The Time-Turner

by bbcherrytomato

Summary

Six months after Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, Hogwarts reopens to welcome the young witches and wizards back for another school year. As everyone tried to adjust to their new world, someone decided to turn back time and change history where Harry Potter was reduced to nothing more than a myth. Strangely, only Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger, former enemies slowly rediscovering each other, were unaffected by the sudden time shift. In order to return to their original timeline, they must find the time-turner that was used or else they would be stuck in a world where Voldemort could reign supreme.
The door to the cellar creaked open to reveal a dark figure slipping inside. This was a secret entrance that only members of the family were aware of. He was positive that the house was not being watched, but it wouldn't hurt to be careful. Especially when it could mean capture and a very long prison term. Large puddles formed on the rough stone steps as the figure crept down the stairs as quietly as he could.

He moved to the door that led to the pantry and turned the knob slowly. He peeked around the corner to make sure that he was alone before he proceeded to the stairs that would take him to the bedrooms on the second floor. He was shivering from the cold, soaked to the bone after running through the heavy downpour outside.

But it was worth it and he did not regret going out on such a dreadful night. It was either this or stay in his hideout and face the possibility of being dragged away to Azkaban. Only his wits and acute instinct for survival had enabled him to elude the hunters.

As far as he could tell, the authorities were still unaware of his whereabouts and he wanted it to stay that way. They had stopped monitoring this house after three months of his non-appearance. They were probably now waiting for him at either one of his rest houses in the country. As if he would be that stupid!

He'd thought of waking up his wife but he remembered that she'd already left, choosing to stay in her family's ancestral home to avoid the constant stream of reporters and Ministry investigators alike. She would not have welcomed him with open arms, anyway, even if she was here. He knew how much she hated him right now and he doubted if she'd already altered her stand. He truly wanted to make things right, to explain himself to her, but her last words to him still rang in his ears.

Besides, after he has retrieved what he had come for, it would not matter anyway. Things between them would change. EVERYTHING would change!

He walked to the room at the end of the hall – his son's room. This was the last room he had visited before he made his disappearing act. After everything started to unravel, he knew that it would be the safest place to hide his precious, albeit illegal, artifact. His wife would not even dream of searching her son's room; she trusted him that much.

And why shouldn't she? As it turned out, he was as different from his father as night was from day. It caused a pang in his heart. Oh, yes! Despite what everyone thought, he did have a heart. And it had broken into a million pieces when he saw his world crumbling before his very eyes. How could they turn against him like that? Didn't they know that he was just looking after the family name and legacy? How could they choose to betray their bloodline?

But enough of that! He had work to do and he must do it fast!

The room was pitch-black, but he didn't need any illumination to accomplish his purpose. He knew this room like the back of his hand. The thick carpeting muffled his steps so he moved freely across the floor, straight to the large, four-poster bed. He went down on his knees when his hands felt the bed. Sliding his hand beneath the thick mattress, he pressed on the round button recessed into the wood frame. After hearing the telltale click, he moved his fingers to the small
compartment that he knew was now open.

His heart hammered against his chest, fearing what he would find. Had his inquisitive son discovered his secret? He hoped not! A great sigh issued from his lips when his hand felt the cold, metallic object nested within the compartment. He wasted no time in pocketing it before running down the stairs and out into the pouring rain.

When he was a few meters away from the house, he turned to look up at the darkened structure. The next time he came back here, he would no longer be skulking in the shadows. He would be welcomed as lord of his own castle again.

He would take back everything he'd lost during the war – his dignity, his pride, his rightful place in society. He would even take back his traitorous wife and his disillusioned son!

And this time, things would stay the way that they should – he would make sure of that!
Hogwarts looked the same and yet it didn't. It was the same ancient structure that has housed thousands of students for centuries, yet there was something different about it. There was an air of unmistakable melancholia and grief, like the very stones were groaning silently. Perhaps because it still hasn't finished mourning its losses. Or perhaps because what used to be a place of adventure and fun had turned into a place of sorrow and broken promises.

At least that's how it felt like to Hermione Granger, one-third of the Golden Trio, war heroine, one of the saviors of Wizardkind.

She sighed as she slung her backpack over her shoulders. Such lofty titles! She didn't even deserve half of it. Except the one-third of the Golden Trio bit. That one she really was. Up until last month, that is. Now she didn't even know if she was still part of a Trio. Or if she even wanted to be. One thing's for sure – she's not too keen on being with one of their members. The red-headed one to be precise.

Everything was going smoothly, or so she thought. They started being 'together' right after the war. After that hot, face-melting kiss that they shared in the Chamber of Secrets, it was the only logical outcome. But then, after a few weeks, the fights started. They would argue about the simplest of things, with Ron blowing up at the slightest provocation. Then, Ron began spending more and more time away from her. Even when she was at the Burrow, he would make excuses (Quidditch practice with Harry, or Dean, or whoever) and leave her in the company of his mom and siblings. Good thing she was already bestfriends with Ginny, so it didn't seem so awkward for her to stay there even when Ron was out. She reasoned that he was just getting more serious about Quidditch, even thinking of turning it into a profession after they graduate from Hogwarts, so he needed all the training that he could get. She missed him, but if that's what he wanted, then she'd support him all the way.

Until she saw him with Padma Patil at Honeydukes, being all sweet and attentive. And on a day that he said he would be out practicing with Harry!

That was their biggest fight ever. Ron, of course, denied that anything was going on between him and Padma. He even accused Hermione of being paranoid. She apologized, mortified that she was probably reading too much into an innocent meeting with an old friend (or flame?). Ron 'forgave' her and things went back to normal for the next few days. She slipped back into complacency and before she knew it, he was also back to his old habit of leaving her in the Burrow. It went on like that for another month, until she caught him again with Padma. This time, Ron could no longer make excuses. It seemed quite hard to explain how his lips were inadvertently glued to Padma's at Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. She walked away without saying goodbye and that was the end of their very short-lived romance. It may have been short-lived, but it still hurt like hell. And now, she didn't know how she would be able to face him again.

A voice calling out her name pulled her away from her dismal thoughts. She turned around and saw Harry walking briskly toward her, his brows knotted in a deep frown.
"Hermione! Will you please wait up. We've been hollering your name for ages!"

Hermione saw Ginny right behind him, her brows arched in question.

"I'm sorry, guys. I was just running my schedule through my head. I wanted to make sure that I won't miss anything," she replied, smiling sheepishly at her best friends.

"Are you okay?" Ginny asked, reaching for her hand.

Hermione's throat closed up on her, touched by the genuine concern she heard in Ginny's voice. She swallowed her oncoming tears and nodded, squeezing Ginny's hand. "I'm okay, Gin. Don't worry about me. What's your first class, by the way?"

"Uhm, I have History and I think it's Advanced Potions with Professor Slughorn for Harry. Right, hon?"

"Yes, it is. What's your first class, Mione?" Harry replied, slipping his hand behind Ginny's waist, pulling her close.

Hermione had seen the two in such a stance countless of times, but somehow she felt uncomfortable seeing them like that now. She needed to get away lest she ruined the day for her best friends.

"Great! I'll see you at Potions then, Harry. I'll just make a detour to the library. I need to get something from there. Good luck with your first class, Gin. I hope you don't fall asleep. Bye!" She waved, turned and walked as fast as she could, leaving the two gawking at her retreating figure.

She did not go to the library, though. She locked herself in one of the stalls in the ladies' room and cried her eyes out.

Draco Malfoy pinned the HeadBoy badge on his robe with trepidation. Under any other circumstance, he would've strutted around with it. But after everything that had happened to all of them because of the war (which up to now he felt a little responsible for), he hardly considered himself worthy of such honor. Why couldn't have HeadMistress McGonagall chosen someone else? Why not Potter or Longbottom? They were truly the two biggest heroes of the war, so why didn't she choose either of the two? Granger deserved the spot, McGonagall informed him that she was the HeadGirl, but him? Sometimes he really wondered if there wasn't something wrong inside the HeadMistress' noggin.

He shook his head and glanced at his image in the mirror. Physically, he looked the same, yet he really wasn't. The past year had changed him so much he could hardly recognize himself. Where was the cocky, arrogant, spoiled brat that he once was? Where was the self-assured, immature snob who bullied his classmates out of boredom? The Draco that was looking back at him now was a grown-up version, a wiser, stronger version of that young, insecure boy. And he could bet half his inheritance that no one ever considered that he was even that. All they saw was the obnoxious Draco. And could he blame them? Up until that time when he decided to finally declare what was truly in his heart and mind, people saw him as nothing but a teenage Death Eater. No one ever thought that all his life, he was being forced into a role that he couldn't get out of.

Zabini's voice calling out to him cut into his musings. He brushed his hair back with his hand, smoothed his robe and turned toward the door.

"Malfoy! We're going to be late! Enough with your primping. I'm sure you're prettier than half the girls in our class, anyway," Zabini hollered.
Draco chuckled at his friend's statement. He really should get a move on. Bending down, he grabbed his backpack, slung it over his shoulders and strode out the room. Zabini jumped to his feet and followed him to the door.

"What's got your knickers in a knot, Zabini? So eager to start with your lessons? That's a first for sure!"

"Pansy's already waiting for us. You know how she gets when we're late. We won't hear the end of it! And I don't want my first day ruined just yet."

"You're whipped, man," Draco threw over his shoulder.

"Hah! Let's see if you're any better at handling your girlfriend," Zabini retorted.

"Which is why I have no plans of having one."

"Oh, right! I forgot that girls, for you, are good at only one thing."

"Damn right, you are! I have no intention of turning into a sniveling fool like you."

"Okay! Enough already! Let's not get worked up before we even get to class. We're having Potions with the Gryffindors, you know."

Draco groaned. Even though they're now on speaking terms with their former enemies, there was still a sort of barrier that they could not seem to overcome. It really isn't that easy to forget all those years of bad blood between the two houses. Only a miracle could change that.

His thoughts went back to the last days of the war. He'd admitted to his mother of his intention to switch sides. She was against it, of course. Not because she still believed in the Dark Lord's cause, but because she feared what his father would do to him if he found out. But he saw no other way to right the wrongs that he has done. He owed as much to Dumbledore. Even after the great man found out about his mission, he still tried to help him. Up to the very last minute of his life, actually. And he could never dismiss that lightly.

He pulled himself from his musings when they reached the Dungeon, the site of their Advanced Potions class. Most of their classmates were already there, even the Gryffindors. Blaise pushed past him and rushed to sit beside Pansy, who was glaring at both of them. Draco chose to sit on the last row, away from the lovebirds. Sometimes it was hard not to get annoyed with their constant whisperings. Dumping his backpack on his desk, he leaned back in his chair and waited for Professor Slughorn to finish what he was writing on the board. He smirked as he realized that it was a potion he was very familiar with. Today's work would be a breeze.

Draco leaned on his bag and sighed. He shouldn't be here. It was only because his mother begged him to finish his studies that he was compelled to come back to Hogwarts. The war had changed a lot of things, but he feared that some things would never do. The opinion of people, for one. Even though he fought side by side with some of his classmates from Gryffindor during the war, they still kept a safe distance from him now. They treated him quite civilly, but with a coldness that was even worse than their former disdain. A slight movement to his left caught his attention. When he turned to look, he was surprised to see Hermione Granger sitting beside him. He whipped his head around to look for the Weasleys (he really should start ditching his former nasty nicknames for the Gryffindors!) and he saw him sitting up front with Longbottom.

"I think you've got the wrong seat, Granger. Your gang is up front, why are you hanging about in the shadows here with me?"
Silence. Hermione's eyes were downcast, her fingers fumbling at the clasp of her backpack. Draco's brows knotted into a frown. He'd half expected a quick retort from her and he wondered what made her wake up on the wrong side of bed. He saw that she was getting frustrated with the troublesome clasp so he reached out and grabbed the bag from her.

"Here, let me," he said as he clicked on the clasp and opened the front flap of the bag. He shoved the bag back to Hermione and took a closer look at her. Her eyes were puffy and her nose was red. She had obviously been crying.

"Hey, Granger, what's wrong," he asked, leaning close.

Hermione's head shot up and her eyes flashed in anger.

"Mind your own business, Malfoy."

"Hey, don't snap at me. I was just trying to help."

"Well, I don't need it."

"You obviously did, just a minute ago. You couldn't even open your damned bag."

"I could've if you didn't just grab it from me and acted like my damn savior!" Hermione whispered furiously at him.

"Well, excuse me, Miss I-Can-Do-Everything-By-Myself! Remind me never to come to your aid anytime soon. Or better yet, make that never," Draco snapped back. He couldn't understand how his emotions seemed to go up and down whenever he was near her. How could his concern turn into annoyance in a flick of a finger? He shot a parting glance at her and turned his attention back to Professor Slughorn who'd just started to address the class.

"Good morning, everyone! So, we're going to do something different today. As you can see, I have here two glasses filled with strips of parchment. You will each get one," he gave one glass to Longbottom and the other to Nott.

"Get one then pass it along. Since we're all starting anew, and this is a brand new day at Hogwarts," he chuckled, "Merlin, the whole wizarding world, actually! I'd like to foster camaraderie amongst all the Houses. So, you will see that if you're a Gryffindor, the name on the parchment that you picked out will be of someone from Slytherin and vise versa. I've charmed the parchments to do that on their own. And just so you won't get tempted to cheat, the moment you pick out the parchment, the partners' names will be reflected on the board automatically."

A slight murmur, mostly grumbling, echoed in the room. "Go on, pass it along, Daley. That's right. Yes, go on. Take note that whoever you picked out will be your partner for the rest of the year."

And just as the Professor had said, names were now appearing on the board: LONGBOTTOM – NOTT, POTTER – ZABINI, PARKINSON - WEASLEY….

The grumbling grew louder as more and more names were revealed. It seemed that none of them were happy with their partners. This really would be an interesting year for the Advanced Potions class of Professor Slughorn.

Draco took the glass from Finnigan, he could see that there were just two strips of parchment left. One for him and one for Hermione.

I have a bad feeling about this, he thought.
He dipped his finger inside and picked one of the last two remaining strips then passed the glass along to Hermione. Then, he looked up the board and waited for their names to appear. He didn't even open the folded strip of paper, he just knew who his partner would be.

And as predicted, their names appeared on the board just as he heard Hermione squeak, "Oh, no! Merlin help me!"

MALFOY – GRANGER.
Chapter Summary

Hermione thought her day couldn't get any worse...until Draco decides to sit beside her at dinner.

There are days that don't really take off the way that you want them to. And for Hermione, this was definitely one of those days. After a disastrous Potions class, everything just continued to go downhill. She was late for her Runes class (which was actually Malfoy's fault – they had to stay behind and clean up the mess they created), then she forgot her book for Charms class, so she had to go back to the Tower to retrieve it (making her miss lunch in the process!), then Defence Against the Dark Arts was with the Slytherins again! She spent most of her time purposely ignoring Malfoy (which gave her a stiff neck since he sat beside her just to annoy her).

Hermione sighed as she trudged up to the Great Hall. Will this day never end? She would've preferred to go straight to bed but her stomach was already protesting. She couldn't miss dinner since she'd already missed lunch, if she did she'd only wake up hungry in the middle of the night and then she won't be able to sleep. Which in turn would make her cranky in the morning. So, she dragged herself to dinner and prepared for the worst.

The Hall was almost full when she got there. The four tables were already filled with students gorging on the delicious fare. Her stomach growled as the aroma of roasted chicken and pudding greeted her. She moved toward the Gryffindor table but stopped in her tracks when she saw Ron and Padma sitting close together, exchanging spoonfuls of pudding. She'd forgotten that the rules have been relaxed and students were now free to sit wherever they chose to. She looked around and indeed, most of the tables were mixed with Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors sitting together. Only the Slytherins sat apart in their old table. I guess some things never really change.

Ginny waved to her and motioned for her to sit beside Luna, but that would make her sit right across Padma and Ron. She waved back and she shook her head, casting a surreptitious glance at Ron. Ginny got the message and gave her a small, sad smile. Hermione turned back and took a seat at the table nearest the entrance. The first-years sitting there gawked at her, eyeing her Head Girl badge nervously.

"Don't worry, I don't bite," she smiled at the two first-years, a black-haired boy and a red-headed one with glasses (why did she feel like they looked somewhat familiar?). Their shoulders slumped visibly in relief at her assurance.

"I'm Hermione, by the way – Gryffindor. How about you two?"

"I'm Luke, Ravenclaw, and this is my cousin, Thomas. He got sorted into Slytherin," the one with the black hair said.

"Slytherin? Then, why aren't you at the Slytherin table," a familiar voice said. Thomas paled at seeing the Head Boy badge pinned on the newcomer's robes.

Hermione closed her eyes and counted to ten before opening them again to smile at Luke and Thomas. "You really don't have to sit at the Slytherin table if you don't want to, Thomas. Look at
the Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. They're all sitting together and no one's telling them
to do otherwise."

Thomas nodded but still cast a nervous glance at the one with the Head Boy badge. He kept his
head down as he stabbed at his veggies. Luke did the same, his eyes focused on his pudding.

Draco chuckled as he sat down beside Hermione. "That's right, boys. What the Head Girl said is
true. You can sit anywhere you want and with anyone you want. I was just messing with you,
Thomas."

Thomas nodded, his eyes twinkling as he smiled. Luke also smiled and soon the two were back to
eating and talking to each other, the persons of authority sitting before them momentarily
forgotten.

"So, why is the Head Girl sitting with two first-years? Not comfortable sitting with the
Ravenclaws?" Draco said as he piled his plate with food. He could almost feel the heat of
Hermione's glare.

"And what is the Head Boy doing here? Why aren't you sitting with your Slytherin friends?
Where's your House pride, Malfoy?" Hermione sneered, filling her plate with veggies, chicken and
corn bread.

"Well, I was about to join them, actually, but I heard you bullying these two poor boys so I just had
to come to their rescue. Don't want you terrifying them before going to bed."

"Bullying? Terrifying? As far as I can remember, it was you who almost scared the wits out of
Thomas with that Slytherin nonsense of yours."

"Slytherin nonsense? And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"It's as I've said, nonsense. Just look around you, Malfoy. There are no House tables, anymore.
Ravenclaws, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, all eating, talking, sitting together. Except for the
Slytherins who still chose to segregate themselves," Hermione said gesturing to the other tables.

Draco did not have to look around to see the truth of her words. It was the first thing he noticed,
even during lunch. But it wasn't entirely the Slytherins' fault. Practically no one chose to sit beside
a Slytherin.

"Maybe it's not because they wanted to 'segregate' themselves but rather that they had no choice
because no one dared invite them to sit with the other houses. And no one even ventured to join the
Slytherin table," Draco replied, trying to keep his simmering anger at bay. He had hoped that the
war would finally end all that crap about House segregation, but it was clear that old prejudices die
hard. People still viewed the Slytherins as the scum of the earth. Even after a lot of them had
fought and bled in the war. Himself included.

"That is so not true, Malfoy," Hermione protested.

"Really? Can you prove it? During the welcome feast last night, did anyone of you invite a
Slytherin to your table?" Malfoy turned to Hermione with brows raised, the beginning of a sneer
forming on his lips.

"I – I wasn't very attentive last night," Hermione said, her voice barely above a whisper. Last night
I was a walking zombie, she wanted to add. How could she have noticed anything other than Ron
and Padma pawing at each other? She had to focus on restraining herself from raining curses at
Ron during the welcome feast that she wasn't sure if she even ate at all!
"What was that? I didn't quite get it."

Hermione groaned. Will he never stop pestering me? "I said I didn't notice. I wasn't paying attention last night."

"And why weren't you?"

"I had other things on my mind, okay? Just go away, Malfoy!"

"I'm not yet done with dinner. Besides, you may be Head Girl, but are you forgetting that I'm Head Boy? You can't just order me around, Granger."

Draco took a sip of pumpkin juice and turned to look at Hermione. He was expecting to meet her glare but Hermione's eyes were somewhere else. He followed her line of sight and inwardly sighed when he saw what, or rather who, she was looking at. **You are such a git, Weaslebee!**

He glanced back at Hermione and saw her staring at her food, pushing her veggies around on her plate, her brows knotted in a tight frown. Draco didn't know why he didn't care to see her in such a state. Somehow, he felt like it was his responsibility to cheer her up. But what could he say? Aside from their sporadic verbal jousting, they'd never really talked to each other. And most of those exchanges were peppered with insults and unkind words. Yet, Hermione seemed at her best during those times. Perhaps if he just diverted her attention for a while…

"Didn't your parents ever tell you not to play with your food?" Draco asked, determined to annoy Hermione out of her melancholia.

"Didn't your parents ever tell you to keep out of other people's business?" Hermione blanched as she realized what she had just said. "I – I'm sorry, I didn't mean…"

Draco stiffened at the mention of his parents. The past year had caused so much devastation to his family and he just hadn't come to terms with that yet. Still, he didn't want to make a big deal out of it or (strangely!) to make Hermione feel guilty about that harsh reminder of his situation.

"Don't bother, Granger. I'll just pretend I didn't hear you."

"No, really, Draco. I didn't mean to…to say anything about…about," she was cut off by the incredulous look on Draco's face.

"Did you just call me by my first name?" Draco smirked.

"What? No! No, I didn't!" Hermione gasped.

"Yes, you did."

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did. I'm not yet hard of hearing, you know. You said Draco."

"Well, you heard wrong. I would never do such a thing."

"You did, too."

"Did not!"

"Did, too!"
"I DID NOT!"

A few heads turned their way and the two first-years before them froze in their seats. Hermione gave them all a bland smile then turned to Draco and whispered furiously at him.

"Alright! So what if I did? It was just a slip," Hermione bit her tongue as she realized her mistake. **Now he would think that I call him Draco in my mind!**

"A slip…hmmm," Draco drawled, his lips frozen in a lopsided smile. "A slip means that you're used to doing something, but only in secret. And calling someone by their first name means that you're a bit on intimate terms with that person. Like a friend, or a…lover?"

Hermione snorted at that. "You're delusional, Malfoy," she said, spearing an asparagus rather too harshly. **Why ever did I call him by his first name?**

Draco leaned closer and whispered into Hermione's ears. "So, you're probably thinking of me on more intimate terms, hmm?"

"You wish!"

"Oh, come on! It'll be our little secret," he continued, taunting Hermione by leaning in closer, their arms now brushing against each other.

"Will you just drop it, Malfoy!"

Draco smiled inside, satisfied that he now had Hermione's full attention. She hasn't even looked once at the Gryffindor table during their exchange. **Now, let's see how far you'd go, Granger.** He moved closer to Hermione, his lips almost touching her ear as he whispered.

"Now, tell me, am I often in your thoughts, Hermione?"

Hermione shot out of her seat and glared down at Draco, her cheeks turning a bright pink.

"You are an impossible, self-absorbed, arrogant, annoying buffoon, Malfoy! And I don't want to ever speak with you again! Ever! You hear?"

And with that, she turned tail and stormed out of the Hall.

Draco grinned, shaking his head as he took another sip of pumpkin juice. **Some things just never change, do they?**
Hermione must make a choice - let go of her pain or destroy The Golden Trio.

The moment Hermione entered the Gryffindor Common Room, she let the tears flow down freely. She didn't know why she got so worked up just now. She really must learn how to get a hold of her emotions. And to think that it was Malfoy who made her lose her temper! How many times during their last six years together had she been exposed to his arrogance? What he did back at the Great Hall should not have surprised her. It's just nerves, she reasoned. She'd been upset over Ron, so it was understandable.

Hermione tossed her bag on the couch facing the fireplace. This was their special spot, the place where she, Harry and Ron used to hang out and talk. Would it feel strange if she sat on it alone? She pushed her backpack aside and dumped herself on the familiar couch. It felt no different, it was the same plushy, squishy seat, yet it wasn't the same. It felt…lonely.

She slumped against the back of the couch then wiped her eyes and cheeks with the back of her hand. The fire was starting to go out so she took her wand out and uttered a spell to rekindle the flames. If only I could use my wand to rekindle what Ron and I had lost. Hermione mentally slapped herself for thinking such a self-defeating thought. She sighed as she leaned back on the couch. Her arms went behind her head, while her tired eyes closed of their own accord.

She really needed to deal with their situation before she turned into a bitter, ex-girlfriend. Her pride would not let her turn into that. She'd survived the war, she definitely would be able to survive a simple break-up.

If only Malfoy would let her be! Why does he keep on butting into her life? He's such a nosy, annoying git! She really should give him a piece of her mind one of these days. Or maybe she could hex him while he's not looking.

Her rather violent train of thought was broken when a body suddenly dropped beside her on the couch. She opened one eye to see who the intruder was. Harry.

"I know you're awake, Hermione. Stop pretending you're asleep," her best friend said.

"I was asleep until you unceremoniously dumped your big butt here beside me."

"No, you weren't. I could almost hear those gears turning inside your head. Besides, I'm well aware that you cannot sleep with the light on."

Hermione heard the soft chuckle in Harry's voice. Of course, he knew that. They'd spent months together searching for the Horcruxes, sleeping in tents and in whatever refuge they could find. And she'd always asked them to turn off all the lights so that she could sleep.

"Okay, I concede. I was thinking, that's all."

"Hmmm….about what?"
"Stuff…"

"Does 'stuff' include a certain red-headed Gryffindor Quidditch player?"

"Who, Ginny?"

"Ha-ha. Give it up, Hermione. I'm your best friend, I know what you're thinking about."

Indeed, he was her best friend, but Harry couldn't be more wrong. Of course, she couldn't tell him that she was actually thinking about a platinum-blonde Slytherin Quidditch player and not a red-headed Gryffindor.

"Okay, Harry. If you're really my best friend, what's on my mind right now?"

"Ron," Harry answered without hesitation.

"And why would I be thinking of Weasel-King?"

"Hermione."

"Harry."

Hermione shifted in her seat when she heard Harry sigh. She really shouldn't be toying with him. He was just trying to help.

"Mione, we really should talk. The three of us," Harry said, his eyes pleading.

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for that," Hermione said, staring at the flames.

"I understand. I won't force you into doing anything you don't want to. But don't you think it would be easier if you dealt with Ron as soon as possible? You need to get it all out or else it would fester inside and start poisoning you."

Harry was right, of course. But she was afraid of what she would do to Ron if she ever confronted him while she was still dealing with her own hurt.

The portrait door opened to admit Ginny and a few other Gryffindors. Ginny smiled at them then headed up to the Girl's Dormitory. Hermione's heart slammed against her chest when Ron showed up right behind a first-year boy. She averted her eyes, but she knew that he'd already seen her looking at him. And just as she'd feared, Ron made his way toward them, stopping directly behind her.

"Hermione, can we please talk?" Ron said. Harry made to leave but Hermione stopped him with her hand. Her eyes were the ones pleading now. A silent message passed between them and Harry nodded.

"Sure, Ron. Grab a seat," Hermione replied, her voice cracking just a bit.

"Alone, please?"

"No, Ron. I don't think that's a good idea. It's better if Harry's here so he could do counter curses should I be tempted to hex you." She wished she could see Ron's face.

"Come on, Ron. Let's do this. I won't interrupt. Think of me as a…a referee," Harry said, smirking up at his other best friend.
Ron shook his head and sighed. He moved from behind the couch and pulled an armchair close. He sat on the edge, his hands resting on his knees. Looking up, he saw that Hermione was staring at him with an inscrutable expression. He didn't know which was better, her wrath or her silence.

"So, what do you want to talk about, Ronald?"

Ron swallowed involuntarily. This is bad, Hermione never called him Ronald unless she's extremely pissed and at the end of her patience. He took a deep breath and rummaged through his brain for a good opening. Nothing came to mind.

"Well? You're the one who wanted to talk, so start talking," Hermione said.

Ron glanced at Harry, looking for a hint or a clue on how to start, but Harry only raised his brows at him. He could tell that Harry would not be helping him out on this one. He couldn't blame him. It's his fault, anyway. Harry had told him that if he really wanted out, he should make a clean break with Hermione first before going out with Padma. But he stupidly ignored that advice and now he must face the consequence of that decision. He cleared his throat before he started talking.

"I-I just want to clear things up between us, Mione," he began looking up into Hermione's hard eyes. They were a dark shade of brown now, not like their usual light caramel color. Ron swallowed again. She's furious!

"What is there to clear up, Ronald? Your actions were pretty obvious. I got the message loud and clear so I see no point in talking about it. It would be like beating a dead horse – useless," Hermione replied, the venom in her voice apparent.

Ron turned his eyes to Harry. He was staring at him blankly with those emerald-green eyes of his. Cold and detached. Harry, he could tell, was still mad at him for tainting their friendship. He'd harangued him about the incident at Madam Pudifoot's, they even came close to blows over it. Obviously, he was on Hermione's side on this one. Ron felt his chest constricting. He didn't plan to end their friendship this way, but it seems that the decision had already been made for him. Still, he must try his best to salvage whatever he could.

"I-I want to apologize for what happened, Hermione. At Madam Pudifoot's. It was tasteless and crude," he was cut off by a loud snort from Hermione.

"This isn't just about that, Ronald. It's about the whole mess of a relationship that we had."

Ron blinked at Hermione. He couldn't understand what she was trying to say. They had a good friendship going on – the three of them. Was she also now regretting being friends?

"What are you trying to say, Hermione? That you regret being friends with Harry and me?"

Hermione smirked and rolled her eyes.

"You really are so dense sometimes, Ron. I was referring to what we had after that damned kiss! Not that I'm totally regretting being friends! Come to think of it, we should've stayed that way even after that kiss."

Yes, he agreed with Hermione on that. Why did they ever make so much out of that kiss? They were confused and terrified by what was happening outside Hogwarts, but at the same time exhilarated by their success at getting rid of another Horcrux. Their emotions were at a high and it seemed like the only rational way to express them. It's just that he thought that he felt more than friendship for Hermione after that kiss. And then it was too late to back out. He couldn't tell her that he was just swept by his emotional high during that time. It seemed callous and cold. But he
apparently did the same anyway. Now, even their friendship is at threat.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just didn't know what to do! Your friendship means so much to me that I didn't want to tell you that…"

"That you regretted kissing me," Hermione finished for him. To be honest, that's also how she felt when things between them started to fall apart – they shouldn't have kissed. And now that she'd finally admitted that to herself, her heart started to ease away from all the bitterness that she had been harboring against Ron. They were both at fault, anyway. She was trying too hard to make it work, to hold on to a relationship that was doomed even from the start, while he was trying too hard to let her (even though deep inside he was dying to get out). Ron gave her all the signs, she kept ignoring them. It was a perfect recipe for disaster.

Or perhaps friends don't really make good lovers, after all.

Hermione took a deep breath and chanced a glance at Harry. His emerald eyes were glistening as his lips curved into a tentative smile. He was more than just a friend, he was like the sibling she never had. Their bond was even stronger than what she had with Ron. And it was perfect. Their friendship – her, Harry and Ron – was perfect. Did she really have the heart to ruin it just because she made the mistake of kissing her other best friend? It's time that she healed not only her heart, but also their broken friendship. They were not called the Golden Trio for nothing!

"I'm sorry, too, Ron. I guess, we were never meant to be more than friends," she said at last.

Ron's remorseful eyes brightened as he looked at Harry, who was smiling at him, relief showing on his face.

"So, d-does this mean th-that…" Ron stammered, still unable to believe that things will be going back to normal.

"The Golden Trio is back together," Hermione continued. There may still be a little corner of her heart that needed healing, but she will deal with that later. For now, it is enough that she's been able to mend fences with two of the most important people in her life. Whatever happened between her and Ron is now in the past.

She looked at her two friends and her heart glowed. They will always be the Golden Trio. And nothing can ever change their friendship. Nothing can ever replace what they have. They are friends for life and they will always stand by each other – no matter what!

Harry let out a deep breath as he put his arms around Hermione and hugged her tight. "Merlin! I'm so glad that's over! I've been wracking my brains for counter curses this past half hour and I couldn't even come up with one!"

"What? You mean that if I turned Ron into a bouncing ferret, you wouldn't have been able to change him back?" Hermione asked laughingly, disengaging herself from Harry's embrace to look at him. Harry shook his head. She turned to Ron and laughed harder when she saw his pale face grimacing at Harry.

"Harry!"

"Ron!"

And they all went back to being the best of friends, teasing and engaging in light banter, the previous conversation completely forgotten and done with. Then, Harry cleared his throat and turned to Hermione.
"Now that that's behind us, I need to ask you something, Hermione."

Hermione turned to Harry, her bright, caramel orbs round, and questioning.

"What was that all about with you and Malfoy in the Great Hall?" Harry asked, his brows arched high up. Ron also turned to Hermione, nodding, curiosity etched on his freckled face.

It was now Hermione's turn to gulp air and blanch a solid white.

Damn you, Malfoy! Now I have to explain to my best friends something I don't understand myself! I will definitely hex you the next time that I see you
Harry's Secret

Chapter Summary

Harry reveals a secret that will change his friends' views about the Malfoys.

Chapter Notes

This chapter will contain a large chunk from J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows".

Hermione swallowed hard before turning a sheepish eye at Harry. How was she going to tell him about what made her lose her temper at Malfoy? She couldn't really quote him word for word! That would definitely turn Harry's raven locks white!

"I-it's nothing. Malfoy was just being his usual annoying, arrogant self. I was tired and didn't have much patience left so I blew up," Hermione replied, avoiding their eyes.

Harry glanced at Ron, who looked even more clueless than him. The redhead shrugged and raised his brows – I have no idea either, he was saying.

"You shouldn't let him get to you that easily, Hermione. You'd be working closely with him since he's the Head Boy. Give him a chance, maybe he's changed a bit," Harry said, nudging Hermione with his elbow.

Hermione snorted and blew a raspberry. She just can't believe that bit about Malfoy changing. He will always be a pompous git even though he'd switched sides during the war.

"I really don't know what Prof. McGonagall was thinking! Why did she appoint Malfoy as Head Boy? He may be smart, I concede that. We've always been vying for the top spot in almost every subject, but brains are not enough to qualify him for such a responsibility! What would he do, bully the younger kids into following him? Even if he'd changed, I doubt if it would make that much difference." Hermione was red in the face by the time she finished with her tirade.

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Harry hung his head as his arms rested on his knees. Perhaps it's time that he told his best friends about what Malfoy, the Malfoys actually, have really done for him. About how their actions that night might have turned the tide of the battle. He'd already told Professor McGonagall, and maybe that's the reason why she appointed Malfoy Head Boy. He really didn't know why he hadn't told Ron and Hermione about it sooner. Maybe because they were so caught up with the cleaning up and dealing with. They'd lost so many – Fred, Lupin, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Lavander, Dobby and even Hedwig. He just had enough bad memories from the past year that he needed to cope with them slowly, painfully, that those two incidents kept getting pushed back the recesses of his mind.

Or maybe because telling them about it would take him back to that most horrible, and yet glorious, night of his life. Talking with McGonagall about it was like doing a debrief after a battle;
straightforward, curt, and emotionless. Just facts.

But with his friends, it would be entirely different. He would be reliving that night.

"Hermione, Ron, there is something that you should know – about what happened in the Forbidden Forest, and right before my battle with Voldemort. I really don't know why it took me this long to divulge this information to you. Whatever my convoluted brain's reason is, believe me, it's not intentional."

Hermione and Ron exchanged curious glances, both unable to fully comprehend what Harry was trying to say. They'd long wanted to ask Harry about what happened in the Forbidden Forest, why he came back seemingly dead, but most importantly, how he was able to make Voldemort believe that he was dead. They respected Harry's privacy, though, so they kept their questions to themselves.

After letting go of a long, ragged breath, Harry turned to Hermione and then to Ron. "I think it's best if I started with what happened in the Forbidden Forest. I've already told you about the things I learned in the Pensieve, of how it made me realize that the only way to defeat Voldemort was to let him kill me. But I never really told you what happened after that."

Both Hermione and Ron leaned forward, their eyes glued to Harry, eager to hear the rest of his story.

My heart was hammering so hard after I stepped back from the Pensieve. I didn't want to die, but I couldn't let my friends die for me either. This war had to stop and the only way to do it was to let Voldemort kill me. That's what the prophecy was all about, and that's the reason why Professor Dumbledore couldn't tell me about it.

I went down the stairs, my legs shaking with each step. This was it! Time to accept the truth, to face my destiny. I tried to keep away from everyone, especially Ginny. I knew that if I saw her, I wouldn't be able to go ahead with my plan. Thankfully, I met no one on my way out. Everyone was so busy searching for survivors, retrieving bodies and healing the wounded. It was better that way.

Soon enough, I was at the entrance to the Forbidden Forest. I remembered the snitch in my pocket. Dumbledore bequeathed it to me, so it had to mean something. I don't know what made me press it against my lips, but I did and it opened. Inside was the resurrection stone. I took it out, and I saw spirits swirl around me. I focused my eyes and realized that they were my mom, my dad, Sirius, and Lupin. They were there to give me strength for the final leg of my journey. They stayed with me up to the very last minute.

I stepped into the forest and went directly to where Voldemort and his army were. I moved quickly lest I changed my mind and ran like hell. It's not really in our nature to face death without flinching, our instinct for survival is so embedded in our psyche that only those who are not in their right mind would willingly go to their deaths.

It happened in a flash, literally! A flash of green light to be exact. I was so intent on staying put, on meeting my death head on that Voldemort's words did not even register in my brain. I kept telling myself to stand still and take it like a man. I didn't even feel the breath being cut off from me. All I knew was this feeling of lightness after that instance of excruciating pain hit my heart. And then, I was in a brightly lit place. Strange, how it felt like King's Cross to me. Then, I saw that piece of Voldemort that was in me, a withered, slimy thing wriggling on the ground. I don't know why even though deep inside me I knew that it was a part of him, that alien invader in my body that had caused me so much torment, I didn't feel hatred but only a deep sorrow and pity for it. As I contemplated that bit of Voldemort, Dumbledore appeared and he helped me make the most
important choice that I could ever make. I could've moved on, a part of me wanted to. I was so
tired of fighting, so tired of losing my friends because of this stupid war. But I also knew that I
needed to finish what I had started. I owe that much to those who sacrificed themselves for what is
right and what is good. I did not move on, I came back.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground, the scent of pine and grass close against my
nose. I didn't know what to do. I was defenseless, wandless, surrounded by Voldemort and his
Death Eaters. Then I heard Bellatrix calling out to the Dark Lord. It seemed that he was also
knocked out by his own spell and was just getting back to his feet. I stayed still, hurriedly
formulating a plan of escape in my brain when I heard footsteps coming toward me. I almost
panicked. What was I to do? How could I defeat Voldemort lying on the ground helpless?

A hand gently touched my arm. I knew I would be discovered, the person beside me would
announce that I lived. Voldemort would just cast another killing spell at me and it would be over.
Soft breath fanned against my cheek and I distinctly heard a woman's quiet voice.

"Is Draco still alive?" the voice whispered into my ear.

And I knew that it was his mother. I battled between telling her the truth and keeping still,
pretending that I was truly dead. But that seemed stupid. She already knew that I wasn't dead,
otherwise, she wouldn't be talking to me, would she? I feared, though, that as soon as I confirmed
that Draco was alive, that she would turn me over to Voldemort. She was the mother of my
nemesis! She's the wife of the most privileged Death Eater! Her sister was within the inner circle
of the Dark Lord. How could I even think that she would side with me? Something told me,
however, to put my trust in her.

I gave her a small nod, my heart going to my throat. What she did next would mean life or death
for me. I remained still, waiting for her to scream that I was still alive. It never came.

Instead, her hand squeezed my arm as she whispered to me again, "Thank you. Now, stay still."
Another squeeze and I felt her getting to her feet.

"Dead. The boy is dead," she said, loudly and clearly.

I heard Hagrid bellow in grief while Voldemort and his army laughed and rejoiced. There was
scuffling in the background then I felt Hagrid's large hands scooping me up from the ground.
Voldemort was marching to Hogwarts to flaunt his trophy.

I was still rummaging inside my head for a plan. I must declare myself sooner or later. But how
could I fight Voldemort without a wand? I'm not Dumbledore! I hadn't mastered wandless magic
yet.

"Harry Potter is dead!" I heard Voldemort announce. Ginny screamed and my heart broke in two. I
heard the cries and the sounds of defeat and I couldn't take it anymore. I must reveal myself, give
hope to everyone who was fighting against the Dark Lord. I heard Neville and it strengthened my
resolve, I must end this!

Then, I heard Lucius calling to Draco. It was the first time that I heard fear and genuine concern
in his voice. He called out to him twice, but apparently, Draco wasn't heeding him. When I heard
his mother calling to him, something tugged inside me. She saved me from Voldemort when she
didn't have anything to gain by it. She saved me when there was no one left to do it. I must give her
back her son.

I wriggled against Hagrid's hold and in his shock, he dropped me and I was on the ground
scrambling to my feet. I was determined to join the Hogwarts defenders. All pandemonium broke lose as some of Voldemort's Death Eaters started apparating away, terrified by my unexpected return from death, while the rest started throwing curses at whoever stood in their way. Voldemort was also shooting curses at me. I ran towards Hogwarts, weaving amongst the fallen stones. I could see Defenders shooting counter curses at the remaining Death Eaters but I could not fight back, I was wandless!

Just as I was about to jump behind a big fallen statue, I heard someone shout ”Potter!”. I turned just in time to see Draco tossing his wand at me as he stumbled to the ground, ducking away from a flash of red light thrown at him by a Death Eater. Thankfully, I caught the wand making it possible for me to fight Voldemort.

And the rest, as you know, is history.

Harry lifted his head to look at his two friends. Hermione's hands were covering her mouth, her eyes wide and bright with unshed tears. Ron was gawking at him, speechless.

"So, you see, Hermione. I owe the Malfoys more than I care to admit. I would've died in that Forest if not for Mrs. Malfoy. She risked her life back there. Had Bellatrix or even one of Voldemort's minions decided to check on me, I would've just been killed again by Voldemort. But Mrs. Malfoy took it upon herself to do the deed because she knew that her word would be trusted by the Dark Lord, helping me return to Hogwarts in the process. Then, Draco gave up his only source of protection to help me defend myself against Voldemort. They're the unsung heroes of that final battle against Voldemort. I guess, deep inside, Draco and his mother aren't really that bad."

Harry leaned back on the couch, exhausted by his confession. He hadn't really thanked Draco and his mother for what they'd done. He just hoped that he would be able to return the favor one of these days. Little did he know that he would be given that chance sooner than he thought.
The Truce

Chapter Summary

Now that Hermione and Draco will be working closely together, would a truce change something in their relationship?

The Slytherin common room had never been as quiet as it was tonight. Most of the students had already gone to bed; exhausted by the demands of their first day back in school. Only a blonde-headed figure could be seen lounging on the plush, dragonhide couch, staring quietly at the blazing fire in the oversized fireplace. Being situated in the dungeons of the castle, the Slytherin dorms needed the extra warmth to keep its inhabitants comfortable. And tonight, Draco needed the familiar, soothing ambiance of his temporary 'home' in Hogwarts.

He really shouldn't be here. He should be in the dormitory for the Head Boy and Head Girl. It was his rightful place, but he still needed to get used to sleeping in quarters other than the one in the Slytherin dorms. Owing to the fact that not all of his former classmates have returned for their N.E.W.T.s, their dormitory had enough space to spare for one more occupant. And his roommates for the past six years, Zabini and Nott, were more than happy to indulge him. They didn't want him spending too much time in the company of the Gryffindor 'Bookworm', did they? Who knows what she'd do to him? Although they were not really fond of her, they still held a grudging respect for her spellcasting and knowing how Draco seemed to push her buttons all the time, they feared he'd be returning to them in the form of a ferret again. And this time, perhaps permanently!

Draco slouched farther down the couch, his long legs spread before him towards the fire, while his thoughts were (ironically) on the Bookworm that he was trying to avoid. He really couldn't understand why she always seemed to cause so much havoc to his temperament. One minute he would be calm and sane, but the moment she walks into the room, his senses would come alive, attuned to everything she's doing!

At first, he thought that it was because she annoyed the hell out of him (he really couldn't stand her Know-It-All attitude and Goody Two-Shoes mentality!) but then, that annoyance turned into fascination. And feelings he could not fully appreciate or accept started to take root. He wanted to hate her because that's what he's supposed to do. A Pureblood like him must never feel anything more than disdain for a Mudblood like her. Perhaps it was just respect for a worthy adversary because truly, there was no one in Hogwarts who ever came close to his level of skill and intellect other than Granger. Yeah, he tried to convince himself - it was just respect. A strong opponent always deserves that. But after that night in Malfoy Manor, where she was tortured by his deranged aunt, Bellatrix, he really wasn't too sure anymore. Was it just respect that made him die a little with her every scream? Now, his ambivalent feelings for Granger were getting stronger and starting to take form, and it scared the hell out of him!

"What are you still doing up, Malfoy?"

Zabini's voice cuts into the silence making Draco almost jump from his seat. He tossed his head and glared at his friend.

Zabini shook his head and jumped onto the empty space on the couch, his eyes narrowing at his blonde friend. Draco has become more reclusive since after the war, avoiding his friends at every turn, preferring to brood for hours on his own. Of course, it could be because of what happened to his family, but Zabini felt that there was more to it than Draco was letting on.

