Ravenclaw. She's been sorted into Ravenclaw."

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