"Come on, Draco. Spill!" Zabini said, nudging Draco's leg with his bare foot. Draco grimaced and brusquely shoved Zabini's feet off of his leg.

"Knock it off, Zabini, or I'll hex you into oblivion!"

"Alright, alright! Geesh, you're such a girl!"

"Damn it! Will you just let me be? I've had enough nagging for one day, okay?"

"Aha! I knew it! The Bushy-haired Bookworm has gotten into your nerves again, hasn't she?" Zabini chortled.

"When did she ever not?" Draco mumbled.

"Look, Draco. You have to act cool towards her. Don't let her see how much she affects you," Zabini said, putting his feet down and scooting closer to Draco.

"And who told you that she has any effect on me?" Draco countered, his left brow raised arrogantly.

"Hmm…yeah, you're right. She doesn't affect you at all. Not one itsy-bitsy, tiny bit," Zabini chuckled.

"Shove it, Zabini, or I'll really hex you!" Malfoy growled, his hand moving down his pants pocket for his wand.

"Damn! She's really got you worked up this time, hasn't she? What were you trying to do, anyway? She seemed pretty upset at you, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard her screaming at you before she stormed out of the Great Hall earlier this evening, so I figured you must've said something to upset her," Zabini said, shrugging.

"You heard that?"

"Everybody heard, Draco," Zabini smirked.

Draco raked his fingers through his blonde locks. *Merlin! Now everyone's talking about us for sure! The damned woman couldn't even keep her voice down!*

"What did you say to her, anyway?"

"Nothing! She was just being her usual Holier-than-thou self," Draco replied, scowling back at the fire.

"Strange. Granger's been pretty civil with all of us since we've switched sides. She's starting to be friends with some of us, actually."

Draco snorted and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "That'll be the day," he grumbled.
Zabini sighed. He wasn't getting anywhere with Malfoy. He knew that his friend was hiding something, and he wouldn't rest until he at least had some idea about what it was. Time to change tactics.

"It's true! Just ask Nott. The freak is now gushing about her like a lovesick fool!"

Zabini smiled inside when Draco's head whipped in his direction, his eyes now a stormy gray and blazing with something akin to fury. Damn! Draco's smitten, too! Well, I've always thought that there was more to his professed 'hatred' for Granger than met the eye. And the idiot isn't even aware of it! Zabini almost chuckled as a sinister plan began to formulate in his mind. This will be fun to watch! Let's see if he'll bite.

"But, hey! Everything's changed after the war, right? Even the teachers are encouraging cooperation and friendship amongst the houses. So, Nott could actually ask Granger out and no one would even say a peep. I think it would be good, too. I'd have to start encouraging Nott about this. We, Slytherins, need to get off our high horses and start mingling with the mortals, don't you know," Zabini continued, keeping his eyes on his friend whose face had now turned a sickening greenish shade.

"Don't be such an ass, Zabini. Nott wouldn't do such a thing!" Draco spat at him.

Zabini feigned drowsiness by yawning loudly. "Maybe you're right. But we wouldn't know, would we? As I said, things are different now. Anyway, we have an early class tomorrow. Got to turn in for the night. Try to be nice to Granger, will you? For all you know, she might soon be dating one of your best friends," he said, tapping Malfoy's shoulder as he rose to his feet and headed back to their room leaving Draco glaring at the unsuspecting fireplace.

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Hermione sat in front of a sumptuous breakfast feast at the Great Hall but she couldn't even bear to lift a measly piece of toast. It wasn't just because she had barely slept last night, but more because she could not get over the feeling of guilt that had lodged inside her chest after Harry's confession.

Who would've thought that Draco and his mother would do something as selfless as that? And to think that she'd been nothing but awful to Draco since they had gone back to Hogwarts. He'd tried to talk to her on the Hogwarts Express but she brushed him off without even a thought.

Well, actually, she would've brushed off anyone who approached her then. She had purposely availed of her privilege (as Head Girl) to sit up front primarily because she was avoiding Ron. She was so messed up during that time that she would've snubbed even Professor McGonagall herself had she the misfortune of even venturing near her. Still, it didn't excuse her abrasive behavior.

And now the guilt was eating her up whole making her even more miserable than she was when she'd arrived. The only way her conscience would be eased was if she apologized to Malfoy, but deep inside she knew that that was next to impossible. Her pride wouldn't let her.

Besides, this was Malfoy for Merlin's sake! The boy who had tortured her since she first set foot in Hogwarts, the one who ridiculed her every chance he got, the one who called her Mudblood (among other things) at every turn! How could she even dream of apologizing to such an ass!

Okay, granted – he's changed a bit. He no longer strutted with that infuriating smirk pasted on his face. In fact, he seemed to be always brooding now, his eyes downcast and avoiding contact. There's also an air of uncertainty about him - like he was always second-guessing himself.
But not when he's around her!

His confidence seemed to get to a certain high when he's annoying her. He's changed, yes. But his attitude towards her hasn't.

And that's why Hermione was in such a dilemma. How could she pacify her grief-stricken conscience without looking like a jackass in front of Malfoy? There must be some way to gain her much needed peace of mind that did not involve self-humiliation!

Her thoughts were halted when she felt someone elbowing her. And lo and behold! The object of her torment was suddenly sitting beside her as if materializing from thin air!

"Malfoy! What are you doing here?" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Good morning to you, too," he replied, smirking as he piled his plate with toast, fried eggs, ham, and a few bits of bacon.

Hermione grimaced as she realized how rude she sounded. Another point against her. My, isn't she starting early today!

"I'm sorry. You just startled me," she mumbled.

Draco gave her a sideways look, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Did I just hear the great Hermione Granger mumble an apology to the nasty Slytherin sitting beside her?"

Hermione pouted and ignored him completely, turning her attention to her breakfast plate instead. She speared a sausage and sliced it into tiny strips. Then, she took a piece of toast, smeared it with butter and carefully placed the sliced sausages on top. She then folded the toast with sausage filling and was about to bite into it when she noticed the horrified look on Malfoy's face.

"What?" she asked, annoyed by his expression.

"That is so barbaric, Granger. Even for you," Draco muttered as he sliced the ham and forked the tiny piece into his mouth.

"Barbaric? Why, pray tell, is it so barbaric?"

"Well, for one, you're not supposed to fold your toast. Secondly, you don't mix butter with sausages," Draco replied, waving his fork in front of her.

"Who said so?"

"It's common table etiquette, Granger. Even a four-year-old knows that."

Hermione huffed and proceeded to repeat the process of buttering, sausaging, and folding. She took a big bite and smirked at Draco, challenging him to call her out on it.

Draco just shook his head and turned his attention back to his food, a slight frown creasing his brows. Why is she purposely trying to annoy me?

After Hermione had finished her sausages and folded buttered toasts, she dabbed her lips with her napkin and turned to Draco.

"Why are you eating here, Draco? Why aren't you sitting at the Slytherin table?"

Draco finished drinking his pumpkin juice before answering. "As you can see, Granger, there are
Hermione turned her gaze toward the table that the Slytherins used to monopolize. And indeed, she saw a couple of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs eating and chatting with the Slytherins there. She even saw Parvati Patil, a Gryffindor, sitting beside Blaise Zabini, totally engrossed in whatever Zabini was regaling her with.

"Okay, I didn't notice that," she murmured.

"You seem to overlook a lot of things lately, Granger. What's going on with you?"

When she turned back to Draco she saw him looking at her with narrowed eyes, a slight smirk adorning his pinkish lips. Hermione's breath caught in her throat. Damn! He is a handsome devil, isn't he? After mentally kicking herself for even thinking such a disgusting thought, she cleared her throat and replied in her haughtiest tone, "It's none of your business, Malfoy."

"Suit yourself, Granger. I couldn't care less, anyway," Malfoy retorted, picking a couple of strawberries from the fruit platter before him.

Hermione wanted to slap herself again. Marvelous, Hermione! Another point to add to your guilt list! Keep it up and you'd soon find yourself groveling before Malfoy asking for his forgiveness!

"Okay, this is getting a bit tiresome, don't you think?"

"What is, Granger?"

"This. Us, bickering like kids all the time. Aren't you getting tired of it?"

"What do you suggest, then, Granger?" Draco said, turning slightly to face Hermione.

"Look, seeing as we'd be working closely together for the entire year, not only because you're Head boy and I'm Head girl, but also because we're partners in Potions class and would be doing projects together, don't you think a little peace between us would help us deal with this school year that much easily?" she was practically breathless at the end of her statement.

Draco lifted his brows, waiting for her to continue. When she did not, he asked, "And?"

"I suggest a truce. Let's try not to act like eleven-year-olds."

"I'm not the one acting like an eleven-year-old," Draco muttered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. This is hopeless. And to think that I felt guilty about how I'd been treating him! Serves you right, Ms. I-can't-live-with-my-conscience!

"Fine. Let's keep on acting like children, then. I'm game if you are," she snarled as she started rising from her seat. A soft, warm hand curled around her wrist and pulled her gently down.

"Wait, I'm sorry, okay? That was uncalled for," Draco said, his stormy gray eyes latching on to her soft, brown ones.

"Did I just hear the high and mighty Slytherin Prince apologizing to a Mudblood?" Hermione said, smirking at Draco as she sat back down.

A couple of seconds passed before Draco's face broke into a genuine smile. "Did you just crack a joke, Granger?"
A bright blush spread across Hermione's cheeks. "Don't push it, Malfoy."

Draco chuckled as he raised both hands in mock surrender. "Okay! Okay! I won't say another word!"

Hermione nodded, then put out her hand in front of Draco. "A truce, then?"

"A truce," Draco replied, taking Hermione's proffered hand. He would never admit it to anyone, but his heart soared during that short moment that he held Hermione's hand. For how could he admit to something that he couldn't even understand?

But there would be time enough to think back on that. He was in no hurry. Somehow, he had that strange feeling that this was just the beginning.

The beginning of what? Well, only time will tell.

And time, indeed, will – in ways that neither of them ever dreamed of.
Chapter Summary

Secrets are revealed when Amortentia fills the air.

The next two weeks passed by uneventfully. Everyone was buried in schoolwork, especially those preparing for their NEWTs, so there wasn’t much time for relaxation and fun. Even the professors were moving about at a frantic pace (planning tests and projects were no easy feats, after all). Yet no one could be more harassed than Hermione Granger. Her school load was nothing short of torturous. Add to that her duties as Head Girl and no one would have blamed her if she checked herself into St. Mungo's anytime soon.

The dungeon was still dimly lit when Hermione entered it; proof that Professor Slughorn hasn’t arrived yet. There weren't any students inside either. They were all still at the Great Hall having breakfast. She wasn’t really hungry so she’d decided to come here straight in order to finish up on her essay for Arithmancy. Taking her usual seat in the front row, she took out parchment and quill and started writing her essay. She was half-way through her writing when she felt someone sit beside her. She knew without looking that it would be her Potions partner.

"You weren't at breakfast," Draco said.

"I wasn't hungry," Hermione muttered not pausing in her writing.

"You didn't have breakfast yesterday, either."

Hermione sighed and cast a sideways glance at Draco.

"I wasn't hungry yesterday, either, Malfoy."

"You know, Granger, it's not really good to start the day on an empty stomach. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"Thanks for the reminder, mother."

Draco clucked his tongue as he shook his head. Then, he dug inside his bag, took out a napkin-wrapped sandwich and placed it on top of Hermione's essay. "It's your favorite, buttered toast and sausages."

Hermione turned to Malfoy, her eyes narrowing at him suspiciously. "What's the meaning of this?" she asked, pointing to the sandwich.

"A simple thank you would’ve sufficed, Granger," Draco replied with a smirk.

A deep sighed issued forth from Hermione as she put her quill down and turned back to Draco, her cheeks coloring a soft pink. "You're right, that was rude of me. Thank you for the sandwich, Malfoy."

"You're welcome, Granger. Now, eat up before Professor Slughorn gets here. We have a long day ahead of us or have you forgotten that we're having double Potions today?"
"Oh, darn, yes! I have forgotten!" Hermione groaned. She reached for the sandwich, unwrapped it and took a big bite before going back to her essay.

"You know, you should drop some of your subjects. You're obviously overloaded with work."

"That's what Harry said."

"Really? Well, I see Potter and I could agree on some things," Draco muttered.

"You can agree on a lot of things, Malfoy. If you'd only talk to each other."

"Don't push it, Granger. Being civil with you is bad enough. No need to add Saint Potter into the mix."

Hermione snorted as she started rolling up her parchment. "Don't be such a child, Malfoy. In case you haven't noticed, things are different now."

A few seconds of silence passed before Malfoy replied in a soft, almost regretful, voice, "No, not really. Some things just don't."

The arrival of their classmates put a halt to their conversation. Harry and Ron waved to her and sat at the back while they awaited their partners. Hermione finished her sandwich and stashed her essay inside her bag. She noticed that Draco was back to his brooding, silent self. She really must talk to him about that. It's obvious that something's been bothering him these past few days and she wanted to know what that was. She reasoned that it was only to satisfy her curiosity (and to ensure the peace between them) and nothing more. What else could be her reason for wanting to help Draco other than that, right?

Professor Slughorn's voice pulled her back from her thoughts. He was writing the ingredients that they needed for the potion that they would be brewing. Just one look at the list and she already knew what it was. She's obviously not the only one who recognized the ingredients, though, since some of the girls were already giggling even before the Professor turned away from the board to ask them the name of the potion they would be working on today.

"I'm sure you are all familiar with this potion. You've already brewed this one in sixth year. Do you still remember what it's called?"

Draco shifted in his seat, mumbling under his breath. He turned to Hermione and whispered, "Why are we brewing Amortentia again? We've already done this! I can even brew it in my sleep."

Hermione stifled a laugh as she looked at the disgust written on Draco's face. "Perhaps the Professor just wants to make sure that we can all brew it properly. If you recall, not all of us were successful in brewing it in sixth year."

"Hmph! I did mine perfectly, so I don't need to do it again. This is a waste of time!"

"Let it go, Malfoy. We have no choice on the matter, anyway. Besides, it could be fun. We'd sail through this one, for sure."

"We'd sail through anything, Granger."

Hermione glanced at Draco and saw that he was staring at her with that inscrutable expression on his face again. She felt goosebumps crawling up her arms as her cheeks started heating up.

Damn! Don't blush, Hermione! He'll notice that and he'll start teasing you again! Why ever do you...
always blush when he looks at you that way?

"So, what's the name of our potion for today? And what does it do?" Professor Slughorn was saying to the class, looking around at the giggling girls. None ventured to raise a hand, though, so he turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, perhaps you can enlighten us?"

"Amortentia, sir. It's the most powerful and most dangerous love potion known to man. It causes the drinker to have strong feelings for someone. But it cannot create a truly, unbreakable connection. It is more of an infatuation or obsession. The aroma is different for each person as it reminds them of what they are most attracted to. It is dangerous because what it creates is an illusion of love and not true love, at all, and can, therefore, be abused by certain potioners," Hermione said, feeling suddenly uncomfortable.

"Very good, Miss Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor. Now, I am giving you an hour to prepare and brew the potion. Then, I will go around each pair to check on your work. The pair that brews the best potion will each be given a vial of Amortentia."

There were several squeals of delight, mostly from the girls. The boys looked rather revolted.

"Alright, then. Get on with it. I will be back when your hour is up," Professor Slughorn said before waddling out of the room.

A mad scramble for the supplies cupboard ensued right after the professor had left. Hermione looked about and saw the miserable looks on both Harry and Ron. Well, especially Ron since she was partnered with Parkinson and was now being ordered about by her.

"Should I get the ingredients?" she asked Draco.

"Whatever, Granger. This is ridiculous! Whoever would need a bottle of Amortentia? Perhaps it's best if we just don't brew it," Draco slumped back in his chair, his arms folded on his chest, brows knotted in a frown.

"Alright. I'll get the ingredients, then." Hermione rose from her seat without giving her Potions partner a backward glance. It seems that she would not be getting much help from him today.

When she got to the supplies cupboard, only Neville and Ron were left there. They were arguing about the ingredients, and they beamed when Hermione joined them.

"Hermione! Just the person we need!" Ron exclaimed.

"Why, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Neville and I are not sure about these two," Ron said, pointing to the last two ingredients. They were herbs and so were not in labeled bottles. Hermione reached up for the needed herbs and gave them to Ron and Neville.

"Thanks, Hermione. You truly are a lifesaver," Neville said. Having gathered all their needed ingredients, the two went back to their partners. Hermione gathered her own ingredients and walked back to her brooding partner, who was now leaning on the table, with a far-away look in his gray orbs.

"Stop pouting, Malfoy. We've got work to do. If you don't help me out, I won't share the potion with you. And that would be tragic, really," Hermione nudged Draco with her elbow in an attempt to draw him out of his gloom. She was rewarded with a smirk and a rolling of his eyes.
"I don't need a love potion to make a girl fall for me, Granger. I'll donate my share to you, seeing as you desperately need it."

"Oh, really? If you don't need it to make girls fall for you, then why don't you have a girlfriend?"

Draco huffed and jumped to his feet, taking the herbs from Hermione. "I don't want a girlfriend, that's why. Who would want to be a former Death Eater's girlfriend, anyway," Draco said, chopping up the herbs vigorously.

The last sentence was said so softly that had Hermione not been listening carefully, she wouldn't have heard it. But hear it, she did, and strangely, her heart went out to Draco. His past was really bothering him to the point of losing his confidence in himself. This school year must be torture for him. His family's fall from grace was beginning to take its toll and Hermione knew that it could destroy him if he didn't receive enough support or encouragement from his peers. It really wasn't his fault that his family had been brought up that way and had chosen to support the Dark Lord. Unfortunately, not everyone would be so generous and take this fact into account. People can be really cruel at times.

Without having a brilliant comeback to Draco's remark, Hermione decided to just concentrate on the task at hand. Although no words passed between them, they were still able to brew the potion to perfection. They worked seamlessly, each knowing instinctively what was needed to be done. Soon enough, their potion was exhibiting its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen, with steam rising above it in lazy spirals. And just in time for Professor Slughorn's inspection, too.

"Perfect! See here, class. Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy were able to brew the most impressive Amortentia I've ever seen for the longest time here in Hogwarts. You two really have a talent for potion-making!" Professor Slughorn beamed at the two.

A smattering of claps and hoots were heard from the class, mostly from Harry, Ron, and Zabini.

"Now, will you please step up to the cauldron and tell us what it smells like to you, Miss Granger."

Hermione moved closer to the cauldron, took a few whiffs of the potion and stepped back, her brows knotted in thought. "I smell old books, crisp new leather, and…minty chocolate?"

"Interesting, interesting! Now, your turn, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco stepped up to the cauldron and inhaled the steam rising from the potion. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, then his lips rose in a lopsided grin.

"I smell old parchment, strawberries, rain and….vanilla."

"Very good, very good! Now, tell me, Ms. Granger. I know you were able to brew a perfect Amortentia in sixth year. Did you smell the same things back then?" Professor Slughorn asked, a knowing grin adorning his lips.

"Uhmm…no, Professor. It smelled different," she answered, two pink spots blotting her cheeks.

"What about you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, Professor. It smelled the same to me," Draco replied.

Professor Slughorn clapped his hands and turned back to the class. "Can anyone tell me why Ms. Granger's Amortentia smelled different to her back in sixth year?" Professor Slughorn pointed to Neville, "How about you, Mr. Longbottom?"
"Uh…maybe because the things that attracted her back in sixth year were different from the ones that attract her now?" Neville stammered, blushing from his toes up to the roots of his dark hair.

"Spot on, Mr. Longbottom!" Professor Slughorn exclaimed. He then turned to Zabini.

"And can you tell me, Mr. Zabini, why the smell of Mr. Malfoy's Amortentia remained the same for him?"

"Because he's still attracted to the same things he was attracted to back then?" Zabini replied.

"Right you are, Mr. Zabini! So, you see class, Amortentia is fully dependent on what attracts you at the moment. Its aroma can change without you knowing it. As for the case of Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy, it appears that Ms. Granger has had a change of heart while Mr. Malfoy remains consistent. He is still attracted to what attracted him before."

Hermione's blush deepened as her head involuntarily swept to Ron's direction. Had she turned the other way, she would've seen Draco's eyes pinned on her, enigmatic and guarded, but with that rare look of sadness that seemed to reach way down deep into his soul.
Saving Narcissa

Chapter Summary

Draco finds out that even though the war was over, for him and his family, the horrors from its aftermath are just beginning.

Time flew fast for the students at Hogwarts. It seemed like only yesterday when they'd boarded the Hogwarts Express, but now two months had passed. The lessons were becoming more complicated, professors started demanding more output, homework and projects were piling up like crazy; yet in spite of it all, a general feeling of euphoria still permeated the castle. Perhaps, because they all knew that things could've been worse. Perhaps, they were just thankful that they'd survived the war. Or perhaps, they were just happy that they could now look forward to a better future and forget about the ugliness that the war has brought into their lives.

Although for some, the horrors of the war haunt them still. The survivors did not all belong to the side that won, after all, some were, either by choice or unfortunate circumstance, caught fighting on the other side of the fence. And today, one of those who used to belong to that unlucky few would be reminded of the harsh consequences of the war's outcome.

Lunch time at Hogwarts had always been a noisy, almost chaotic, occasion. It was during this time that the owls would come swooping in to deliver the students' correspondence, usually letters or parcels from home or subscriptions to Witch Weekly or The Daily Prophet. And so, aside from the mad grab for quick meals before going off to their next classes, news (including gossip) from home or their chosen subscription, preoccupied the students during this time.

As the letters were unfolded and parcels were opened, the din would also intensify since the students would now be talking about what they received from home, more often all at once. Today, however, an eerie silence ensued following the owl deliveries as all eyes suddenly found their way to the group near the back, the only ones who seemed oblivious to what was happening around them.

It was considered the 'elite' group of Hogwarts since the Head Prefects were almost always there together. Ever since their truce, Hermione and Draco had formed a habit of sitting together during mealtimes. They didn't know how it started, they surely did not make any verbal agreements about it, it just turned out that way. Working closely together on their projects and assignments as Head Boy and Girl had made them quite at ease with each other's company. Although they could still get on each other's nerves every now and then, those moments were now the rarity instead of the norm.

They would often be seen eating with either Draco's friends, which consisted mostly of Zabini (and usually Parvati, now that they were officially going out together; him and Pansy parted as friends), Pansy and Nott or Hermione's set which consisted of Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Neville. Or on rare occasions even a mix of both (Ron would sometimes join them when he's not sitting with Padma and her friends). The lines that delineated their differences before were fast getting blurred, but no one was complaining; even Harry and Draco were now exchanging more that two words a day (which was a feat in itself)!

Lunchtime talk today was about Quidditch and Harry and Zabini were having a very lively
discussion about it in between bites of lamb stew and corn bread. Draco wasn't really participating, yet he would often nod, smirk, or even snort at either Harry's or Zabini's remarks. The three of them would not be getting any owl deliveries so they were not too keen on the messengers flying overhead. Only Hermione received a parcel from a dark barn owl that swooped past them.

But it wasn't from home, it was just her Daily Prophet subscription. Still, Hermione wouldn't pass up the chance of reading any parchment that has a written word on it, so after finishing up her shepherd's pie and downing her pumpkin juice, she untied the string around the parcel and took out her copy of the Daily Prophet. Draco was just about to (finally!) join in on the now very heated conversation between Harry and Zabini when he felt Hermione's hand grip his arm. He turned just in time to see the dawning horror in her eyes.

"Draco…" she said, her voice was barely above a whisper, yet he heard the anguish in it. She slowly slid the paper in Draco's direction.

The breath was nearly knocked out of his lungs when he read the headline: NARCISSA MALFOY ARRESTED FOR ALLEGED WAR CRIMES. WHAT FATE AWAITS HER? AZKABAN OR THE DEMENTOR'S KISS? Below it was another article: SEARCH FOR CELEBRATED DEATH-EATER, LUCIUS MALFOY, CONTINUES.

Harry and Zabini stopped mid-sentence and turned to look down at what Draco was reading. It was only then that they noticed the unusual lull in the Great Hall. When they turned around, they saw that the whole congregation of students was staring at their group, some were even craning their necks to get a good look at Draco.

Meanwhile, the subject of their interest was clutching the paper with his hands, crumpling the edges in his tight grip. He need not look around to see the eyes that were now glued to him, he could feel them. His heart was hammering against his chest and he could feel the anger building within him, but he tamped it down and closed his eyes as he tried to calm himself.

"Come on, let's go," he heard Hermione whisper beside him.

"Malfoy! Let's get out of here!" Harry said, the urgency in his voice unmistakable. Draco would've told him to shut up, but he knew that Harry meant well. He's had his own share of unwanted attention, after all. He knew how to deal with it.

"Draco, let's go!" This time, it was Zabini. Draco slowly opened his eyes and stared at the damning words before him. He could almost hear his world crumbling around his ears. He wanted to scream, to tear his hair out, to make the earth swallow him whole, to throw hexes at everyone who was now staring at him like he'd grown two heads overnight!

A hand squeezed his arm, and he turned to see Hermione's eyes intently focused on him. There was no pity nor condemnation in them, just determination and strength. And as if she had imbued him with her power, Draco found himself getting up to his feet and walking out of the Great Hall, Hermione beside him with Harry and Zabini following closely behind.

He could feel the eyes of the whole school stabbing at his back and his feet almost stumbled (his legs were like jelly), but a small hand slipped into his and gripped his fingers tightly. He looked down and saw Hermione's fingers intertwined with his own, lending him with a rare kind of compassion that he never even thought he would receive from anyone. He wrapped his fingers around her smaller ones, thankful for her unexpected show of support.

As soon as they were out the great doors, though, he reluctantly let go of Hermione's hand and started to walk away from the group.
"Malfoy, we need to see the Head Mistress," Harry called out to him. Draco stopped and sighed.

"Look, Potter. This does not concern the school. I'm on my own on this one," Draco replied, turning around to glare at Harry.

"No, you're wrong about that. Just trust me on this one, Malfoy. You're not alone."

"Oh, please, Potter! This is not about House unity or camaraderie, or whatever. This is about my family being a bunch of Death Eaters! And how we can never be anything more than that!"

"Draco Malfoy! Don't you dare say that!" Hermione cried, shaking her head.

"I think it's better if we just hear out what Potter has to say, Draco," Zabini interjected.

Draco snorted, turned on his heels and started walking away again. Frustration was now threatening to engulf him. Why could they not just let him go? They can't help him on this, can't they see that?

"Malfoy, I know you don't want my help. But I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for your mother. We need to save her," Harry threw at him.

Draco stopped in his tracks. What? Why would he be doing something for my mother? Is it just his 'savior complex' acting up again? Does he really believe that he has the power to save everyone?

He turned on his heels and walked back to Harry. "What are you playing at, Potter? You don't even know my mother."

Harry nodded, "I may not know her that well, but enough to know that I owe her."

Zabini turned to Harry, a curious, questioning look etched on his face. "What are you going on about, Potter?"

"Let's go to the Head Mistress, first. I'll explain later," Harry said, walking past them. "Just trust me for once, Malfoy."

Both Zabini and Draco turned to Hermione, their brows knotted in question. She shrugged her shoulders and gave them a small smile.

"Let's just do as he says," Hermione said as she followed her best friend. Zabini furrowed his brows and tilted his head at Malfoy as if saying, your call, bro. Although Draco had no inkling as to what Harry was talking about, his curiosity has been pricked. He needed to know what Harry meant by 'owing' his mother, so he nodded to Zabini and they ran after the retreating figures of Harry and Hermione.

The group reunited in front of the gargoyle statue that led to the Head Mistress' office, what used to be Dumbledore's. Harry stepped in front of it and said, "I don't know the password, but my name is Harry Potter and I need to see the Head Mistress. It is very urgent that I speak with her."

A few seconds passed and then the gargoyle stepped aside to reveal an ascending circular staircase. Harry motioned for the others to follow him as he stepped onto the stairs, which had now started its slow ascent to the upper floor. Upon reaching the top floor, they all disembarked and walked into the smooth, marble floored office of the Head Mistress.

Harry looked around, eyes starting to blur as nostalgia almost choked him. He'd visited this room several times during Dumbledore's tenure, more often than not under quite less pleasant, or even
normal, conditions. When he looked up, he was startled to see the intelligent eyes of Albus Dumbledore twinkling at him behind the large, ornate desk. It took him a moment to remember that this was just a portrait and not the real wizard he'd almost idolized since he first set foot in Hogwarts.

A few moments later, Professor McGonagall stepped out from behind the portrait of an old, medieval witch. She threw a quick glance at the four students, then with a swift flick of her wand conjured four poufy armchairs.

"Sit down and make yourselves comfortable." Then, she went to her desk and took out a square tartan tin can from one of the drawers. Deftly popping the lid, she walked to Zabini and placed the can in his hands. "Have a biscuit, all of you", she said before going back to sit behind her desk.

Zabini squinted at his companions, unsure of what to do. Harry mouthed, Get one then pass it on. Zabini nodded and did as instructed.

"I know why you are all here. It's good that you have accompanied Mr. Malfoy. He needs all the support he can get right now," Prof. McGonagall said, nodding to each one of them. Her eyes rested on Draco, silently assessing him. "I'm sorry you had to find out about it this way, Mr. Malfoy. I had tried to persuade the editor of The Daily Prophet to postpone the printing of that edition. Unfortunately, I was too late. I suppose my sources are not as good as they used to be."

"I understand, Professor," Draco said, eyes downcast, focused on the swirls of the marble flooring. He wished he could be more appreciative of the Head Mistress' concern, but after trying hard to control the fury churning inside him, he just felt numb.

"Professor, I would like to testify on Mrs. Malfoy's behalf," Harry said. Draco's and Zabini's heads snapped to him in unison. Hermione just bowed her head, a small smile curving her lips.

Prof. McGonagall nodded as she looked at Harry from the top of her rectangular spectacles, wearing what seemed to be eerily similar to Dumbledore's usual expression.

"I had guessed as much," she said after a few beats. She turned to Draco and gave him the tiniest of smiles, but her eyes were kind and full of empathy. "We will do everything we can to help out in your mother's defense, Draco. I would also do my best to support Harry's testimony."

There was bewilderment in Draco's expression, so Prof. McGonagall swept her eyes back to Harry. "You haven't told him, have you, Potter?" she asked.

Harry shook his head, "I haven't had the chance, Professor."

"Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell him about it."

"Tell me what, Potter?" Draco piped in, no longer able to rein in his curiosity.

Harry turned to Draco and sighed. "I'm sorry, I should've told you this a long time ago. But I never seem to find the right time to broach the subject."

Draco raised his brows at Harry in a careless manner. He might appear cool to everyone around him, but deep inside his gut was twisting every which way and his heart was thumping like a congo drum.

Hermione gave Harry a small nod, encouraging him to continue.

"During the last battle here in Hogwarts, your mother saved me, Malfoy," Harry said, looking
straight at Draco.

A loud gasp from Zabini broke the silence and all eyes snapped to him.

"Sorry," he said, raising both hands in mock surrender. "Please continue."

"What do you mean by that, Potter? How did my mother save you?" Draco asked.

"How come your mother never told you this? How come she never told anyone this?" Harry quipped, shaking his head. Actually, he already knew the answer to that, but still, he could not believe that Narcissa kept her silence, even to her son.

"Tell me what, Potter?" Draco almost screamed. He was at the end of his patience.

"When I went to the Forbidden Forest, Voldemort used the killing curse on me. I'm sure that for a few seconds, I really died. But I came back. I felt like I got dragged through hell, but I was alive. Now, as I laid there on the ground, knocked down by the curse, I was thinking of ways to escape. It seemed hopeless since I knew that the moment I got up, everyone would start cursing me. Then, your mother came to me. Bellatrix wanted to make sure that I was dead so she told your mother to check up on me. Your mother saw that I was still alive, but she told Voldemort that I was already dead. Had she told him that I had survived the killing curse, Voldemort would've just cursed me again and I doubt if I would've survived that second round. So, by that single act, your mother turned the tide of the battle. She gave me another chance to fight and defeat Voldemort."

By the end of Harry's tale, tears were streaming down Draco's face. He knew why his mother had saved Harry. She did it for him. She wasn't just giving Harry a second chance to fight, she was also giving her son another chance to redeem himself, another chance to shake off the shackles that have bound him to the twisted traditions and beliefs of their family. She knew that only Harry could defeat the Dark Lord, and she made sure that it would happen.

He also knew why her mother never told anyone, not even him. It was her own way of atoning for her sins. Because just like him, she didn't think that it was enough to give her a clean slate. She didn't think that one single act of goodness deserved to be glorified because her 'evil deeds' far outweighed it.

But if truth be told, his mother never really did anything to deserve Azkaban or the Dementor's Kiss. Yes, she remained loyal to the Dark Lord, but only in support of her family and her husband's wishes. She was never a Death Eater for she never took the mark. She was never on active duty nor did she ever use the Unforgivable curses on anyone, not even during the war.

So, yes, Potter was right, his mother needs to be saved. She deserves to be saved.

And he would do everything in his power to make sure that she is.
"Hermione! Hermione!"

The brown-haired girl was instantly jolted from her thoughts at Harry's frantic whisper. They were in the library so he could not very well raise his voice, but she could still sense the urgency in it.

"I'm sorry, Harry, were you saying something?"

"Where is Malfoy?"

Just the person that's been keeping her mind preoccupied a moment ago before Harry intruded into her reverie. If she hadn't known for a fact that he hasn't mastered the skill of Legilimency yet, she would've sworn that he had just read her thoughts.

"I don't know." And I don't care, she wanted to add.

"Did you even see him this morning?"

"Harry, you know very well that he wasn't at our Potions class this morning and, no, I haven't seen him since last night after our rounds," Hermione replied, her brows now knitted in a tight frown. She'd rather not think about last night, not until she'd figured it out herself.

Harry sighed as he ran his fingers through his mussed up hair. "Where is he always going off to? His mother's trial is tomorrow and we haven't even finalized our plans with the Head Mistress."

Much as she wanted to answer Harry's question, there really wasn't anything she could say. Malfoy had become more distant this past couple of days. She tried drawing him out during their rounds last night, but he brushed her off rather rudely, morphing back into his blasted annoying, arrogant self. She tried to justify his actions by blaming it on nerves. He was probably just nervous about the trial. But it still did not excuse his behavior. She couldn't say that to Harry, though. Whatever Malfoy said to her last night, she'd rather keep to herself, no need to involve Harry. It would only trigger his protective instincts and create tension between them again.

"He's just nervous. He's never been to a wizard trial, so he doesn't know what to expect," she said instead. Hopefully, that really was the only reason.

"Which is why we need to find him. I've been put through a Wizengamot trial, remember? I can walk him through it," Harry said, pulling a lethargic Hermione to her feet. "I'll go to the Quidditch field and walk the corridors leading to the Slytherin Common Room. Hopefully, I get to bump into Zabini or Nott. They might know where Malfoy is."

"Okay, I'll go back to our dormitory and see if he's already there. If he's not..."

Harry broke stride to glance at Hermione, "If he's not, then what?"
"I don't know…I'll think of something brilliant," Hermione sighed.

"Okay. Let's meet up at the gargoyle corridor in one hour, with or without Malfoy. We have to inform the Head Mistress in case we don't find him within the hour."

The two friends nodded in unison before going their separate ways. Thankfully, the corridors were not crowded since most of the students in the lower years were still in their respective classes leaving them to walk the hallways unaccosted. Hermione even peeked around every nook and cranny that she passed by on her way to their dormitory, but she caught neither hide nor hair of Draco Malfoy.

Why was he being so much like his old self again? She really thought that they'd made great progress these past two months! She actually thought that they were now fast becoming friends!

Her heart gave a little lurch as she looked back at those times that they sat in front of the fire in the Head Prefects’ common room, just talking and laughing, sharing ideas and whatnots. In truth, she was already beginning to enjoy his company. Seeing glimpses of his true self made her change a lot of her preconceived ideas about him. Although he hadn't really opened up to her yet, there were instances when he would let his guard down and she would see the Draco that he was adamantly trying to hide. And it wasn't at all bad! So, why was he being obnoxious again?

Soon enough, she was standing in front of the portrait of an ancient wizard with a brown and gray owl perched on his shoulder. The wizard was currently dozing while the owl had her eyes opened and scanning her surroundings. Hermione stepped up and cleared her throat noisily. The owl hooted, waking up the wizard.

"Ah! Young mistress! Entrance you will gain if you but use your brain. Give me the answer to this riddle: Brothers and sisters, I have none, but this man's father is my father's son. Who is this man?"

"The man is the speaker's son," said Hermione.

"Well done, young mistress! You may now enter," the wizard beamed, the portrait swinging forward to reveal the entrance to the dorm. Hermione practically ran inside in search of Draco.

"Malfoy? Are you in here?"

Silence.

She walked to Draco's quarters and knocked on the door. "Malfoy!"

Still no answer. Thinking that he was probably just sleeping, she pressed her ear against the door and knocked again. Harder and louder.

"Malfoy! You better come out of there or I'll barge in whether you like or not!"

Not even a peep.

*You're giving me a headache, Malfoy!*

He obviously wasn't in their dorm, but where could he be hiding?

Hermione scratched her head as she gave the dorm one last glance. Then, a thought hit her.

Time to get creative, Granger! she said to herself.

***************
Draco looked around the familiar surroundings. He'd missed this, his old room. His home life may not be ideal, but his room was still his refuge. It was the only place where people left him alone. Even his father never set foot in his room; he considered it beneath him. Draco was always summoned, never visited in his room.

Except by his mother. She would always drop in to check up on him.

His mother.

The thought stabbed at his guts. She would be put on trial tomorrow. A trial that she didn't deserve. And all because his father was too selfish to face the consequences of his actions. He ran away and left her to face the wolves. Coward!

Anger roiled within him and he started punching at the cushions of his settee. He slammed his fists repeatedly against the hapless cushions while loud, wracking sobs escaped his throat. He let all the fury, frustration, fear, and hurt pour out through his fists. Too caught up in his pain that he did not even hear the door creak open to admit a slight figure into the room.

"Draco?"

The soft, tentative sound sliced through him like a knife. He knew that voice, it was music to his ears. Was he going crazy? Why was he hearing her voice?

"Draco."

This time, he turned toward the source of the sound and gasped when he saw two gentle, brown eyes staring at him with such sweet sorrow.

"Granger? What are you doing here? How did you find me?" He turned away from her and buried his face in his hands. This was the reason why he came here, so he couldn't see her look at him with those haunting eyes. How could he bear having those eyes on him when he was nothing but a monster!

"Why are you hiding in here?" Hermione asked, taking a hesitant step toward him.

"I am not hiding! And you haven't answered my question. How did you find me?" he tossed over his shoulder, not daring to look at her.

"I asked for help in finding you."

Her answer was like a bucket of ice-cold water thrown at his face. Why was she looking for him? Was she worried about him or was she here to finish off what he started last night? Whatever her reason, she must've been desperate enough for the Room of Requirement to reveal itself to her. He swallowed hard before he turned around to look at her again.

"Mudblood."

The word slapped him hard. How could he have called her again by that despicable word last night? After everything she'd done for him! After she had welcomed him into her world and did everything in her power to make her friends see him in a different light. After she had made him see himself in a different light!

How could he, in a moment of insecurity and vexation, just throw that word at her like it meant nothing? How could he make her feel like she meant nothing?
Because he was nothing but a rotten, twisted excuse for a human being!

"Go away, Granger. I don't need you here," he spat at her. He must protect her from himself before he hurt her again. He saw her blink twice, thrice, then she pulled herself to her full height and squared her shoulders.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. Not until you explain to me why you're pushing me away. I'm not stupid, Malfoy. I know you said that word to make me hate you again. I want to know why."

"Really, Granger? You really want to know why?" he sneered.

"Yes," she replied, tilting her head up stubbornly.

"Because I'm tired of being nice to you, that's why! I'm tired of pretending to be somebody I am not! I'm tired of spending time with you like we're the best of friends! I am NOT your friend, Granger. And you shouldn't want to be my friend. EVER! You should run away from me. Far, far away! Some place where we wouldn't even breathe the same air!"

He expected her to scream and curse at him, to cry and stomp out of the room. Instead, she started walking towards him, her face set in an expression he'd never seen before.

"How dare you tell me what I should and shouldn't do. I can think for myself, Malfoy."

"You're obviously not very good at it!"

Hermione stopped in front of him, her mesmerizing brown eyes locking with his stormy gray ones. Draco's heart slammed against his chest as he caught a whiff of that unique scent of hers – strawberries and vanilla.

"I want to know why you are pushing me away. And don't give me that crap about you being a rotten person. Give me an honest answer, Malfoy, or we are not getting out of this room."

What was he supposed to say? That he needed to stay away because he was fast falling for her? That every time he looked into her eyes, he must stop himself from kissing her like there was no tomorrow? That he must always remind himself that he did not deserve to even be in her presence? That he was tired of constantly battling with himself, telling himself that he was poison and he would contaminate her if he even laid one finger on her?

Perhaps he should, that way she could start running away from him. But was that what he really wanted? For her to turn her back on him, for her eyes to cloud with hatred and disgust? For things to go back to the way they were? Would he be able to survive it? Or should he take a chance, roll the dice and let the chips fall where they may?

"Well? Tell me, Malfoy. I'm not going away until you –"

Hermione never was able to finish her sentence because Draco's lips were suddenly pressing hard against her own. Her breath caught in her throat as her heart started beating a painful tattoo inside her breast. She felt Draco's lips moving against hers, patiently nudging them to open. She could feel his arms moving around her waist, pulling her close. Then, without willing it, her hands moved of their own accord, sliding up his neck, gliding through his silken hair.

Draco felt her lips opening up to him and he needed no further invitation than that. He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue inside her delicious mouth, exploring her depths. He could never get enough of her. She was intoxicating! Her soft body was pressed against his, and his heart hammered against his ribs. He wanted more of her, but this was not the right time or place for it. It
was enough that she did not push him away and hex him to oblivion.

So, despite the protestation of every cell in his body, he slowly pulled away from her, releasing her lips from his onslaught. He was breathing hard, but he noticed that she was, too. It brought a tiny smile to his lips as he rested his forehead against hers.

"That's why, Granger. That's the reason why I want you to run away from me," he whispered against her lips.

Hermione laughed, softly, enchantingly. And Draco had to mentally slap himself from kissing her again. He must not take advantage of her. For all he knew, it could be pity that was driving her to him, and nothing as foolish as what he was feeling for her.

"Oh, Draco," she breathed, that sweet smile still grazing her reddened lips. She slid her hands down his arms, squeezing gently. "Did you think that I would run away from that?"

He felt like bursting at the seams. She did not hate him! She did not hate his kisses! He stepped back, taking her hands in his and slowly led her to the settee. They sat facing the fireplace, his arm going around her shoulders as he pulled her to him. Taking his wand from his pocket, he cast a silent spell and lit a fire. He loved the feel of her against him. It felt right. It felt like she was meant to be there. But the memories of last night intruded again and threatened to burst his blissful bubble.

"I'm sorry about last night. I was so afraid that you would want to stay away from me now that my mother would be put on trial."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Well, because...I don't know. I just thought that you would not want to be associated with me anymore, former Death Eater and the only child of two notorious criminals," he said, chuckling now that he realized how stupid that sounded. He should've known that Hermione was not as shallow as that.

"Draco, I know we didn't start off on the right foot. We've spent six years 'hating' each other (he loved the way she put the word hate in quotation marks with her fingers). But I understand why you did what you did back then. You were only trying to protect your family, your mother. And you did not want to disappoint your father."

"I've always been a disappointment to my father. I just thought that if I did everything he asked me to do, that he would finally see me as the son he'd always wanted to have. That I would finally be worthy of the Malfoy name."

Hermione heard the sadness and regret in his voice and her heart went out to him. She reached up and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. Draco glanced down at her and smirked.

"Can't get enough of me already, Granger? Ow!" Hermione playfully smacked his arm and threw a raspberry at him.

"You wish, Malfoy," she chuckled. Draco did the same before planting a soft kiss on top of her head.

They both turned to the fire, each one contemplating on this new development in their relationship. Did this mean that they would now be more than just friends? Were they officially 'together' now? Neither knew the answer to that, so they let the words, the questions, die on their lips. For now, they can just be content in being in each other's arms, like only the two of them existed in the
whole wide world.

But just when Hermione was starting to feel cozy in Draco's arms, Harry's face swam into focus. She sat bolt upright and muttered a few curses to herself.

"Damn! I forgot that we're supposed to meet Harry at Prof. McGonagall's office!"

"We are? What for?" Draco asked lazily, he didn't want to leave the room, and her embrace, just yet. He still needed to make sure that this wasn't just a dream or a product of his imagination.

"Draco Malfoy, have you forgotten that tomorrow is your mother's first day of trial?" Hermione scolded in her most 'professor-ish' voice.

"Of course not. But what does Potter have to do with it?"

"He's going to testify on your mother's behalf, so he wants to discuss his testimony with you and the Head Mistress first."

"Oh, right!" Draco nodded, finally understanding what the fuss was about.

"So, shall we get going, then?"

"Well, if we must," Draco said, gingerly getting to his feet and helping Hermione up from the settee at the same time.

He looked down at their entwined fingers. He couldn't believe that he was holding her hand, Hermione's hand, the hand of the girl who'd haunted his dreams for as long as he could remember. When he lifted his gaze, he felt his heart swell at the tender look in her eyes.

"I could get used to this, you know," he said as he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. She smiled that smile that made her eyes crinkle at the sides. He had that uncontrollable urge to kiss her again and so he did. His hands went behind her head, tilting it up to his as he let his lips show her everything he'd been trying to hold back for the longest time. They were both gasping for air when they finally parted.

"I think we better go now, before I totally lose control and ravage you in this very room," he breathed, taking her hand back in his. Hermione giggled, her cheeks turning a delicious pink.

They were but a few steps away from the door when they noticed that it was glowing and before they could even react they were thrown back by an unseen force that rippled through the whole room.

And then everything went black.
Chapter Summary

Draco and Hermione find some shocking developments after leaving the Room of Requirement. Will they figure out what really happened to them?

The walls seemed to roll in waves when he opened his eyes and there were a couple of aches blossoming on his back from being thrown a few feet away. Draco turned his head to the right and saw the unmoving figure of Hermione lying beside him. Her hand was still clutching his, but her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow. He gasped a few deep breaths and pushed up on his elbows to take a closer look at Hermione. She was now starting to stir, her eyes flickering open, a soft moan coming from her lips.

"Hermione, are you okay?" Draco asked, squeezing her fingers.

"Draco? What just happened?" Hermione started to rise, twisting slightly to face him.

"I don't know. I've never experienced anything like it before."

"Me neither. Was it an explosion, don't you think?"

"I can't say. The door is still intact, so it probably wasn't. Plus, there was no sound. Even if something went off outside, we would've heard it."

Draco rose to his feet as he extended his hands to help Hermione up. She took both of his hands and hauled herself from the floor. As soon as she was on her feet she stretched her legs and arms. Then, she arched her back as her hand went to the back of her neck.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked, searching her face.

"Yes, don't worry about it. Just a few aches here and there. I've been through worse," she answered, smirking at him.

Draco pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair.

"That's my brave girl," he murmured.

Hermione smiled against his chest. She liked the sound of that – him referring to her as his girl.

They would've preferred to stay that way for all eternity, but their curiosity about what happened got the better of them. Pulling apart as if in silent agreement, they turned back to the door and slowly walked toward it. Nothing spectacular happened so they continued on, both of them stopping just in front of the door. Hermione glanced at Draco and she had the feeling that he was thinking what she was thinking. A slight pull on her hand confirmed it.

"Hermione," he said, apprehension seeping into his voice.

"Yes, Draco?" she replied, tilting her head up to his.
"Uhm…are we going to tell the others about us?"

She could tell that he was quite unsure about declaring themselves in public and it pinched at her heart somehow. But she also understood his uneasiness, he was, after all, just beginning to get to know her friends, to be welcomed to the 'other side'. And although things were progressing quite swimmingly, he still wasn't sure how they would take it if they learned about this new development. He's probably still worried about the 'Death Eater' tag that some people have attached to him and how it would reflect on her, too.

"We don't have to make a public announcement, you know. I'm sure people will figure it out sooner or later. Let's just take this one step at a time and see where that leads us, okay?" Hermione said, looking intently into Draco's stormy gray eyes, looking for any sign that there was more to his reticence than what she thought.

Draco blinked at her straightforward answer. He was actually hoping she'd say that they can do whatever they want because everything’s fine and everything would be peachy. But then, he should've known that Hermione does not mince words nor does she indulge in false hopes. She knew that there would be difficulties ahead, people may or may not accept them; it could really go either way. What she's saying to him now is that they should not worry about anything until there's reason enough to worry. And, he had to agree, that's truly the best that they could do for now. He smiled and tugged her closer to his side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"Okay. I'm sure we can do this…together, we can face anything," he said, leaning down to plant a chaste kiss on her soft lips. Hermione smiled and nodded.

"Together," she whispered before taking a deep breath.

"Ready?" Draco asked, his hand going for the brass doorknob of 'his room'.

"Ready as I can ever be," Hermione agreed.

Draco turned the knob and pulled the door to reveal the hallway beyond. Everything seemed quiet so he stepped out, turned his head both ways and seeing as there was no one outside, gently pulled Hermione behind him. The door disappeared the moment they had both stepped out into the hallway.

"Come on, let's hurry. Harry should be waiting for us at the gargoyle corridor by now," Hermione said, tugging on Draco's hand.

It was only after they had walked through a couple of corridors, and went down the stairs that they noticed something peculiar.

"Hermione, have you noticed anything strange?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

"Well, doesn't it seem peculiar that we haven't met a single soul since we left the Room of Requirement?"

"I know. It could only mean one thing, then. Everyone's at the Great Hall," Hermione said as they turned into the gargoyle corridor.

"Which probably also explains why Potter is not here," said Draco as soon as they reached the gargoyle statue that led to the Head Mistress' office. No Harry in sight.
"There must've been some announcement made while we were in the Room of Requirement."

"Should we go straight to the Great Hall, then? Or should we give Potter a few more minutes to get here?" Draco asked, turning to Hermione.

"Let's give him five more minutes. If he's not here by then, let's head out to the Great Hall."

They both leaned back against the wall beside the statue. Draco moved closer to Hermione, touching his shoulder against hers. Not satisfied with that, he took her hand and entwined his fingers with hers. Hermione smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"So much for taking it one step at a time. What do you think will Harry say if he found us like this, huh?" Draco chuckled. Hermione pinched his arm and giggled.

"He'll probably faint on the spot," she said.

Draco leaned closer and whispered in Hermione's ear. "Do you think I can steal a quick kiss before he gets here?"

He did not get to hear Hermione's response. They were both startled by a strangled cry from a visibly distraught Theodore Nott. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Nott! What are you doing here? And where's everybody?" Draco snapped, disentangling himself from Hermione's grip.

Nott swallowed hard when he was reminded of Draco's infamous temper. He snatched a look at Hermione then turned his back on them. "I-I'm sorry, Draco. I-I-I didn't mean to intrude. I wasn't spying on you, I swear," Nott stammered.

Draco threw a quizzical look at Hermione. She raised her brows and shook her head. What in Merlin's name is wrong with Nott, she seemed to say.

"Nott, what's got your panties in a knot? It's just Hermione. Where is everybody?"

"Uhhh….they're all at the Great Hall. The Minister of Magic is supposed to make an announcement," Nott answered, taking another nervous glance at Hermione.

"Shacklebolt is here?" Hermione queried.

Nott's head spun towards her, so fast, he could've had whiplash. His eyes were as big as saucers as he stared at Hermione like she'd grown an extra arm. "Who? Shacklebolt? Who's that?"

Draco has had enough. Nott was acting like a fool again. He pushed off from the wall and walked towards his friend.

"What's this all about, Nott? Who put you up to this prank? And if everyone's supposed to be in the Great Hall, then why are you here?"

Nott threw another glance at Hermione then quietly pulled Draco away from her.

"Perhaps, I'm the one who should be asking you that question, mate. What are you doing here getting cozy with the Princess of Mudbloods?" he whispered furiously at Draco.

Had Theo not been his mate for six years, Draco would've beaten him to a pulp right then and there. Draco took a few calming breaths before he lifted his eyes to him. Is this how his friends would react when they find out about his relationship with Hermione? If that's the case, then he'd
be losing quite a few of them this year most definitely.

"Watch your tongue, Nott. I wouldn't be too understanding the next time that you make that slip," Draco said, his eyes boring into Nott's. His friend seemed to be taken aback by his statement. He saw a flash of hurt in Nott's hazel eyes, but it was quickly replaced by incredulity and then irritation.

"Look, Draco. I'm just looking out for you. If this is your new deviation, then fine! I won't get in the way. Whatever gets you off, as I always say. But, be mindful of your new position, mate! Your father would not be happy about this," Nott said, his eyes darting back to Hermione as his brows furrowed.

"I couldn't care less what my father would say, or think," Draco hissed. What else could that coward do to him, anyway? He'd already destroyed his and his mother's lives! Besides, he's probably more preoccupied with finding a very big rock that he could crawl under to evade his pursuers nowadays.

"Ssshh…Please, don't say that, Draco," Nott said, his eyes darting from left to right nervously.

"Why shouldn't I when that's how I feel about him?" Draco scoffed. Theo's shoulders slumped.

"Look, I know you and your father do not always see things eye to eye, but he's still your father. And you should be proud of him now," Nott said, thumping Draco's back.

Draco froze at that. What is going on with Nott? How could he tell his best friend to be proud of a father who abandoned his family just to save his skin? Something's definitely not right here.

When he looked back at Nott he saw that he was eyeing Hermione with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. Draco had to take a few deep, calming breaths to keep himself from pummeling his friend. Still, in spite of his growing irritation at his fellow Slytherin, something that he needed to discuss with Hermione before they went traipsing to the Great Hall. He first needed to get rid of his irritating friend, though, so he decided to humor him.

"Tell you what, Nott. Why don't you go on ahead to the Great Hall and I'll follow in a sec. I'll just finish my business with the…uhm…Princess Mudblood, eh?" he whispered conspiratorially.

Nott gave him a nasty grin before casting a salacious eye at Hermione. It almost made Draco forget that he was playing along just so he could get rid of him.

"Fine, mate. But you better not walk in there with her in tow. And you have to tell me all the nasty details later, hear? I've always wondered what she's hiding under those robes," Nott chortled.

Draco had reached his limit, so he thumped Nott's back harder than he should and shoved him away rather viciously. "Don't worry, mate. I'll tell you all about it. Now sod off!"

Nott almost stumbled from the force of Draco's shoving, but he regained his balance and threw a mischievous smirk before sauntering away from them. Draco heaved a sigh of relief when he saw Nott disappear around the corner.

"What was that all about?" Hermione asked as she walked towards Draco. "Nott was giving me some nasty looks and I couldn't tell if he was just jesting or not!"

"I don't know, Hermione. Something's a bit off about him. He seemed surprised to find us together when we'd spent most of the past two months with him tagging along and eating with us," Draco
replied, shaking his head.

"I know! If I didn't know better, I'd think that he reverted to his old self. He was actually giving me the same 'look' that he used to give me before."

"What look?"

"Well, you know, that look that was a mixture of disgust and… something else, something creepy. It's more like a leer than a look, actually," Hermione said, scrunching her nose.

"Hmmm…I know what you mean," Draco nodded. A thought hit him and he leaned closer to Hermione, capturing her hands. "Did I ever give you that look?"

Hermione blew him a raspberry and laughed. "Nah! The look you always gave me was more like that of a lovesick puppy begging for my attention."

"No way! I never looked at you like a lovesick puppy!" he snorted as he pulled Hermione into his arms. "I'd say, I probably looked more like a starving, wounded puppy…starving for your attention… and kisses."

Hermione slapped Draco's arms playfully before shoving him away.

"Behave, Mr. Malfoy! Who knows who'd come along and discover us in another compromising pose. We're lucky it was just Nott."

A frown formed on Draco's brow as he was reminded of his friend again.

"Something's not right, Hermione. Nott said a lot of strange things to me."

"Strange? In what way? What did he say to you?"

"Didn't you notice that he didn't even know who Shacklebolt was? How could he not when Shacklebolt's been the Minister of Magic for several months now?"

"Yes, I noticed that, actually. But I thought he was just playing a prank on us."

"That's also what I thought, at first. But then he said some other things that seemed a little off. He even defended my father! Theo hated my father the same way that I did, basically because he was a lot like his own father. He even told me that I should be proud of him, would you believe that?"

"Hmmm…that does sound strange, considering the current situation."

"I think we better find the others fast. I have a feeling that Potter won't be making an appearance here anytime soon," Draco said, taking Hermione's hand in his again.

"Are we heading down to the Great Hall then?"

"Yes, I think we'll find our answers there," Draco replied, walking briskly towards the Great Hall with Hermione falling a step behind.

They reluctantly let go of each other's hands when they reached the door to the Great Hall. If they were to gauge their friends' reaction to seeing them holding hands by Nott's earlier one, then it seemed logical to not give the others anything to react to yet. Giving one last nod to Hermione, Draco pushed open the door as quietly as he could. Thankfully, all eyes were glued to the front of the hall so no one took notice of the two tardy figures slipping in through the door.
Professor McGonagall was speaking. "Head Master, will you please do the honors of introducing our new Minister of Magic."

Hermione's scream would've turned all those eyes to them had it not been for Draco's quick reflexes. He hurriedly pulled Hermione behind one of the large columns, his hand covering her mouth.

He chanced another peek at the podium and almost fainted himself because standing up front was the Hogwarts' Head Master, the 'resurrected' Potions' Professor – Severus Snape.

And beside him, standing tall and arrogant as always, was apparently the new Minister of Magic. The man Draco hated with all his heart.

None other than his father, Lucius Malfoy.
The Muggle-born Registration Act

Chapter Summary

The new Ministry laid down new laws that will cause chaos in the Muggle-born community.

Draco slowly slid his hand off of Hermione's mouth as he whispered in her ear, "Calm down, Granger! Don't call any attention to us. Something's definitely not right here and until we figure out what that is, it's better if we try to stay as inconspicuous as possible, okay? Try to walk to the Gryffindor table without drawing much attention to yourself."

Hermione nodded, her heart thumping painfully against her chest. Draco was right, there is something strange going on around them. It's not every day that you get to see your dead teacher walking around in the flesh, after all. Ghosts are a common occurrence, but previously dead teachers resurrected back to life? Not even Dumbledore could do that!

"I don't think we can join our House tables. We'd be calling attention to ourselves if we walk in now. Especially you, he'd surely notice you," Hermione quietly said.

"You're right. Okay, let's just stay here and listen to what the new Minister has to say. I have a feeling it wouldn't be to our liking, but let's listen just the same. It might give us a clue as to what's going on," Draco said. Hermione noted that he didn't say the word father.

They nodded to each other and turned back to the podium where the Minister (Lucius) was greeting the school teachers (no one seemed happy to return his greeting), and the students (some were not even looking at him).

"Look, they segregated the tables according to Houses again," Draco pointed to the House Tables. Hermione scanned the room and indeed the students were sitting according to Houses, no mixed tables there.

With the greetings done, the Minister was now getting down to the reason for his appearance at Hogwarts. The students were now more attentive than before, some were even leaning on the tables, necks craned to hear every word from the new Minister for Magic.

"As we all know, the Ministry of Magic is now under a new administration. And as the new Minister, I have been privileged with the task of reviewing the state of our people. The Council has therefore decided on implementing some new laws that will aid us in providing a better life for all Wizardkind," the Minister paused to glance at his audience. Seeing as he still had their full attention, he continued.

"Hence, it is with great pleasure that I announce the first of these new laws that will be effected immediately. As of today, all Mud- (coughs) Muggle-borns are required to submit to the Muggle-born Registration. All Muggle-born wizards and witches are expected to present themselves to the Ministry of Magic within three days from receipt of notice."

A loud gasp slipped from Hermione's lips. Draco's hand reached for hers, squeezing it reassuringly.
The once quiet room erupted into a cacophony of grumbles, curses, even catcalls after that mind-blowing announcement. It only stopped when the Head Master stepped forward and gave the students his darkest scowl. Yet the air was now heavy with unspoken hostility.

The Minister nodded his thanks to the Head Master then turned back to the students.

"Half-bloods will also be required to fill-out this form," he lifts a long piece of parchment and waves it in the air, "to be returned to the Head Master no later than Monday morning. You may contact your parents if you need to clarify some of the questions. The forms will be given to you by the Heads of your Houses once you return to your dormitories."

The grumbling started to pick up and Snape had to clear his throat rather noisily for it to die down. The Minister smirked and continued, the parchment now floating towards the teachers' table.

"It's nothing to worry about, you would just have to provide details about the Muggle or Muggle-born parent or grandparent. This is in line with the Minister's aim to catalogue the bloodline of each witch and wizard. It's a progressive move that has been deemed necessary by the Council."

"This is discrimination, that's what it is!" someone from the Gryffindor table shouted.

"Harrassment by the Ministry!" was heard from the Ravenclaw table.

"That's totally mental!" from the Hufflepuff table.

The crowd broke into another series of grumbling and cursing, words like 'barbaric', 'unfair', 'brutal', 'primitive', 'cruel', and 'crazy' were hollered by the students. A lot of them were now on their feet, waving their fists at the Minister, yelling their protests. Only those seated at the Slytherin table were not participating, most of them sporting self-satisfied smirks on their faces while the others wore bland, neutral expressions. It was common knowledge that Muggle-borns were never, ever sorted into the Slytherin House, so they were not very much affected by the new Ministry decree.

"QUIET!" the Head Master bellowed. " Fifty points from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff. And if you don't stop with your childish antics, you will all receive detention!"

The room quieted down after that with the students contending themselves with throwing malevolent glances at the Minister and the Head Master every now and then.

"Thank you, Head Master," Lucius said giving Snape a short bow, his eyes glittering maliciously. Turning back to the students, he lifted a brow and smirked. Draco felt his chest tighten, he knew that look. His father wasn't finished yet, and he was preparing to drop another bomb.

"All Muggle-born students will be required to present themselves to the Ministry for registration at the start of next week. And just to show you how supportive we are of all Muggle-borns (sneers), we will send a train to pick you up on Sunday morning. You will all be lodged temporarily in one of the Ministry-owned houses while awaiting registration on Monday."

Draco noted that his father did not mention when the Muggle-borns would be returned to Hogwarts and that did not bode well. He glanced at Hermione, his mind whirring a thousand times faster than normal. He had to find a way to prevent her from registering. Somehow, he felt that there was more to this Muggle-born registration than his father was letting on. And it made his blood curdle.

"As some of you will be graduating in a few months, I feel it imperative to let you know of the second law that had just been passed recently. The Ministry is well aware that most wizards and witches marry at a young age, usually as soon as they step out of this illustrious school and have
found jobs in the Ministry or elsewhere. The Ministry has also noted the dwindling numbers of purebloods and so to ensure the preservation of the existing bloodlines, a new marriage law has been passed."

The low murmurings were getting louder and had now taken on the sound akin to what a hundred bees buzzing around a honeypot made. The animosity in the atmosphere was also getting heavier by the minute. Lucius' smirk had started to turn into a fiendish grin, and Draco just knew what was coming next. Unconsciously, his hand tightened its grip on Hermione's, his brow furrowing and breaking into a cold sweat.

"Our new marriage law is as follows," his father paused and scanned the room, a devilish twinkle in his eye, "Marriage between a Mud- (coughs again) Muggle-born witch or wizard and a Pureblood witch or wizard is from now on strictly prohibited. A Half-blood witch or wizard may be permitted to marry a pureblood wizard or witch provided that he or she is a third-generation half-blood and that he or she can prove having at least two pureblooded ancestors in the bloodline. Existing marriages between a Muggle and a witch or wizard will be reviewed and appraised of its merit."

What came next was sheer pandemonium. Sixth and seventh years from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and even a few from Slytherin, jumped to their feet as if in unison and started screaming obscenities at the Minister while those in the lower years looked on with stunned expressions frozen on their ashen faces. Plates and goblets started flying toward the podium. Some students even had to be personally restrained from rushing the Minister himself. Snape's bellows were ignored and the other teachers were forced to perform stunning spells on students with a more violent bend.

Hermione's eyes wandered over to the Gryffindor table hoping to see a glimpse of Harry. If the first law had made him mad, this second one would turn him livid. He was, after all, a first generation half-blood and this law would make things between him and Ginny, a Pureblood, quite difficult. She craned her neck and saw Ron and Neville holding on to a thrashing Seamus, his face a dark purplish red, the veins on his neck angrily standing out. Seamus' father was a Muggle and his mom was a witch. Their marriage would be pried into by the Ministry. Dean, a half-blood with a Muggle mother, was also being restrained by Ginny (although her face was also almost as red as her hair), while Parvati, another Half-blood with a Muggle father, was crying into her hands, being comforted by Lavander (Hermione gasped at that) who had her arms around her, crying as well. But no matter where she looked, she couldn't find her best friend. There just was no Harry anywhere! Before she could turn to the front podium (if he was truly livid, no one could've stopped him from assaulting the Minister!), her hand was tugged rather forcefully from behind.

"Let's go, Hermione! There's nothing we can do here," Draco shouted over the din.

"I can't find Harry!"

"We'll look for him later. We need to figure out what we should do next! Come on!"

Hermione cast a last glance at the chaos behind her before giving in to Draco's tugging.

"We have to go back to the Room of Requirement. That's the safest place we can be," Draco was saying.

"Why don't we just go to our dorm?", she asked, breathless from the fast pace that Draco had imposed on her.

"I'm not sure if it would still be where it is or, even if it's there if it's still ours," Draco replied, just
as breathless as she, but he did not slow down even one bit until they had reached the corridor where the Room of Requirement was. After a few deep breaths, he took both of her hands and looked into Hermione's eyes. Although he was aware that Hermione knew how to work out the Room of Requirement, if they were going to do this at the same time, they must have only one thought in mind, otherwise, it would not appear.

"We have to be thinking of the same thing for this to work. Think of the room that was here earlier, think 'Draco's room in the manor', okay?"

"Okay," Hermione nodded.

They passed the blank stone wall three times, thinking of 'Draco's room in the manor' and after the third pass, a dark oaken door with a brass knob appeared. Draco wasted no time in letting themselves in. Once they were inside, they both ran to the settee and collapsed against its soft seat.

"What just happened, Draco? Why is Snape alive? I even saw Lavander Brown! She's also alive! What is going on?" Hermione cried, panic seeping into her voice.

"I don't know, Hermione. I'm as baffled as you are," Draco said, leaning against the back of the settee, his fingers pinching at the bridge of his nose.

First, it was Theo acting like a lunatic. Now, not only did Snape come back to life, but his father had also turned up like nothing had happened. And as the new Minister for Magic as well! How did that happen? When did that happen?

"And your father! I thought he was in hiding? How did he become the Minister of Magic all of a sudden?"

"I DON'T KNOW, OKAY?" Draco yelled as he jumped to his feet and furiously paced before Hermione.

"Well, don't scream at me! I was just asking a question!"

"And they were stupid questions! How would I know what's happening? Did you think that I have a magic mirror or a crystal ball in my pocket?"

Why was she asking him these questions anyway? Couldn't she tell that he was as much in the dark as she was? Did she think that he was privy to what was happening? Why didn't she try figuring it out herself? She's the smartest witch of their age, why couldn't she start using her brain instead of barking up at him? A soft sob made him halt his frantic pacing.

He silently cursed himself when he realized that he'd just blown up at Hermione again. Taking a few calming breaths, he turned back to her and mentally kicked himself upon seeing her eyes glistening with unshed tears. He walked back to the settee and sat beside her. Draping his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her close and planted a soft kiss on the top of her head. His heart almost broke in two when he felt her tremble against him.

"Don't cry, Hermione. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I didn't mean to. I'm just so….confused," he murmured against her strawberry-scented locks. Her arm went around his waist as she snuggled closer to him.

"I'm scared, Draco. I don't understand what's happening," she sobbed.

"I am too, sweetling. But we'll figure something out," he twisted a little and tilted her face up to his, "we always do, don't we?"
She gave him a small smile, but the fear in her eyes was still there. Draco leaned in and kissed her slowly, savoring her sweetness.

"Together, remember? We can do anything when we're together," he whispered against her lips. Hermione smiled more brightly this time, her eyes crinkling at the sides.

"As long as we're together," she whispered back.

He pulled her closer and hugged her tight because he didn't want her to see the fear that was now gripping at his insides like a coiling snake. What in Merlin's name did just happen out there in the Great Hall? Why are supposedly dead people walking around in the flesh? It would've been quite normal if they'd seen them in their ghostly states, Hogwarts, after all, has its own resident ghosts, but for them to be walking and talking in their corporeal selves! Now, that's mental!

And what about these new laws?

Another horrifying tendril wrapped around his guts as he thought of what could happen to Hermione. He could smuggle her out and hide her, but how and where? She's the most famous Muggle-born in Hogwarts, everyone knows her. Of course, he could disguise her but again, how? Polyjuice potion could very well do the trick, they both knew how to brew it. But the potion needed to mature for a month before it could be of any use and they had only until Saturday to come up with something that could help her come Sunday morning. He must not let her go to the Ministry, so many bells were clanging their warning inside his head. There's also something that has been nagging at him since he'd set foot in the Great Hall, he just couldn't put a finger on it yet.

Draco pulled away from Hermione as a plan started to form in his mind. He would not tell her about it yet. Not until he was sure that it would work. But first, they needed to find Potter. Much as he hated to admit it, he needed to know if Potter was okay.

"Hermione, we need to go back to our dormitories tonight."

"But you said…"

"No, not to the Prefects' dormitory, to our House dormitories. Go to Gryffindor tower and find Potter. We need to make sure that he is alright. But try to act normal, don't ask too many questions. Just observe the people in your dormitory. I'll go to our dorms in the dungeon and do the same. Then, let's meet up here again tomorrow, if possible, before breakfast."

"Okay. But if you find out something really, really important, send me a note so we can meet up as soon as possible," Hermione said, taking both of his hands as she looked intently into his eyes.

Draco nodded and pulled her back into his arms. He could feel the cold fingers of doubt and terror grasping at the recesses of his mind. He stubbornly pushed them away and hugged Hermione tighter.

*We will figure something out. We have to or I don't know what would happen to us.*
Of Myths and Altered Truths

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco return to their old House dormitories to find answers. What they found out, however, gave birth to more questions, not answers.

After putting together a rough plan on how they would unravel the mystery before them, Draco and Hermione came to an agreement that they needed to return to their respective House dormitories first. They needed information and their housemates may be able to contribute on that end. Yet now, as Hermione walked towards the Gryffindor Tower not knowing what she would find there, the cold fingers of dread started to creep into her heart. She steeled herself and trudged on; a Gryffindor never backs out of a challenge, no matter how dangerous it might be.

She was just a few steps from the portrait of The Fat Lady when she realized that she didn't know the password. As she contemplated on what to do next, a voice called out her name. Turning back, she saw that it was Neville, waving to her.

"Hermione! I've been looking for you," Neville said, breathless.

"What's wrong, Neville?" she asked, waiting for Neville to catch up with her.

"Where were you? Were you at the Great Hall?" asked Neville, stopping beside her.

"Uhm...yes. I was a bit late so I didn't join our table. I was at the back with Dra-uhm, Malfoy," she replied. Draco had suggested that they go back to calling each other by their last names, just to be safe and play it by ear from thereon.

"Oh, yes. Being Head Prefects and all," Neville nodded.

Well, at least that hasn't changed, Hermione thought to herself. Apparently, she and Draco were still Head Prefects.

"Were you just going in?"

"Yes, I was just waiting for Ginny," she lied, not knowing if it would seem strange to Neville if she told him that she didn't know the password since she'd been staying at the Head Prefects' dorms for two months now, but since she and Draco hadn't found out yet if they still had a Prefects' Dorm, and since they needed to do some investigating, they'd decided to go back to their house dormitories.

She wouldn't really be surprised, though, if the Head Prefects no longer had their own dorm. Everything was all topsy-turvy now and nothing seemed to be as they would expect. She thought she'd gotten away with her white lie if not for the puzzled look on Neville's face.

"What's the matter, Neville?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought it strange that you would be out here waiting for Ginny when the two of you hardly talk to each other."
Hermione almost gasped at that. What’s going on? Ginny’s one of her closest friends, and Neville knew that, so why was he saying that she and Ginny hardly talked? She took a deep breath and composed herself, frantically thinking of a quick save. She failed miserably, the shock from Neville’s revelation paralyzing her brain somewhat. Thankfully, Neville brushed it aside and grabbed her hand instead and pulled her toward the portrait.

"Well, it's none of my business, anyway. It must be just another of those girly things, eh?" Neville said, winking at her.

Neville, winking? What’s up with him today? He seemed to be more confident and relaxed than usual. There's something quite...

She never got to finish what she was thinking when a pair of arms were flung around her the moment she stepped through the portrait hole.

"Oh, Hermione! It's so horrible! I'm really sorry that this has to happen to you," the body holding her tight cried, literally sobbing against her neck. Hermione's hand automatically went to the back of the girl, patting it tentatively. She didn't know who was holding on to her like it was a matter of life and death, but she felt it her duty to console the girl at least. After a few minutes, she felt the arms loosening, letting go of her. When the girl finally pulled away, she was confronted with the tear-streaked face of Lavander Brown.

Lavander Brown? As far as she knew, the girl hated her guts, so why was she hugging her like they were the best of friends all of a sudden?

"I didn't see you at the Great Hall during the announcement. Where were you? Luna was there but you weren't sitting beside her. Parvati and I thought that they'd already taken you!" Lavander continued to sob, holding on to Hermione's hands.

Luna? Why would she be sitting beside Luna when the Hall was segregated according to Houses earlier? Oh, probably because as Head Girl, I could sit wherever I wanted, Hermione reasoned. But, wait, wait! What was Lavander saying about being 'taken'?

"Why would I be taken, Lavander? Taken by whom and taken where?" she asked, getting more and more confused by the minute.

Lavander cast a nervous glance around her and bit her lip. "Haven't you heard? They're rounding up the Muggle-borns as we speak. And since you're the most famous Muggle-born in Hogwarts, we thought that they'd started with you."

Hermione's blood nearly froze. "But I thought Muggle-borns would not be leaving until Sunday?"

Neville moved closer, his eyes clouded. "Let's move over there," he said gesturing to the couch facing the fireplace.

It was only then that Hermione noticed the furtive looks being thrown her way. The Gryffindor common room wasn't really that large, so it was usually cramped with students huddled together to study or just hang out. Tonight, there were just a few groups of three or four dormmates lounging about, their facial expressions ranging from grim to furious. Gryffindor House would be hit hard by the new laws since they had the second largest population of Muggle-borns.

Once Hermione and Lavander were seated on the couch, Neville pulled a smaller armchair and sat on it, squarely in front of the two girls. He leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

"The Muggle-borns will be leaving on Sunday, but the Minister had left instructions with the Head
"Master to pull them out of their House dormitories and place them in a holding cell in the dungeons."

"What? But why?" Hermione's voice trembled in anger.

"To make sure that no one will slip away," Neville replied.

"How can anyone slip away from Hogwarts? We can't even apparate within the grounds!"

"I don't know, Hermione. That's just what I heard. That's also why I was looking for you."

At the baffled look on Hermione's face, Neville leaned in closer, his head almost touching Hermione's forehead.

"We need to do something about this. I think it's time that we went ahead with our plan."

"What plan, Neville?"

"Come on, Hermione. We've discussed this before, or were those just words to you?"

Hermione felt goosebumps crawling up her arms. Talk about déjà vu! She was just reminded of that time when Neville said the same words to Harry before Dumbledore's Army flew over to the Ministry of Magic to rescue Sirius.

"N-no, of course not. I'm just a little overwhelmed right now. A-and we've talked about so many things, I'm not really sure which of our plans you're talking about," she said, taking a chance at Neville clearing things up before she made a fool of herself.

Just as Neville was about to speak, the portrait swung open, a teary Parvati bursting through. She ran to Lavander who was now on her feet. The two embraced and cried in each other's arms. Neville had also risen and was now consoling the two girls. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ron striding purposely toward them. Hermione rose, sighing in relief. Finally! Now she'd have some real answers. But Ron swept past her, hardly even glancing her way. He stood beside Lavander, his arms going around the weeping girl. Lavander turned from Parvati and wrapped her arms around Ron's waist.

"Oh, Ronniekins! Where were you?" Lavander cried, snuggling closer to Ron who was now whispering soothingly to her.

Hermione stood there stunned speechless by what she was witnessing. Has the world gone mad? Well, it must have, considering that she's just been hugged by a very much alive, and in the flesh, Lavander Brown!

Parvati turned and almost lunged at Hermione when she realized that she was there standing beside her.

"Oh, Hermione! I'm glad they haven't put you in the dungeons yet. Seamus and Dean went looking for Heather, Angus, and James, but they haven't returned yet. The Muggle-borns from the lower years were already in the holding cells in the dungeons," Parvati sobbed into Hermione's shoulder.

"Parvati, has the Minister left yet?" Neville asked. Parvati stepped away from Hermione and turned to Neville.

"He was just leaving. That's why we were able to go down to the dungeons, Filch was busy fawning after Mr. Malfoy. But we couldn't find the sixth and seventh years. They must've been
placed in a different room."

Something intense and dangerous flashed in Neville's eyes. Hermione saw him cast a meaningful look at Ron so she turned to her best friend. His eyes were also burning with something she could not easily identify. She saw Ron's head nod in her direction before going back to Neville, an unspoken message seemed to pass between the two.

"She's with us now, Ron. We can trust her," said Neville.

Hermione's mouth dropped open at that. "Wait! What? What is going on here? What did you mean by that?" Hermione quipped, hardly able to hide her irritation at the two men. Why was her trustworthiness in question all of a sudden?

Neville slowly turned, looking at her incredulously, "Unless I was mistaken. Was I mistaken, Hermione? Are you with us or not?"

With us on what, she almost blurted out, but fortunately didn't. Play it by ear, were Draco's words.

"Of course I'm with you! Why are you asking me such a stupid question? I can't believe that you would even question my loyalty!" she said instead.

Neville's shoulders slumped visibly, a sheepish look coming over his features. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's just that, well, you've been acting strangely just now."

Is she acting strange? She wanted to scream at Neville that they've all been on a whole new level of strange since this afternoon!

"You're Head Girl and what we're about to do isn't really by the book. Plus you're working closely with Malfoy, who is now the new Minister's son," Neville paused, looking intently at her.

"Believe me, he's not happy about that," Hermione muttered.

"What's that?" asked Ron.

"Nothing, Ronald. I was talking to myself."

Lavander whispered something to Ron, then she pulled away from him and turned to Parvati with a smile.

"Come on, Parvati. Let's see if we can find Luna." Parvati nodded and took Lavander's hand.

The two waved at Hermione before stepping out of the portrait hole. Hermione still couldn't wrap her head around the fact that she seemed to be so tight with those two. When did that happen? The biggest question actually should be why were Snape and Lavander, who she knew for a fact had already left the land of the living, gadding about like normal people? They couldn't be Inferi, could they?

"Hermione!" Neville's urgent voice pulled her from her thoughts. She saw that Ron and Neville were already seated, so she moved back to the couch and sat beside Ron. It felt strange how she did not appear to be even on friendly terms with Ron or was this his way of getting back at her? But for what? They'd already settled everything between them, right? They were back to being the Golden Trio, so what's his problem now? Speaking of which...

"Where's Harry?" she asked, mentally kicking herself for almost forgetting that he's the real reason why she came back to the Gryffindor dorm.
Ron and Neville exchanged strange looks.

"Harry?" asked Neville, looking at Hermione like she'd just told them she's Morgana in disguise.

"Harry Potter! I didn't see him at the Great Hall. Where is he?"

Ron and Neville gawked at her like she'd totally gone mental. Then, their faces broke into broad grins as they both shook their head at her.

"Nice one, Hermione. I see you're going to be good at this," Ron chuckled.

It was now Hermione's turn to gawk at the two Gryffindors like they'd grown extra heads. What are they playing at? She would be good at what?

"Alright, look, the Order hasn't given us anything specific yet. But our job, for now, is to keep spreading the rumor that Harry Potter is not just a myth, that he really did survive the Dark Lord's curse and that he'll be coming back to fulfill the prophecy. We have to make people believe that the prophecy is as real as Dumbledore's beard and that it will soon be fulfilled," Neville said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hermione could not believe what she was hearing. Of course, the prophecy is real! And Harry Potter is not a myth! He's her best friend, and Ron's and Neville's, too! Why are they talking like he doesn't even exist? And, what's all this talk about 'spreading rumors'? She thought it best not to air her opinion, however. Just observe them, Draco had said.

"We've already been recruiting over the summer break, Hermione. Me, Ron, Lavander, Seamus, Dean and a whole bunch of others. Your best friends Cho and Luna have been doing the same. Parvati told me yesterday that she's already convinced Padma to join us, too," Neville said. Ron was nodding.

"Join us? To do what?" asked Hermione.

"Really, Granger? Must we go over this again?" grumbled Ron as he slouched back against the couch with a grimace.

"I just want to be clear about everything, Ronald."

"Must everything be in black and white with you?"

"Yes, if you must know! We're not playing games here, after all!"

"Alright! Stop arguing you two! Hermione, it's about the Order of the Phoenix! Now that the Ministry has been taken over by people closely identified with the Dark Lord, the Order has to be revived! And so, we've been recruiting people to join us in the Resistance," Neville explained, keeping his voice as quiet as possible.

Resistance? For Merlin's sake, Voldemort is dead! He's been defeated by Harry! Is this the handiwork of Death Eaters? Are they rising again?

Just then, Seamus, Dean and a bunch of Gryffindors came bursting through the portrait hole. Lavander and Parvati ran toward them followed by Dean, Angus, James, and Seamus. Lavander sat on Ron's lap while Parvati squeezed herself between Hermione and Ron. The boys took their places on the floor.

"All Muggle-borns have been released from the dungeons by the Head Master," said Angus as he
slumped down before the fireplace.

"The Head Master was talking to the sixth and seventh years, that's why they were not in the holding cells below," said an agitated Seamus.

"What did the Head Master want with the older students?" Hermione asked.

Seamus, Dean, and Angus turned to Neville who gave an imperceptible nod.

"Don't worry, we have her full support. She's with us, you can speak freely," Neville said.

Hermione couldn't help but notice that Neville appeared to be the default leader of the group. It didn't surprise her at all since Neville had proven himself capable of leading and making hard decisions during that time that they were not in Hogwarts whilst hunting for Horcruxes with Harry. He's brave, smart, dependable, dedicated, and extremely loyal. He also had everything that the prophecy required and had Voldemort not made the choice to go after the Half-blood like himself, Neville could very well have been the Chosen One. It just felt strange seeing him acting so natural and without any of his insecurities.

"He just told us to look after the younger ones, and to be prepared for anything," said Angus.

"Prepared for anything?" asked Ron.

"That's all? Nothing more?" asked Hermione.

"He also told us not to forget our wands on Sunday," James said, his eyes swiveling toward Neville. Hermione saw the twinkle in Neville's eye. He seemed to know more than he was letting on.

She about to ask more questions, especially about Harry, when Neville stretched his arms and stifled a yawn.

"Well, it's been a stressful day for all of us. We still have classes tomorrow, so why don't we call it a night, eh?" he said, turning to the others with a benevolent smile.

"Are we going to meet again tomorrow?" Dean asked.

"Yes, same time, same place. Agreed?" Neville said. Everyone nodded before they went their separate ways. Everyone except Hermione, which Neville did not miss.

"Is there something wrong, Hermione?" he asked as he helped Hermione to her feet.

What was she supposed to say? That she didn't know what 'same time, same place' meant? Play it by ear, she reminded herself. Don't ask too many questions, just observe them, Draco's voice echoed in her mind.

"No, nothing's wrong. I was just thinking about something." Neville nodded. She, however, saw the surreptitious look that passed between him and Ron who was still seated on the couch with his arms around Lavander. It still unnerved her whenever she saw the 'resurrected' brown-haired girl.

"I think I better get some rest now. It's been a long day," she said cheerily. Lavander rose to her feet and gave Hermione a warm hug.

"Everything's going to be alright, Hermione," she said before letting go of Hermione's hand.

"Thanks, Lav. I really appreciate your concern," Hermione smiled at her former rival.
"Oh, that's nothing. That's what friends are for, right?"

Hermione just nodded, unable to reciprocate the other girl's unexpected friendliness. She nodded to Ron who in turn just waved his hand at her.

"Come on, Hermione. I'll walk you to your dorm," Neville said striding past her. He was half-way through the portrait hole when he realized that Hermione hadn't moved. His brows rose in question.

"Which dorm? Can't I stay here?" Hermione asked, feeling a bit stupid the moment the words left her lips. Lavander giggled while Ron groaned.

"You would be most welcome, of course, Hermione. But as Head Girl, you should set an example for all of us, don't you think?" Neville winked at her.

A blush bloomed on Hermione's cheeks at Neville's words. Did he just reprimand her?

"Fine. Let's go then. Actually, you don't need to escort me, Neville. I can manage on my own I'm sure. I'm the Head Girl, after all. I can roam the corridors even after curfew," she smirked.

"Sure, Hermione, if that's what you want. I'll just see you out then," Neville stepped out of the portrait hole, chuckling softly to himself.

Hermione waved goodbye to Ron and Lavander then stepped out of the portrait hole herself.

"Good night, Hermione," said Neville, giving her a most winsome smile.

"Good night, Neville. See you tomorrow," she said turning to the left.

"Uh, Hermione," she heard Neville call to her when she was about ten paces away.

"Yes, Neville?"

"The Ravenclaw Tower is...that way," Neville said, pointing to the staircase at the end of the corridor to his right.

Ravenclaw? I'm in...RAVENCLAW? What in Merlin's beard is going on here?
Draco discovers some hard truths about their current situation in the Slytherin dormitory.

The Slytherin dormitory had always been the hardest to find in Hogwarts. For one thing, it was located in the dungeons (which most students would rather avoid than explore), secondly, the entrance to it was hidden behind a brick wall that can be opened only by uttering a password (which was changed every day). Thirdly, only a true Slytherin would be admitted by the wall. As Draco stood in front of an expanse of aged, rough-hewn bricks, he wracked his brains for the possible password that would gain him entrance. Slytherin passwords always pertained to the pureblood status of the majority of its populace, so he tried the most commonly used.

"Purebloods rule," he uttered. The bricks started to glow, forming a door-like shape that soon melted to reveal the room beyond. At least that still works, he thought.

Draco stepped beyond the portal and walked into a group of Slytherins lounging before the oversized hearth. They were laughing and bantering with each other without a care in the world. He did not know why, but a sliver of irritation sliced through his innards. How could they act like everything's coming up daisies when they knew that the rest of the wizarding world was in such turmoil because of the new laws? Granted, those laws did not affect them much, but still…

Was I this insensitive before? Caring for nothing but my own hide?

His thoughts inevitably turned to Hermione and how these new laws would drastically affect her and, by extension, their budding relationship.

Relationship? Are we truly in a relationship now? Goosebumps started crawling up his arms as something twisted in his gut. Would she really consider being more than friends with him? They've been 'enemies' for most of their years in Hogwarts, could she really get over those harsh and hurtful words that passed between the two of them? He certainly hoped so.

The taste of her lips still lingered on his and her sweet scent still clung to his nose. He'd give everything, do anything, just to have her in his arms again. Now that he'd come to terms with his lifelong infatuation with the only girl that has ever truly intrigued and fascinated him, the one he thought he'd never even get a chance to speak civilly with, nothing would ever keep him from her. Not even Voldemort himself, had he still been around and about, would have prevented him from being with the most captivating witch he'd ever known.

"There he is! The man of the hour!" Ruther Phillip's voice intruded into his musings. He turned to find his fellow Slytherin and Quidditch teammate standing in the middle of the room, clapping enthusiastically. A few of the younger years were nodding and clapping with him, their faces plastered with silly grins.

"What are you on about, Phillips," Draco snapped, irritated that he was pulled away from his thoughts of Hermione. He never really liked Phillips. There always was something that irked him about that bloke. If he had not been the best Beater to come along ever since Peregrine Derrick had
left Hogwarts, he would've kicked him out of the team long ago.

Phillips smirked as he pulled Draco into a tight hug. Draco shoved his burly housemate away, now getting really annoyed at his unwarranted friendliness. Phillips just shrugged and sneered.

"Well, pardon me, mate. We're just proud to have the son of the Minister for Magic walking about the Slytherin Common Room," speaking more to his captive audience of younger Slytherins than to Draco. He seemed to enjoy their attention.

Draco snorted, deftly evading Phillips' attempt to clap him on the back. Good thing he still had his finely-tuned Seeker reflexes. As he walked toward the stairs leading to their dorm rooms upstairs, he saw from the corner of his eye Zabini and Nott sitting on the couch facing the fire. A brief nod in their direction sent the two young men jumping to their feet and following in his footsteps. He'd just reached his bed when his two friends slipped in themselves.

"That Phillips can really be an annoying git sometimes," Theo said, throwing himself face down onto his own four-poster bed, his arms stretched out hugging the sides of the mattress.

"Don't mind him, Draco. He's been trying to wiggle himself into your good graces for as long as I can remember. I'm sure he'd be trying harder now considering your new status as the Minister's son," Zabini said, sitting in his own bed, his eyes fastened on his blonde friend. He knew that Draco didn't like people who smooched up to him because of his family's wealth and social standing. An irritated snort from his friend confirmed Zabini's view.

"I don't want to have anything to do with the so-called Minister for Magic," Draco growled, fingers raking through his tousled hair. He still hadn't figured out how his father managed to turn himself from the most wanted fugitive into the Minister for Magic overnight. And it disturbed him to no end.

Theo flipped himself on the bed and sat up shooting a quick glance at Zabini. They were both aware of the not so loving relationship between Draco and his father. All through the years, Draco had been trying to distance himself from his father's influence, which earned him a lot of reprimands and even physical punishments whenever he came home to the Manor. It was only when he was back in school that Draco was able to act out all his frustration and teenage angst. Unfortunately, most of their daft schoolmates saw it as just plain arrogance on his part. They did not know that it was Draco's way of coping with the pressures at home. Especially from his father.

This falling out with their fathers was what Draco shared with Nott, they both despised their fathers' high-handed manners and their being proud Death Eaters. Or at least that's how Draco remembered it. His earlier conversation with Nott suggested otherwise, but still, that's not fully established yet. He really should explore that area later on to avoid any awkward moments with his friend.

Zabini, on the other hand, who had lost his father at an early age, was brought up, more or less, by his mother's succeeding husbands (she'd had six, all dying within two years of marriage) so he did not have the opportunity to forge any lasting bonds with anyone of them. His mother's current husband was a wealthy, pureblood landowner who tried to remain neutral during the war. Before the end of it, though, he openly declared support for the enemies of the Dark Lord and had even given testimony against some of his supporters. Zabini himself had fought beside Draco against the Death Eaters during the Battle of Hogwarts. For although Zabini was a pureblooded wizard who did not generally associate himself with Muggle-borns, he neither had any soft spot for Death Eaters. Except for Draco, of course. But, again, that was only because Zabini knew that Draco was only forced to take on the mark.

"You know that nobody here will believe that, mate. So you better prepare your arse to be licked
and smooched like crazy in the coming days," chuckled Zabini. His eyes showed concern for his mate, though. This blonde Slytherin would not be in the best of moods when that happens.

Draco just grunted in reply and collapsed on the bed.

"Seriously, mate. You should be more careful nowadays. There are spies running lose around here. You wouldn't want them reporting your every move to your father now, would you? Especially with regard to what I witnessed earlier," Theo piped in, his statement pregnant with unpleasant implications.

"What are you talking about, Nott?" Zabini asked. Theo already told him about catching Draco and Granger getting cozy together, but he preferred to hear it straight from Draco.

"It's none of your business, Zabini. Neither is it yours, Nott," grumbled Draco, swinging his long legs off the bed to sit up with his elbows resting on his knees.

"Look, mate. What would your father think if word gets to him that you're fraternizing with a mud…" Theo squelched the word at the murderous look that came into Draco's eyes.

"Wait! What is Nott talking about? Fraternizing with whom?" queried Zabini as he leaned his elbows on his knees, his greenish gray eyes fixed on Draco.

He really should jump at this chance to clear up things with his two best friends. It would give him the opportunity to gauge their reaction to his being with Hermione. But he just remembered that there was more to their present situation than met the eye. There were just too many strange things going on at the same time that he'd have to set aside his personal dilemma for another time.

"Can we just put it to rest? I really am in no mood to discuss my personal liaisons right now," Draco said in the most annoyed tone that he could muster. Hopefully, his two friends would back off now, they never savored facing the full blast of his rotten temperament.

The two exchanged glances and shrugged almost at the same time. "Sure, mate. No worries," Zabini quipped.

Draco was wondering how he could start probing without rousing the suspicion of the two Slytherins (Theo he could easily sidetrack but Zabini was too smart for that) when Theo's fondness for gossip sprang to the fore.

"By the way, have you heard the latest that's been going around?"

Zabini groaned, falling back in his bed, "For Merlin's sake, Theo!"

"No! No! This is not about who's snogging whom. I'm not even sure who started it or if it can even be considered as gossip. It's a bit dangerous, actually," Theo said, his voice dropping conspiratorially.

That perked Draco's interest. He waited for Theo to continue with bated breath.

"Dangerous? In what way?" Zabini asked, his own curiosity now stirred.

Theo leaned closer to his two friends, both of them now sitting up with their eyes trained on him. He had their full attention now, obviously.

"There's been rumors going around that the prophecy about the…(gulp)..fall of the DL, is all true and that Harry Potter survived the curse and will be coming back soon."
Theo's voice was now barely above a whisper, but it seemed to echo around the room.

Draco felt like he was doused with ice water. That niggling feeling at the back of his head was there again. How could Harry's surviving the curse just be a rumor? For the love of Morgana! Scarhead already defeated the Dark Lord, didn't he? So what's with this 'prophecy' crap? Something's just not adding up…

Unless his two friends were playing a prank on him, of course. A quick glance at Zabini, however, squashed that theory like a bug. Zabini's eyes were too intense and his dark skin sported a greenish tinge for him to be in on Theo's joke. Besides, Zabini was not much of a prankster. He considered it a waste of his talents.

On the other hand, if what Theo's saying is true, it would reinforce the theory that's been forming in his mind since this afternoon.

"That is dangerous indeed, mate. I hope you're not spreading it around like jam on toast, especially now that the Ministry is more or less under the control of…him," Zabini warned.

Theo swallowed hard, his eyes betraying the fear within. Draco digested this and added it to the things he would be discussing with Hermione tomorrow. He wondered how she was faring with his fellow Gryffindors. Was she also getting the shock of her life?

"Theo, what's wrong?" Draco asked after noticing the furtive eyes of his friend.

"Uhmmm…"

"Is there something more?" asked Zabini.

"T-there's a movement…"

"What movement?" questioned Draco, his hackles rising.

"Alright, but this should not leave the room, you hear?" Zabini and Draco nodded in unison.

Theo took one deep breath before speaking. "I'm seeing this girl from Ravenclaw, okay? Don't ask me who, please. I promised her that I wouldn't say anything, but since you're two of my best mates…"

"Just tell us, Theo!" Draco almost screamed, he didn't like being kept in suspense this long.

"Right! Alright (another deep breath), she told me that there are people here in Hogwarts recruiting for the Resistance. One of her housemates invited her to attend a meeting."

"Resistance? Against who or what?" Draco asked.

"Against the Dark Lord, of course!" Theo replied.

Draco almost fell off his bed. What is Theo talking about? The Dark Lord is dead! The war had been over for almost a year! The room seemed too constricting all of a sudden.

"Did she attend the meeting?" asked Zabini.

"No, she was too scared. I have a feeling she'd be joining soon, though, especially now. She's very close to Granger," Theo said, his eyes turning to Draco.

"What does Granger have to do with it?" Draco asked, glaring at Theo.
"I have a feeling that she's involved in this organization…"

"Why do you say that, Theo?" Zabini asked, moving forward, bracing himself to thwart any possible attack from Draco. His friend looked like he could pound Theo senseless if he ever made any slur against the Muggle-born witch. Merlin! He's not just playing around, he's serious about the Ravenclaw witch, he thought.

Theo cast a nervous glance at Draco before replying to Zabini. "Look, she's the smartest witch around here, the Resistance would be stupid not to recruit her. Plus, she's a Mud-(some noisy throat clearing) Muggle-born and we all know that they're the ones being slowly oppressed by these new laws."

"I'd prefer that you stick to the facts, Nott. What you just said is pure conjecture on your part. And it could get Hermione in trouble if you start peddling that around," Draco hissed, his eyes skewering Theo with a deadly stare.

Draco's use of Granger's first name was not lost on his two friends, but they chose not to call attention to it since the blonde Slytherin looked like he could slaughter them both if they did.

"I would not even dream of whispering about it to anyone but you two! I don't want to get into trouble, you know? I just wanted to let you in on something that could probably blow up into a major thing later on," Theo cried, hurt that his two best mates would think him that dense.

"Look, mate. I know I'm a prat most times, but I also think that those two laws that the Minister announced earlier are just a bit too much," Zabini said to Draco, diverting his friend's attention away from the volatile subject called Granger.

A dark shadow crossed Draco's brows. Somehow he had the feeling that they would get worse and those two laws would look like a walk in the park compared to what's forthcoming. His heart clenched as his thoughts returned to Hermione. He must find a way to protect her!

"I'm sorry about how I acted around Granger earlier, Draco. She's not really that bad, come to think of it. At least she's not a Gryffindor," Theo mumbled.

It was Draco's turn to notice the stiffening of Zabini's shoulders as his eyes took on a hard glint when it swiveled to Theo. It appears that he's not the only one whose heart was captured by a Gryffindor. He wondered which lioness had snatched the heart of this elusive snake before him.

What is it with the three of them? Draco pondered. Theo's seeing a Ravenclaw (probably a Muggle-born, too), while he and Zabini were enraptured with Gryffindor girls. Why couldn't they stick with their own? Inter-House romances were always riddled with problems basically because of the inherent House rivalries. So, why did their eyes (and hearts) have to wander beyond the walls of Slytherin House? He was about to move on to a different subject, but his blood turned cold when what Theo said sank in.

"Wait! Theo said Hermione's not a Gryffindor? What the…"

"Ravenclaws are much better in my opinion. Gryffindors are just too uptight and self-righteous for my taste," Theo continued with a smirk, oblivious to the growing tension his statements had raised between him and his two roommates.

"Hermione's a Ravenclaw?" Draco blurted before he could stop himself.

Theo's and Zabini's eyes flicked to each other before they both turned to Draco and started guffawing like donkeys, inevitably dissipating the air of hostility that was rising just minutes ago.
"Damn, mate! You mean to tell me you've been snogging Granger without even knowing what house she's in? That is just vicious, man! Vicious!" Theo chortled.

"You've been snogging the Princess of Mudbloods?" Zabini sniggered, shaking his head at Draco.

And before either of the two Slytherins could react, a red-faced Draco had launched himself against an unsuspecting Zabini.

"Don't call her that, Zabini, or I'll forget that you've been my best mate for the last damned six years!" Draco growled, his hands grabbing at Zabini's robes as he pulled the dark-skinned wizard up from his bed.

Thankfully, Theo recovered quickly enough from his initial shock before it escalated into a full-blown fistfight. He grabbed Draco's arms and pulled him with as much force as he could muster away from their stunned, gawping roommate.

"What's got into you, Malfoy? Why are you so protective of Granger all of a sudden? How many times have you called her that yourself? Now you act like it's a crime to call her by that moniker that you yourself had coined," Zabini snarled back, straightening his robes before dropping back on the bed.

"Will the two of you just shut it? I think we've got bigger problems ahead of us than Draco's infatuation with Granger," Theo said, himself dropping unceremoniously beside Zabini.

The other two Slytherins cast guilty glances at their impromptu referee. Theo may not be the sharpest tool in the shed but he's quite good at calming frazzled nerves. His last statement must've hit Draco hard because his next query was delivered in an almost fearful tone.

"What did you mean by that, Theo? Is there anything else you're not telling us?"

Theo ran nervous fingers through his hair before letting out a deep sigh.

"I received an owl from my 'loving' (a bit of eye rolling there) father yesterday. He did not go into much detail but the message was clear - Hogwarts is no longer safe from the clutches of the Dark Lord. Remember what I told you about spies running around Hogwarts? The two laws that have been passed are just the tip of the iceberg, too. And with the Resistance starting to get organized, it won't be long before we're faced with a full-blown war. I'm afraid that we'd have to start thinking where our true loyalties lie. We need to make a choice before even that is taken away from us."

And the floor seemed to fall away from under Draco's quaking feet.

WAR? AGAIN? Damn, Hermione! We really need to talk. NOW!
The Lull Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Draco tries to deal with his pain and fears.

The constant tapping on the window broke through Hermione's thoughts. When she looked up she saw a regal-looking eagle owl that she didn't recognize staring at her. She opened the window to let it in and it flew straight to her four-poster bed. She followed it to the bed where it stretched its leg toward her. The owl hooted once, its large, intelligent eyes silently studying her. A note was attached to it and she wasted no time in detaching it from the feathery messenger's leg. She stroked its magnificent feathers to calm it down, she'd rather not wake up her roommates just now. It would be quite hard to explain the presence of the owl inside their dorm room at this time of night.

"I'm sorry I have no treats for you," she said as she continued to stroke it.

The owl playfully nipped at her fingers, hooted again, then spread its wings and flew out of the window. It disappeared into the dark of night in a blink, making her wonder if it was ever really there at all. Had it not been for the note in her hand, she would've thought that it really was just a figment of her imagination. She wouldn't be surprised even if it was considering the kind of day she's been having so far.

She had been sitting in the plush armchair near the window overlooking the Quidditch field, unable to sleep in spite of her exhaustion. It could be just because everything around her felt strange, (even though all her things were neatly stacked in the trunk at the foot of her bed) or it could be because she hadn't come to terms with her being 'transferred' to Ravenclaw House. Ravenclaw's great, but she'd always thought of herself as a Gryffindor. It would probably take some time before she came to terms with her being an eagle instead of a lioness.

A yawn escaped her as she stretched her arms above her head. Yet, bone-tired as she was, she knew she wouldn't have a wink of sleep tonight.

The note seemed to burn in her hand so she unfolded it to find out who had sent it at this late hour. She frowned when she saw that there was nothing written on it. She turned it over, but still, it remained blank. Then, she realized that it was probably enchanted to stay that way unless she uttered a spell. Grabbing her wand from her bedside table, Hermione tapped on the piece of parchment and whispered, "Revelio".

Nothing. It stayed as blank as brand new parchment. Apparently, whoever had sent it was just a bit too secretive, or afraid of it being read by someone other than her. A thought struck her. If this still didn't work, she'd just chuck the piece of parchment into the fire.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said, tapping on the parchment. And voila! Words done in neat cursive started to scribble themselves across the tiny parchment.

Hermione,

We need to meet. Room of Requirement, NOW!
She frowned at the note. They'd agreed to meet before breakfast, so why was he...

Her breath caught in her throat, goosebumps crawling up her arms. *Unless he'd found out something that couldn't wait until tomorrow!*

That brought her jumping to her feet and grabbing her Ravenclaw bathrobe, her wand stuck inside its spacious front pocket. Slipping into her loafers, Hermione quietly padded out of the room that she shared with Jasmine and Luna. Thankfully, both girls slept like the dead, so she wouldn't have any problems slipping away unnoticed. She just hoped that Filch and his cat wouldn't be roaming the corridors just yet.

She reached the Room of Requirement without incident. She passed the wall three times thinking of 'Draco's room in the Manor' and as expected, the dark oaken door appeared after the third pass. Turning the brass knob, Hermione cautiously peeked through the crack when two, strong arms pulled her inside without preamble.

"Merlin! I've missed you," Draco whispered against her hair. His arms were wrapped around her tight, like as if he had not seen her just a few hours ago.

"Draco, what's wrong?" she said, her own arms wrapping around his waist.

Draco stepped back, cupping her face in his hands. His gray eyes were glowing, almost silver against the firelight. They were roving over her face, memorizing her every feature. It made her shiver, an unwelcome thought wiggling itself inside her brain.

Why does it feel like there's something earth-shattering that he's going to tell me? Why does this feel like he's about to say goodbye?

"Why did you-" her words never left her lips since Draco's were suddenly pressed against hers, warm and soft, begging for a response. She relaxed against his arms and welcomed his deepening kiss. His tongue brushed her lips and she opened up to let him in. It was a slow, but passionate kiss and it affected her in ways she'd never thought possible. It made her want to melt in his arms, to stop time and to forget the world beyond these walls. But just as it started in a flash, it was over just as quickly.

Draco stepped back and walked away from her. He dropped himself onto the settee and sat with his head cradled in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He was a picture of despair and hopelessness and Hermione almost cried at the sight.

"You should stay away from me, Hermione," he said in a voice that was alien to her.

She took a deep breath before walking to him. He barely moved when she knelt before him.

"Draco," she said, reaching up to caress his pale cheek. It was wet with his tears. "Tell me what's wrong, please. You said that together we can do anything."

"And that was a stupid thing to say! I was stupid for saying something like that," he growled, turning his head away from her inquiring eyes.

Draco could've slapped her and it wouldn't have hurt as much as his words did.

"Stupid? Why was it a stupid thing to say? Because you've changed your mind? Because you've finally realized that you don't really want to be with me?" Hermione retorted, her fear and
frustration rising to the fore, making her reckless. She jumped to her feet and stood before Draco with her fists clenched tightly at her sides.

"That's not what I meant!" Draco groaned, raking his fingers through his tousled hair.

"Then enlighten me, oh, wise one! What did you mean by what you've just said?"

Two pain-riddled silver orbs swiveled up to her brown ones and Hermione's anger vanished into thin air. He didn't need words to tell her of the pain, the terror, and the doubts that were torturing him right now. She was instantly at his side, pulling him close as she cradled his head on her lap. He was really crying now, loud, gut-wrenching sobs wracking his body as he clung to her like a drowning man.

"Shhh...it's okay," she whispered over and over as her hands rubbed his back. His whole body was trembling, and she couldn't do anything to stop it. She had a hundred questions running inside her head, but she kept them at bay. There will be time enough to address them, but for now, all she wanted was for him to feel her presence. For him to know that whatever horrors he had to face, he would not be facing them alone. After what seemed like an eternity, Hermione felt Draco's body relaxing against her arms, the anguished sobbing dying down completely. A few minutes more and his breathing had returned to its normal, steady rhythm.

"He's alive, Hermione. He's alive," he mumbled.

Hermione did not need to ask who the 'he' was. She'd already found that piece of the puzzle while reflecting over the day's events in Ravenclaw Tower. Still, her blood froze when she heard him say it. Suspecting it and knowing it to be true were two different things after all. She could feel the cold fingers of fear clawing up her throat, but she brushed it aside with a savage hand.

"I-I kinda figured as much," she said.

She felt Draco chuckling softly. "I'm not surprised that you did," he said as he lifted his head to smile at her. He looks so vulnerable when he drops his mask, Hermione thought.

Sighing deeply, Draco rose from Hermione's lap and sat up on the settee, his arm going around her shoulder to pull her close against him.

Hermione slipped her arms around his waist and savored the warmth of his body. How was it that she felt safer in his arms than in Ron's? Was it really that easy to forget that they used to be enemies?

"You know, I really should keep in mind that my girl was not called the brightest witch of our age for nothing," Draco said while kissing her hair.

"Your girl, hmmm?"

Draco pulled away from her and tilted her face up to his.

"Well, you are, aren't you?" Her cheeks heated up as she looked at those gorgeous eyes of his.

"Of course I am," she replied, snuggling back into his arms. If only they could stay like this forever, wrapped in each other's arms with nary a care in the world. But even as they sat quietly together, Hermione sensed the tension returning to Draco's body. He was like a spring that was slowly being wound tightly at the core.

"Nott said that he saw the Dark Lord when he went home for the summer," Draco said, his voice
flat and without emotion, yet Hermione caught the anxiety he tried to tamp down. "I'm not sure if he told me that before, but he said it again tonight."

Hermione nodded, unsure of how to respond.

"Are you truly in Ravenclaw?" he asked, after a few minutes of silence.

"Yes, I truly am," chuckling softly. He laughed as well.

"Oh, my! It seems that I fell for an eagle, after all, and not a lioness."

Hermione giggled. "I'm not really that surprised, you know. The Sorting Hat almost put me in Ravenclaw before but changed it's mind at the last minute. Perhaps it...just changed its mind again. What about you? Are you still a Slytherin?"

"That I am. I guess I am a snake through and through," Draco said, snuggling against her.

"I went to Gryffindor Tower, you know after we left here."

"I thought as much. That was our plan, anyway, to go back to our House dormitories, right? And since you didn't know that you had been re-sorted into Ravenclaw, you'd have naturally gone straight to Gryffindor Tower. So, how was it? How did you know that you should be in Ravenclaw and not in Gryffindor? Did they chuck you out?" he said before playfully tweaking her nose.

"Ha-ha! No, they didn't," she replied while pinching his side. "I was able to talk to Neville and...the others..."

Draco must've noticed her hesitation since he twisted to the side to look into her eyes.

"But Potter was not there, was he?" he asked.

She shook her head, a sharp pain slicing through her heart as she thought of her absent friend. A friend who was slowly starting to sound like an imaginary one.

"It seems that he doesn't exist in this reality that we're in," said Draco.

"What do you mean 'in this reality that we're in'?"

Disengaging himself from their embrace, Draco turned to face her fully, his eyes burning with an intensity that almost frightened her. And she knew that he was going to confirm what she'd feared all along - that this was no longer the Hogwarts that they woke up in this morning.

"I know this is going to sound crazy, but hear me out, alright?"

Her throat had closed up on her so she just nodded.

"It's been nagging at me since we went into the Great Hall and saw that the people, who we knew were already dead, were very much alive. I just wasn't sure what it was, but after talking to Theo and Zabini, my theory was confirmed. We are in an alternate reality. This is not the same timeline that we were in just this morning. Something happened while we were in the Room of Requirement this afternoon."

"Timeline? What do you mean by that, Draco?"

"Look, when we woke up this morning, everything was as we remember it, right?"
Hermione nodded, a thoughtful frown creasing her brows. She could see where Draco was going with this. "The war was over, and we're doing our seventh year," she said.

"Yes! Just as it should be! Then, when we left the Room of Requirement it was as if we stepped into a different world - where the dead rose and my father was the Minister for Magic."

"But we are not in a different world since we are still in Hogwarts, you are still you and I am still me and all our friends are still here. Well, most of them anyway."

"Exactly! We are not in an alternate world, we are in an alternate timeline!"

They stared at each other in silence as they let that thought sink in. Hermione gasped as she thought of the timeturner that she had used during their third year.

"Do you know how I've been able to take in so many subjects during our third year?" she asked Draco, then she realized that he probably didn't even notice that.

"I've always wondered about that, you know," he admitted, a sheepish grin adorning his lips.

"You noticed that?" Hermione quipped, blushing profusely.

"I've always noticed. Even during our first year. How did you think was I able to catch you and Potter traipsing around the castle after hours? I was following you! You're the one who never took notice of me," said Draco giving her an impish grin.

Hermione's cheeks burned. How could she tell him that she did notice, but he was just always so mean to her that she had to force herself to stop noticing?

"Of course, I noticed you! You've always been calling me Mudblood, how then could I just ignore you completely?" she smirked.

It was Draco's turn to blush. Hermione half expected him to mumble an embarrassed apology, but he instead chuckled as he pulled her into a tight embrace.

"I'm sorry about being so horrible to you, dearest. I kept on calling you that because that's the only time that you ever talked or even looked at me, you foolish girl! Didn't you know that all those stupid antics that I did before were to catch your attention? But alas! You felt nothing but disdain for yours truly that you practically broke my heart," Draco said as he kissed the top of her head.

Hermione squirmed from his hold and looked up into his eyes, her brows knotted.

"I don't believe you. I've heard all the rumors, you know. Of how you have a new girl in your arms every week. And how you've been..." she stopped and cleared her throat, horrified that she'd almost said 'snogging every girl in Hogwarts'. "Never mind," she said instead, returning to Draco's side.

"The operative word there is 'rumor', Hermione. They're not entirely true," he chuckled. "But we're getting off the subject, sweetheart. How ever did you manage to go to all those classes during our third year, anyway?"

"McGonagall gave me a time-turner. She let me use it during the year, but I returned it before I left for the summer."

"Aha! I knew there was something strange going on back then. And are you thinking that it's also what was used by whoever changed the timeline now?"
She thought hard about that. As far as she knew, the time-turner that she used could only take her as far back as five hours, and no longer than that.

"I'm not sure. The time-turner that I used could not take me back more than five hours, but what happened here was more like a time reversal. So many things have changed that we can't even be sure how far back in time the time-turner had gone. Or if even that's what has been used at all!"

"I see what you mean. This stinks of dark magic, that's for sure. But if Potter is non-existent in this alternate timeline, then we can assume that time was made to go back to when he wasn't born yet, or since so many things have changed..."

Hermione blanched at the implication of Draco's words. What if Voldemort succeeded in killing Harry during this alternate timeline? Then he would be reigning supreme! But what about Dumbledore? Does he even exist in this timeline?

"What did you learn from the Gryffindors?" Draco cut in.

"Pretty much the same as what you've learned. Harry Potter and the prophecy are just myths," Hermione sighed.

"Did they talk about the Movement?"

"Yes, actually! How did you know about that?"

"Well, apparently, Theo's dating a Ravenclaw who's being recruited to join the Resistance. And that there's a meeting, but the girl did not attend because she was too scared. Theo thinks that the girl will be joining soon, though, because she's very close to you."

"Close to me? Why would that motivate her to join?"

Draco scoffed, "Theo thinks it's because you're part of the Resistance. I suppose he's right. You and Potter were Dumbledore's Army, after all. I wouldn't be surprised if you've organized something like that here. But, of course, I told Theo, in no uncertain terms, mind you, to stop spreading that tidbit about because it will put you in danger."

"I think I am more of a reluctant participant this time," Hermione said.

Draco pulled away to look down at her. "Reluctant? You? I find that hard to believe."

Hermione punched his arm teasingly. "And what did you mean by that? I'm not a natural rebel, Mr. Malfoy! I'm outraged that you think me as such!"

"Ow! You're not only a natural rebel, you're a violent one, too!" Draco cried in mock anger.

"Oh, stop it! I hardly touched you!" countered Hermione as she leaned back on Draco's chest.

"I learned something strange, though," Draco said after a while.

"What about?"

"It seems that in this timeline, Theo and Blaise are considering going rogue and joining the Resistance. It was actually Theo who said that we should start thinking about where our loyalties lie. The Theo I knew would not even dream of crossing his Death Eater father, let alone join in any Resistance movement against the DL. He would be terrified."

"He's different now, I guess. Well, I hope he chooses to join our side. What about Blaise?"
"Blaise, it seems, is enamored with a certain Gryffindor, so I can safely say that he would most definitely be joining up. And I have a feeling I know which lioness has him mooning," Draco smirked.

"You do? Oh, do tell, Draco," Hermione said, looking up at him.

"Hmm...a certain redheaded Quidditch player with a brood of equally redheaded brothers."

"Ginny? Ginny Weasley? Whatever gave you that idea?" she scoffed.

"Well, I know for a fact that, in our old timeline, Zabini fancied Weaslette even though he knew that she was with Potter," he replied, a smug grin gracing his lips.

"You're such a gossip, Malfoy!" she laughed, hitting him playfully on the chest.

"That wasn't gossip! Were you not listening? I said it was fact!" he retorted feigning indignation. They both laughed after that, momentarily forgetting the precarious situation that they were in. After their humor died down, they reverted to sitting together in quiet companionship, each one lost in their own thoughts.

"Shouldn't we be going back to our dorms?" Draco asked after a while.

Hermione sensed the hesitation in his voice, like didn't want to leave, but he didn't want to get her in trouble, either.

"Can't we just stay here? I don't feel like going back to Ravenclaw Tower," Hermione mumbled against his chest. She'd rather have his arms around her as she listened to the quiet beating of his heart than stare up the drapes of her cold, lonely bed.

"Are you sure? I'm all for it if you are," replied Draco, pulling her closer against him.

"Mhmm...Just for tonight..."

"Just for tonight," he agreed.

In truth, neither of them would mind staying here with each other every night...for the rest of their lives.

Both of them knew that there were still so many things to talk about, but they were just too drained for that. For tonight, all they wanted was to enjoy this peaceful lull before the storm.

There's always tomorrow, after all. And nobody knows what it will bring.

Especially now.
There's Something You Should Know

Chapter Summary

Draco finally realizes the depth of his feelings for Hermione.

Draco awoke to the soft chiming of bells. Slowly opening his eyes, he almost jumped out of bed upon recognizing the surrounding dark mahogany walls. Why was he in his room in the manor? Dread started to freeze his insides when something to his left moved. He turned and a mass of dark, brown curls greeted him. It was only then that he remembered where he was - the Room of Requirement - and the chiming he heard was his wake-up call.

Reaching out, he gently pushed away a few stray strands that fell onto her face. She looks like an angel, he thought. His lips curved into a smile. Hermione, do you even know how beautiful you are? he wanted to ask. Of course, had he done so, she would've just snorted at him in disbelief. And that's probably what captured his heart in the first place, her lack of conceit. She was the smartest, most beautiful witch he'd ever known, and yet she acted like it was nothing. He suspected that she didn't even know it.

All through the years, he'd battled with himself. He'd been fascinated by her brain and quick wit during their first year at Hogwarts. He just couldn't believe that a Muggleborn like her could rise to the top of the class, beating even him in most of their subjects. She obviously was an exceptional witch and he eagerly told his father about her. He thought that he could make his father see that Muggleborns were not really that inferior to Purebloods. That some of them could even be more gifted than a handful of their kind. That was when he received his first beating. His father was furious when he told him about her. Not only because he admitted that no matter how hard he tried he couldn't top her, but also because his father recognized the growing respect that he had for her.

Muggleborns (or Mudbloods, as he preferred to call them) were nothing compared to Purebloods, they're not even worth getting acquainted with, much less befriended. The Malfoys belonged to an ancient, noble line of Purebloods, and they were the proudest of the lot. His father had ingrained in him that they were the superior race, even half-bloods were not fit to mingle with them. He taught him that to socialize with Mudbloods was akin to betraying their Pureblood status. That's also why he was forbidden from associating with the Weasleys, the Potters and all the others of their pureblood lineage who had made peace with the Muggleborns. They're what he called Blood traitors. He was adamantly ordered to keep away from Potter, not only because Harry's father, James, who belonged to another ancient line of Purebloods, had married a Mudblood, but because he was the cause of the Dark Lord's downfall.

When he went back to Hogwarts for their second year, he forced himself to 'hate' the Mudblood. He taunted her every chance that he got, not because he really disliked her, but only because he wanted her to dislike him. Perhaps if she hated him, then he would be able to control his own feelings. Perhaps then he would also start really hating her. But no matter how hard he tried, deep inside, he felt nothing but respect and awe for her. He'd known that something terrible would happen in Hogwarts that year. He overheard his father talking to the owner of Borgin and Burkes about a diary, and how it could bring back the Dark Lord. He also heard of their talk about a monster, hidden beneath Hogwarts castle, that could eliminate all the Muggleborns there.
He mulled over what he'd heard, especially about the monster. He'd searched their extensive library, but he came up with nothing. Then, just by chance, he came upon this book in Flourish and Blotts that talked about a Basilisk. He couldn't let his father know that he was researching about 'Unusual Monsters and Where To Find Them' (which was the title of the book), so he just tore off the page and pocketed it when no one was looking. When the first attack happened, and he saw the writing on the wall about how the Mudbloods would be next, he felt scared for Hermione. But of course, he couldn't let anyone know. When he sneered at her and told her "You would be next, Mudbloods", he was actually hoping that she would be warned. But, no! She even took it upon herself to uncover the mystery (damned typical Gryffindor nosiness!).

He followed her around for days (clandestinely, of course), just to make sure that she would be safe. He even asked the dimwits, Crabbe and Goyle, to keep an eye on her, too. Eventually, however, the goons started suspecting his true motives, so he had to make them believe that he was truly hoping the monster would get Granger next. And so, just to keep the suspicious nitwits from asking too many questions, he did the shadowing himself. It turned out to be harder than he thought since he still had classes and Quidditch practices. His fear was realized when he received news from the two halfwits that Hermione was in the hospital wing, petrified. As soon as he had the chance, and when he was sure that no one was around, he slipped inside the hospital to see her. His heart almost stopped when he saw her in such a state.

He blamed himself for being such a coward. He should've told her about the Basilisk. He had planned on giving her that page that he tore off the book, but he never mustered enough courage to approach her. And now, it was too late. But then, he knew that Potter and the ginger would visit her eventually. He tucked the page in her half-closed hand, hoping against hope that it would be found by either of the two. Thankfully, they did, and she was saved.

By next year, his feelings for her were getting much more complicated. His father was beside himself when his plan to bring back the Dark Lord was thwarted and so he turned his anger on him. He blamed Draco for his inability to outdo the Mudblood even in academics (he came in second place again). More beatings, more verbal abuse. And he thought he'd truly started hating her just then. But only because he was getting hurt because of her. When he finally saw her again at Hogwarts, he convinced himself that he was over his infatuation for her. He hid behind his mask of arrogance and disdain, never letting a moment pass without insulting her. It wasn't really difficult to act like an ass around her because by then he was introduced to another emotion that involved her. Jealousy. He would never admit it, but the green-eyed monster was riding his back pell-mell during that year. Much as he tried to deny it, he envied Potter's and Weasley's closeness to her. Why couldn't she fall for his charms just like the other girls do? That punch that she gave him should've have made him shun her, but instead, it just reinforced his desire for her. And so he had to abandon his illusion of hating her. Still, he knew that he stood no chance with her.

Their fourth year in Hogwarts was riddled with even more heartache (for him, that is). He still moped around whenever he saw her with Potter and the Weasel. But nothing could've prepared him for the hurt that he had to endure during the Yule Ball. It was bad enough that she never even glanced his way (even his barbs were often just ignored now), but to see her being sweet and attentive to that foreigner was just too much to take. It was pure torture looking at her, seeing how lovely she was, only to be reminded that she would never, ever be his. Then, came the shocking news that the Dark Lord was finally back. Terror gripped him when Potter screamed that Diggory was murdered by Voldemort. He knew just then that their lives would never be the same again. His fears were confirmed when he went home for the summer. His father was so exhilarated by this new development that he even forwent beating him when he told him that he finished (as per usual) second place again.

Fifth-year saw him battling with himself even more. It was obvious that Hermione would never see
him as anything more than a nuisance, an arrogant boor. Still, his feelings grew. But this one-way affair was also starting to annoy him. It was during this year that the other girls became more insistent in pursuing him. He thought he could finally let go of his stupid crush on Hermione if he started seeing other girls. And so he did. Which turned out disastrous, actually. Instead of filling the void in him, it only aggravated it. None of those girls could hold a candle to her. None of those girls truly liked him, either. They were just after the bragging rights of having dated the Malfoy heir. Their lack of genuine affections only made him even more jealous of Potter, especially the Weaslebee since it appeared that she favored him. He changed girlfriends as often as he changed shirts and it gained him the reputation of 'Player'.

He hated that term, but he did not discourage it either, hoping in his own twisted way that she would finally notice him. She did not. By then he was so exasperated with her that he grabbed at any chance he could to get to her, even joining Umbridge's ludicrous Inquisitorial Squad. Looking back, it was probably one of the most asinine things he'd ever done. He was so blinded by his jealousy that he did not even realize that it would drive Hermione farther away instead of impressing her.

If he thought his fifth year was torturous, his sixth year in Hogwarts brought the word torture to a whole new level. His father was imprisoned in Azkaban because of his involvement in the disastrous raid in the Ministry of Magic. As the default head of the House of Malfoy, he was forced to take Lucius' place in the Dark Lord's army. And with that, the embedding of the dark mark on his left arm. He had no choice. Voldemort made it clear that unless he was willing to take his father's place, the house of Malfoy would be eliminated instead. And that would mean his and his mother's deaths. He had never been as terrified as he was that night that the mark was burned into his arm. Narcissa begged her sister, Bellatrix, to plead with the Dark Lord to spare Draco, but his aunt was too besotted with the Dark Lord that she chastised her own sister for being so foolish. Bellatrix told his mother that she should feel privileged that the Dark Lord had chosen her son for a most important task. His mother knew, however, that the mission was doomed to fail, and that it was actually punishment for his father's incompetence in getting the prophecy that the Dark Lord wanted.

When he went back to Hogwarts, he was more like a shell of his old self. He couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, he was consumed by terror every minute. The dark mark burned on his arm, a constant reminder that he was now a condemned man. This, if nothing else, guaranteed that he would forever be seen as the enemy and that he'd finally lost whatever little chance he had with Hermione. He tried to put her out of his mind, all he wanted now was just to survive this year. Not just for himself but more so for his mother. He knew she would be killed if he failed in his mission. But his heart just wasn't in it. He delayed as much as he could, until one day he received something that prodded him to work harder. A dead bird - he got the message.

He concentrated more diligently on fixing the broken Vanishing cabinet in the Room of Requirement since then. And after a few more tries, he succeeded. At least he was able to complete the first part of his mission, his mother would be safe for the meantime. When the day of the attack came, his apprehension grew. Not only because he dreaded the second part of his task, but also because Hermione could get hurt or even killed. He knew that she would not sit on the sidelines and wait for things to calm down. She would be in the thick of things and that's what he feared the most. Yet, he could not do anything to help her, he was being guarded by his deranged aunt, Bellatrix. He just hoped that Potter would be able to protect her somehow. He, however, failed miserably in killing Dumbledore. He just couldn't do it. And that's when he realized that he could never, ever be a Death Eater. Dumbledore was right, he was no killer. Surprisingly, it was Snape who killed the Headmaster, saving him in the process. It was only later on that he learned of the Unbreakable Vow that Snape made with his mother.
As expected, he was severely punished when he returned to the Manor. It was the first time that he sampled the joys of the Cruciatus curse. By this time, the Dark Lord had already turned Malfoy Manor into his own headquarters. His father had been released and returned to them. But the Malfoys had already lost their standing in the Dark Lord's army. They were more like hostages now instead of favored members. Although his father still tried his very best to make up for his and Draco's failures, he never was able to regain his former stature. They all knew that they were now expendable. Draco tried to cope as best as he could with his new situation. He started his training as a Death Eater, and he knew that soon he would be forced to torture, and eventually kill, the captives that the Snatchers brought to their home every day. He couldn't stand it, but he had no choice. He wasn't ready to die just yet.

He thought of Hermione every once in a while, wondering how she was doing, hoping that she was safe. He had learned that the Golden Trio had not returned to Hogwarts. At first, he thought that they had gone into hiding. But then, one day he overheard the Dark Lord telling his aunt Bellatrix that Potter was hunting Horcruxes. He had no idea what they were, but based on the Dark Lord's reaction, he was sure that they were important to him. If Potter was out there doing some hunting, Hermione would definitely be with him. That's just how she was, she would never abandon her friend. And his fear for her escalated for she would be a prize catch for the snatchers.

And just when he thought that he would never hear of her again, she was suddenly standing right smack before him. A group of snatchers had captured them in the forest just a few miles from their home. He had an inkling that they were trying to make their way back to Hogwarts. Potter's face was swollen, probably from a spell done hastily to disguise him. The Weasel seemed okay, just a few bruises here and there. But it was her that really concerned him. His heart almost shattered when he saw her. She was thin and haggard looking. Her clothes were dirty and frazzled. But at least she was alive and uninjured. He wanted to put his arms around her, to secret her away from the place. He was already making plans on how he could help the three escape when Bellatrix arrived.

Apparently, the snatchers did not recognize the three, but since the Dark Lord had made it known that he was looking for three teenagers, two boys, and a girl, they brought the trio to Malfoy Manor instead of the Ministry. Thankfully, the Dark Lord was not there when they were brought in. Bellatrix wanted to inform the Dark Lord immediately, but Lucius, not really keen on making another mistake, wanted to be sure first. And so he ordered Draco to identify the three, especially the one with the swollen face. For the first time in his life, Draco used his natural gift of Occlumency. He closed his mind from Bellatrix's probing and lied through his teeth, telling her that the snatchers were wrong, those three were not who the Dark Lord was looking for. His father was disappointed, Bellatrix was furious.

He renewed his plans of helping in their escape when Bellatrix singled out Hermione and tortured her out of spite. He died a little with her every scream. He wanted to save her, but he feared that they would all be killed, him, his parents and even Hermione, if he interfered. His aunt was the most brutal, bloodthirsty dark witch he'd ever known, and she would not think twice in killing them. Miraculously, Potter and Weasley were able to escape the dungeons. He had no intention of fighting them, but he knew that his parents would be put in danger if it appeared that he was not. He pretended to fight, but when he finally faced Potter, he let himself be disarmed. In the middle of the fight, their former house elf, Dobby, appeared and rescued Potter, Hermione, and Weasley. It was only then that he was able to sigh in relief. She was safe!

Looking down at her now, Draco knew that he would do anything to keep her safe, always. He would never let anything like that happen to her again. The cold fingers of dread crept up his spine as the events of the previous day invaded his thoughts. With the Dark Lord alive in this timeline, there's a very big possibility that they would have to fight him again. This time, though, there
would be no hesitation or doubts in his mind. This time, he was ready to die. For her. And nothing would hinder him from doing the right thing. For now, more than ever, he had every reason to fight against the evil that Voldemort wished to bring into their world. She was more than enough reason.

Hermione shifted, her arm stretching in front of her, carelessly laying itself on his waist. She was mumbling in her sleep. He leaned closer to listen, eager to uncover some of her secrets. He almost burst into laughter when he realized that she was enumerating the ingredients of Amortentia. Even in her sleep, she was studying! Wasn't she just so adorable?

Slipping his arm beneath her head, he wrapped it around her shoulder and pulled her close. He savored her sweet scent and wished that they didn't have to leave this room at all.

He felt her moving in his arms, her head tilting up to him.

"Draco?" her sleep-laden voice caressed him in ways he never expected.

"Yes?" he replied, his fingers tangling in her hair.

"Is it morning already?"

"Almost, sweetheart. But not quite yet." He had asked the room for a 5 am wake-up call, just to give them enough time to return to their dorms before going off to breakfast.

"Can we stay for a few minutes more? I'm still sleepy…"

"Of course, Luv. Go back to sleep, I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

"Thanks," she mumbled.

Draco sighed in contentment. He could stay like this forever. He would never get tired of holding her, kissing her and…well, he shouldn't get ahead of himself, should he?

He chuckled inside. Who would've thought that Draco Malfoy, heir to the richest and the proudest Pureblood clan in the Wizarding world, would be lying blissfully beside a Muggleborn?

He looked down at the girl in his arms. Her even breathing told him that she was sleeping deeply, oblivious to everything around her. There would be troublous times ahead, especially with the new laws. Their relationship was now officially forbidden by law. And unless they were able to figure out how to get back to their own timeline, they would pay dearly if they continued on. One thing's for sure. Even if they were not able to leave this timeline, he would never give her up.

For years he'd been baffled by his feelings for her. He went from confusion to recognition, then to denial and finally, acceptance. He had long acknowledged that his interest in her went way beyond admiration. But it was only now, in their last year at Hogwarts, that he had made peace with it.

He touched his lips to her strawberry scented curls and whispered, "I think there's something you should know, Granger. I really am in love with you."
Chapter Summary

As The Resistance gears up for the possibility of war, they find support from a few unexpected personalities.

To say that the atmosphere in the old, abandoned classroom on the fifth floor where a group of students was gathered was tense would be a grave understatement. It was virtually crackling with a mixture of apprehension, dread, excitement, anticipation but most of all, confusion. The students huddled in groups of three or four and judging by the patches on their robes, were segregated (whether intentionally or not) according to Houses. But amongst all these befuddled faces, only one wore the rarest expression of all - happiness. And it was displayed, albeit subtly, on the blushing face of a girl sitting alone at the back of the room, her head of chestnut curls bent down on a piece of parchment.

Hermione could no longer count how many times she'd read what was written on that small piece of parchment. Still, the smile on her pink lips would not vanish. It was given to her by the first-year Slytherin boy, Thomas, as she was coming out of the library. Her heart soared when she read what it contained: "This morning I woke up to find perfection in my arms. I wish I could do that every day...for the rest of my life. Missing you, DM"

That part about waking up brought butterflies to her stomach every time she thought about it. She didn't know how they both ended up in Draco's large, silk-covered bed, but she had a hunch that he carried her there after she had fallen asleep in the settee. She had been startled at first, it wasn't every day that she woke up in bed with a man's arms wrapped around her, after all. But when she looked up to find those sultry, gray eyes staring down at her, it made her wish really, really hard, that it wasn't just a dream. Thankfully, it wasn't. The passionate kisses that she received, later on, proved that he was indeed flesh and blood. Nothing but pleasurable, happy thoughts filled her head whenever she reviewed the events of last night.

Well, except for that part where Draco broke down and tried to push her away again. That still mystified and troubled her, but she would rather not think about that now. She preferred to wallow in her bliss, even for just this once.

Unfortunately, circumstances would not let her 'wallow' much longer. The tension in the room suddenly rose just a few notches higher that even Hermione in her euphoric state felt it. Tucking the note back in her pocket, Hermione looked up to find Daphne Greengrass, together with her best friends Tracey Davis and Sebastian Daley standing by the door. Hands started going for wands when Neville rose and walked up to the trio.

"Glad you could come, Daphne," Neville said, extending his hand to the blonde-haired girl who took it despite the apprehensive look on her face.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to be here, Neville?" she asked, her eyes sweeping the room.

"Of course, it is. They're just surprised, not yet used to having people from your House joining us in our meetings. They'll adjust, I'm sure."
Daphne nodded and gave Neville a tentative smile. She turned to the other two Slytherins beside her, then with a slight inclination of her head, they took their seats at the farthest corner of the room. It was only then that Hermione felt Neville's eyes on her.

"Hermione, if you could please join us here at the front. We'd like to start now," he said.

There was a loud scraping of seats as people moved around and settled themselves. With a nod of her head, Hermione rose and walked up the front and stood beside Neville. As she scanned the room a sense of déjà vu hit her again upon seeing almost all of the same faces that looked up at her when she was recruiting for Dumbledore's Army.

Seated in the front row were Parvati and Padma Patil, the brothers Colin and Dennis Creevey, Seamus Finnigan, Nigel Wolpert, Dean Thomas, and Luna Lovegood. A few seats to the left were Ron and Lavander, Hannah Abbott, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Anthony Goldstein. To the right sat Ginny Weasley, Terry Boot, and Susan Bones. Of course, other members of the DA were missing since they'd already left Hogwarts - the Weasley twins, Angelina Johnson, Cho Chang, Lee Jordan, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet. But since there were a few new faces in attendance aside from the three newcomers from Slytherin like Angus McDermot, James Toffler, and Heather Piccard, Hermione thought that they could somehow compensate for their absence.

"Alright. So, we all know everyone here since this is already our third meeting. And I'm happy that our numbers are growing," said Neville as he pulled up four chairs to the front. "Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge our new members first (gestures to the Slytherins seated at the corner), we all know them anyway, so there's no need to introduce them."

Just as Neville was about to call the meeting to order, the door opened a crack and the head of Jasmine Chang, Cho Chang's cousin, and Hermione's roommate popped in.

"Are we late? Can we still come in?" she quietly asked, two pink spots blooming on her cheeks.

"It's okay, Jasmine. Come on in," Neville said, smiling at her.

She smiled, then pushed the door open. She turned and gestured behind her, disappeared through the door again, then came back with a red-faced Theodore Nott in tow.

Wands were immediately grabbed from pockets and bags. When Blaise Zabini sauntered in, everyone in the room (except for the three Slytherins at the back, of course) rose in unison, wands poised at the motley group near the door.

"What are they doing here?" growled Ron, his face an ugly beet red.

Jasmine jumped in front of Theo and Blaise, her arms outstretched as if to shield the taller men behind her whose wands were also pointing at the other occupants of the room.

"Please! Listen to me first!" she cried.

"Why should we? Have you come here to turn us in? Does Cho know about your treachery, huh, Jasmine? I'm ashamed to be in the same house as you," sneered Anthony.

"What are you talking about? I'm not turning anyone in! We're here to help!" Jasmine shrieked.

"Help? From them? They're Slytherins!" Seamus bellowed.

"So are we," a voice from the back shouted. Eyes swiveled to the speaker. It was Daley, his cheeks
flushed red in spite of his mocha-colored skin.

"That's enough. Let's all calm down," Neville said as he moved beside Jasmine, effectively providing a barrier between the two hostile factions.

"Alright, everyone. Let's settle this like adults," Hermione said as she stood before Neville, her wand held loosely at her side.

"How can we settle this like adults when there are traitors in our midst!" It was Ron. Hermione sighed, wishing that Harry was here. He always had a way with people. Thinking of her absent best friend was like a knife to her heart, and it made her growing frustration boil to the fore.

"Just because we're Slytherins you automatically assume we're traitors?" Zabini said, the hurt and anguish evident on his face.

"Well, you're snakes, aren't you?" someone from the middle row said.

"Enough," Hermione said, her hand now trembling in anger.

"And what are you? A cute, little badger?" taunted Nott.

"I told you this would be a mistake, Jasmine. These people would never change their opinion of us. We might as well have come from a different planet!" sneered Zabini.

There was now a jumble of voices from everywhere. Hermione heard Neville trying to placate Ron and Seamus while Jasmine pleaded with Theo and Zabini to lower their wands. Everyone was speaking at the same time. The noise was getting louder, angrier; the air getting more volatile, more hostile and it was just too much for Hermione to take. She wished she could go back to her earlier light and bubbly mood, but the belligerence of her fellow Resistance members just destroyed that possibility completely.

"I SAID, ENOUGH!" Hermione hollered, no longer able to contain her boiling exasperation at the sudden turn of events.

They all jumped at the force of her voice. No one ever thought that the soft-spoken, mild-mannered Ravenclaw Bookworm could even muster a screech much less a booming command that would make them all quake. When they turned to look at her, the fury in her chocolate brown eyes was nothing compared to her verbal outburst.

"Lower your wands or you will all regret it," she said, her wand pointed at no one yet was menacing just the same.

Low murmurings were heard as heads turned to cast furtive glances at each other. They all knew that Granger was the best in spellcasting. And no one dared challenge her to find out if she would carry out her threat, especially not in her current state. An uneasy silence enveloped the room as wands were slowly lowered and tucked inside pockets. It was Seamus who finally gave voice to the group.

"Not to be a prat or anything, but how sure are we that they are really here to help us?"

"I've talked to Daphne's group, Seamus. And they're here because they want to fight. They have their own reasons, but I'm not at liberty to divulge them," Neville replied.

"But what about them?" Justin asked, gesturing at Theo and Zabini.
"I will vouch for them," Jasmine said.

"And so will I," Hermione seconded. She heard the loud intake of breath both from the group before her and the ones behind. She didn't care. They needed every help that they could get and she would not let House pride and stupid prejudices get in the way like they did before. She was just relieved that Draco did not make good on his plan of joining Theo and Zabini just now. He'd expressed his willingness to go public with his defiance of his father, but Hermione convinced him to get a feel for the situation first. Merlin only knows what would've happened if he had made his appearance in this meeting.

"Alright, then! I suppose we should get back to our seats. Jasmine, Theo, Blaise?" Neville stepped aside to let the trio pass. They took their seats near Daphne's group.

There were still low grumbling in the background, but just one sweep of Hermione's eyes and the annoying noise died down. Hermione and Neville moved to the front and took their seats.

"If I may say something?" a voice from the back said. It was Daphne. All heads swiveled in her direction, curiosity written on their faces.

"Sure, Daphne," said Neville, smiling warmly at the blonde Slytherin.

Daphne walked up front, her head bowed, fingers clutching at her robes. When she was at last standing beside Neville, she looked up and gave a shy, hesitant smile. Then, she cleared her throat and addressed her fellow students.

"I know most of you have certain ideas about us, Slytherins. We have always been painted as supporters of the Dark Lord just because we are Purebloods. But let me assure you that not all Slytherins are bloodthirsty, pompous asses bent on wiping away all Muggleborns and Half-Bloods," she paused at the smattering of soft chuckles. It seemed to give her confidence since she squared her shoulders before plunging ahead. "I'm not sure if anyone of you had heard, but my parents have been very vocal about their views regarding the treatment of non-Purebloods. In spite of the pressure being placed on my father to refrain from hiring Muggleborns in our company, he still went ahead. He even promoted one to a very estimable position. As punishment for his disobedience, my mother was kidnapped, tortured, and later killed by a group of Death Eaters…"

There were gasps and muffled curses heard amongst the group, but Daphne wasn't finished yet. "My father had just been placed under House arrest, all our companies have been sequestered, our assets frozen. It is only by the charity of Head Master Snape that I and my sister, Astoria, are able to stay here at Hogwarts. My sister wanted to come to this meeting, but she was taken ill. She took our mother's death really hard and her old condition has resurfaced because of it. But she is in full support of what we're doing here. She also wants to fight. I guess what I really want to say is this, not all Slytherins are bad. Some of us are just like you, caught in a battle between good and evil. And some of us want to fight for the good. Please don't let this Pureblood nonsense divide us. My parents fought hard to stamp that out. I'm here to fight, not only for my mother, not only to avenge her death but to honor her lifelong dream of an equal society. A society where blood status does not matter. I would understand if you do not want us to be part of your group, we've been at odds for so many years and it is hard to trust just anyone nowadays. But I want to let you know that whether you let us fight by your side or not, we would still fight, even if we're on our own."

There were sniffles and soft sobs heard by the end of Daphne's speech. Parvati and Lavander were the first to rise and go to Daphne. She was quite surprised when the two girls hugged her, but she returned their hugs nevertheless. Soon she was surrounded by the other girls and it inevitably turned into one huge group hug. After a few minutes, when the sniffles and sobs finally died down, Daphne made her way back to her fellow Slytherins. Tracey hugged her while Sebastian and Blaise
tapped her back. Only Theo was left staring moodily at the floor, his knotted brows a clear indication of his troubled thoughts. When Jasmine gently nudged him, his face cleared somewhat but not completely. And before anyone could guess what he was up to, he was on his feet and addressing the group.

"I would also like to say something," his deep voice reverberated in the room and it caught everyone's attention. His eyes remained fixed on the floor, though, his frown deepening as he spoke. "I'm sure all of you know that my father is a Death Eater. That's probably why you thought that Jasmine here had turned traitor. But my father's beliefs are not mine. And my presence here now is a clear declaration of my breaking away from him. Yes, I've been an arse to most of you… especially to you, Granger," he looked up and fixed Hermione with a pained expression. "I regret that now. I shouldn't have listened to my father's twisted ideals. But I'm not here to ask for your forgiveness or to make amends. That's too self-serving in my opinion. All I want to say is that in this battle against the Dark Lord, I am one with you. And whether you accept me here or not, you have nothing to fear from me. For on this day forth, I pledge to this group my loyalty…and my life…if it ever comes to that…"

When he turned to sit back in his chair he saw the shocked look on his fellow Slytherin's faces. None of them ever thought that Theodore Nott could ever be this eloquent and zealous in his words. It was only Blaise who nodded and clapped him on the back when he was seated. Of course, that's because he had been exposed to Nott's rare brilliant moments. Theo's speech did not really come as a surprise to him.

Hermione was quite overwhelmed by Theo's and Daphne's speeches that a lone tear freely flowed down her cheek. Damn! Are these Slytherins really this passionate about their beliefs? She asked herself. Her lips twitched as she was reminded of her own ardent serpent and how much she enjoyed his displays of passion. She mentally shook herself and stubbornly pushed her wayward thoughts aside to focus on what Neville was saying.

"...to make it easier for us to coordinate our efforts. So, we would like to ask Hufflepuff and Slytherin Houses to pick your representatives. They would be responsible for disseminating information amongst your group members."

"It's Daphne for us," Zabini said after a few minutes of discussion amongst themselves.

"Hufflepuff's rep is Hannah," Justin piped in.

"I just have one concern here," Ernie Macmillan said, rising to his feet.

"What is it, Ernie?" asked Neville.

"How can we ensure secrecy. I mean, how can we guarantee that no one in here would turn traitor later on. This is not a social club, after all. A lot of the things we'll be doing would be dangerous…"

Neville leaned closer to Hermione and whispered in her ear, "I think it's time that we ask them for their commitment."

A chill went up Hermione's spine as the full force of what they're about to do descended upon her. She did something like this for the DA before, but that was child's play compared to what she was now about to make his fellow students commit to. If there was any other way to ensure the safety of everyone, she would've taken it. But soon things would boil down to life and death situations and they couldn't risk harboring a traitor.

She had already ran this idea through Draco and he was also adamant in having her plan
implemented. He'd been exposed to the forces of Voldemort before, and he knew just how much of a role treachery has played in the Dark Lord's rise and return to power. Neville was at first apprehensive, but when he saw the logic of her argument, he agreed completely. Still, it gnawed at her conscience. Because aside from the fact that she would be breaking a lot of school rules, she would be doing serious magic.

Magic that could cause permanent damage to the offender.

But in the fight against the forces of evil, they could not afford to be soft or be beholden to childish ideals. Clearing her throat, Hermione slowly rose to her feet and faced those brave souls who looked upon her with anticipation, so eager to hear her words.

*Now we'll see who's really serious about the cause.*

*We'll see who's willing to lay their lives on the line...*
The Muggle-borns are all set to leave Hogwarts for the Registration, but Draco can't shake off a bad feeling about it.

A/N: So, how was the last chapter? Was it boring? I'm sorry if there's not much action yet. It will get more exciting in the next chapters, especially now that the Resistance is girding for war. As you must've noticed, I've introduced a few new characters. We're now getting deeper in this alternate reality and with the Slytherins now joining the Resistance, things are going to get really heated.

BTW, guys, I'm starving for comments, so a few words would really help me keep going with this. Just let me know if this story's getting crappy. Thanks to all those who are still sticking with it.

I'd also like to think the following people for the kudos/bookmarks - Jowyn05, Moonlit_magnolia80, Ivory_Inkwell, Seleeene, csilivili12, deathexmachina and of course, the guests!

Saturday went by in a blur. And Draco could not believe that it was already Sunday morning, the day when the Muggleborns would be boarding the Hogwarts Express and taken to the Ministry of Magic. Much as Hermione tried to assure him that everything would be alright, he could not shake the nigglng feeling that something terrible was about to happen. As he looked up the emerald green canopy of his four-poster bed, Draco reviewed the previous day's events with that unshakable cloud overhead.

After the meeting with the Resistance on Friday night, Hermione and Draco met in the Room of Requirements to discuss what had transpired. He wasn't surprised when Hermione told him that Theo and Blaise were there. He'd somehow figured that they would choose to fight the DL rather than become one of his lieutenants. What astounded him was the fact that they signed the 'contract' that Hermione had made to ensure the safety of all Resistance members. It was almost as binding as an Unbreakable Vow, guaranteeing that there would be no turning back once the participant had signed their name. She told him that she had done something similar to it for Dumbledore's Army, but not as binding as the one she penned for the Resistance.

He understood her reason for doing so. The Resistance was not as simple as Dumbledore's Army after all, where they just met to learn defensive spells since Umbridge had made it clear that she did not want them 'trained' in them. The Resistance would be more involved not only in training but also in spying and doing dangerous errands for the Order. Up until now, he couldn't believe that she could perform such advanced magic. Even he, with his vast knowledge of both light and dark spells and counter-spells, could not perform something as complicated as what she had done. A
surge of pride swelled within his breast as he thought of his exceptional witch. 

Thinking of her turned his thoughts to their more tender moments together, making him clutch his oversized pillow close to his chest. If only it was she he was holding close instead of this inanimate object, but Hermione had to go back to Ravenclaw Tower to finalize plans with Luna and Jasmine. One would think that waking up beside her for two nights straight would've been enough to satisfy his longing for her. Instead, it had made him crave her company even more. They'd talked until past midnight that Friday night and it was only sheer exhaustion that made them stop (actually, she again fell asleep in the settee). Which was fine with him since it gave him a valid reason to take her to his bed and sleep beside her. They woke up blissfully in each other's arms. He would've been content to stay in bed with her for the rest of the day, but the preparations for the Muggle-borns' departure the next day prodded them into action (after quite a long snogging session, that is). 

Draco's newly acknowledged and declared raw emotions for her, long suppressed and forbidden, still had a tendency to scare him senseless. And there were still times when he would hear the sharp stabs of his conscience, urging him to let go of her, telling him that he did not deserve her. There was also that paralyzing fear of what might happen to her once his attachment to her was made known. He knew how the Dark Lord's minions operated, they would use her to get to him. Which was why he'd decided to keep his support for the Resistance quiet for now. Hermione was right, he needed to test the waters first, especially now that they're on a different timeline. They had no clear allies here, no one they could fully trust. In truth, they only had each other to rely on. 

And so, even though he truly wanted to openly join Hermione in the rebel movement, he had to keep his involvement a secret. Who knows, it could be even more advantageous if he remained an unknown factor. Perhaps, he could use his connections to help the Resistance - work in the shadows and turn spy for the Order just like what Snape did in their original timeline. 

He couldn't help but smile whenever he thought of Professor Snape, the man who was hated by everyone, the man who 'murdered' Dumbledore, the man who risked everything for the woman he loved, the man who saved him from utter destruction. The truth of Snape's sacrifice, when Potter eventually divulged it to give honor to him, came as a shock to all of them. Who would've believed that the man who everyone called a coward, turned out to be the bravest of them all? He wondered what role his old Potions teacher played in this alternate reality that they were in now. Was he still a spy for the Order or was he now a fully entrenched and loyal henchman to the Dark Lord? Would he still mentor him? Draco knew that he must explore this avenue further. Because with Potter gone, and the Golden Trio basically non-existent, they would need a really powerful ally to survive the coming war. 

Speaking of allies, he really must get up and seek out his only one true ally - his beloved Hermione. He must at least see her before she left for Hogsmeade. He had wanted to see her off, but she thought that it would raise a lot of eyebrows if he did. True, of course, because even here in this alternate reality, they were still, if not enemies, not friends either. And as Hermione pointed out, the prejudices in this Hogwarts were stronger than before. And yet…he MUST see her! 

Flinging the thick comforter from his body, Draco practically jumped out of bed and rushed towards the bathroom. If he couldn't send her off, then he would at least be with her at breakfast. They were still Head Prefects, he could pretend to discuss last minute Prefect work with her. Mentally patting himself on the back for his brilliant plan, Draco sauntered into the bathroom quite happily. He had just stepped out of a steaming bath when a red-faced Nott followed by a frowning Zabini burst into the room. He could tell by their expressions that a heated argument between the two was brewing in the air. 

"Oy! Where have you two been this early?" Draco asked as he put on a navy blue button-up shirt
and black slacks.

"Nowhere," Zabini quipped.

"At the Great Hall," Nott said at the same time.

Draco frowned at the two. Can't they just tell him where the bloody hell they've been?

"Why can't you just tell him that we were at the Great Hall?" Nott rounded onto Zabini. Blaise just glared at him.

"What's this all about? Is it a crime now to go to the Great Hall?" Draco asked, pulling at his dark woolen socks. Nott rolled his eyes at Zabini and turned to Draco, mumbling under his breath.

"Look, I know this is going to sound...I don't know...strange? But I do know why you went to the Great Hall. You can't hide these things from me, you know. It's not a crime to go to the Great Hall this early," Draco smirked at the two. "In fact, I'm just getting ready to go there myself."

"Why?" Nott and Zabini said in unison.

"To have breakfast, of course! Just like you did earlier," Draco chuckled. Zabini frowned, Nott just shrugged.

"Tried having breakfast is more like it, seeing as Zabini here almost got into another row with the Gryffindors for staring at...OW!" Nott grimaced as Zabini's elbow dug into his ribs.

"If you're going to see Granger..." Zabini began, tousling Theo's brown locks rather roughly. The gesture was not lost on Draco. He sat back on his bed and glowered at his friends.

"Spit it out, you two. What's going on?"

"Look, mate, we're going to be straight with you. If you're planning on doing your usual routine with Granger, think twice about it, okay? Before you get hurt," Zabini said in all earnestness. Nott nodded in agreement, focusing his bright, hazel eyes on Draco.

Draco didn't know how he should take his friend's statement. Was he warning him? About what? Was he now Hermione's champion all of a sudden? Somehow the latter made him want to punch his best mate of six years.

"Before I get hurt? And what exactly are you trying to imply?" he said through gritted teeth.

Zabini and Nott exchanged meaningful looks, then they both pulled out crystal pendants hanging from thin silver chains. They appeared to be identical - plain, opaque moonstone shards. Draco almost laughed. He'd already seen those, Hermione had shown them to him before the meeting. He also knew what they were for and what they were capable of doing, but since he still did not know if he could divulge his relationship with Hermione to the two Slytherins before him, he held his tongue in check and feigned ignorance, reflexively twisting the emerald and silver ring around his fourth finger. Hermione had also charmed a couple of rings for both of them. Hers was a silver band with a dark blue, sapphire stone. They function pretty much the same way as Nott's and Zabini's crystals did.

"And what do your couple necklaces have to do with Granger?" he smirked.

"She's a scary witch, mate! Scary but brilliant! Do you know what these crystals can do? All members of the Resistance were given this. It's our way of communicating with each other," Nott
said in a rush as he bandied the pendant before Draco's eyes.

"So? It's very much like the dark mark, isn't it? It's what the DL use to summon his followers to him," Draco shrugged.

"Yes! But Granger is an eighteen-year-old witch! How does she know how to do this kind of magic? The Dark Lord is like…how old…70?" Nott stammered, clearly agitated now.

"Actually, he was much younger than that when he created the dark mark," Zabini volunteered.

Draco hid his laughter by pretending to cough.

Nott huffed and stamped his feet. "That's beside the point! All I'm saying is that I wouldn't get on Granger's bad side if I were you. I bet she could turn you into a ferret with just a flick of her wand, and she wouldn't even blink!"

This time Draco could no longer disguise his laughter, he ended up guffawing in front of the two confused Slytherins sitting before him.

"Mate, this is no laughing matter! Theo's right, we underestimated Granger. We thought she was just books and memorization and all. She's not! She's a really, really gifted witch!" Zabini said in all seriousness.

Draco could tell that his two friends were just now realizing just how brilliant his lovely witch really was. And it made him puff up his chest unconsciously because that wonderful creature was his girlfriend now.

"And did you know that she made us sign a 'contract'. With our blood!" Nott exclaimed.

"Yes, mate. She knows how to work Blood Magic. That's really serious stuff if you ask me," Zabini said in agreement, his brows knotted in thought.

"What contract?" Draco asked, even though he already knew. The expression on his two friends' faces when they'd realized their mistake was priceless.

"Uh…well…as we've already discussed…we need to make a decision…” Theo stammered.

"A-and we decided to join the Resistance. We understand that this is not your cup of tea, but we cannot be fence sitters for too long. We need to make a choice…Light or Dark, good or bad…and we all know that the Dark Lord's forces must be stopped…so, we took the pledge…” said Zabini, turning to Nott, who nodded with him.

Had circumstances been different, had he not been exempted from this sudden time shift, Draco wondered if he would've had the same courage that Nott and Zabini were now displaying. Would he have joined the Resistance? Or would he have taken the easy way out and just followed his father's wishes just like he did before? But even then, he'd always had that urge to break away, to rebel from the norms and traditions of his family, so perhaps he still would've turned to the Light.

"Did all of you sign the contract?" he asked just to break the silence. He already knew the answer to that, Hermione had already told him.

"Surprisingly, yes! At first, we thought that half of those attending would be running for the hills after Granger explained the intricacies of the contract. But nobody left, everybody signed," Nott said.
"I guess everyone who went there was really determined to fight the Dark Lord," said Zabini.

"Did Granger tell you what she would do to those who would not sign?" asked Draco.

"Yes, and that's what's really scary about that girl," Nott shuddered.

A bubble of laughter was building inside Draco since he was the one who suggested it to Hermione. But since his two roommates were not privy to that, he diligently kept a straight face as he waited for further explanation.

"And why is that?" he asked.

"She said that she would obliviate those who would leave, just to make sure that they don't go babbling about the Resistance and endangering its members in the process," was Zabini's quiet response.

"She did? My, my…I guess Granger is no longer scared of breaking school rules…" Draco mused. His declaration brought a flurry of protests, grunts and grumbling from Nott and Zabini.

"Mate, don't you dare report Granger to the Head Master. You'd be putting us in grave danger, I'm telling you! I wouldn't want to end up in the Infirmary or worse St. Mungo's!" Nott spluttered.

"But aren't you already in 'grave danger' now since you just told me about the Resistance?" Draco chortled, thoroughly enjoying the discomfort that bloomed on his friends' faces.

"Well…not really. You already knew about the Resistance, so we're not telling you anything you didn't already know…except of course, for…the crystals…and the blood oath..." Nott's face started turning purple as the gravity of what he had just done started to dawn on him. "Merlin's beard! Are there boils growing on my face now?"

Zabini and Draco both burst out into hysterical laughter as they watched Theo run for the bathroom, his hands running all over his face and body.

"Theo! Come back here, you daft boyo! I don't think that's how it works!" Zabini hollered. Theo came back with a flushed face complete with freckles standing out magnificently. Glaring at his roommates, Theo plunked down beside Zabini.

"And how does it work, pray tell, Mr. Genius?" he simpered.

"I think you'd have to put the Resistance or someone in the Resistance in danger for the oath to take effect. And since you've not done anything that would endanger the Resistance, I'd say you're safe from the boils…maybe," chuckled Zabini.

Draco pondered on whether he should tell his friends that they would get more than boils if they ever betrayed the Resistance, but then he felt that they would become too suspicious if he did. Hermione's binding spell went beyond the physical and the only reason that they were not thrashing in pain right now was because he had also signed that enchanted piece of parchment (although Hermione hid his name by turning it invisible where only she and Neville could summon it to appear).

Therefore, he was their blood brother, albeit in secret, and telling him about the Resistance was not a betrayal at all. He was sure that, eventually, Zabini would be able to work that one out. He was just too distracted by Theo at the moment to give it much thought. Hopefully, he'd have already come clean before that time came. He didn't want his two friends to hate him too much and think that he was double dealing them.
When the two were done bickering about the after-effects of their blood oath, they both turned to Draco with a more serious mien. After a short moment of silence, Theo broke it with something that made their skins crawl.

"You know, when I think about how powerful a witch Granger is, I start to fear for her safety. If the DL ever got wind of her abilities and potential, he would surely go after her. Imagine what she could do if she was trained in the Dark Arts! Muggle-born or not, the DL would not hesitate in turning her into a Dark witch. He would either use her or kill her if she proved too difficult to turn. Either way, she wouldn't benefit from getting in the DL's line of sight," Theo mused, his eyes glowing with the same intensity they always displayed whenever his unusual foresight hit him.

Something slammed into Draco's chest at Theo's chilling forecast. Even Zabini turned a shade paler as he digested what Theo had just said. There's a very slim chance that Hermione would be seduced by the Dark Arts, she was too good to be turned, but Theo had a point - she would be in peril if the Dark Lord ever learned of her exceptional skills.

"Did I tell you about what my father wrote to me regarding the Muggle-born Registration?" Theo asked, now back to his usual self.

"That it's just the start of something bigger?" Zabini ventured.

"Yes, but there's more to it than that. All the Muggle-borns would be tested in their magical abilities. Now, why do you think would the Ministry do that?" Theo said, his brows knotted in thought.

"The Ministry's looking for...threats...Muggle-borns who could wield magic better than Purebloods...and those they deem dangerous would be disposed of..." Draco carefully said; his earlier feeling of dread now magnified ten-fold. He was right in thinking that Hermione shouldn't go to the Ministry! But how could he stop her from going? How could he hide her? As he pondered on what he should do next, a soft knock echoed in the quiet room.

"It's open, just come in," said Theo. A red-headed, young boy peeked inside before walking tentatively towards Draco.

"Ms. Hermione asked me to give this to you," the boy named Thomas said.

"Thanks, Thomas," Draco smiled at the boy as he took the folded parchment in his hand. Thomas ran out of the room before Draco could question him, obviously intimidated by the other seventh years in the room. Draco shrugged then unfolded the parchment. It was a note from Hermione. His hand shook as he read on.

"What is it, mate?" Zabini asked after seeing Draco's pale face turn white as freshly fallen snow.

Before either of the two could say anything more Draco was barreling through the door, his feet flying against the cold, stone floors of the dungeon, cursing himself for dilly-dallying with his friends.

His heart was almost bursting at how fast he was going, but still, it felt like he was running on leaden legs. When he reached the Great Hall, there were just a few students left. He quickly scanned the faces, but the one he desperately needed to see was nowhere in sight. Clutching at a stitch in his side, Draco ran back towards the main entrance of the castle, praying that he was not too late.

_Damn! I need to stop her from boarding that train! No matter what happens, Hermione must not go_
to that cursed Muggle-born Registration! She must never set foot inside the Ministry or they'll never let her leave!
Draco will do anything to stop Hermione from going to the Muggle-born Registration at the Ministry. But how far will he go?

The Hogwarts Express stood idly by while it awaited the arrival of the students that it will be bringing to Platform Nine and Three Quarters in King's Cross Station. White plumes of steam intermittently puffed out of its top as its engines revved up for the impending journey back to London. The train looked impressive - an ageless reminder of the magical world to which it belonged. Thousands of young witches and wizards have boarded it since its first run in the middle of the 19th century and it will keep on going for as long as the Magical world remained. Its red and black cars were often met with smiles and cheers as the ancient train diligently carried students to and from Hogwarts at the start and end of term and even during holidays. It has also borne witness to many teary goodbyes between parents and children who would be separated for the duration of the school term. But it has never been looked upon with foreboding. Never, that is, until today. There were no smiling faces looking up at this majestic train on this cold, cloudy day.

When before Hogsmeade Station would be filled with the excited and noisy chatter of students eager to go home after the end of term or during Christmas or Easter break, today there was an eerie silence shrouding it, a palpable sense of doom hovering in the air. The train itself looked forlorn since there were only five cars idling at the train tracks. Proof that it would not be hosting that many passengers today. In fact, less than a quarter of the entire Hogwarts population would be getting on its esteemed steps in a few minutes. For today, only the Muggle-borns would be leaving Hogwarts. And as the conductor and engineer made their last minute inspections, a group of boys and girls stood huddled in one corner of the station. Smack in the middle was a slight figure with curly, chestnut hair. She may not have the most formidable stature in the group, but she commanded its utmost attention just the same.

"Havelock, I want you to take charge of Ravenclaw House. Try to calm the first years as much as you can. I don't want them getting tenser than they already are," Hermione said to a tall, brown-haired Ravenclaw boy. Chris Havelock nodded as he took the list that Hermione was holding out to him. He turned to his girlfriend, Emma Smythe, a petite beauty wearing Ravenclaw robes. She was in sixth year while Chris was in seventh year.

"Why aren't the other Prefects here?" asked Janice Porter, a blonde girl wearing Hufflepuff robes. She was in sixth year.

"Well, because amongst the Prefects, only Havelock and I are Muggle-born and only Muggle-borns were allowed to leave the school grounds today. That's the reason why I asked you to come here early with me so you can help with the boarding," Hermione patiently said.

She'd been asked that same question three times already and she wished that they would just stop whining about the non-attendance of their House Prefects. They were all anxious, she got that, but there's no need to magnify it with incessant and unnecessary questions. She had chosen this lot only because they were from sixth and seventh years. Now she's starting to regret a few of her choices.

"Give us the list for Gryffindor, we'll take care of them," James volunteered, smiling at her.
Heather stood beside him, her face calm and serene, but her hand shook as she reached for the list.

"Great, thanks! Janice, can you please take care of Hufflepuff House? Just make sure to check the names on the list against those who are boarding. I believe that they would feel more comfortable with you in charge of them," she smiled at the blonde-haired Hufflepuff. Janice nodded as she quietly took the list from Hermione.

"We'll take care of the luggage," Angus said, as he and Justin moved to the front. Hermione nodded at the two boys, grateful for their foresight.

"Alright, so now we're all set. Professor McGonagall and Hagrid would be here with the rest of the students. I believe Professors Sinistra, Sprout, and Flitwick would be coming with us. Try to keep things as cheerful as possible. I know that's hard to do. We're all a bit antsy about this. And we do not know what we'll find in the Ministry, but keep calm and encourage one another, especially those in the lower years," Hermione said as she glanced at the fretful faces before her. She wished she could offer more assurances, but she'd rather not give out false hopes in case things turn murky later on.

"Are there any other questions?" she continued just to break the uncomfortable stretch of silence that descended upon them. When they all shook their heads, Hermione dismissed them and moved towards one of the seats on the side.

Now that she's done with the official part of her job, she turned her attention to the other reason why she included Justin, Heather, Angus, and James in the advance party. Catching Justin's and Heather's eyes, she motioned to them to sit beside her. The two then tugged on Angus' and James' arms so that they would follow.

"I don't want to alarm you, but I have a feeling that the Ministry is not being entirely forthright with us. This could be more than just a simple registration. We have to be prepared for all possibilities," she said to the four members of the Resistance once they were seated.

"The Head Master thinks so too. That's what he also told us," Justin nodded at Hermione.

"You have to be very alert at all times. Don't take anything for granted. If you notice anything suspicious, or out of the ordinary, do not hesitate to use your crystals to communicate. There's a big chance that we might be separated when we reach the Ministry," said Hermione, as she cast a cautious glance at the other students standing a few feet from them.

"But what if they confiscate our necklaces, how can we send messages?" asked Heather.

Hermione realized that it could happen. Why didn't she think about that earlier?

"I want to try something," she said as she pulled out her the crystal pendant from inside her blouse. Touching the tip of her wand to the opaque white shard, her lips moved in a silent incantation. The others gasped as the crystal vanished right before their eyes.

"What did you just do, Hermione?" Angus asked, his bright blue eyes as big as saucers.

"It's a concealment charm that I had been practicing on. I should've taught this to all members when I gave you the necklaces. But, here, let me show you. It's quite easy to do." She placed the tip of her wand on Angus' crystal and said, "Con-ce-la-re". Angus' crystal disappeared.

"It's still there, feel it," she said to Angus.

Angus touched the place where his pendant should be, and his face quickly broke into a smile.
"Yes! It is still there! I can feel it," he exclaimed, his fingers curling around the invisible shard.

Justin, Heather, and James did the same to their crystals with the same results. They were all laughing by the time they were finished.

"That was brilliant, Hermione!" quipped James.

"I've put something extra in that spell to make it just a bit more complex than a simple concealing charm. Only you can make what you've just concealed visible again. It could probably still be broken by an advanced revealing charm, but if they can't see it, how would they know that there's something that needed to be revealed, eh?" Hermione chuckled.

"Damn right!" Justin chortled. The others beamed as well.

"We should teach this to the others," Heather said.

"Yeah, but we should do it while we're still on the train. We might be deprived of our wands when we get to the Ministry," James said, his brows knotted in a deep frown.

"Do not talk about the Resistance unless you're sure that you're in the clear. Don't try to recruit the other Muggle-borns, either. We can't be too careless about information, okay?" Hermione reminded them. The other Resistance members nodded in assent before turning back to each other, marveling at the new spell that they'd learned.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Hermione slumped against the back of the wooden bench and closed her eyes. Although she tried to put up a brave front, deep inside her guts were also twisting with worry. Nothing good could come out of this trip to the Ministry, she mused. Yet she could not give voice to her apprehensions. She must swallow her fears and show strength before the people who were now depending on her.

Why did they have to look up to her, anyway? Did they think that she had all the answers? Didn't they know that she was just as clueless about this as they all were? She never considered herself a leader. She didn't have that natural gift of commanding the respect of others. Not unlike Harry. She may have been the brains of the Golden Trio as she provided head knowledge about lots of things, but they had always deferred to Harry for their actions. And for the umpteenth time she had arrived in this alternate reality, Hermione found herself desperately wishing that he was here.

Forcing her mind away from her dismal thoughts, she unrolled her copy of the list of names and scanned through it. There was a total of seventy-five students going to the Ministry today - 25 Gryffindors, 15 Ravenclaws, 35 Hufflepuffs and 0 Slytherins.

Reading the word Slytherin automatically sent her an image of a certain Slytherin with platinum-blonde hair and mesmerizing gray eyes. Draco was probably awake by now and searching for her in the Great Hall.

Guilt washed over her as she thought of him. She should've waited for him in the Great Hall. His presence would've driven away much of the gloom that she was feeling now and it would've been great to feel his arms around her before she left. But she was not much for goodbyes. Not since she'd obliviated her parents to protect them from Voldemort.

So, in spite of her need to be with him even for a short while, she slipped away and offered to oversee the preparations for the journey. She just hoped that Thomas was able to give her note to Draco before he came down to breakfast. He would surely be furious at her if he didn't find her there. The note she hurriedly scribbled before leaving was as perky as she could manage. It
couldn't be farther from the truth, but at least it would make him calm down and let go of his own misgivings about this trip to the Ministry.

Hermione couldn't be more wrong.

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Draco ran to the Grand entrance to find Professor McGonagall and Hagrid ushering the Muggle-borns into carriages drawn by those horrid but fascinating creatures that he saw when he came back to Hogwarts for his seventh year. Luna told him that they were called Thestrals and only those who had witnessed death could see them. It gave him no pleasure to note that it took Dumbledore's death for him to be able to see these magnificent creatures. He would rather have not witnessed any death and remained ignorant of the existence of such animals.

His eyes swept through the crowd of students, but Hermione wasn't there either. Much as he wanted to avoid talking to any teachers, his need to find Hermione won over. Noticing that Professor Slughorn was amongst the teachers supervising the loading of luggage, he jogged to his Potions teacher without a thought.

"Erm…Professor, would you know where Granger is?" he asked, breathless from all that running.

Professor Slughorn glanced at him and skewed his face as if in thought. "Ah! Yes! Ms. Granger had already left for Hogsmeade with a few students. She was put in charge of the boarding, so she had to go with the advance party."

Draco's heart dropped to his stomach. Bloody hell! How am I supposed to stop her now?

"Can I go with you, Professor? There are some things that I forgot to ask Granger. Head Prefect duties, you know," he asked with fingers crossed.

Prof. Slughorn's face seemed to droop as he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy. But no other student is allowed to leave the school today. Whatever it is you have to ask her would have to wait until she returns from the Ministry."

"I see. When will they be returning, Professor?" Draco asked, expertly hiding the disappointment that he felt.

A few moments of silence ensued as the Potions master contemplated his question. "I'm not really sure, Mr. Malfoy. You'd have to ask Professor McGonagall, I'm afraid," he replied before returning to his duties, effectively dismissing Draco.

Panic gripped Draco as he saw his chances of getting to Hermione slowly sliding away. He must get to Hogsmeade! He must not let her board that train! He could slip in between the trunks, but he doubted if he could escape Professor Slughorn's notice.

The loud crashing of trunks sent the old Potions Master running to the carriage up front. It was just what Draco needed and he wasted no time in squeezing himself between the large trunks. After a few minutes, he heard the Professor muttering under his breath about 'incompetent household help' as he came back to check on the other luggage. Draco thanked his lucky stars that he had the presence of mind to put a Disillusionment charm on himself before the professor arrived.

When at last Professor Slughorn gave an all-clear signal, the carriage lunged forward as it started its slow trek towards Hogsmeade. It would take them around fifteen to twenty minutes to reach the train station, just enough time for Draco to formulate a 'rescue' plan. His shoulders were starting to get sore from being constantly bumped against the wooden trunks, but he ignored it and focused
on his plan. His biggest concern was how to convince Hermione to come back with him to the castle. Admittedly, she could be as stubborn as him, if not even more. He would have to have an airtight argument for her to see his logic.

The sudden jolt of the carriage told him that they had arrived. Peeking from behind a red leather-covered trunk with a Gryffindor emblem, Draco skidded along the hard carriage floor and slowly lowered himself to the ground. Turning his head from left to right, he crept along the sides of the carriages on his way to the platform, forgetting that he was still under the Disillusionment Charm. The other Muggle-borns were now alighting from the other carriages and moving toward the platform. Draco breathed a deep sigh when he spotted Hermione on top of the platform guiding the new arrivals to the other students holding parchments in their hands.

Boarding had now started and Draco knew that he had just a few minutes left before the train started moving down the tracks. Nimbly moving amongst the throng, Draco was able to reach Hermione in no time.

He moved directly behind her and whispered in her ear, "Hermione, it's me, Draco."

She flinched a little but turned toward the source of the sound. Her brows knotted into a frown when she failed to see him.

"I'm under the Disillusionment charm, so you can't see me. I need to speak with you," he said in a rush, aware that his time was running out.

"What are you doing here? Didn't you get my note?" Hermione whispered back, carefully covering her face with the list.

"Let's talk somewhere, this cannot wait," Draco said as he gripped Hermione's arm and pulled her alongside him. He walked back to the now empty and unguarded carriages. Hermione grunted but followed without protest. When they were behind the rearmost carriage, the one that he had ridden in earlier, Draco removed the Disillusionment charm so Hermione could see him.

"You can't go, Hermione. You have to come back with me to Hogwarts," he said.

A deep frown formed on Hermione's arched brows. "What do you mean by that? I'm just going to register at the Ministry, Draco. It's no big deal."

Draco sighed and took Hermione's hands in his. "The Ministry will be testing the magical abilities of all Muggle-borns. They'll tell you that it's standard procedure. But I know what it's for. They're looking for potential threats to the Dark Lord. And given the level of your magic, I'm sure you would stick out like a sore thumb."

There was a flicker of surprise in her eyes, but it was immediately replaced by firm determination. And Draco knew what she was going to say even before the words left her lips.

"I still have to go, Draco. I can't leave the others."

_Effing Gryffindor hero complex! She is so much like Potter!_

"You won't be able to do anything for them even if you're there. Do you understand the danger that you would be in once the Dark Lord realizes your potential? He wouldn't care if you're Muggle-born or not! All he would care about is how he could use your talents to benefit him!"

Fear flitted in Hermione's eyes, her teeth biting her lower lip as she mulled over what Draco had said. "Even if I leave now, they would look for me. My name is on that list, Draco. Don't you think"
they'd notice my absence?"

"We'll think about that later. The important thing is that you don't set foot in the Ministry. They won't let you leave, Hermione!"

"And where would I go if I don't board that train now? I can't go back to Hogwarts!"

"I have something planned for that, Hermione. Please, just trust me. I don't want anything to happen to you!" Draco nearly snarled as his patience started to wear thin.

"But what about the others? Shouldn't we warn them, at least? And what would they think of me if I don't show up there?"

Draco thought fast, this was one of those things that he hadn't considered. His brain was too focused on keeping Hermione safe that he didn't even give a rat's ass about the others.

"They won't be in as much danger as you would be if you get tested. I don't think anyone of them would even be on the same level as your magical abilities. And if they don't see you there, they'll probably just think that you've been isolated by the Ministry," he replied, hoping that it would be enough to quell Hermione's misgivings. There was doubt in her eyes, but at least she was thinking about what he just said.

A loud whistle from the train startled them both, pulling Hermione back from her thoughts.

Time's up, Draco thought. It was time to leave.

Hermione gave him a sad smile before planting a soft, chaste kiss on his lips. "I appreciate your concern, Draco. But I just can't abandon the others."

_Bloody, fucking hell! Why is she so stubborn?_

Another loud whistle sounded just as Hermione started to step away from him.

"I really have to go now. Don't worry too much, I will be alright," she said, squeezing his fingers. She gave him another smile, one that did not quite reach her eyes.

In that split second, Draco made his decision. She would definitely hate him for what he was about to do. He knew that he would be crossing the line here, but it was the only way to keep her safe. He would deal with the fallout later, but for now, he must get her out of there.

"I really, really, am sorry about this, Hermione," he said as he lifted his wand and pointed it at her. Her eyes flared as she realized his intention. She started to go for her wand, but Draco had already cast his non-verbal spell.

_STUPEFY!_
Okay, so this is just a heads up. From hereon, the chapters will be really long, containing from 3-4 scenes and about 9-12k words (or even more). There will be new non-canon characters that will be playing vital roles in the story. The subject matter will also be a bit darker and more mature. So, if you're not into all that, you may stop reading at this point. Anyways, thanks for dropping by. For those who are still determined to push forward, my love to y'all.

The train slowed down to a stop right where it was supposed to - at Platform 9 and ¾. But instead of the usual noisy, super-excited assembly of kids tumbling down its steps, there was now a procession of somber faces disembarking halfheartedly from it. One by one the students stepped out of the train, the curiosity on their faces overshadowed by a gloom that shrouded them all. They lined up along the platform with hardly a peep, their eyes betraying the terror that was now gripping them. The younger ones tried to put on a brave front, desperately standing tall in spite of the weight bearing down their shoulders. The older students tried to act nonchalantly, feigning a look of boredom that in truth hid the anxiety that was slowly turning their insides cold.

But still none could compare to the icy chill that was running down the tall Prefect's spine. He had not seen the Head Girl since they'd boarded the train and it did not bode well for him. Chris Havelock walked past the group that he was supervising, his head tilting up the windows of the train, straining to see beyond, looking for a chestnut-brown, curly head. He shouldn't worry, but still he thought it strange that Hermione had not even sought him out for last minute instructions. She did not even check up on them during the train ride. And that's what's really bothering him. Granger had always been a bit of a control freak and she would never, ever, completely delegate any job, no matter how small it is.

As far as he could tell, all the cars were already empty, but just to be sure he strode up the steps and made one last sweep of the compartments. Convinced that the object of his search was not there, and that there were no stragglers hiding under the seats, he stepped out and joined the others, stubbornly ignoring the alarm bells clanging inside his head. She was probably with the Gryffindors, he reasoned. Hermione had always been much closer to them than him and Emma, after all. Then, just as he was about to return to his spot at the Ravenclaw line he saw James Toffler waving at him. After a quick whisper to Emma, Chris jogged towards Toffler.

"What is it, Toffler?" he asked just as Heather, Justin and Angus joined them.

"Have you seen Hermione?" James asked, his brilliant sapphire eyes boring into Chris.

Chris shook his head. It was only then that his doubts crystallized into a lump in his throat. He just knew that something's gone terribly wrong.

"I thought she was with your group," Chris said.

"We thought she was with you," said Angus, frowning.
"Let's ask Janice," Heather said as she walked towards the Hufflepuff line, the others following swiftly behind her. Janice turned when Heather tapped her shoulder. Heather gently pulled her to the side, away from the other Hufflepuffs.

"Have you seen Hermione?" Heather asked her.

Janice seemed to think for a bit, then shook her head. "I didn't see her after we boarded. She was at the back, very near the luggage car when I last saw her. Maybe was helping with the loading of the luggage?"

"No, she was not. Angus and I took care of that," Justin said.

An uncomfortable silence upon the group. Could Hermione have abandoned them? But why would she do that? Knowing her, she would not willingly leave the people who she knew depended upon her.

"Do you think...she might have...you know...ditched us?" Janice stammered, afraid of how the others would respond. She knew that she was tight with James, Justin, Angus and Heather. And true enough, the four glared at her after that. But it was Chris who spoke up for Granger.

"I know Granger, she's not like that. Why would she volunteer to help with the boarding if she had no intention of going to the Ministry? Besides, she takes her role as Head Girl seriously. Too seriously, in fact, if you ask me. She would not leave us hanging...if she could help it," he said, a deep frown now marring his perfectly-arched brows.

"Then...are you saying that..." Janice gulped, her throat closing up on her.

"She was forcibly taken," James almost snarled as the anger that had been festering inside threatened to burst through.

"But...who would have done something like that?" Heather cried.

"And why would someone 'take' Hermione against her will?" quipped Justin.

"Well, we all know that Hermione's at the top of all our classes. I've even heard Professor Slughorn tell Professor McGonagall that she's probably the most brilliant witch of our age. She's not exactly someone who could hide from the Ministry's roving eye," Chris said as he put his arm around Emma who had just sauntered over to them.

"Are you saying that she must've been prevented from coming to the Ministry?" asked Emma.

"Maybe...It's not far from possible. I'd think that's better than the other possibility that I'd rather not think about," Chris replied, his face ashen.

"What other possibility?" asked Janice, her baby blues flaring in fear. She took another big gulp of air as six sets of eyes glowered at her, daring her to voice what they were trying to avoid.

"This isn't good. We've not even reached the Ministry yet and one of us has already disappeared," James said, barely hiding his ire.

No one knew for he'd never told anyone, but James had been nurturing a soft spot for Hermione these past couple of months. He'd already noticed her during sixth year, but she was too elusive, always locking herself to her favorite seat in the library. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor did not really suffer from any intense House rivalries so they had no problems getting along. Still, it prevented them from spending much time in each other's company. Gryffindor classes were usually spent
with the Slytherins while the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were often thrown in together. Even their free time did not give them much opportunity to cross paths.

The demands of being the Gryffindor Quidditch team captain had also prevented him from seriously pursuing her. Plus, she seemed more interested in Longbottom before. And had he not heard from Heather that Neville was officially dating Luna, he would've thought that he and Hermione were an item. He thanked Merlin that they were just good friends. At least, he wouldn't have to go against his fellow Gryffindor for Hermione's affections. He was just mustering the courage to ask her out when that blasted Minister of Magic complicated things for them. If only he was not unduly distracted by Angus and Heather at the station he would never have left Hermione alone on the platform. He was just beginning to curse himself when Angus' voice pulled him from his thoughts.

"Let's just hope that the Ministry has nothing to do with Hermione's disappearance. I'd fear for her safety if it did."

"True. Hermione's an exceptional witch, just look at the things she has done these past couple of days. That was magic way beyond the capacity of a seventh-year Hogwarts student!" Heather exclaimed, biting her tongue when she realized her slip.

Angus grimaced, Justin stared, James scowled, while Chris, Emma and Janice looked on curiously, not fully understanding what Heather was talking about.

"And I doubt we're just going to write down our names on a piece of parchment to declare our blood status. It can't be as simple as that," said Angus as he tried to change the subject, purposely ignoring the questioning eyes of Emma and Chris.

"I know. Even the Head Master thinks that we are not going to a simple 'registration'. Why else would he warn us if he didn't think otherwise?" said Justin.

"What do you mean? Are you saying that the Ministry would be doing something to us aside from making us register as Muggle-borns?" Janice's voice cracked just a little.

"Why else would they force us to go there ourselves, huh? They obviously know who the Muggle-borns are. Why would they still ask us to 'register' as Muggle-borns when they already have a list of all our names? And I'm also sure that the Ministry knows everything there is to know about Hermione. I'd rather not think what they'd do if they get their hands on her," James snapped, no longer able to control his temper. He raked his fingers through his sandy-brown hair, mussing it up unintentionally.

Janice swallowed as she looked up at the tall, handsome Gryffindor. She could tell that there was a dangerous, hidden power being desperately controlled as he paced before them like a caged lion. She could also tell that he was genuinely, deeply worried about Hermione. Were they dating? Could he be in love with her?

Before anyone of them could voice another opinion, though, a short whistle grabbed their attention. They turned to see Professor Flitwick motioning them to get back in line. The group grudgingly went their separate ways, the sense of impending danger now seeming more real.

It was time to face whatever the Ministry had planned for them. They stood with their housemates quietly, each one trying to rein in their own apprehensions about what awaited them.

Only one young wizard was thinking of someone other than himself.
I hope you're okay, Hermione. There would be hell to pay if the Ministry did something to you, James thought as his guts twisted in knots for the girl who had unknowingly and unintentionally captured his brave and noble Gryffindor heart.

Hermione woke up with a splitting headache. Her arms and legs were also a bit sore. She felt like she had ran a marathon without doing any warm-up exercises. Stretching her arms as far as she could reach, her back arched as it untangled the knots in her shoulders. She looked around her and was rather surprised to find herself in Draco's 'room'. She could've sworn that she'd slept in Ravenclaw tower last night. How could she now be lounging in the soft, silky sheets on Draco's bed? Looking around, she saw that she was alone. She'd never been alone in Draco's room before. Not the one in the Room of Requirement, anyway.

Propping herself up on her elbows, Hermione shook her head in a feeble attempt to clear it. The sliver of light coming from a crack in the drapes made her think if she'd ever noticed any windows in the Room of Requirement's version of Draco's room. They'd always met there at night, and left before the sun was up, so that's probably why she'd never noticed it. Still, there was something different about this room. It felt more chilly, more forbidding somehow. And why would she be in bed at this late hour? If the sun was already up, then it would definitely be late in the morning, or even near lunch time. Wasn't she supposed to go to the Ministry of Magic today?

 Damn! I must've overslept! Why didn't Draco wake me up?

Propelled by that urgent thought, Hermione swung her legs to the side and jumped out of bed, but a wave of nausea sent her down on her knees, clutching at the thick comforter left discarded on the carpeted floor. As soon as the room stopped swaying before her eyes, she rose up on wobbly legs and gingerly walked towards the door. She was just a few steps away from it when a slight movement caught her eye as she passed by the window. Curious, Hermione went to the window and drew the drapes back a little, just enough to take a peek. Her heart fell to her stomach when she saw Narcissa Malfoy standing in the middle of a rose garden talking to a wizened house elf. She almost screamed but a warm hand clamped down on her mouth and pulled her away from the window.

Her instinct for survival resurfaced and Hermione slammed her head with all her might against whoever was holding her from behind. She jammed her elbow against the body behind her just as her foot came crashing down on the bigger one next to hers. She heard a loud grunt and a yelp of pain from her 'captor', yet she did not stop from fighting against the strong arm that remained hooked around her waist. Her nails dug into the arm holding her, drawing blood as she scratched at it viciously. With one final burst of strength, she brought both elbows swinging backwards. The arm around her loosened after one loud OOF. She did not waste time looking behind her, quickly dashing for the door only to be stopped by an all too familiar voice.

"HERMIONE, STOP!"

She halted at once. Slowly turning on her heel, she was greeted by a sight she never thought she'd ever see. There before her was Draco, bent over as he clutched at his ribs, his split lip dripping blood, arms also bloodied from her scratches. She would've laughed if she didn't know that he was in real pain.

"Draco! Oh, Morgana! I'm so sorry!" She rushed back to his side and helped him sit on the bed, frantically dabbing at Draco's wounded lip with a handkerchief she had fished from her pocket. Draco winced. His hand grabbed her wrist to stop her ministrations.
"Stop it, Hermione. I'm okay."

I must've hit it when I slammed my head against his face. Well, at least it wasn't his nose, she thought wryly.

Taking her wand from her robe pocket, Hermione muttered some healing spells for the broken lip and scratches on Draco's arm. When it finally looked like only his ego was left bruised, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and sat beside him on the bed.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! You are such a hellcat!" Draco muttered as he rubbed his tender ribs.

"Well, you shouldn't have startled me like that," she countered.

"You shouldn't have been so freaking defensive! Didn't you realize that it would've been me?"

"How could I have known that? I saw your mother standing in the middle of a bloody rose garden talking to a house elf! I assumed that I was taken by Death Eaters to Malfoy Manor!"

"Uhm, well...technically speaking...a Death Eater, or a former one actually...did take you to Malfoy Manor..." Draco mumbled, looking sheepishly at Hermione.

Big, brown eyes swiveled back at him. He almost quailed as a spectrum of emotions flashed in those lovely orbs - doubt, incredulity, comprehension, fear, hurt and then fury. But he'd already expected the last one. What he wasn't prepared for was the brief flicker of betrayal that he saw in her eyes before it was immediately replaced by red-hot anger. Strangely, that look hurt him even more than the anger. Didn't she trust him? Did she really think that after going to such lengths to protect her that he would even wish to hurt her? How could she even think that he would betray her?

Okay, stupefying her was sort of a breach of trust, but he only did it to save her! If she hadn't been so stubborn, he wouldn't have resorted to such an underhanded measure.

"Are you telling me that we are actually in Malfoy Manor?"

"You said you saw my mother outside, the Room of Requirement wouldn't have been able to conjure her even if I asked it to!"

"So...We. Are. Actually. In. Malfoy. Manor." Hermione said, carefully enunciating every word as she slowly got up to her feet.

"It was unintentional! I didn't mean to come here. I was supposed to take us both back to Hogwarts, but Professor Slughorn started to come back to inspect the carriages, so I had to hide the both of us inside that old stockroom in the station. Unfortunately, by the time I came out the carriages were already gone. I couldn't very well carry you on my back all the way to Hogwarts. And when we apparated, the first thing that came to my mind was my room here in the Manor."

"Wait a minute...why would you have to carry me back...I'm confused. What is this stockroom that you're referring to?"

Draco froze. Had she forgotten already? Is this an after-effect of his spell? Merlin! He didn't obliviate her, too, did he? Damn! Everything happened so fast he couldn't even think straight now! He wondered if he should lie to her, but thought against it. Things would get more complicated if he did. Might as well come as clean as he could now before everything blew back in his face.

"We were at Hogsmeade Station. You were on the platform, about to board the train..." he stopped
mid-sentence when he saw Hermione's wand pointed threateningly at his face.

"And you stupefied me..." she carefully said as the earlier events slowly dawned on her, cheeks blazing a bright pink as her anger returned in full force.

"Hermione, please listen to me first," he said, his arms raised in surrender.

"Listen to you? Tell me why I should still do that. Tell me why I should believe anything that comes out of your filthy, lying mouth."

Her words hurt, but he would not let them affect him. True, he broke trust when he turned his wand against her. But what was he to do? She wasn't listening to him, putting herself in danger, obstinately ignoring his warnings. He would rather see her fuming mad at him than not see her at all.

"I was trying to save you, but you were being unreasonable. What was I to do?"

"Save me? Who asked you to save me? I sure didn't! And this is your idea of saving me? Am I really SAFE here, huh, Draco?"

"For as long as you stay here in my room, you would be safe. No one comes in here. My father would never deign to even step foot inside my room and my mother would always knock and ask for permission to enter. For Merlin's sake, she doesn't even know that we're here," Draco said in a rush, getting impertinently irritated now.

Hermione kept silent as she stood rigidly before him, a suspicious look playing in her hard gaze.

"You have the nerve to take me here of all places? Have you forgotten what happened to me the last time that I was here?"

How could he forget? How could he make himself forget? He suffered with her every scream, a piece of his heart torn with every tear that fell from her eyes. He died that night. And was reborn only when she escaped. He lived because she lived.

"Did you think me so insensitive, Hermione? Did you think I would ever forget that night? Did you think I would ever forgive myself for letting you suffer while I did nothing? I would've died for you right then and there if only I had the assurance that my death would have saved you. I still hear your screams in my head when I close my eyes, Hermione. And I would never let that happen again. I swore after that night that I would do everything in my power to protect you. Even if that means protecting you from yourself!"

His words must've have punched through the thick fog of her anger. He saw her lips quiver, unshed tears bright in her gorgeous brown eyes. But she recovered quickly. She swallowed her pain and refused to back down. Her wand remained steady, pointed at his heart.

"Protect me from myself? You dare insinuate that I will freely put myself in danger yet here you are trapping me inside the dragon's lair. Your father is the freaking Minister of Magic, Draco! And I'm sure Voldemort did not give him that post out of the goodness of his heart."

Draco wasn't sure he would like where this was leading. And he was right. Hermione's next words cut deeply into his heart.

"Were you ever true to me, Draco? Or were you just biding your time? Is this the price you have to pay to save your skin? Or were you doing it for your family, for your dear, old dad, perhaps? My head for your father's favored position in Voldemort's royal court?"
"If I wanted to hurt you I wouldn't have waited this long! Damn it, Hermione! You know how much I hate my father. This is not even our own timeline! You already knew how I felt about you even before we were transported to this fucking alternate universe, for crying out loud!"

"How should I know if anything you've said was even true? You've tormented me for six years, Malfoy! Six, bloody years! You never showed me even an iota of kindness during those six years. I was always Mudblood Granger to you, why would you suddenly change your stance?"

Much as her tears wounded him, her words were what really broke his heart. He felt the pain in those words, the doubts, the desperation, the frustration and the brokenness. Should he tell her about how he'd waged war with himself during those years that he treated her like dirt? Should he tell her how he was tormented more than she was with every scathing word that he uttered to her? But would she believe him? Would she even see his point of view? And it's 'Malfoy' again now?

So be it.

He didn't care anymore. If she wanted to hex him, curse him, kill him for what he did, then fine! As long as she saw reason. As long as she was made to realize that what he did, he did out of desperation, out of his desire to save her from the very real danger that she was in right now. He wished he could take her back to their own reality, back to that time when the war was already over and done with. Back to where he was the only one suffering for his and his family's mistakes. At least, she was safe there.

"Curse me, kill me if you want, Hermione. It wouldn't change anything. I couldn't take back all those words, all those years that I had been such an arse. I cannot undo what I had done to you this morning. All I want you to know is that you are in danger here. And don't take it lightly. There's no Golden Trio in this timeline. There's no Chosen One, no Harry to come riding on a fucking white horse to save you this time, Hermione. Whether you like it or not, I'm the only one you have right now. And I will do anything, ANYTHING...to keep you safe."

He knew it was now up to her. There's nothing more that he could do. If she really wanted to ditch him, he would step aside and let her have her way. But he would never stop looking after her, even if from a distance. He saw the hand holding on to wand shake just a bit. Perhaps he still had a chance at turning things around. What would it hurt if he opened up a little more of his heart to her?

"Did you know why I was in Hogwarts when you and Potter came back?"

Hermione did not reply, but her eyes had softened a bit. It was all he needed.

"I was waiting for you. I was hoping to see you again. I wanted to be there for you if you ever needed me. You probably would've thrown my offer of help in my face back then. But I didn't care. I would've done anything to make sure that you came out of there alive. I didn't have to be there. But I wanted to be there. I had to be there. Not for Potter, not for the fight against Voldemort. Not for any idealistic mumbo-jumbo. I was there for one reason and one reason alone. I was there for you!"

A tear fell down Hermione's cheek as she slowly lowered her wand.

"I don't know if I can truly trust you, Draco. I don't really know you that well," Hermione said, tears freely flowing down her cheeks now.

There was so much hurt in that one sentence and Draco's heart shattered anew. He just realized that she was right, she didn't know the real Draco. She saw what he let her see. It was time for him to
shed his mask and let everything he had hidden inside be displayed before her eyes. Could he do it? Did he have the courage to do it - be vulnerable, be at her mercy? He really didn't know. But for her, he was willing to try. He waited for her to speak, but she remained silent, staring at him with those tear-filled, riveting eyes of hers.

Tentatively, he moved, his hand reaching out for her. There was still pain in her eyes, but she did not push him away when he gently pulled her into his arms. She sobbed against his chest, her arms going around his waist. Tilting her chin up, he looked deep into her eyes before lowering his head to capture her lips in a soft kiss. She moved against him, igniting the passion that was burning within. He moved deeper, plundering her sweet mouth with all the love that he felt. They were both breathless when they pulled apart. When he glanced down at her, the pain in her eyes was gone, replaced by a hunger so intense it left him weak in the knees.

"I love you, Hermione. I've never felt this way before, so please forgive me if I sometimes act like a total jerk. You may hate me for what I did, and I'm really sorry that I had to resort to that. I only did it because you left me no other choice. Besides, I would rather have your anger than have nothing of you at all," he whispered against her hair, breathing in her unique sweet scent. It's not over yet, he knew. But at least there's a bigger chance of her listening to him now than before.

After a few minutes, after her sobs had finally subsided, Draco led her to the bed and sat her down. They remained wrapped in each other's arms, the quiet beating of their hearts their only companion.

"Why did you think I was in danger, Draco?" she whispered after a while.

"Theo told me that the Muggle-born Registration was only a front, a ruse for something bigger."

"Something bigger? What do you mean?"

"Just think about it, Hermione. The Ministry already had a list of all Muggle-borns. Why would they have to enforce this Muggle-born Registration Act all of a sudden?"

"I had actually thought about that. It didn't seem logical. Obviously, the Ministry's after something else and was using the Registration to cover for it. I just hadn't figured out what they were really after," she said, settling more comfortably against Draco's arms.

"They're looking for possible threats against the Dark Lord. That's the reason why I had to stop you from going to that damned registration. Theo's father told him that all Muggle-borns would be tested for their magical abilities. I have a feeling that those they deem 'dangerous' would suffer dire consequences. You are at the top of the food chain in that aspect, my love. And who knows what the Dark Lord would do if he found out about your potential. He might even try to turn you to the Dark side and..." Draco paused when he felt Hermione snickering against him. "And what is so funny, Granger?"

"Nothing! It's just that you sounded like Darth Vader when you said 'Turn you to the Dark side' (snickers) It sounded like a line from Empire Strikes Back!"

"Darth who? Empire strikes what?" Draco pulled away from Hermione to look down at her, unsure if she was actually making fun of him.

"Oh, forget it, will you? It's a Muggle movie. One of these days I'm going to make you watch it with me. It's one of my all-time favorites. I'm sure you'd be able to relate," she chuckled.

"Ah! I see. Well, okay. I suppose I can sit through one of those. But only if you promise to let me hug you until it's over," he leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose.
"Of course! But you're changing the subject, Mr. Malfoy. I'm still a little cross, you know."

"Well, who was it who introduced this Darth Baker into the conversation," he replied in mock anger. Hermione playfully thumped his arm as she giggled.

"Darth Vader not Baker!"

Draco waved his hand in dismissal. "Vader, Baker. They almost sound the same."

After a few more pinches from Hermione, Draco pulled her back in his arms, lazily drawing circles on her back. He leaned back against the numerous large pillows, pulling Hermione down with him, her head resting on his chest.

"I don't think Voldemort would try to turn me, though. He abhors Mudbloods. He wouldn't sully his ranks with my dirty blood," Hermione said after a while.

"Oh, don't be so sure about that, my dear. The Dark Lord craves power like he craves air. He wouldn't care if you're Muggle-born or not, as long as he could use you to get what he wants. He wants to rule even the Muggle world and he would surely see you as a very good source of knowledge about that world."

"But what about the other students, Draco. We have to help them. We have to get them out of there," Hermione said, propping herself on her elbow to look at Draco.

"I know. I'm not sure how we will do it, but I'll think of something. Don't worry about them, they'll be safe for the time being. What we need to do is to contact the Resistance and the Order. I'm not sure if they already know about the real purpose of this Muggle-born Registration."

"We should go back to Hogwarts."

"I already have a plan for that. But are you willing to trust me on this one?" Draco asked, his stormy gray eyes intent. Hermione returned the intensity of his gaze as she made her decision.

"Alright. I will trust you, but please, never use your wand against me again, Malfoy," Hermione said in her sternest voice, her lips twiching.

"I promise," Draco said. I guess I'd have to start practicing wandless magic now, he thought with a smirk.

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The headquarters of the British Ministry of Magic, unbeknownst to most Muggles, is actually located deep underground at the heart of Muggle London. This location was primarily chosen to enable easy coordination with the British government. However, only wizards and witches can enter or leave it at will. Although no one can apparate directly to the Atrium of the Ministry, there are fireplaces connected directly to it via the Floo Network. Then, there are also contrived entrances provided for the underage and for those who would be coming straight from Muggle London.

Today, however, none of these modes of entry would be used by the Hogwarts students. The Ministry had issued special potkeys for the Muggle-borns for this trip. Because, honestly, it would've looked strange if they all were to line up outside a telephone booth. And although the entrance locations were always placed in secluded areas, there was always that risk of being seen by a less than oblivious muggle who might accidentally stumble upon them. One-time-use Portkeys were also easy to create and dispose of, so it was only logical for the Ministry to use it for
the transport of the Muggle-borns of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Not everyone is fond of this means of transport though. Chris Havelock, for one, never liked traveling by Portkey. It always made him nauseous and disoriented. And it was no different today. Interestingly, it seemed that he was not the only one affected by this adverse reaction to Portkeys. Emma and two Ravenclaw first-year boys were also looking green when they finally landed at the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He would've liked to be given a few minutes to recover, sadly the Ministry was not that accommodating today. He had barely regained his balance when they were immediately greeted by a rather over enthusiastic young wizard wearing dark blue Ministry robes.

He was just handing over the battered umbrella to the young wizard when he saw that the other students were just arriving together with the other professors that accompanied them on the train. Professor Sinistra, who came just after Chris' group, was now talking to a short, plump witch wearing maroon Ministry robes. Soon, Professors Flitwick and Sprout were also in on the discussion - one that appeared to be getting heated by the minute. Christ couldn't help but be just a little curious about what they were talking about. It took a lot of self-control to not just waltz over there and butt in uninvited.

He almost laughed when he noticed Angus slowly drifting towards the group of teachers looking clueless and innocent as he pretended to gawk around the Atrium in awe. He was later chased away by one of the Ministry wizards who unfortunately saw through his charade. Catching Angus' eye, Chris motioned for him to come join him and Emma. Angus nodded then tapped James on the shoulder, who in turn nudged Heather. The three had barely reached them when he saw Justin and Janice coming over to them as well.

"So, what was that all about? Did you hear anything?" Chris asked as soon as Angus was near enough to hear him whisper.

"Apparently, we are to be taken to a 'waiting' station. More like a manor or something. We would be staying there tonight before returning here tomorrow to register," Angus whispered back.

"Well, we already knew that we would be housed somewhere, so what's the fuss about?"

"They're not letting the professors come with us and won't even tell them where we would be taken, that's what the fuss is about," Angus replied, his eyes darting back to their professors. They were now arguing more fervently with the plump witch.

"Hmmm...that does sound fishy. Why won't the Ministry let the professors come with us or even tell them where we would be staying?" Emma said, taking Chris' hand in hers as she looked up at him. She seemed really anxious now.

"The Ministry wants to isolate us, that's why," James spat, his brows knotted menacingly.

Chris sighed and shook his head. He was right, this wasn't going to be a simple registration. He'd been thinking about it ever since the Muggle-born registration was announced. It seemed strange that the Ministry would still require them to register when they already knew who the Muggle-borns were. What he couldn't put his finger on was the Ministry's motive behind the requisite. Whatever it was, he feared that it wouldn't be for their benefit.

They would have discussed this new development further had they not seen Professor Sinistra striding briskly toward them, followed by a scowling Professor Sprout (which was a sight to behold since the always amiable professor had never even been seen frowning), and a thoroughly agitated Professor Flitwick who seemed to bounce with his every step.
"Havelock, you're one of those in charge of the boarding, are you not?" Professor Sinistra said rather brusquely. She was obviously nearing the end of her patience.

"Yes, Professor," replied Chris.

"Well, seeing as you seem to be doing quite a good job at it, I'm putting you in charge of the transfer to wherever you would be housed whilst awaiting the Registration."

"Uhm...are you not coming with us, Professor?"

Professor Sinistra's elegant brows arched in apparent annoyance as she replied with just a little venom in her voice, "The Ministry has prohibited us from accompanying you. We were instructed to return to Hogwarts as our presence here is no longer needed."

Professor Sprout puffed up her chest as she muttered to herself while Professor Flitwick grunted and muttered unintelligibly.

"I see. Did they tell you where they would be taking us?"

"No. They said it was not important for us to know," Professor Sinistra snapped. Chris just nodded, not really eager to further antagonize the visibly incensed witch.

"Well, we should get going now. Take care of your fellow students, Havelock. We'll be returning here tomorrow, hopefully. I will have a long talk with Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster when we get back to Hogwarts," Professor Sinistra said as she turned back to Professors Sprout and Flitwick.

"Professor, before you go, I think there's something that you should know," James interjected.

"What is it, Toffler?"

James glanced at the others. Chris nodded, giving him the go signal to say what he was also about to tell the Professors.

"It's about Hermione Granger...she wasn't on the train."

"What do you mean she wasn't on the train, Toffler? I saw Ms. Granger at Hogsmeade Station. She was helping with the boarding," Professor Flitwick said.

"She was. But we never saw her on the train. We all thought she had boarded, but when we got off at Platform 9 and ¾, she wasn't there," said James, turning to the others for support. They all nodded, concern written in their eyes.

"Are you sure none of you saw her on the train?" Professor Sinistra asked, her intelligent eyes skewering them with a hard glare.

Six heads shook in response.

"We asked around. No one has seen her on the train," said Chris.

"Ms. Granger would never abandon her post willingly," Professor Flitwick quipped.

"And I've never known her to be irresponsible," said Professor Sprout, her face turning a shade paler than usual.

Professor Sinistra nodded, her perfect brows creased as she turned to her fellow teachers. The look
she gave them was subtle but unmistakable - Hermione Granger did not disappear voluntarily.

"We'll look into it when we get back to Hogwarts. She might've just been detained by something urgent. Don't worry too much about her, alright? She'll be here as soon as we ascertain her whereabouts," Professor Sinistra said after a while.

James was about to say more, but the witch in Ministry robes came over and told the professors that the students would now be moving to their lodgings. Seeing as they could not do anything more, the professors said their goodbyes and reluctantly left their Muggle-born students at the hands of the Ministry.

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"Would you like to go back to Hogwarts now?" she heard Draco ask. It was already getting dark and they were both famished.

Draco had thought of asking one of the house elves to bring them food but decided against it in the end. House elves owe their loyalty and were answerable to, first and foremost, to the Master and Mistress of the Manor and since he was neither, he could not really force them to lie for him. It would be too risky to involve the house elves.

"Yes, perhaps we should," she replied, stretching like a cat beside Draco. They had lain down on his bed as they talked about what they should do upon returning to Hogwarts. It seemed strange lying around comfortably inside one of the rooms of the manor when the last time that she was here she'd almost died. But that seemed like a thousand years ago, so she'd rather not dwell on it.

"I suppose it would be easier to sneak into Honeydukes now, right?" Draco said, rising to his feet. He straightened his shirt and removed the creases from his pants.

Hermione had told Draco of the secret passage that ran between Honeydukes' cellar and Hogwarts. She was pretty familiar with it since she, Harry and Ron had used it numerous times during their fifth and sixth years. "Yes, but we're still going to use a Disillusionment charm, aren't we?"

"Of course, we are. But it's still safer not to bump into anyone on the street. Fewer people, fewer chances of that happening."

"You've got a point there," Hermione conceded. She took Draco's proferred hand and rose to her feet. She slipped her stockinged feet into her loafers and shook her legs to get the blood flowing.

"Where would we be apparating to?"

"As close to Honeydukes as possible."

"I think we should do side-along since the wards around the manor may not allow you to disapparate from here on your own."

"I think so, too. You do it, then. I'll just hold on to you," Hermione said, taking Draco's arm.

"Okay, hang on tight," Draco draped his arm around Hermione's shoulder as he disapparated the two of them with a pop.

They reappeared just behind the back door of Honeyduke's. Turning their heads around to make sure that no one had seen them, the two slowly made their way down the cellar, but not before Draco placed a Disillusionment charm on both of them. Thankfully, neither Mr. Flume nor his wife was in the cellar so they were able to open the secret passage without a hitch.
After a few minutes' trek through the very low and very narrow, winding passageway (Draco cursed every time he bumped his head against the ceiling), they were able to reach the stone slide that led into the third-floor corridor of Hogwarts. Hermione then transfigured it into a stone ladder to enable them to climb up the steep tunnel. Soon, they were clambering out of the hole that was just behind a large statue. A soft tap of her wand against the hunched back of the statue of Grunhilda, together with the incantation of 'Dissendium' made it slide to the side and reveal the dark corridor on the third floor.

"We better move fast, it will be dinnertime soon. The corridors would be crowded with students," Hermione whispered to the invisible figure of Draco beside her. She felt his hand take hers as they moved quickly up the steps and through the corridors until they reached the stretch of blank wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy on the seventh floor.

After three passes, a dark door with a brass knob appeared. Draco was just about to turn the knob when they heard a voice that sent chills up their spines.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Our two Head Prefects taking a stroll on the seventh-floor corridor. Out on a date, perhaps?"

Hermione stiffened and she could almost feel Draco's wild eyes turning toward the speaker. How could he know it was us? She knew that the Disillusionment charm hasn't worn off since she still could not see Draco.

Turning slowly on her heels, Hermione gasped when she saw Headmaster Snape sneering at them, a large, familiar-looking, tattered piece of parchment resting lazily in his large hands.

*Bloody hell! Snape has The Marauder's Map!*

Chapter End Notes

Dun..dun..dun...BUSTED! (evil laugh)

What do you think will they do now? And what about Snape? Will he turn over Hermione to the Ministry? What role will he play in this alternate reality?

Hang on tight, the fun's just about to start :)

Chapter End Notes
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco learn more about their current predicament from Snape while the Muggle-borns' situation goes from bad to worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Draco squeezed Hermione's hand when she gasped. He slowly turned to face the Headmaster, quickly formulating a believable alibi. But before he could say anything, Snape was already talking.

"Don't bother replying, Ms. Granger. And don't remove the Disillusionment charm yet. Just follow me quietly and don't say a word until we're in my chambers."

Snape turned and walked away from them, his black cloak billowing magnificently behind him.

Hermione had Draco's hand in a death grip and his fingers were already turning numb, still he did not complain nor try to disengage from her.

"Hurry up, you two. I haven't got all day," Snape threw over his shoulder.

Draco ran after the Headmaster and pulled Hermione behind him. They were breathing heavily by the time they had reached the Gargoyle statue. Snape was already there, eyes fixed on the tattered piece of parchment in his hand. He swiveled towards the Gargoyle and whispered something. The Gargoyle jumped to the side, revealing the opening that led to the spiral staircase. Snape stepped aside and motioned for them to go before him.

"Get on the stairs, it will take you straight to my office," the Headmaster said, his head still bent on the parchment.

Draco stepped on the stairs with Hermione following closely behind him. The enchanted stairs moved upwards and stopped at the topmost level.

"Move, Draco," he heard Hermione say behind him. He stepped off and walked into the marble floors of the Headmaster's office.

It was darker than he remembered. McGonagall's office had bright gold and red, poufy armchairs strewn around the room and brilliantly-colored tapestries hanging on the walls. Now, there was a large, dragonhide sofa pushed against the wall at the far corner of the room, an old trunk sat before it laden with books. The walls were covered in dark green paneling left bare except for a few wall lamps. There were shelves of books squeezed around the corners partnered with high-backed armchairs in emerald green velvet. Large volumes of books sat atop the Headmaster's table of dark mahogany done in an ornate, baroque style. It wasn't a friendly room and it perfectly reflected the personality of its present occupant.

"Finite Incantatem," muttered the Headmaster as he walked past them. Warm air trickled over Draco's body as the Disillusionment charm was lifted.
Two straight-back chairs were conjured before them with a wave of the Headmaster's wand.

"Sit," he instructed before going behind his desk. He sat in his chair and folded the parchment before him meticulously.

Draco sat on the chair nearest him, glancing at Hermione as she sat on the other chair. She looked nervous. He would've reached out for her hand, but Snape's voice caught his attention.

"Now…tell me what is going on," the Headmaster was leaning on his desk, his hands steepled before him as he skewered them with a deadly glare. "Why is Ms. Granger not on the train to London?"

Hermione's foot was tapping on the marble floor. Her head was bent forward, her eyes shut tight as her jaw clenched. Draco sensed that she was angry at him, probably even blaming him for their present predicament. She still didn't seem to realize that she would've been in a worse situation if he had let her get on that train. At least now there's a slim possibility that he could outmaneuver Snape.

"It wasn't her fault, Headmaster. I made her stay. Actually, I kidnapped her," Draco said, looking at Snape with the typical Malfoy arrogance he was known for. The Headmaster's only reaction was the arching of his dark brows.

"And why did you do such a thing, Mr. Malfoy? Is this your way of getting even with Ms. Granger? Are you trying to get her into trouble?"

"That wasn't my intention, Headmaster."

"And what was your intention? Did you think that the Ministry would not notice that they were short by one Hogwarts student? How would you explain Ms. Granger's absence to the Minister?"

Hermione's tapping stopped and Draco felt her eyes on him again. He turned to look at her, ready to face her wrath. But what he saw was not anger, it was fear. Fear for him.

"I will deal with the Minister, if needed, Headmaster. He is still my father, after all," Draco replied with as much bravado as he could muster. He could not deny that his insides churned at the thought of a possible confrontation with his father, but he would never let Snape see that.

"Yes, he is your father. And he's the one who campaigned vigorously for the passing of these the new laws, especially this non-sensical Muggle-born Registration Act, Mr. Malfoy," Snape spat at him, his eyes flaring in anger.

Was he hearing the Headmaster right? Was Snape not in favor of the new laws? He was about to agree with the Headmaster's view, but thought better of it. He still wasn't sure where Snape's loyalties lie and this could just be a trick. Something told him that he would know soon enough.

And he was right.

When he looked back the Headmaster's eyes were soft as he stared at Hermione. Draco saw pity…and…was that concern that flashed briefly in the Headmaster's dark eyes?

"I hate to admit it, but I believe that you owe your life to Mr. Malfoy here, Ms. Granger."

Hermione's head snapped to Snape's, her eyes wide with shock.

Wait, what? Did the Headmaster just agree that Hermione shouldn't have gone to the Ministry? Did
Draco's brain was spinning with thousands of possibilities. Snape's words were so unexpected that he was literally blindsided.

"W-what d-do you mean by that, Headmaster," Hermione asked in a timid voice.

"You would never have left the Ministry alive if you went there, Ms. Granger," Snape said, rising to his feet. He started pacing before them, his hands stuck inside his front pockets. "I had just received news that the Ministry did not allow Professors Sinistra, Flitwick and Sprout to come with the students to their lodgings. They were told to go back to Hogwarts right after their arrival at the Ministry. They were not even told where the students would be taken. Thankfully, I still have my sources and a very reliable one had just informed me where they would be housed for the next couple of days," Snape paused before his black eyes swiveled to Draco, "Malfoy Manor. The Muggle-borns were taken to Malfoy Manor. And right after their so-called Registration at the Ministry tomorrow, they would be brought back to the Manor to be tested on their magical abilities. And I fear that those who would perform exceedingly well in the tests would not be allowed to return to Hogwarts."

Snape's words were like a sledgehammer against Draco's chest. How could his father do something like that? Was he even more evil here than he was in their own timeline?

"And that's the reason why I told you, Ms. Granger, that you probably owe your life to Draco here. You would've been the star in those testings," the Headmaster said, staring down at Hermione.

"I don't understand, Headmaster," mumbled Hermione, her face now as pale as Draco's.

The Headmaster stopped in his pacing and rounded on Hermione with a sneer.

"If I didn't know better, I would think that you're fishing for compliments, Ms. Granger. But, no, you're not the sort. So, I'd try to explain this to you in a way that even your self-effacing ego could understand," Snape paused before his eyes sizing up Hermione under dark brows that were knitted together in thought. After seeming to come to a decision, he went back to his pacing.

"I'm sure Mr. Malfoy would agree with me that you are an exceptional witch," Snape held up his hand as Hermione started to protest, "Enough with your annoying humility, Ms. Granger. I am not trying to put up a Fan Club on your behalf, I'm just stating a fact. You have a natural aptitude for magic, an ability to wield it, control it and manipulate it in ways that would put to shame half of the Pureblood population. And that is very unusual for a Muggle-born. Yes, there are a number of excellent Muggle-born witches and wizards, but they would still fall short when pitted against the skills of a truly gifted Pureblood or Half-Blood even. The only Muggle-born to ever come close to that level was Lily Evans, but even her abilities would be a couple of notches below yours," the Headmaster's voice was barely a whisper when he said the last few words, his eyes glazing as they stared past the two sitting in front of him. The silence grew heavy, enveloping them with a gloom so palpable they could almost touch it.

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his seat and it was that slight movement that brought the Headmaster out of his trancelike state. He cleared his throat before continuing.

"As I was saying, your level of magic would've elevated you above the rest of your fellow students. You would've stuck up like a sore thumb. I've also been told that you can perform spells and charms that have not even been taught in class, and that you've even invented a few of your own," again Snape held up his hand when Hermione tried to defend herself, "I have nothing against it, believe me, Ms. Granger. It only shows that magic is truly running in your veins. Can I assume that
you can also perform wandless magic with ease?"

How could Snape know all that? Was he spying on students for the Ministry? Draco thought uneasily. He resolved to observe the Headmaster more closely.

Hermione frowned, but at Snape's raised brows, she nodded reluctantly and uttered, "Just a few simple spells, Headmaster, like Accio, Incendio and Protego."

"Protego is not that simple, Ms. Granger. It may be easy to perform with the aid of a wand, but quite hard to focus when done without it," Snape said. "And I can tell that you have a natural gift for Occlumency as well," Snape smirked.

_I knew it! I felt those walls whenever I tried to read her mind!_ He could get past them all, but his conscience just wouldn't let him.

"Your walls are not that strong yet, Ms. Granger, but they're there. I don't even know if you're aware that you have this inborn ability. With enough training I'm sure you'd even rival Draco's skills."

"I don't understand what you're saying, Headmaster. I've never put up any walls," Hermione said, glancing briefly at Draco. She looked really scared now.

"Not intentionally, perhaps. But as I said, they're there. Weak, but enough to keep away brief passes or the feeble efforts of a less skilled Legilimens. Tell me, Draco, have you ever tried getting into her head?" asked Snape, turning to the young Slytherin with an amused smirk.

Hermione looked at him with wide eyes and Draco wanted to curse the Headmaster for planting that seed of doubt in her mind. He could've lied and said no, but it would've only prompted Snape to probe further so he decided to come out clean. Well, almost…but not entirely.

"Once, during third year…when I found you and Weasley standing outside the Shrieking Shack…" Oops! That probably wasn't the best incident to confess. He was desperately trying to get her out his mind back then, so he went to Hogsmeade with the nitwits for a little entertainment only to find her standing there alone with the Weasel! He was so angry he tried to get into her head just so he'd know if she was planning on snogging the redhead later on.

The look on Hermione's face was enough to pull him back from his thoughts. She was livid!

"How dare you! And why did you try to read my mind back then?"

Draco shrugged, "I just wanted to know if you and Weasel were together," he said, evading Hermione's angry eyes.

"And why did you want to know that?"

He turned to Hermione with a meaningful look. She blushed profusely.

Snape's loud throat clearing broke their impromptu staring contest.

"We'll explore that area some other time, shall we? Let's go back to your 'untapped' abilities, Ms. Granger. If you're a natural Occlumens, there's also a big possibility that you're a natural Legilimens. Have you ever tried reading somebody's mind?"

Hermione shook her head. Snape's brows arched dramatically.
"Really? Not even once? (Hermione shakes her head) Well, then, have you ever felt like you could tell what someone was thinking? (Hermione's face turned blank) Ah! There it is! That blank look tells me that it's happened more than once. It's confirmed, then. You're also a natural Legilimens, just like Draco here."

"Well, what's that supposed to mean, then, Headmaster?" Hermione asked, biting her lip.

Damn, she's biting her lip! She's getting really nervous now, Draco thought. He felt that familiar urge to pull her in his arms to reassure her of his promise of protection.

"It means, Ms. Granger, that the Dark Lord would find you a valuable pawn. Had the Minister been able to test your abilities, you would find yourself face to face with the Darkest Wizard of all time before you can even say Expelliarmus. And although Mr. Malfoy's manner of preventing you from registering seemed a bit drastic, or crude, he actually did the right thing."

"But what about the other students, aren't they in danger as well?"

"They are, indeed. But we'd still have to wait and see, Ms. Granger"

"Isn't there anything we can do, Headmaster?" Draco asked.

Snape turned to Draco with a twinkle in his eye. A moment later, he was striding back behind his desk and pulling at a drawer. He took out a large, ornate box decorated with ancient runes and placed it on top of his desk, carefully flipping the lid open. Inside were numerous slim phials placed side by side. The contents were shimmering, moving inside the phials.

"Do you know what these are?" he asked.

"Memory vials?" Hermione ventured. The Headmaster nodded, the corners of his lips lifting in a restrained smile.

"Smart as always, Ms. Granger. Yes, they are memory phials. Do you know who they belong to?"

Draco glanced at Hermione just in time to see her shake her head. Now Snape was looking at him with arched brows.

"I have no idea, Headmaster," Draco said, shaking his head as well.

Snape smirked before closing the lid. He walked in front of his desk and sat on the edge facing them. "Before I tell you whose memories those were, I want you to tell me first where you were when the Time-Turner took effect," Snape said, folding his arms against his chest.

Draco's head whipped around so fast in Hermione's direction he could've sworn he heard the bones in his neck crack. Hermione's ashen face was proof that she was thinking what he was thinking - Snape knew about the time shift!

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After the Hogwarts teachers had left, the plump witch took over the herding of the Muggle-born Hogwarts students. She introduced herself as Madam Crowe then she took them to the hallway where the fireplaces were lined up. The students were then made to form two lines before two fireplaces. Each student was given a handful of Floo powder as soon as it was their turn to get into the Floo Network. The young wizard in blue Ministry robes, who asked them to call him 'Emmet', assisted in the transport of the younger students to prevent any accidental appearances in places other than their intended destination.
James looked on as the lines dwindled. When it was his turn to Floo, Madam Crowe gave him a handful of powder and asked him, "I assume you've travelled by Floo before?"

He nodded. The witch beamed and told him in a singsong voice, "Go on, get in there and say 'Malfoy Manor'."

James walked into the fireplace, took a deep breath to clear his mind and threw the powder on the floor before saying, "Malfoy Manor". As soon as he uttered the words, emerald green flames engulfed him and he felt the familiar swirling sensation typical when going into the Floo Network - like being sucked into a vortex. Images of several fireplaces flashed before him until the whirling finally stopped and he found himself down on his knees looking up at the anxious faces of his fellow students. Stepping out of the grills, he brushed the soot from his robes and walked up to Chris, Emma and Justin.

"Where are the others?" he asked Justin.

Thankfully, Justin understood what he meant. He nodded his head towards the far end of the hall where Angus and Heather were huddled with two younger students. He turned to Chris and Emma, mumbled an excuse and motioned Justin to follow him. Angus and Heather were talking with the Creevey brothers by the time they got to their motley group.

"Are we really in Malfoy Manor?" Dennis was asking.

"I believe so. It's not that surprising, is it? The Minister would want to keep a close eye on us so it's only logical for him to take us to where he could easily control things," replied Angus.

James looked around and could not help but be awed by what he saw. The hallway that they were standing on was easily twice the size of the corridors in Hogwarts. The floor was light green and white marble, polished to a sheen, and the walls were done in dark, mahogany paneling with footboards and cornices edged in gold trim. Two man-sized brick fireplaces with black grills, clearly intended for the sole purpose of Flooing in or out of the Manor, stood opposite each other. Huge tapestries were interspersed with intricately designed sconces. Half a dozen settees done in polished mahogany with seats covered in emerald green and silver brocade were pushed against the walls with tall candelabras standing like silent sentinels beside each. The hallway ended with a set of curtained French doors (which as of now were closed, leaving them no idea where they led to). Looking up, one would be treated to a magnificent view of an enchanted ceiling that changed pattern every few minutes. Three miniature chandeliers, spaced at regular intervals, were hanging from it, the emerald-cut, clear crystals reflecting its ever changing colors. The room itself breathed money, opulence and power. The furnishing, though sparse, oozed of understated elegance and privilege. Malfoy Manor, from what little James could see, was designed to intimidate and it was having the desired effect on most of his fellow students. A light tap on his arm pulled him away from his perusal of the Manor.

"Yes, Heather. Did you just say something?" he asked.

"I was asking if we should inform the others where we've been taken. We can use our crystals for that, can't we?" Heather said, her fingers clutching at the invisible pendant hanging from her neck.

James smiled at Heather's brilliant idea. "Yes! Only one of has to do it and everyone will get the message. Good thinking there, Heather." Heather blushed at the compliment.

"So, can you do it? Hermione said that we have to concentrate hard on the message while holding on tight to the crystal. Care to try it?" Heather asked.
"Why not? Better do it now before that annoying Ministry witch comes again," James said.

"Wait, how will we know if the message got through?"

"Hermione said that the crystal will feel warm to the touch. Hold on to yours while I send the message, will you? If it gets warm, then I did it right." Heather nodded, her fingers going back to the concealed crystal on her chest.

"Here goes," said James as he clutched his own crystal and forced his mind to concentrate on one single thought: Malfoy Manor. A few moments later, Heather was grinning at him. He saw Angus' and the Creevey brothers' hands going for their own veiled crystals themselves. They looked at each other in alarm so James told them about what he had done.

"That was brilliant!" Colin exclaimed, his brown eyes sparkling with admiration.

"But, hey! How are we supposed to read our crystals if they're under the Concealment charm?" Dennis inquired as he examined his 'invisible' crystal.

"Hermione taught us the charm, didn't she?" Colin replied, scowling at his brother.

"Oh, yeah! Right! I'd forgotten it, though," Dennis mumbled, smiling shyly at the others.

"It's okay, kid. I'll show you how to do it later, but not here. Too many people around. Let's wait until they show us to our quarters, then I'll teach you the charm," Angus said, tapping Dennis' thin shoulders.

Dennis nodded vigorously as he smiled up at Angus like he was a superhero. Angus blushed in spite of himself and turned away from the two younger Resistance members. He scowled when he saw James, Justin and Heather smirking at him. James chuckled, Angus was never fond of too much attention.

"So, what do you think they'll make us do next?" he asked in all seriousness, purposely ignoring the amused looks on his friends' faces.

"Here's Chris and Emma. Let's ask him. Now that Granger's not here, he's obviously our default leader," Justin said.

That brief reminder of Hermione pinched at James' heart. It frustrated him that they didn't have any way of finding out her whereabouts. He wondered if he could use the crystal to get information about her. He'd just have to frame his question in such a way that it would be easily understood by the other Resistance members.

"What's next, Chris? Did Emmet say anything?" Justin asked as soon as Emma and Chris were settled before them.

"No, he didn't say anything. It seems that his job has been just to transport us here. We'd have to wait for Mrs. Crowe. Maybe she'd gone to see the Minister," Chris answered.

They were still discussing the day's earlier events when the French doors opened with a bang. Several of the younger students jumped in fright at the sight of the Minister of Magic striding through the doors with a scowl. Behind him, looking just as frightened as the students, were Mrs. Crowe and Emmet.

"Why are you not in line?" the Minister said, cold, steel-gray eyes sweeping the room.
There was a mad scramble as the students swiftly fell back in line. James hadn't moved, but stood glaring at the Minister when he felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned to find Heather looking up at him with her doe eyes.

"Let's just go back to the Gryffindor line. Try not to draw attention to yourself, James," she whispered while pulling on his arm.

Reluctantly, he followed Heather to the Gryffindor line. The Hufflepuff line was the longest, yet it was the first to get settled. Always accommodating, these Hufflepuffs, James thought with a shake of his head. The hall took on an eerie silence punctuated only by a few silent coughs and sniffles.

"My, my. I never thought there were these many Mud (clears throat) Muggle-borns in Hogwarts," the Minister drawled. "We really must review the school's standards in accepting students. It's obviously slipping." Crowe and Emmet laughed nervously.

"At any rate, let me welcome you all to Malfoy Manor. I advise that you act in a manner expected of wizards and witches. Though you may be made of more inferior stock than us, Purebloods, I would still expect a modicum of decency from you. Prove to me that Headmaster Snape was not too wrong in letting you partake of his wisdom," Lucius sneered.

The Ministers's words cut through James like wildfire. It burned his heart and scorched his soul. Never before had felt this kind of anger that he'd been feeling these past few days. And right now, it was nearing boiling point. He would've rushed the impertinent snob if not for the hand that steadied him. Heather had reached for his hand and was now squeezing it, a silent reminder for him to keep his cool. Remembering that old advice his father had given him, James slowly counted to ten, slowly breathing deeply in and out.

Lucius turned to the Ministry officials behind him and murmured something that made them lose the painted smiles on their lips. Emmet's face turned red while Mrs. Crowe nodded and stuttered a reply. James wished that he could read lips…or even minds for that matter. He was dying to know what had caused the two officials to react in such a way. He didn't have long to wait.

"Well, then," the Minister said upon turning back to the students. His cold eyes made another sweep and then he clapped his hands together. Six house elves wearing tablecloth togas materialized before them with a loud pop carrying huge baskets laden with bread and bottles of water. Lucius snapped his fingers and the elves moved toward the line of students, distributing bread and water with efficiency.

James looked down at the old, wizened elf handing out his ration to thank him, but was taken aback by the malevolence in its eyes. Bloody hell! Even his House Elves hate us! Man, this will surely be an interesting stay!

"You will shortly be escorted to your, ah…quarters and will be expected to stay there until summoned tomorrow for the Registration." Lucius started to move away, but turned back as if in an afterthought, "Do try not to gorge on your food. Make it last until breakfast," he sneered before marching away, his black, velvet cloak swirling around him.

Mrs. Crowe walked to the front and gave them all a nervous smile. Emmet's face was blank, but his eyes blazed with something James could not place. There was murmuring among the students.

"Ehem. Quiet, please. As the Minister had said, you must act accordingly. Now, get back in line, all of you," Mrs. Crowe said, looking pointedly at the handful of students who had left their lines. They scampered back immediately.
"Now, we'll take you to your quarters. Follow me and Mr. Fawley. And no talking."

Mrs. Crowe turned on her heels and waddled toward the French doors with Emmet just a few steps behind, a deep scowl adorning his usually cheerful face.

They went through the French doors and walked along a corridor that looked much the same as the one they had just left, but with walls displaying life-sized paintings of the Malfoy ancestors who looked down their noses at the procession of students. At the farthest end, Mrs. Crowe and Emmet turned right and stopped in front of a large, black door with the embossed image of two intertwined silver serpents. On either side of the door stood two, burly men in heavy robes of black and silver trimmings standing guard with drawn wands. The man on the right flicked his wand and the door swung open. He walked inside and with another flick of his wand lit the torches that were hanging on the rough, brick walls.

Heather's hand slid into James', squeezing tightly. He could almost taste the fear emanating from her so he squeezed back. The low murmurings of the students had also resumed, echoing in the dark and narrow passageway that seemed to hem them in. It was a far cry from the halls outside. There were no chandeliers or snotty paintings in this place. It was bare, dark, dank, and creepy. There was also that telltale musky, cloying smell pervading its damp walls.

And that's how James knew where they were being taken. He wasn't really surprised, given the Minister's abhorrence of their kind. Also, most ancient castles had them. And Malfoy Manor was, for all intents and purposes, a castle.

"Where are they taking us?" Heather whispered, gripping his fingers like a lifeline.

"The dungeons. Our 'quarters' will be in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor," he answered bitterly.

Hermione almost fell off her seat at the Headmaster's question. How could he have known that it was a Time-Turner that screwed up their reality? Of course, she and Draco had already talked about its possibility. But now, it seemed that they were right. Did this mean that Snape was the one who used the Time-Turner?

She glanced at Draco. His eyes told her that they were both thinking the same thing. What were they supposed to say? Draco's voice flashed inside her head - *Wait. Let Snape do the talking.*

He was opening his mind to her so she did the same. It felt strange, yet...not uncomfortable... but very intimate. She shivered as another of Draco's thoughts invaded her brain - *We have to be careful. We're not sure if this is just a trick.*

*Okay, I won't say anything,* she replied.

"Will you two please stop talking with your minds. It's rude. And very annoying," Snape broke into their 'conversation' with a snort.

"We were not doing...well...what you just said," Hermione mumbled.

"Oh, please. I may not be able to butt in your telepathic conversation since you've both closed your minds to me, but I can still see your eyes. Perhaps, you should practice communicating telepathically, without looking at each other. It sort of gives away the game, honestly."

Hermione almost laughed at the childish pout on Snape's face. He seemed different, not like his usual tight-lipped, stuck-up old self. He was quite evidently still snarky, but he was less brooding and seemed much more...open (?) *Merlin!*
Was the Snape in this alternate reality different from the one in their's? And if so, how different? Truth be told, she actually preferred the old Snape. At least, she already knew how to handle that one, and was sure that that Snape was a brave and faithful fighter. Would this Snape be as fierce and as loyal as her old Potions professor? One thing's for sure…this Snape had also fallen in love with Lily, as evidenced by his earlier behavior when he talked about her. The question now is if she was the same Lily as the one who became Harry's mom. Had she also died protecting Harry? Does Harry even exist in this place?

There were so many questions tumbling inside her head, but she knew she would never get an answer to any of them if she didn't take a chance with Snape. Yet Draco had been wary of trusting this Snape. Before she could say anything more, Snape had gone back behind his desk and sat in his chair. He looked quite serious now. Gone was the pout, replaced by a sneer that gave her a glimpse of the old Snape.

"I see that you two are going to hold out on me. Well then, I suppose it's up to me to do something to earn your trust," he said, reaching out for the box on his table. Do you have any idea why I know that a Time-Turner had been used? And that you two seemed to be unaffected by it?"

Hermione held his breath, waiting for Draco to say something. All she heard was his silent thought, "Here it comes…" as he shook his head in response to Snape's question.

"These memory phials belong to the ousted Minister of Magic, Albus Dumbledore," he paused and looked up at them, awaiting their reaction.

It took a great deal of effort for Hermione to remain seated. She almost jumped to her feet when Draco's colorful curses burst inside her brain. When she chanced a glance at him, though, he appeared to be as calm and collected as a Tibetan monk.

Damn! How do you do that, Malfoy? She thought, trying hard to maintain a straight face herself.

With practice, Granger. Lots of practice. Having a father like mine, with whom you always need to keep thoughts to yourself, also helps.

"I see that you're both trying to act unsurprised. Although Ms. Granger looks like she had just swallowed a blast-ended skrewt, or whatever those nasty things that Hagrid's breeding are called," said Snape, smirking at Hermione.

I don't know how long I can stay like this, Malfoy! I need to ask questions! She screamed into Draco's mind.

Typical Granger. You're sometimes too inquisitive for your own good, you know, came Draco's reply inside her head. No one's stopping you, go ahead and ask your questions. Just don't blame me if it backfires on you. We don't know this Snape. He could be more cunning than the one we know.

Yeah, right. Leave everything to me now, huh? So, you'll just act like you swallowed your tongue and do nothing? Backing away again, are you? She snarled.

What the fu…I can't believe we're even arguing right now! Merlin's arse! That's it! I'm closing my mind from you. If you want to argue, open your freaking mouth. Draco snarled back.

And sure enough, she felt his walls going up. She could no longer listen to his thoughts. Somehow, she felt…lonely.

"I'm sure Ms. Granger is dying to ask a gazillion questions. Let me answer the first one that I know
is just tickling your tongue right now. Yes, Albus Dumbledore was the Minister of Magic. He'd been Minister since 1981 and was ousted just a month ago when trumped up charges against him were brought to the Wizengamot. We all knew that the Dark Lord was behind it, but what we didn't know was how far he had already penetrated the Wizengamot and the Ministry itself."

"And I suppose it was my father who orchestrated the whole thing," Draco said in a deadly calm. Hermione saw fury briefly flash in his eyes before it was hidden behind a veneer of cold detachment.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. That is true. And as his reward, he was given Dumbledore's position," Snape said, leaning forward to observe the younger Malfoy.

Hermione digested everything that Snape said, but something stuck up like a rotten tomato. The Time-Turner could not have gone back that far! And it couldn't have changed everything so fast. They blacked out for just a few minutes, didn't they? So, why did they step out into a world that was altered by several years instead of just minutes? Could time have sped up out here while it remained frozen inside the Room of Requirement?

"Profe… I mean, Headmaster…" Hermione began, but was interrupted by Snape.

"You can call me Professor, Ms. Granger. I know for a fact that from where, or should I say from when, you came from Dumbledore was the Headmaster and I was your Potions teacher," he said with a trace of an amused smile on his lips.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Draco flinch. The movement was so small, but enough to cause Snape to turn to him.

"Were you going to say something, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked.

"No…I was just…" he stammered, his eyes going back to Hermione. He gave an imperceptible nod and she opened her mind to him again.

I suppose we'll never get to the bottom of this unless we start trusting Snape, she heard him say in her head.

I know. Just be ready to stupefy him in case he starts acting weird, she threw back at him. She 'heard' him chuckle before saying, I'm always ready to stupefy anyone who's acting pigheaded!

She did not reply, but instead glared at him, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly. She turned back to Snape and was met with an annoyingly amused smirk. Was he listening to us?

"So, Ms. Granger…you were saying?"

"Yes, Professor…You asked us earlier, where we were when the Time-Turner took effect. How can you be so sure that there was a Time-Turner? And what does it matter where we were?"

"Because there are certain places in this castle that are protected by a different kind of magic. Magic that cannot be affected by cursed objects or Dark spells."

"Dark spells?" Draco asked.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. You see, an ordinary Time-Turner is quite limited. It can only go back for a few hours, not days, and certainly not years. But obviously, a Time-Turner had been used to create this alternate timeline. Not just any ordinary Time-Turner, though. It would have been something that was modified by Dark Magic…by a very powerful dark spell."
"But Professor, even if something like that was used…why didn't it affect us? We remember everything from our own reality. And how did you know that we're not from your own timeline?" Hermione asked.

"Your first question can only be answered if you tell me where you were before everything you knew changed. The second one's quite easy to answer. But before I do, can you tell me what it is I'm holding in my hand?" Snape asked as he brandished the Marauder's Map before their faces.

Draco shrugged. Hermione smirked and said, "The Marauder's Map."

"Very good, Ms. Granger. And what does it do?"

"It shows the names and location of everyone within Hogwarts."

"Excellent! So, to cut the story short, I saw the two of you, on the map, spending so much time in each other's company during the last couple of days. And it made me think…why would Draco Malfoy, arrogant Pureblooded Muggle-hater and son of the new Minister of Magic, be wasting his time trailing after the Princess of Mudbloods? That's what he calls you, by the way, Ms. Granger. Well, the Draco in the world that I know of, at least. And I also thought…why would the equally snotty Princess Know-it-All of Mudbloods tolerate the presence of her tormentor? You two are practically at each other's throats whenever you cross paths then, all of a sudden you're like two peas in a pod. Something just didn't smell right. And so, when I saw the two of you walking around the castle when Ms. Granger here should've already been in London, I got even more curious and followed you to the seventh floor corridor." Snape smirked arrogantly, evidently pleased with his own accurate deduction.

"And then, there is this box in one of those hidden closets in the Headmaster's chambers that I accidentally found just yesterday when I was looking for...never mind, it's not important. Anyway, the closet itself was protected by ancient runes that somehow protected this box from the time change," Snape paused to peek at his now very captive audience. He pulled out one of the phials and shook it gently. Its contents shimmered and swirled. He replaced it inside the box before continuing with his revelations.

"I didn't know that the box belonged to Albus. But, just like you Ms. Granger, I also have an insatiable curiosity and so, I took one of the phials and pored over the memories of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. At first I thought that they were not real memories…but then, why would they have been placed inside such a well-protected box and an even more protected closet? After looking into a few more phials, I realized that they were memories from a different time…and not the one that I am in right now. That's also when I realized that probably, the reason why the two of you were acting so strange was because you did not belong in this timeline either. Probably you came from a place where you two were not enemies, but more like friends...even lovers," Snape finished with a twitch of his dark eyebrows.

Hermione's eyes unconsciously swiveled to Draco's direction. He was looking at her with his stormy gray eyes, a soft smile etched on his pinkish lips. His hand reached out for hers and Hermione eagerly took it.

"So, tell me...where were you when all this happened?" Snape broke in.

Draco's head nodded at her, giving her the permission she was seeking.

"We were inside the Room of Requirement, Headmaster," she said.

"Ah! Well, that explains it. The Room of Requirement is governed by a special magic all its own."
That's why it's unplottable and changes in accordance to the needs of the seeker. It protected you from the dark magic that enveloped Hogwarts and the whole of the wizarding world. I suppose you blacked out?" They both nodded. "While you were out, everything was changing everywhere except in the Room of Requirement where time had been frozen."

"But we only blacked out for a few minutes," Draco said. Hermione nodded in agreement.

"It seemed like a few minutes to the both of you because of the protection of the Room's magic. Besides, time moves differently when altered by a Time-Turner, especially one that was imbibed with a powerful dark spell."

"Alright, granted that everything transpired the way that you explained…what's going to happen now? Can we go back to our own reality?" Draco asked.

"I'm not really sure if that's possible at all. As far as I know, Time-Turners do not travel forward in time, always backwards. But since this is obviously not your ordinary flea market variety, we can never tell. We'd have to find the actual Time-Turner that was used to alter this timeline. And we have to figure out who has it and what dark spell was used. But until then, you'd have to live like you belong here. And right now, there are a lot of issues that we need to address immediately."

"But…what if we don't find the Time-Turner, Professor?" Hermione asked, afraid that Snape's answer would be the same as the one Draco had just whispered inside her brain.

"Then, I'm afraid you'd be stuck here for a very, very long time, Ms. Granger…if not forever…" 

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The students moved down the steps leading to the dungeons with growing panic. There were now a few sobs echoing around the dark passageway. Mrs. Crowe seemed to be deaf to them, though, as she kept on rambling about how they should behave and never wander around the castle, and how they should not put Hogwarts to shame by their actions. Emmet Fawley remained stoic, his eyes staring at the far distance. Gone were the cheery greetings and shy smiles from him.

James trudged behind Heather, his hand pressing against the small of her back as he tried to support her. She'd almost fainted when she saw that they were going underground. Apparently, she was claustrophobic and knowing that she would be several feet below ground had tripled her level of anxiety. Only the quiet chatter of the Creevey brothers walking in front of her had kept her distracted long enough to regain control of her affliction.

A hand clapped on James shoulders and he slightly turned to see Angus's uneasy eyes boring into his. Angus was taller than James, with broad shoulders and thick biceps and it was disconcerting to see fear in such a big man. But then, James remembered that Angus was also just a kid. He hadn't even turned eighteen yet and he was being pushed into a situation that would cause even full-grown men to cower. He, himself, was growing restless. But it was more out of anger than from fear.

Soon they were standing inside the biggest dungeon James had ever seen. True, only a small portion of it was visible since the rest of the way was cast in darkness, but the echoes that reverberated around them told James that it stretched farther than he'd anticipated, like it spanned the whole underground of the castle. More torches were lighted and they finally saw what their 'quarters' looked like. It made his skin crawl and his guts twist. They were looking at holding cells, complete with the prerequisite iron bars and huge locks.

Mrs. Crowe stepped up again and smiled her fake smile, but even in the dark, James could tell that
her façade was starting to crumble. Her eyes darted furiously around the walls and her lips twitched crazily, like she wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. James saw Emmet whisper something to her that made her smile look more like a grimace. She swallowed hard before turning to Emmet and pulling him towards the guard. She waved her wand and James knew that she had just cast a Muffliato charm. Now he really wished he knew how to read lips! However, if he were to pass judgment based on his observation, he could confidently say that it wasn't going so well. Mrs. Crowe now looked really outraged, her hands frantically waving in front of the guard who just looked down at her with a blank face. After getting nothing but a cold stare from the burly man Mrs. Crowe stomped her foot and walked back to them. She cleared her throat, then spoke in her singsong voice.

"Now, children, listen carefully. You are not prisoners here. The...uhm...cells won't be locked, but you must now go around visiting other...uh...cells...rooms! Yes, rooms! Stay in your rooms, understood? We will return tomorrow to bring you all to the Ministry. Now, there will be four students to a room. Girls, form a line here....and boys, walk over here," she pointed to her left and then to her right, her fake smile plastered on her lips again. Her face disturbingly reminded James of a sinister Jack-in-the-box.

As the students formed the two lines, James felt Heather's hand tighten around his fingers. She looked like she was about to give in to hysteria any time now. He knew that this was just her claustrophobia acting up and under any other circumstance, Heather wouldn't be like this. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close as he leaned forward to utter a few words of encouragement in her ears.

"It'll be okay, Heather. It's just for tonight. Remember, you're part of the Resistance. We're here for each other. Just hold on to your crystal and once you think it's safe, you can use the spell that Hermione had taught us so you can see our messages, alright?"

Heather nodded against his shoulder. She looked up and smiled at him, then she walked over to the girls' line. Within minutes, she was back to her old self, encouraging the younger students with her soft words and brilliant smiles.

Angus and James shared their 'room' with the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis. There were four cots flushed two to a wall. The thin mattresses were covered in rough, olive-green linen sheets. Images of a Polish concentration camp flashed on James mind and he shivered at the thought. Being a Muggle-born, he was aware of the horrors of WWII and he couldn't help but associate what they're experiencing now with the persecutions that took place during that time. Was that the Ministry's ultimate goal - the eradication of all Muggle-borns from the Wizarding world?

Once they were all settled in their cells (James would rather not delude himself that these were 'rooms'), Mrs. Crowe started speaking again.

"Now, one last thing, children..." she paused at the sound of several loud pops. The House elves were back with their baskets. They were now empty, though, and James had a feeling what the elves had come for.

"For your own safety, the Minister has ordered that you surrender your wands..."

The cacophony was deafening and angry voices drowned out the words of the Ministry witch. She waved her wand and silence ensued - she had cast a wordless Silencing charm on them.

"That's better. As I said earlier, you must remain in your best behavior. Don't worry, your wands will be returned to you before you return to school. You must believe that this is for your own good...yeh?" Her voice was starting to crack and James almost felt pity for the older witch. She
obviously wasn't in agreement with how they were being treated, but she was under orders and no one ever challenged the new Minister of Magic.

The elves went around the cells and collected their wands. A different elf than the one that James had encountered earlier walked into their's. She looked younger than the others and her tablecloth toga was neat and quite new. She walked towards James and extended her basket, there were already a few wands inside. Before James could drop his wand in the basket, the elf reached out and grabbed it with her gnarled fingers. She closed her eyes and then something unusual happened. When she opened her eyes again, two identical wands were already in her hands. Her big, baby-blue eyes bored into James' as she put one of the wands inside the basket and the other she thrust back in James' hand. Then, she lifted two fingers to her lips before turning on her heels to walk out. When James looked up, Emmet was at the entrance of their cell looking at him with a slight smirk on his lips. After giving him a short nod, Emmet looked down at the female house elf and winked. The house elf smiled and disappeared with a loud pop.

James was about to walk up to Emmet when Mrs. Crowe's voice rang out. She was having another row with the guard. And this time, she didn't bother to cast a Muffliato charm.

"You cannot do this! They're just children! They won't be able to do anything, especially now that you have taken their wands! This is barbaric! I'm sure there's a misunderstanding here. I can't believe that the Minister would treat these children this way! First, the rationing of food, then quarters in the dungeons, and now this?"

The guard looked down at her with the same blank stare. He waved his wand without taking his eyes off of the infuriated witch and the doors to all the cells slammed shut with a bang. Mrs. Crowe turned just in time to see the second guard walk up behind her and grab her arm.

"What are you doing? Get your hand off of me! I am a Ministry official! You cannot do this to me! Wait! Wait! Let me go!" she screamed as the guard manhandled her and dragged her towards the stairs. Her voice rebounded around the damp walls only to be cut off once they were out of sight. James couldn't tell if it was because the guards put a silencing spell on her or if she was knocked unconscious. The second guard walked up to Emmet with his wand pointed at the young wizard's chest. Emmet gave James a tiny nod before turning away to follow the other guard up the stairs.

The torches died out as soon as Emmet and the guard were out of sight.

Students shrieked and cried as the heavy darkness embraced the cold dungeons. James groped for his wand, raised it up high and whispered, "Lumos".

Light flared at the tip of his wand, bathing their cell in an eerie light. Soon enough, there were whispers of "Lumos" from the other cells. Apparently, he was not the only one that a mysterious elf and a sympathetic Ministry wizard had gifted with a smuggled wand.

With that, James' spirit somehow lifted.

They were not alone.

There was still hope.

And that was enough for now.

He just wished he knew where Hermione was.
Okay! So how was it? Too long, too boring, too whatever? Please review! And hang on tight, because a lot of things are going to happen in the next chapters (Hint: Harry's whereabouts would be revealed!)

Excited for the next installment? I am! :P
Conspiracies and Convoluted Plans

Chapter Summary

Blinny begins, Draco gets a glimpse of Hermione's hidden power, Emmet takes a more active role in the Order whilst Theo gets peeved with Draco.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blaise Zabini had always been known for his somber dignity. He was often called 'The Quiet Slytherin'. Maybe because he was always lurking in the shadows, his striking eyes constantly observing. He'd always tried to keep out of trouble, preferring to maintain as low a profile as much as possible. Everyone knew, however, that he was one of Draco Malfoy's, a.k.a the Slytherin Prince's, closest friends, so no one ever messed around with him. Not even his fellow Slytherins. And so, it was only natural, with Draco's new status as the Minister's son, that people would start smooching up to him as well. He hated it, but it couldn't be helped. The girls had also begun giving him shy smiles. But the only smile he ever wanted, he yet had to see.

No surprise there considering that he'd set his sights on a girl who was known, not only for her red-hot, short temper but also for belonging to a family of 'blood traitors', notorious for their defiance of the Dark Lord and their abhorrence of his supporters. It never fazed him, he was never a big fan of the DL either. Still, like a typical Gryffindor, she treated him the way she did all Slytherins, with borderline revulsion. And it was starting to get on his nerves. He wanted nothing more than to change her opinion of him, but how could he do that if she would not even look his way? He'd never even caught her without a posse of giggling girls revolving around her. Until today.

He'd gone out to the Quidditch field to clear his head (and avoid the annoying arse kissing in the Slytherin Common Room). He'd always found that flying around that oval always helped him put things in perspective. Admittedly, the events of the past few days had been taking a heavy toll on most of the Hogwarts population, including him. Add to that the fact that he was now a member of a secret rebel society and he was close to losing his trademark cool. He didn't expect to find anyone there since it was already nearing curfew. Imagine his surprise (and glee!) when he found the girl who'd been occupying most of his not-so-wholesome thoughts these past few months flying above the stands by her lonesome! He was tempted to fly up there and join her, but her impressive moves made him sit in the bleachers and watch her in awe.

Then, as she executed a complicated combination of feint and roll her hand slipped from her broom and she was soon in free-fall. Luckily, she wasn't that high up when she fell. Still, the fall knocked her out cold. Blaise ran to her side in a flash, the fear in his heart beating a painful tattoo inside his chest. When his attempts to rouse her proved ineffective, he didn't think twice about carrying her all the way up to the Infirmary, forgetting that he was a wizard capable of levitating her unconscious form (though it could be due more to the irresistible pleasure of having her soft body in his arms). Madam Pomfrey fussed, as per usual, but she was grateful for Blaise's quick response to such an unfortunate incident. She'd dismissed him once Ginny was all settled, but he begged her to let him stay.

Thankfully, she was in the middle of brewing some potions so she easily acquiesced to his request,
demanding only that she be called back as soon as she was awake. Blaise, of course, promised to do as required in a heartbeat.

He stood by the bed, looking down at her. This was the first time that he would be openly admiring her beautiful face without being in danger of getting hexed. Normally, he would just be stealing glances at her, quickly diverting his eyes before she caught him staring. She was famous for her Bat-bogey hex and he had no intention of sampling that skill. And so it was only now that he noticed how her thick lashes fanned against her porcelain skin, how her lips were just plump and red enough to look sultry, how the smattering of freckles on her nose made her look young and fresh, how her chin was strong and soft at the same time, how her hair crowned her head with a glorious red haze, how she embodied everything he would ever want in a girl.

He sighed and debated between taking the bed next to hers or getting a chair to sit on. He remembered Madam Pomfrey giving him permission to conjure a comfortable armchair for himself if he was intending to stay until she woke up and so with a flourish of his wand he made a plump, green and silver velvet chair appear beside Ginny's bed. He was just getting settled in said armchair when Ginny started to stir, her hand going up to her head, mumbling. Blaise was on his feet in an instant, leaning forward to listen to her soft murmurings. He couldn't make out what she was saying so he leaned in closer.

SMACK!

Blaise nearly toppled backward, not only because the slap hurt, but more out of shock at the sheer force that came with it.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU PERVERT?" Ginny screamed, her eyes blazing.

"PERVERT? What made you think that I was doing anything perverse?" he retorted, rubbing the side of his face to ease the sting of her slap.

"Well, what did you expect me to think? Your face was very close to mine!"

"You clearly have a dirty mind, Weasley. Just because I was leaning down on you, you easily assume that I was doing something perverted."

"Why were you leaning down on me? Trying to see if I was totally defenseless?"

"Of course not! I was trying to listen to what you were saying! You were muttering in your sleep," he said in exasperation.

"And why were you interested in what I was saying?"

"I thought you were asking for water or something," Zabini replied, shuffling uncomfortably. He was actually hoping that she would reveal some of her deep, dark secrets. He truly wanted to know if she had someone special in her life and if she was calling out his name. Unlike Draco, who up to now seemed to be in denial of his true feelings for a certain Ravenclaw, Blaise had no illusions about the witch presently glaring at him. He wanted her, probably loved her, even. Okay, that's probably a bit of a stretch, but he must concede that he has strong - very strong - feelings for this Gryffindor princess.

Ginny smirked, not really convinced of his alibi. "And what if I was? Would the great Blaise Zabini have condescended to bring me a glass of water?"

Blaise was caught off guard by her remark. He never even thought that she knew him by name. And apparently, she has some pre-conceived image of him in her mind. Which wasn't really good
because he was sure that whatever it was, it wasn't at all very flattering.

"And why would I not? I am here to serve your every whim, my lady," he said, bowing before her with a flourish.

"I highly doubt that," she mumbled.

He was sorely tempted to defend himself from her mocking reply, but the slight smile and twinkle in her eye held him back. His heart fluttered instead.

"Why are you here, anyway?" Ginny asked, one perfect brow arched high.

Before Blaise could reply, the bustling figure of Madam Pomfrey swept him aside.

"Mr. Zabini! I told you to call me as soon as Ms. Weasley had regained consciousness," the Mediwitch said with evident displeasure.

"I-I was going t-to…"

"Oh, alright! Off with you then! Go back to your dormitory. There's nothing more you can do here. I'm thankful for your help, but it's already past curfew," Madam Pomfrey said, cutting him off.

When Blaise didn't move, the Mediwitch took him by the arm and escorted him to the doors of the Infirmary. "I will be keeping Ms. Weasley here for the night. You cannot stay because I will be doing some tests on her. You may visit her tomorrow if you wish," the last sentence was whispered by a smiling Madam Pomfrey.

Blaise felt his cheeks burn as he correctly surmised that the healer somehow knew of his tender feelings for Ginny. He craned his neck to catch a last glimpse of her and was rewarded with a small smile from the redhead.

It wasn't much, just a tiny, teensy smile, but for Blaise, it was more than enough.

He didn't sleep a wink that night.

Not really because he spent the whole night tossing in bed thinking about her, but because Nott was beside himself with worry when he found out that Draco was missing.

o-0-o

Draco wasn't really missing. He was just spending the night with Hermione in the Room of Requirement - again. But this time, with the Headmaster's permission. Snape had begrudgingly admitted that the Ministry indeed have spies inside Hogwarts so Hermione could not very well go parading about the school without alerting the Minister. She had to stay hidden until Snape knew enough about the full extent of the Registration's consequences on the Muggle-borns and the Room of Requirement seemed a good enough hiding place. Though, since she could not stay there indefinitely, Snape had provided a solution that they had no choice but accept. It involved a complicated spell that when performed properly would enable Hermione to hide in plain sight.

And tonight, they would be learning the spell together. It was very advanced magic, one that wasn't taught in Hogwarts, but the Headmaster was confident that Hermione could handle it very well. It wouldn't hurt Draco to learn it as well since it could also help him in the future. Snape taught them how to do it, even made a demonstration that was so impressive it drove away the doubts in Draco's mind. Hermione, however, was worried about a different matter.
"Do you think the Ministry would believe Snape's alibi about my disappearance?" Hermione asked whilst pacing like a caged tiger in front of Draco. She was also biting her nails, a nasty habit that Draco noticed to mean that she was really on edge.

"Let's not worry about that. I'm sure he'd be able to take care of the Ministry. Will you please sit down, Hermione. I'm getting dizzy with all that pacing," Draco said, exasperated.

Hermione paused in her tracks to glare at him. He would've made a scathing remark, but knowing how anxious she already was he just swallowed his ready retort and gave her his most devastating smile instead. Then he mouthed, PLEASE? She huffed and stomped towards him, the corners of her mouth twitching as she tried to repress a smile. He threw her arm around her shoulders as soon as she was seated and dragged her against him.

"Don't worry your pretty head too much, Luv. Let's just rest for a while, then we'll take a crack at this spell later, agreed?" he said, tilting her chin up. There was fear in her eyes as she nodded in agreement and his heart clenched. He wished he could wipe away all her worries and take her back to their world. He bent his head and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. She smiled and snuggled closer to him.

"Do you think we can do this, Draco?" she whispered, her head resting on his chest.

"Hermione, Snape wouldn't have taught us this spell if he thought we couldn't pull it off. He may be a right git most of the time, but he's a smart man. And he doesn't give out false hopes. He'll call a spade a spade and would not be apologetic about it. Besides, he knows of your skill. Even in this timeline, he's taught you for years, so he's got a pretty good picture of what you can and cannot do."

"But for this spell to be truly effective, I also have to practice my Occlumency and I don't think I can do both at the same time. This spell would be useless if I can't close my mind."

"I know you can do it, Hermione. You are a natural Occlumens, so you already have the skill. You just have to enhance it a bit more. Learn to control it just like you control your Legilimency."

"But I don't have control over my Legilimency," she protested. Draco chuckled.

"Yes, you do. The only reason why you're not very effective with me is because I'm a very skilled Occlumens. I've felt you poking around my brain many times, Hermione, and you do it quite well. It comes naturally to you that's why you don't even notice that you're already doing it. Try doing the same with your Occlumency."

"But how? That's what scares me, Draco. What if I don't realize that my walls are already down and a skilled Legilimens like yourself takes a shot at me. The spell would be useless!"

Draco felt her stiffening against him, proof positive that she was close to panic, so he turned her around to face him. Her face was tilted up to his and he was sorely tempted to kiss her to oblivion, but he had to put some sense in her head first.

"Just relax, Hermione. That's the secret to Occlumency. Relax and empty your mind. Compartmentalize your thoughts. Put it this way...imagine that you are in a...hmmm...a library! Those shelves filled with books are your thoughts, stacked neatly...in an orderly manner. You can't hide everything, that would be a dead giveaway that you're an Occlumens. Leave a few things lying around, but protect those that are important to you. Now, go farther to the back...where the Restricted Section is...go there...and put those thoughts that you would not want anyone to find in there. Put them in locked cabinets, if you want. Just send them where no one can touch them. Are
The widening grin on her face told him that she indeed was getting the picture. He breathed easier, assured that if anyone could pull off what they were about to do, it would be her.

"Now, let's try this out. Think of something...anything. It doesn't have to be big. Just think of that thing, then put it in the Restricted Section. Put locks around it. Are you doing it now?"

She nodded.

"I'll try to see if I can break through your locks and walls," Draco said as he locked eyes with her, letting his mind plunge into hers, running through the stack of books. Searching...searching...searching...ignoring the clutter that she left here and there.

He was almost at the very end when he hit a wall...a very thick and solid wall. He concentrated on breaking it down...pounding, scratching, barreling against it. His head started to ache. She was pushing him out! And with such tremendous force that his eyes started to water. Then, something strange happened. Sizzling tendrils of her mind were reaching out to him, grasping at him and dragging him back. He shut his eyes and forced his own walls up, but not before he felt the scorching coils of her mind lunging at him.

When he sensed her retreating from his mind, he pulled away from her and slumped against the back of the settee. He'd never felt so...drained!

"Fuck, Hermione! What was that all about?" he panted.

He opened an eye to look at her. She was gaping at him with wide eyes, her mouth hanging open. Dread sliced through him at her unblinking stare. His hand went to her shoulders and started shaking her with such vigor that her teeth chattered. It seemed to break her trance and she blinked at him rapidly before leaping into his arms, her own going around his neck. She was crying! He held her tightly against him, crooning soothing words in her ear, his fingers running through her hair. A few seconds more and her cries died down into soft sobs. Her arms slid down to his waist as she moved to his side, her head nestled on his shoulder.

"Are you okay now, Luv?" he quietly asked, fingers entangling themselves in her curls.

"Yes...I think so. Did I hurt you?" her voice was steady despite her trembling.

He shook his head. Why was she so scared? If anyone between the two of them should be trembling with fear, it should be him. He'd never experienced getting his mind assaulted like that before. There was something elemental about her skill. It was fierce, relentless and just a little bit...dark. He hated to admit it, but it terrified him. She could break someone's mind with her innate ability. Perhaps she felt it, too. And that's what terrified her.

"You did not hurt me, Hermione. And don't worry about it. I'll help you learn how to control your skills. You already have them naturally, they just need a little tweaking."

"Did I frighten you?" she whispered.

Should he lie to her and tell her that she didn't? Would it make her more confident or reckless? But if he told her that she did, that he saw the darkness in her, would she despise her inherent talents?

Before he could decide what to do, she shrugged and spoke in a soft voice, "It's okay. You don't have to answer. I know that I did. I saw it in your eyes."
Draco's heart skipped a beat. He started to speak, but Hermione swiftly turned, settling in his lap as she straddled him. Her eyes were soft yet full of passion. She cupped his face in her cold hands, dipping her head and kissing him full on the mouth, her tongue sliding between his lips begging entrance. He gave it, opening up to her, tasting her sweetness. She pressed her body against him as she continued to kiss him with a hunger that surprised even him. Then, she jerked back and looked into his eyes, searching for something he did not know.

"Please, don't be scared of me, Draco. I love you and I will never, ever hurt you. Promise," she said, her beautiful, brown eyes tearing up. He reached up, his thumb caressing her wet cheeks.

"I know," and with that he pulled her back to him and kissed her with total abandon, pushing away all thought of complicated spells, convoluted plans, and dark powers.

They will face their demons tomorrow.

But tonight, only he and this beguiling witch in his arms mattered.

o-0-o

Snape paced in his chambers as he waited for the fireplace to burst into flames. He'd made sure that this avenue of transport was secure and beyond the Ministry's reach. Yet, he could not discount the possibility of another breach in their security. They've suffered some losses during the past few months, the biggest of which resulted in the ouster of Albus Dumbledore. They'd expected that, more or less, considering that the Dark Lord had been gaining control over the wizarding world as soon as he had awakened from his decade-long 'sleep'.

The crackling sound in the fireplace alerted him to the arrival of his 'guest'. He stood to the side and watched the cloaked figure step out of the grate. Brushing the soot from his expensive, black cloak, Snape's visitor straightened and swept the room with his dark eyes, finally fastening on the Headmaster. His face broke into a grin as he walked towards Snape, throwing his arms around him.

"Uncle Severus! It's always a pleasure to see you, but your message gave me quite a fright."

"Emmet, how many times must I tell you not to call me Uncle! Your mother was a very, very distant cousin, I'm not even sure if we're really related," Snape said with just a trace of annoyance. He returned the young man's embrace, however, if a bit reluctantly. Snape knew that he was most certainly related by blood to Emmet's mother, Gwendolyn, her being also a Prince, like his own mother. He just liked teasing the young wizard about it.

"Even so, I wouldn't mind being related to you, Headmaster. And my father agrees that you would be a good addition to the family tree," Emmet replied, releasing the older man. He shrugged off his cloak, revealing his dark blue Ministry robes underneath, and folded it in his arm whilst he gazed around the Headmaster's chambers.

"Did he now? He must be getting senile," Snape quipped.

Emmet chuckled. "He's not that old and you know it. He sends his regards, by the way. As does mother. You should visit with them sometime."

Snape snorted. Emmet spoke like everything was going just swimmingly for all of them. Snape, however, knew for a fact that Emmet's father, Gordon, the scion of the rich, Pureblood Fawleys, had gone into hiding. And the only reason that Emmet and his mother had stayed in Britain was to dispel any doubt regarding their trumped-up reason for Gordon's absence. The Fawleys were known to have businesses abroad so it was quite easy to spread the rumor that he was needed
elsewhere and would be returning as soon as the non-existent crisis was over.

Although the Fawleys had always appeared neutral, they were actually staunch supporters of Dumbledore. No one knew that Gordon and Gwendolyn were also secret members of the Order. Gordon left to avoid being forced to pledge the allegiance of his family to the Dark Lord. To further dismiss doubts regarding the family's loyalties, Emmet remained at his post in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Which, in hindsight, proved beneficial to Snape and the rebels. Ever since the Dark Lord's cronies started appropriating Ministry positions for themselves, Emmet had taken on a more active role in the Order. He was now their 'Inside Man'. He was also the one who informed Snape about the whereabouts of the Muggle-borns.

"So, what did you wish to discuss with me, Headmaster?" Emmet asked, taking his seat in front of Snape's desk.

"Before I do, tell me more about my students. Where are they and how are they being treated?" Snape asked, sitting on the chair opposite Emmet.

A dark shadow flitted across Emmet's boyish features before he replied. "I fear for them, Headmaster. The Minister is doing his best to break their spirit… obviously to have them scared and subdued before the testings. They were placed in the dungeons and given a measly ration of bread and water that they needed to make last for at least two meals."

The sharp intake of breath from the Headmaster made him pause. Snape waved his hand, instructing him to continue. "Even Madam Crowe, who was very welcoming of the new Minister, didn't like the way the children were being treated. But of course, she couldn't do anything. Good thing I have my own insider at Malfoy Manor," Emmet said with a mischievous grin.

"What do you mean?" Snape asked, leaning forward.

"We used to have this very curious House Elf, Twinkle. My mother had already set her free a long time ago, long before I was born. Twinkle, instead of leaving Fawley Manor, felt so indebted to Mother that she pledged, of her own free will, to continue to serve the Fawleys in whatever capacity she could. She was free to come and go, of course, but she remained very loyal to our family. Now, Twinkle had a sister who belonged to the Malfoys. She's now very old and quite ill, but still, the Malfoys would not set her free. Twinkle decided to help her sister with her chores so she went to the Malfoys and presented herself. I don't know how she did it, but she's now free to serve in her sister's place without being tied to the Malfoys," Emmet paused to see if the Headmaster was still following his story.

"Go on," Snape said with an amused smirk.

"And since her loyalty is still with the Fawley's, she's more than willing to do my bidding. Through her, I was able to provide your students with a little help," Emmet finished with a satisfied grin.

"What kind of help?"

"Well, as of now I'm sure the Muggle-borns have just finished a very delicious dinner comprising of mushroom soup, cornbread, fried chicken legs, and pudding. With an unlimited supply of pumpkin juice, too. Tomorrow morning, they would be treated to a very filling breakfast of muffins, fried eggs, and bacon. She also left a few wands in the hands of the most capable seventh-years."

Emmet could tell that the Headmaster was impressed in spite of his blank face and unblinking stare. The loud clearing of his throat sort of gave him away.
"I see that you've been quite resourceful. Wouldn't Twinkle make the Malfoy guards a bit suspicious, though? Especially with regard to the wands? What if the students smuggled them out of Malfoy Manor?"

"I've already instructed Twinkle to take care of that. The wands were also enchanted to vanish if they were ever taken out of Malfoy Manor. The guards would not see them, either. A long-lasting Confundus charm courtesy of yours truly," Emmet chuckled.

Snape inclined his head to Emmet, his own version of showing gratitude. He was impressed. Emmet's proving to be a very valuable member of the Order indeed. Just as young Malfoy was proving to be something he'd never expected - a fierce, powerful and loyal ally. Well, the powerful part, he'd somehow suspected. Draco had always been smart and sharp, with exceptional wizarding skills. He just wasn't sure if he could ever be an ally. True, he knew of the young man's animosity for his father, yet he didn't really think that Draco would openly and actively support the Resistance. Looking at Emmet, Snape thought of something he'd not seriously considered until now.

Perhaps, Malfoy could be persuaded from publicly declaring his true allegiance… not just yet, anyway. He could be a more effective 'insider' than Emmet since he was the Minister's son and would have deeper access into the Ministry…but only if he agreed. For the meantime, though, Snape had a more urgent assignment for him and that equally brilliant Ravenclaw witch, Granger. However, he must take care of everything on his end first before sending them out on the most dangerous mission of retrieving Potter. Emmet's subtle fidgeting pulled Snape from his thoughts. He lifted an eyebrow at the young wizard giving him permission to ask his question.

"Headmaster, what was it you needed to ask me? Your note was a bit cryptic, which is why I found it terrifying," Emmet asked.

"What can you tell me about International Apparition?"

"The Ministry is now strictly monitoring all forms of travel. To apparate internationally, you would have to acquire a special permit not only from the Department of Magical Transportation but also from the Department of Int'l. Magical Cooperation and ours."

"Hmm…that will prove to be quite difficult…" Snape said, more to himself than to Emmet.

"Are you planning on doing some traveling, Headmaster?"

Snape shook his head. "No…not me, but Resistance members. Is there any way that you could secure these permits for two people?"

Emmet seemed to weigh the possibilities before answering. "I suppose I could, but it could raise a few questions. My father was only able to travel under the Ministry's radar because all of our houses are connected via the Floo Network. If you want, you could have your people traveling that same way. As far as I know our Network has not been placed under surveillance yet."

Snape thought about what Emmet was suggesting. He could take him up on his offer since he was sure that the Fawleys could be trusted. But that would depend if they have property in the country where Draco and Hermione would be traveling to.

"Do you have a house in the US? Somewhere near New York, perhaps?" asked Snape.

"I'm not sure. I'd have to check with Mother."

Snape nodded, satisfied that another mode of transport had been added to their options.
"I'll let you know as soon as possible so we can make the necessary arrangements."

"Will you be present during the testing of the Muggle-borns?" Snape asked after a moment.

"I really don't know. I haven't received any instructions from my Division head. I'll try to be, but if not, we can always ask Twinkle to keep an eye out for the kids since the testing will be done at Malfoy Manor. I'd prefer to be there myself, of course, so I'll try to sweet-talk Alecto's assistant. Perhaps she could insert my name in the list of observers."

"Inform me as soon as you can. Also, is there any way for you to snoop around the Auror office? It would help us to know who they're investigating now. But don't do anything rash and please, be careful. Don't attract undue attention and do it only if you're 100% sure that you're not being watched," Snape said, rising to his feet.

Emmet rose as well, correctly concluding that their meeting had come to an end. Snape walked toward the fireplace but turned at the last minute to retrieve a small package from his desk. He strode over to Emmet, who was now waiting by the fireplace.

"Take this, but use it only when necessary."

Emmet untied the package and took out a silver necklace with a small shard of white, opaque crystal dangling from it. At his questioning look, Snape explained.

"Longbottom gave it to me. That is what the Resistance is using to communicate with each other. You can use it to send messages to them. Remember, though, that what you send will be read by everyone who has that same crystal. Just hold on to the pendant and think of a short message that you would like to send. But as I said, use it only when absolutely necessary and only when you can't get to me," Snape said.

"This is brilliant, Headmaster. Whoever did this?" Emmet said as he inspected the small item in his hand.

"Granger did that." Snape reached for the container of Floo powder on the mantle and passed it on to Emmet. "By the way, has anyone noticed Granger's absence at the Manor?" Snape asked.

"Granger's a Muggle-born?" Emmet asked with an incredulous look on his face.

"Yes, she is. Why is that so surprising?"

"I-I just thought…well, I've been hearing some amazing things about her," Emmet shifted uncomfortably, suddenly ashamed.

"Careful, Fawley. If I didn't know better I'd say that you're having a Pureblood-superiority-complex attack just now," Snape smirked.

Emmet blushed profusely as he mumbled an apology. He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and stepped onto the grate.

"Stay safe, Emmet. Don't do anything heroic, do you understand?" Snape admonished with a brief smile. The young wizard smiled back and winked.

"No heroics, I promise. You be careful, too, Uncle Severus. I don't want to lose another leaf in my family tree," Emmet jested before being engulfed by emerald flames.

Snape quietly chuckled as he shook his head at the antics of the young man. As soon the flames
had died down, he waved his wand and disconnected the fireplace from the Floo Network. He went back to his desk and proceeded to plan the mission that he would be handing out to Draco and Hermione in the next couple of days. It had to be perfect…the survival of most of the wizarding world depended on it.

James woke up to a feeling of being watched. And indeed he was! He almost fell off his cot when he was greeted by two pairs of large, baby-blue eyes staring down at him, illuminated by the bright glow of the wand which she held very close to her face. It was the House-elf from last night, the one who gave them the wands and the delicious dinner.

"Hello," the elf said cheerfully.

"Uhm…hello," James replied as he slowly sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Was it morning already? He couldn't tell, there were no windows in the dungeon.

"Twinkle brought you breakfast, sir. Twinkle also left baskets in the other cells," she said in her squeaky voice.

James saw the elf lifting a big basket of food, more than enough for the four of them.

"Thanks! You're very kind to us. I don't know how I can repay you," James took the basket and the wand from the elf. He placed the basket beside him on the cot.

There were tears brimming in the tiny elf's eyes, but her smile was as brilliant as the sun.

"Oh, it's not Twinkle, sir. Twinkle only following master's orders," her voice was softer this time.

"Is that your name? You're called Twinkle?"

The elf nodded, shuffling shyly as her hands twisted the hem of her toga.

"Glad to meet you, Twinkle. My name is James," James extended his hand to the elf. The tears in Twinkle's eyes fell down her cheeks as she took James' hand in her own calloused one.

"Mister James very kind to Twinkle. Mister James reminds Twinkle of Master," she sniffed.

"May I know who your Master is?"

Twinkle shook her head, but the smile on her lips remained. "Master told Twinkle not to tell."

James nodded. He had a pretty good idea who Twinkle's Master was, but if he wanted to remain anonymous, then he wouldn't press the issue. It's enough to know that they were at least not alone in this ordeal. Someone out there had their backs.

"I understand. I suppose you could give him my thanks when you next see him?"

Twinkle nodded vigorously, her bat-like ears flapping loudly.

"Very well. I shall be content with that assurance. And thank you again, Twinkle for looking after us. I shall never forget you," James said, tapping the tiny elf's shoulder.

"Just say my name if you need anything else, Mister James. Master has given Twinkle permission to help the young students from Hogwarts," Twinkle smiled and waved at him. Then, she snapped her fingers and disappeared with a loud pop.
Colin and Dennis were already awake, talking quietly to each other. James took the basket beside him and walked over to where the two brothers were seated, his wand lifted high up to light up the gloomy cell.

"Hey, Twinkle brought us some breakfast," he said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He placed the wand on the edge of the bed where it gave just enough light to let them see each other.

"Wow! That's awesome," the brothers said in unison. Colin dragged his blanket to the floor and spread it like one would do on a picnic. Dennis helped him take out the platters of eggs, bacon and freshly-baked English muffins. There was also a thermos of hot chocolate and four mugs. James distributed the forks and knives while Colin poured out the hot choco.

"Oi! What's that smell," Angus called out from his cot.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head. We need to finish this up before the guards come for us. We'll be leaving for the Ministry soon," James said before biting into a plump muffin.

Angus sat beside him on the floor and grabbed a muffin whilst accepting a mug of hot choco from Colin. The four of them ate in silence, savoring the food that Twinkle had brought them, not really sure how long the elf could keep on smuggling such delicious fare to them.

"Any word yet?" Angus said in between bites of bacon and fried eggs.

"From the others, you mean?" James asked.

"From those in Hogwarts."

"None yet. But I'm sure they got my message yesterday. What I don't know is if they're aware that we are being held in the dungeons and not in the many rooms of this monstrosity of a house."

"Maybe we should send another message…tell them that we're being held in the dungeons," said Angus.

"But what good would that do? They couldn't file a complaint with the Ministry, could they? Besides, we won't be staying here for long. The registration's today," James sipped his now cold choco drink, praying that he was right in his assessment. He didn't know long he could stand sleeping in this damp, cold cell. Especially since he still didn't know what happened to Hermione. He tried to put that thought aside for now. It was just too painful to dwell on her disappearance.

"Do you think they'd let us go back to Hogwarts after the registration?" Colin asked, the fear in his voice reflected in his younger brother's eyes.

Angus and James looked at each other, both knowing that something else was afoot. It was Angus who replied in his usual gentle voice.

"Don't think too much on that, Colin. Even if they don't bring us right away to Hogwarts, at least we're sure that someone's looking after us here. Just eat up, we don't know how long that registration will take. Don't leave even a crumb or the elf who brought us this would feel offended."

Both Colin and Dennis nodded and proceeded to do as Angus as instructed, cleaning up their plates judiciously.

As soon as they've eaten everything from the basket, James put back in all the platters, cutlery, and mugs. And just like what happened last night, the basket vanished when he closed the lid.
"Oh, I truly love Elf magic!" Angus breathed. Colin and Dennis chuckled.

"Don't we all! If it wasn't for Twinkle, we'd all be starving by now," James said, shaking his head at that bit of good fortune in spite of their present condition. Although they would be more thankful to the Elf's master since he's the one who's taking a risk in helping them. He wondered if he was right in thinking that whoever it was, that person had access to both the Ministry and the Resistance.

"I like that name…Twinkle. It makes this place less forbidding," Dennis said with a small grin.

"Do you think she works for the Malfoys?" asked Colin.

"I don't know. In theory, she should be since house elves are bound to their masters and can only go where they are ordered to go," Angus shrugged.

"Yeah, but I also read somewhere that although house elves are bound to their masters, they can go wherever they please. They just have to punish themselves in case they disobeyed a direct order that prohibits them from leaving the residence of their master," James said.

"That's barbaric! You mean they have to inflict harm upon themselves if they disobey?" Angus said, his brows knitted in a tight frown.

"Well...yeah. But you have to remember, elves are bound only to Pureblood families. So, it's not so surprising, is it? It's been going on for centuries - everything in the name of Pureblood Superiority," James almost spat. He loved being a wizard, he could still remember how amazing it felt when he received his Hogwarts letter, but there are aspects of the wizarding world that he found really abhorrent. And now he would be getting a taste of those deep prejudices first hand. He wondered how his parents would react if they ever learned of this oppression. They were both human-rights advocates and they've campaigned ceaselessly for the eradication of segregation and class discrimination. His mom, in particular, a celebrated trial lawyer, would be livid if she got wind of how her own son was being held in a dungeon. If he didn't fear that they would stop sending him to Hogwarts if they ever found out about the atrocities being committed against the other members of the wizarding world, he would've let his mother have a go at the Ministry itself. He chuckled inside as he saw in his mind's eye an image of his very riled up mother. Boy, she could drive a hardened criminal to tears when she's at her best!

"There's nothing much we can do about it, though, just as we can't do anything about this imposed Muggle-born Registration. Let's just hope that it stops there. I'd hate to think what else the Ministry has planned for us," James said after a while, his face as grim as his thoughts. They sat in silence for a few more minutes, digesting everything that they'd discussed when Angus suggested that they try to get back to sleep. They all agreed, knowing that they had a long day ahead of them.

Just as they were settling back in their cots, they felt the warm glow of their crystals. James hurriedly pulled out his own glowing pendant, tapped it with the wand Twinkle left him and a message slowly appeared - TRUST EMMET. He looked up and saw the others looking at their own pendants.

Angus and the Creevey brothers moved to sit before him, their eyes filled with questions.

"Who do you think sent that message, James?" Angus asked.

"Longbottom perhaps," James replied quietly. But how could Neville have known Emmet? Could Emmet be a member of the Resistance or the Order, too?
"Emmet's the Ministry bloke who helped us Floo here, right?" Dennis said.

"Yes…and I have a feeling that he's the Master Twinkle was referring to," James said, a slow smile forming on his lips. Everything's starting to make sense now.

"You mean…." Angus' lips were curving into knowing smile as well.

"Emmet's on our side!" quipped Colin, hugging his brother.

"Sshhh…I'm sure we're not supposed to announce it to the whole world, Colin!" chided Angus.

"Uhm…yeah…s-sorry. Got carried away," Colin mumbled.

"Let's just keep in mind that he's helping us at great risk to himself, so don't try anything that might put him in danger. Whoever sent us this message just wants to let us know that we're not alone here…that's all's not lost," James tapped his crystal with the wand and muttered the Concealment charm to return it to its former invisible state. He told the others to do the same.

They spent the next few minutes discussing Emmet's role in the Resistance. To make sure that no one would be able to know who they're talking about, Angus suggested that they give Emmet a code name. They settled on Elf Master since it was obvious that he was also the one who instructed the elf to bring them food. James used his crystal to tell the others about Emmet's code name.

From then on, Emmet Fawley, Ministry Official, became known to all Resistance members as the Elf Master, the bringer of hope in the deep, dark dungeons of Malfoy Manor.

o-0-o

Theo's head was pounding. It was now nearly time for breakfast, but they still had to see any sign of Draco. It's not usual for his friend to stay out without informing them. Even when he was planning on spending the night with a girl he would still give them a heads up.

"Get some sleep, Theo. Draco won't magically appear even if you wear the carpet down to its barest threads," Blaise mumbled from his bed. He was sprawled face down, feet dangling at the edge of the mattress, still fully clothed just like Theo.

"How can I even think of sleep? This is highly unusual, you know. Draco would never stay out all night without telling us of his whereabouts!" Theo almost screamed.

"He probably just forgot to tell us that he would be out snogging some girl all night long."

"He's not out snogging some girl, I tell you. Have you forgotten how upset he seemed yesterday morning when we told him about what could happen to Granger if she went to that blasted registration? Do you think he'd be snogging some dimbo after that?"

That seemed to get to Blaise. He slowly rose on both elbows, his head swiveling to Theo.

"Hmmm…you've got a point there. He did seem very upset yesterday."

"He was! But the Muggle-borns have already left for London, Granger with them presumably. And that's what's bothering me. What if Draco went on that train with Granger? How would his father react if he found him fraternizing with the Muggle-borns?"

"Come on, mate. I'm sure Draco wouldn't have done something that stupid. Why would he get on that train? Besides, the Professors wouldn't have let him leave the castle. Jasmine told you how
strict they were, didn't she? They weren't even allowed to wave goodbye to them from the castle
grounds," Blaise said, finally sitting up. He'd apparently given up on getting at least a few winks of
sleep. Theo could be very tiring when he's upset.

"Well, yeah, I've thought about that. But this is Draco we're talking about, mate! You know how
clever he can be when he truly wants something. And if he really wanted to warn Granger he
would've found a way to get to her."

Blaise nodded before running his finger through his dark, wavy hair. "I know what you mean. My
point, however, is - would Draco go to such lengths to get to Granger? We don't even know how he
truly feels about her. She could be just a passing fancy, easily dumped when someone else catches
his eye. You know he does have a wandering eye, Theo."

Theo shook his head at Blaise. He could be wrong, but he saw something different in Draco's eyes
when they told him about how dangerous it would be for Granger if she ever got caught in the
crosshairs of the Ministry. He was really scared for the Ravenclaw witch. And Draco never got
scared for anyone other than himself.

"I don't know, mate. Draco didn't seem to think of Granger as just a passing fancy. You saw how
he barreled through the whole castle after getting that note from her. He wouldn't have acted that
way, if Granger was just another one of his slags."

"You know what, mate? I'm going to have a shower. Let's just go down to breakfast when I get
back. All that pacing made me hungry. I also need to drop by the Infirmary," Blaise said, rising to
his feet. He took some fresh clothes from his trunk before grabbing his green and silver Slytherin
bathrobe and towel.

"Pacing? I was the one doing the pacing! And why do you have to go to the Infirmary?" Theo
called after Blaise's retreating form.

"All in due time, mate. Shower first. You could do with it as well, mate. You wouldn't want
Jasmine seeing you in your pajamas, would you?" he threw over his shoulder.

Theo grumbled, but he took Blaise's advice and followed the other Slytherin to the showers. They
were dressed and heading out to breakfast within fifteen minutes.

They felt the gloom that was hanging over the room the moment they entered the Great Hall. Only
the Slytherin table seemed to have at least a few lively, smiling faces sitting around it. The other
three tables were quiet, their occupants' faces grim and staring at the food spread out before them.
Theo nudged Blaise after seeing Daphne and Astoria huddled together with Sebastian and Tracey
on one end of the long table. They quietly made their way to them and sat side-by-side opposite
Daphne.

"Hey, what's with the long faces?" Blaise asked, reaching for a muffin and a few strips of bacon.

"Have you checked your crystals?" Daphne whispered, leaning forward on the table.

Theo and Blaise looked at each other, then both shook their heads in response. They'd been so
wrapped up with worry over Draco that they'd forgotten to check.

Astoria rolled her eyes and huffed. "What's the point of having it around your necks if you're not
going to look at them? Are you even wearing them?"

"Of course we are! We've just been quite preoccupied last night," Theo retorted.
"What's the fuss, Daph? Did someone send a message?" Blaise asked.

"We know where the Muggle-borns were taken," Daphne said, her eyes looking around cautiously. Tracey and Sebastian were doing the same. They all knew of the spies in Hogwarts.

"Well... where are they?" Theo asked, leaning closer towards Daphne.

"Malfoy Manor," she said.

"What? Why would they be there?" Theo felt a lump going to his throat. Could this be related to Draco's disappearance?

"The Minister clearly wanted to keep close tabs on our Muggle-borns," Tracey said as she forked some scrambled eggs into her mouth.

"Could that be why Dra... OOF!" Blaise almost choked on the toast he was nibbling on when he received a vicious jab in the ribs from Theo. He turned to glare at his friend, but the look on Theo's face told him to drop it. Instinctively, Blaise understood what Theo was trying to tell him. They were, after all, the only two people who knew of Draco's rather intimate interest on the Ravenclaw Muggle-born princess.

"I wish Draco was here so I could ask him if there's any way we could get more information about the Muggle-borns. Where is he anyway? I don't think I've seen him anywhere yesterday," Daphne asked, her eyes shifting between Theo and Blaise.

Theo shrugged, "I'm sure he's around here somewhere. Probably snogging some naïve and gullible fifth year or something." Theo contrived to stuff his mouth with a large piece of muffin, just to have an excuse from answering what he felt would be Daphne's unending questions.

"Why would you like to talk with him anyway, Daph. It's not as if he would be interested in helping the Muggle-borns out. You know how much he hates them," Astoria piped in, spearing a strip of bacon over and over.

"Tory, he's not really like that. It's more like a front and you know that," Daphne said to her sister, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

"I don't know, Daph. He was really awful to Nigel," Astoria quietly said.

"Nigel? Who's Nigel?" asked Blaise, leaning closer to the girls before him. He had a pretty good idea who Nigel was, but he still needed to hear what Astoria had to say.

"Stop acting like you don't know, Zabini. You were there when Draco made fun of my friend," Astoria answered quite heatedly, her eyes shooting daggers at Blaise.

"Ah! That Nigel. Look, Draco didn't mean to offend your friend. He was just a bit pissed off when Nigel kept on acting like a right know-it-all," Blaise shrugged.

"He could've just kept to himself instead of traipsing over and interrupting our conversation. He ruined that day for us, you know. I invited Nigel over to our place! Draco embarrassed me!" Astoria cried, throwing Blaise with another heated glare.

Theo reached out to console Astoria, he'd heard of that ugly bit of confusion, but she pulled her hand away and jumped to her feet. She threw her linen napkin down on the table and ran out of the room. Daphne was up in a flash running after her upset sister.
"What was that all about? Did Draco really pick on Astoria's friend just because he was a Muggle-born?" Tracey asked.

Blaise was shaking his head even before Tracey had finished her sentence. "Draco got pissed at the bloke because he was a right git, not because he was a Muggle-born. He didn't even know that Nigel was Muggle-born, for Merlin's sake! Astoria's just infatuated with the bloke so she took personal offense when Draco tried to set the arse in his place."

Sebastian was snickering at Blaise's colorful explanation. "Yeah, I've met that Nigel. He can be really full of himself. I guess his good looks had gone to his head. He can be quite a pain in the arse, Tracey. I'm sure that had you met him, you would also have given him a piece of your mind."

"He's not from Hogwarts, is he?"

"No, he lives in the US, so he goes to Ilvermorny. He comes here to visit his grandparents during the holidays," Blaise answered.

"How did Astoria meet him then?"

"At Madam Malkin's, I think. At least, that's what I heard," Blaise said before finishing his juice.

"But Daphne's quite right, you know. Draco could help us," Sebastian said.

"I don't know, Seb. Draco's not a member of the Resistance and although he doesn't hide his conflict with his father, I don't think he'd openly oppose him now that he's the Minister of Magic," said Tracey as she rose to her feet. "We better go, Seb. We have an early Transfiguration class."

She nodded to Blaise and Theo before walking away.

Sebastian got up and started to follow her out when he turned to Blaise and Theo whilst munching on an apple. "Try talking to Draco, okay? Let us know if he could at least help us find out more about the others at the Manor."

Theo turned to Blaise with raised brows. "What do you think? Should we even tell Draco about what Daphne and Seb are suggesting?"

"I honestly have no idea. Draco may hate his father, but will he join the Resistance? Will he defy his father openly? He's a bit of a prickly creature, you know," Blaise replied with a chuckle.

The two Slytherins continued to eat in silence, each one immersed in his own thoughts. Blaise was dying to get out and run to the Infirmary to see how Ginny was doing, Theo was still worried about Draco. As the Hall started to empty of students, Blaise and Theo wolfed down their remaining food to get to their first class for the day.

They were walking down the corridor to head to their Potions class when Blaise stopped in his tracks and turned to Theo. "I need you to do me a favor. Tell Slughorn that I'm not feeling well and that I went to the Infirmary," he said, winking at his friend.

"Wait…wait…why are you…" Theo stopped midsentence because Blaise was already running in the other direction at top speed. He shrugged and continued walking, his mind still focused on figuring out Draco's whereabouts.

Did he get on that train with Granger? Was he now in Malfoy Manor?

A thousand scenarios were still running in his brain when the object of his thoughts came striding right past him, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.
Theo froze when he realized why Draco did not even look his way. He was so immersed in deep conversation with a girl who he was walking hand in hand with. But what really made Theo speechless was not Draco's ignoring him, but rather by the girl in Draco's arms. He was damned sure that Draco was so infatuated with Granger that he would run after the Ravenclaw witch to save her from a fate worse than death. But, boy, was he wrong and Blaise was so right! What he had just witnessed told him that Granger was, indeed, as Blaise had said, just a passing fancy for Draco.

Because the petite and pretty blonde in Draco's arms was definitely NOT Granger.

> You're such a fucking player, Malfoy!

Oooh! He so hated it when Blaise was proven right!

Chapter End Notes

A/U: Sooo..how was it? Let me know what you think. Did you get the hints about Harry's whereabouts? Please leave a comment or suggestion...or just let me know if the story's still worth writing...

'Til next time!
Body of Lies

Chapter Summary

Don't want to spoil anything, so...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After their brief breakfast, the students were fetched by the stoic guards that led them down the dungeons last night. One by one the cells were emptied as they all trooped back up the main house. They found Madam Crowe with her now familiar clipboard, her lips set in a thin line, waiting for them by one of the huge fireplaces. Beside her stood the lanky figure of Emmet dressed in his usual navy blue ministry robes, his sharp, brown eyes scanning their faces attentively. He inclined his head when James walked past him, a silent message transmitted between two comrades.

"Good morning, children. As you all know, today is the big day, Registration Day," she smiled nervously at them, but no one was in the mood to be cheerful. "Alright then! We'll be Flooing to the Ministry in a few minutes. Now, I want everyone to promise me that you would all behave and not give me any headaches. Are we agreed on that?" Madame Crowe said in a quavering voice.

A few heads were nodding, mostly the younger ones at the front. Strangely, it seemed enough for the older witch. She looked down at her clipboard then started counting heads. Satisfied, she made a notation on the parchment and moved towards the other fireplace.

"Fifth to Seventh years, please move over here. I'm sure you're all familiar with this mode of transport and would not need the assistance of Mr. Fawley. Come on, let's start moving. You will be met there by one of the Ministry officials, so you have nothing to fear."

Chris and Angus moved to the front. They wanted to be the first to get to the Ministry as it would give them time to secretly send a message to the Resistance members at Hogwarts - in case they needed to, that is. They were banking on the initial confusion and disorder that was sure to ensue when they get to the Ministry giving them enough cover to use their crystals. Herding seventy-five frightened students was no easy feat after all.

Angus took a handful of floo powder from the container Madam Crowe was holding in her hand and stepped into the man-sized fireplace. As soon as he was engulfed by the emerald-green flames, James moved forward and did the same. A few moments later and he was stumbling out of the fireplace, being greeted by a middle-aged Ministry wizard wearing maroon robes; clearly someone from Madam Crowe's department.

As James looked around the Atrium, he noticed that it was crowded with older wizards and witches lining up towards several booths placed near the lifts - Muggle-borns. Each booth was manned by a wizard with a long parchment set before him, consulting it every time that a witch or wizard approached the booth. A stern-looking wizard with a shock of unruly, gray hair was supervising them all. Behind him were four hefty wizards wearing dark-blue Ministry robes. Their wands were loosely held at their sides, but their eyes were scrutinizing the faces before them quite thoroughly.

"I didn't know that there were this many Muggle-borns," Angus whispered behind him.
"Some of them are probably spouses or friends of the Muggle-borns. Look, not all of them go past the booths and into the lifts," James pointed to a witch whose companion, a tall, thin wizard, was walking past the booth, waving at her. The woman was sniffing as she waved back. A ministry witch touched her shoulder and she moved back to the line near the back. There were a couple of women and several men standing nervously at a darkened corner - friends, lovers and spouses of Muggle-borns most probably. Whether they were Pure or Half-blood didn't matter; they were just as affected by this new Muggle-born Registration law.

"Ah, I see what you mean. I wonder if we're going through those as well," Angus said.

"I don't know. They might have a different thing planned for us," James replied.

He wished he had a wand, he felt so defenseless and weak without it. He'd thought of smuggling out the wand that Twinkle had given him, but he feared that it would raise questions if found on his person. He didn't want to put the good elf and her generous master in jeopardy so he left it tucked under his cot in the dungeons. He just hoped that it would still be there when they, or should he say if ever, came back to Malfoy Manor.

Before they knew it, Madam Crowe and Emmet were already walking past them, ushering their schoolmates along the corridor. James saw Chris, Emma and Justin gesturing at them to come forward. He nodded and tugged Angus behind him. The Creevey brothers were already up front, talking quietly to a younger boy and girl - Hufflepuff first-years. He had to admire those two, they could be a handful at times, but they never lacked for enthusiasm and compassion. Colin was already in sixth-year, yet he never stopped hanging out with his brother, Dennis, who was now in fourth-year. The brothers were really like two peas in a pod. They were actually considered a rarity - Muggles don't normally have more than one magically-gifted child. Most of the Muggle-borns in Hogwarts were either an only child or the only magically-gifted one in the family. It's a good thing that the Creeveys also had their hearts in the right place, otherwise, they would've flaunted their uniqueness and used it for less than honorable purposes.

"Now, we will be going straight to the Registration Department upstairs. The Ministry had provided all of you special passes, so you do not have to go through those booths. Form two lines…yes, that's it young man, very good…” Madam Crowe beamed as she approved of the way that Colin was helping out the younger students get settled in their lines.

James moved behind Angus while Heather, Emma, Justin and Chris stood behind him. Beside him was Janice Porter. The lines started moving and within minutes they were standing before the lifts. The students were squeezed into them eight at a time and told to stand in the hallway when they reach the second level. Madam Crowe went inside the Registration Department while three Ministry wizards stood guard outside with the students. The door opened and a middle-aged wizard wearing dark-blue robes came out with a clipboard. He stood before them and loudly cleared his throat.

"When I call your name, you must step forward and go inside this room," he said, pointing at the dark, polished door behind him. "Once inside, take a seat then wait for your name to be called again. Alright?" he looked down his rectangular spectacles at the first-years standing before him. They stared back, slightly quaking in their boots.

"Let's start, then," clearing his throat again, the wizard looked down at his clipboard and called the first ten names on the list. "Step forward - Allen, Allison, Amberley, Baxter, Bentley, Bryan, Carmichael, Coates, Creevey and Creevey," the wizard frowned as he looked down at his list, puzzled. His face cleared when he saw the Creevey brothers, puzzle solved. Six girls and four boys came forward and followed the wizard inside. Dennis and Colin threw them a parting wave and
James smiled encouragingly at the younger boys.

"They're doing it alphabetically so we still have a long wait ahead of us," Angus muttered.

James looked around and saw that some of the students were leaning against the walls while others were now sitting on the cold, tiled floors. None of the wizards guarding them seemed to mind so James followed suit and sat on the floor with his face to the wall. Angus, Justin, and Heather copied his move. Emma, Chris, and Janice scooted over as well.

"Do you think they'll notice that Granger is not here?" Heather asked.

"I'm sure they would, her name is on that list after all," Justin said, turning around to lean back, his head resting against the wall. His fingers were unconsciously rubbing at the concealed crystal on his chest. The movement stopped when he caught sight of James' disapproving look.

"But why didn't Madam Crowe notice that when she made a head count?" whispered Janice, her eyes roving around the hallway.

"I wondered about that as well. Perhaps she doesn't know how to count," snickered Angus. It earned him a slap on the arm from Heather and a snort from Justin. Janice giggled.

"Or perhaps she was told that Granger wouldn't be coming," ventured Emma.

"Who would've told her that?" Janice asked, turning to Emma.

"How should I know? It was just a thought."

"I wonder what they would do if they find out that she's missing."

"Let's not think on that, Heather. We can't do anything about it, anyway," said Angus.

Not really wishing to participate in the discussion, James squeezed himself between Angus and Justin, leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, feigning sleep. He was in no mood to share his thoughts with his friends. His thoughts, of course, went to Hermione and her mysterious disappearance.

After about half an hour, or so it seemed to James, the wizard with the clipboard was back, calling out the next ten names on his list. Three girls and seven boys were soon following him inside the Registration Department. A few minutes later, James saw Emmet. The young wizard walked swiftly past the guards and went inside the room, a frown gracing his perfectly arched brows. When he came back out, Madam Crowe was already with him. James eyes followed the two until they disappeared inside one of the dark doors at the far end of the corridor.

"What was that all about?" Justin queried, rising from his spot.

"Could it be about Hermione?" Heather offered.

"It can be about anything...so, let's not get our hopes up," Angus sighed, slumping against the wall, his head resting on his knees.

Moments later, the Registry wizard was back with his clipboard. Names were called again - Elliott, Etheridge, Farah, Fairmont, Garcia, Green, Granger, Greeley, Hastings, and Havelock.

Chris pecked Emma on the cheek and slowly got to his feet. He gave the others a shy smile before walking towards the line forming before the bespectacled wizard. The man looked at them, then
back to his clipboard. He frowned as he counted the students before him.

"There should be ten of you. Who's missing here?"

All heads turned to Chris. They all knew who was missing, but they'd rather have him speak for the group; he was a Prefect, after all.

Chris took a deep breath and said, "Granger, sir. She's not here."

The older wizard's frown grew deeper, creasing his dark, bushy brows even more.

"And why is she not? Did she go to the little girl's room?"

Chris blushed in spite of himself. He didn't know how to explain to the wizard that Hermione was not there because she was missing. Luck was still on his side because just as he was about to speak, another voice took over for him.

"Alfred, I just received word from Hogwarts. I have here a note from the Headmaster himself," Madam Crowe screamed as she ran towards the wizard. She was breathless as she handed over a piece of parchment to the older wizard. Alfred snatched it from her and skewered her with a dark look. His scowl grew darker as he read the entire message.

"Dragonpox? You expect me to believe that a young girl such as Ms. Granger, someone who had not left the school grounds for nearly half a year had contracted a dreaded disease such as Dragonpox?" the Registry wizard snarled at Madam Crowe.

The plump witch rolled her eyes and shrugged before saying, "Well, if you are implying that the Headmaster of Hogwarts is lying then you're welcome to pay him a visit anytime at your convenience. Perhaps you could also check on the poor girl and tell Madam Pomfrey that she was wrong in her diagnosis. But, I would advise you to be careful, Alfred. Dragonpox is known to be fatal to older wizards such as yourself."

James almost laughed at the brazenness of the woman. She definitely had spunk. The wizard called Alfred, however, was near apoplexy. James could almost see steam coming out of the wizard's ears as he stomped his foot and headed back inside without another word. Chris cast a last glance at them, winking as he followed the others inside the Registry Department.

Emmet was leaning against the wall in front of them. He was looking at Madam Crowe with a smug smile. The older witch turned to him and an unspoken message seemed to pass between the two. She gave him a brief nod before walking back inside the room.

James was no detective, but he could tell that something was going on. The Headmaster was covering up for Hermione's disappearance. Did that mean that he knew where she was? Could Hermione be in Hogwarts?

Perhaps it was time to contact the Resistance. He leaned back on the wall and slipped his hand inside his shirt. When he felt the concealed crystal underneath, he grabbed onto it and closed his eyes. To those who were not part of the Resistance, it would appear that he was just dozing off, but to those who were, they would know that he was trying to communicate; their crystals would heat up in a few seconds.

Taking deep calming breaths, James cleared his mind of all thought except one, the one message that he wanted to send: WHERE'S HERMIONE? James.

o-O-o
Neville Longbottom never thought of himself as a leader. He'd always been more comfortable staying behind the scenes, often plagued by doubt and feelings of insecurity. He wasn't the brightest in his class nor was he the local sports hero, either. Yet people flocked to him and sought his opinions. Because no matter how much Neville tried to deny it, he had an inert courage, a quiet strength and practical intelligence that always shone through whenever needed. He also had a compassionate heart, an even temper and a generous nature. And those are the things that people look for in a leader.

When the Dark Lord awoke from his decade-long sleep, Neville quickly shifted from being a shy, timid teenage boy to a fierce Resistance fighter. No one was surprised when he chose to form a rebel group. After all, his family had been members of the Order of the Phoenix before. And everyone in the wizarding world knew of the bravery of his parents, Frank and Alice Longbottom, who were tortured to insanity without betraying the Order. However, Neville did not start the Resistance for his parents' sake alone. It was also because he knew in his heart that if the Dark Lord was not stopped, then the world as they knew it would cease to exist. Still, he did not, even in his wildest dreams, think he would be asked to lead the Hogwarts rebel faction.

Actually, he'd really hoped that they would have someone smarter than him to lead; someone like Hermione or perhaps someone braver like Ron whose family had also been known for defying the Dark Lord. But even those two stepped back and let him take the helm.

Hermione was a surprise and a puzzle.

The Resistance was, in a way, her brainchild. She was the one who talked him into forming a group within Hogwarts to fight against the Dark Lord (Okay, she did not really tell him to form a group, but she was the one who gave him that idea).

Neville still remembers how she kept on talking about standing up against the Dark Lord, about how they could aid the Order in their campaign against his forces. She bent his ear on how they could do covert assignments for the Order since they were still under the Dark Lord's 'radar' (whatever that meant). She was convinced that with the proper training, even Hogwarts students could fend for themselves if war ever erupted. She planted those ideas in his mind and gave him enough courage to speak to people about it. Ron readily agreed, of course. And the two of them started talking to others.

Before the end of term, the group had grown and they had started to loosely call themselves, The Resistance. Over the summer break, he and Ron spoke with members of the Order, specifically Ron's brothers, Charlie, Bill and the twins, Fred and George, and they agreed that they could use the help of the Hogwarts students. Ron's parents, especially his mom, were of course against involving them but had later on relented on the condition that they would not do anything dangerous.

When they came back to Hogwarts for their seventh year, Hermione was appointed Head Girl and became partners with Draco Malfoy, the Head Boy. The two seemed to work surprisingly quite well together (considering that Draco used to make fun of Hermione, even calling her the Princess of Mudbloods). The sudden change in their relationship caused Ron to doubt Hermione's commitment to the Resistance especially since Malfoy's father had always been a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord. To be fair, Draco himself never publicly supported the Dark Lord; still, he was his father's son.

Their first mission for the Order was to disseminate misinformation about the Harry Potter myth. They were to spread rumors that Harry Potter was alive and would be returning soon to bring the Dark Lord down. It wasn't much, but the Order needed something to create a little tension in the
Death Eater ranks. They figured that if they could convince people that Harry Potter was not a myth but a real, living, breathing person, then the prophecy would be more believable and would put a crack in the Dark Lord's armor.

Again, Hermione surprised Neville in this.

When she asked about Harry Potter's whereabouts, Neville had the impression that she did it in all truthfulness. It wasn't an act like Ron had supposed. He saw the confusion in her eyes when they laughed and told her that she was good at acting like Harry was real. He felt the tension in her when they told him that Harry Potter was just a myth. She was flabbergasted and annoyed at the same time. She seemed to know that Harry Potter indeed was alive and was expecting to see him in Hogwarts! That was a strange night indeed. Hermione seemed fidgety and on edge, definitely not acting herself. Neville would've dismissed it offhand if only she didn't forget that she couldn't sleep in Gryffindor Tower or where Ravenclaw Tower was. But in the end, he reasoned that she was probably just too tired from all that studying and doing Head Prefect duties at the same time.

Then, she did the Protean charm on the crystals and that chilling Blood Magic on their 'contract'. He knew that Hermione was smart; she'd always been at the top of their every class. What he didn't count on was the brilliance of her magical abilities. How could she have known such complicated and advanced magic? And that Blood Oath bordered on the Dark Arts! When did she ever dabble in that?

Neville fished out the crystal hanging on his neck. He still marveled at the ingenuity of it. It was embedded not only with a simple Protean charm but with something that he could not identify. He tried taking it off, but he found that he couldn't. He hadn't asked the others if they had tried removing theirs, but he didn't think they would get a different result. It would probably scare them; he was, admittedly, a tad scared, too. He truly must talk to Hermione about it. He must know what other enchantments she had embedded in their crystals.

He started to put the shard back inside his shirt when it started to glow and get warm. Words began scribbling across the opaque crystal - "WHERE'S HERMIONE? James"

Neville's heart slammed against his chest. What in Merlin's beard is James going on about? Hermione left with them, didn't she?

Two figures burst into the room just as Neville was getting up from his bed to find the others.

"What does this mean, Neville?" Seamus sat on the bed opposite Neville, brandishing his pendant at the other Gryffindor's face.

"Hermione left for the Muggle-born registration, didn't she?" Dean asked, sitting beside Seamus, his own hand clasping his pendant.

"I'm sure she did. Luna told me that she left early because she was placed in charge of the boarding in Hogsmeade Station," Neville told them.

"Then why is Toffler asking us where she is?" Seamus asked.

"Are we sure he's asking us? What if the message was meant for the others in the Manor?" Dean suggested, although his face betrayed his own doubt.

Before Neville could reply, Ron came rushing through the door clasping his own pendant.

"Bloody hell, Neville! What is the meaning of this?"
"I have no idea, Ron. We were thinking if it's meant for us or not," Neville replied.

"Are you barking? Of course, it's meant for us! Why else would Toffler send it?" Ron huffed.

"Well… what if he meant it for those in the Manor? Maybe they got separated," said Dean.

Ron snorted. "He couldn't have just asked them then? And how many Resistance members are there in the Manor, anyway? Besides, knowing Granger, she would be on top of things and would be very visible…" Ron paused, his red face turning white, "unless she was taken away from them."

An uneasy silence descended upon the group, each one nursing a grim thought.

"We need to meet," Neville broke the silence, taking charge as always. "Go and get ahold of the others and tell them to go to our usual place in fifteen. We need to talk about this."

The three Gryffindors nodded before running out of the room leaving Neville to ponder on his next move. He needed to be calm and collected, now more than ever. Hermione was like a sister to him. Ever since she'd rescued him from the enchanted cabinet that a group Slytherins had locked him in during their first year, a bond had been formed between the two of them. It didn't matter that they belonged to different Houses they still became the best of friends. She had tutored him in his studies, had even helped him develop enough confidence to perform difficult spells. She was also the one who brought him and Luna together and, for that alone, he would be forever grateful. Luna's like the sun in his dark universe, everything turns bright when he's with her. And as if that was the encouragement he was waiting for, Neville jumped to his feet and hurriedly left his dorm.

I need to find Luna. She may appear quirky to some, but she sees things that many do not. Perhaps she would be able to make sense to all of this!

Neville found Luna as she was leaving Ravenclaw tower. Thankfully, she was alone. He grabbed her hand and pulled her aside, under an alcove. Without much warning, he cupped her face and kissed her with all the passion that he could muster. She reciprocated without hesitation. Neville didn't know why Hermione's disappearance crushed him or why it made him fear for his own Luna. All he knew was that he would be lost if either of them was taken away from him.

Five minutes later, they were on their way to meet with the other Resistance members, Neville's fears momentarily forgotten and replaced by a determination to get to the bottom of the mysterious absence of his best friend and sister-at-heart, Hermione Granger.

o-O-o

Dinnertime at Hogwarts had always been an event to look forward to. For one thing, the food was fabulous, so if you skipped lunch, dinner would more than compensate for it. Dinnertime also allows students to catch up with various in-school rumors while gorging on the hearty fare. It was also during this time that important announcements were made as the entire staff was present during this meal. And tonight, the students would receive a rather unusual one.

Theo grumbled as he sat beside Blaise. He didn't know why what he saw in the hallway earlier had peeved him so much. He had told Blaise about it but, as always, he preferred to reserve judgment. Blaise spent most of the afternoon practicing Quidditch, while he spent most of it brooding. Even Jasmine could not knock him off of his morose mood.

And to top it off, Toffler sent a very 'cryptic' message. Okay, it wasn't really cryptic. It was clear as day, actually - he was looking for Granger. It only became cryptic when they started discussing it. They - meaning the members of the goddamn Resistance.
The group had met thirty minutes before lunch, but the discussion went on and on that, they ended up missing it entirely (which could be why he was in such a rotten mood; an apple did not constitute a proper lunch for Theo). He couldn't understand why some of their brilliant members had to keep on wondering if the message was meant for them or not! Why else would Toffler send it if it wasn't? Why would he use the crystal to communicate with those who were in the Manor with him? Couldn't he just wave at them and ask? Of course, he was talking to those who were not there - to those who were miles away from him! Why did they have to complicate it?

They really should focus more on finding Granger. She couldn't have vanished just like that! Could she have accidently apparated somewhere and couldn't get back for some reason? Could she have twisted her foot or lost consciousness in the process? Or was there something more sinister behind her non-appearance? Did the Minister of Magic have anything to do with it? Those were the questions that they should've discussed and not that stupid thing about whether the message was meant for them or not!

But, if he were to be truly honest, what was really, up to now, roasting his gander was seeing Draco traipsing around the castle with that blonde dimbo! Admittedly, he could just be feeling guilty for treating Granger like dirt all those years. And now that he'd realized how she was a truly brilliant witch and a wonderful person he definitely didn't like his friend taking advantage of her good heart. He also didn't like seeing Draco acting nonchalant while he was getting all worked up with worry over the fate of his friend's latest conquest. He also hated to think that one of the people whom he considered to be a true friend was in fact just another cold-hearted snake!

For how could Draco act like a fool fawning over Granger one minute and then flirt with another in the next? Was Granger nothing more than a curiosity to him? Was he really such a player that he wouldn't be satisfied until he's had every girl in Hogwarts? And where did that girl come from, for Merlin's sake? Did she just materialize from thin air? She obviously wasn't a Hogwarts student, otherwise, he would've noticed her before; she was really pretty, after all. He winced at that.

What the fuck? She's not pretty, Theo! She's a dimbo! Get a grip, you daft arse!

A dollop of mashed potatoes plopped on top of his chicken leg and saved him from further self-flagellation. When he looked up he saw the object of his ire sitting before him sporting the most annoying grin he'd ever seen.

"What's up with you, mate? You've been glaring at your chicken like it just ate your favorite fluffy bunny slippers!" Draco laughed.

"I wasn't glaring, I was thinking," Theo huffed before returning the favor, dumping a larger portion of mashed potatoes on Draco's buttered veggies.

"Ugh! I'm not going to eat that now! How many times do I have to tell you never to mix mashed potatoes and buttered veggies, Theo? You're so crude!" Draco pushed his plate away and grabbed a new one from the pile.

"Better crude than heartless," Theo muttered before taking a bite off his chicken.

"What was that?" Draco demanded, his eyes taking on a hard glint.

Theo replied with a shrug and continued to eat his chicken. He endeavored not to look at his friend, turning instead to Blaise who was eyeing the two of them with amusement.

"Will you please pass the Pumpkin juice," Theo mumbled with a mouthful of food.
Blaise chuckled but passed the pitcher of juice just the same. Theo started to pour into his goblet when something (or someone) caught his eye and he ended up spilling most of it on the table.

"What's the matter with you, Nott? Why are you acting like a moron?" Draco snarled, angrily dabbing at the spilled juice with his own napkin.

But Theo wasn't listening. His eyes were fastened on the petite blonde who was striding towards the teachers' table. Had he been more attentive, he would've noticed that he wasn't the only one whose eyes were following the blonde. She stopped before the Headmaster who, like a true gentleman, rose to his feet to receive her. He then introduced the newcomer to the other teachers. The girl graciously greeted them one by one before going to stand at the side. The Headmaster went around the table and walked towards the podium.

"Attention everyone," he paused and waited for the students to put down their forks, knives or goblets. When he saw that all eyes were on him, Snape gave them all a bland smile.

"Tonight, we have a new addition to our roster. She arrived from the US last night and will be staying with us for her seventh year. Ms. Adams, if you may," the Headmaster stepped back, his hand sweeping in a grand gesture of welcome toward the new girl.

She walked forward and took the Headmaster's hand. "Let's welcome, Ms. Abigail Adams from Ilvermorny." Abigail Adams waved her hand at the students and flashed her most dazzling, charming smile at them.

"Hello," she said.

Choruses of hellos were heard from everywhere (mostly from the male population).

"Which House would she be staying?" someone from the Ravenclaw table yelled.

"You're welcome to stay at Gryffindor Tower, miss!" was heard from the Gryffindor table.

"No! Stay with us, Ravenclaws! You look like you're smart!"

"Hufflepuffs are nicer!"

"Slytherin!"

"Gryffindor!"

Each house was now chanting its own name, forks and knives banging on the tables.

Snape smirked and raised his hand to silence the students. The chanting continued.

"Quiet," Snape drawled, his dark eyes sweeping the room. The chanting abruptly stopped.

When he had the students' full attention again, Snape gestured for Abigail to stand beside him.

"As it is, Ms. Adams had already been sorted this morning," he smirked.

The Hall seemed to hold its own breath as it awaited the announcement from the Headmaster.

"And she was sorted into….Slytherin House," he finished with a diabolical grin. Everyone knew that the Headmaster was a Slytherin and he'd never stopped being a Slytherin.

The moans and groans rivaled with the cheers that reverberated around the walls of the Great Hall.
The Slytherin table was in an uproar. Only Theo was not that enthusiastic with the acquisition of the petite, blonde beauty. His eyes involuntarily swiveled back to Draco expecting to see him jumping up and down with joy. Surprisingly, the Slytherin Prince wasn't on his feet howling like the others. Draco sat with his head bowed down, a cynical smile adorning his face. When his eyes found Theo's there was a sadness to them that further astounded the latter. Why wasn't he rejoicing? Theo knew that he had the most reason to be happy than the rest of their housemates, having witnessed that affectionate exchange between him and the Ilvermorny lass earlier. So, why did he seem put out?

"You don't seem happy about Ms. Adams being sorted to our house. Don't you think she's a good addition to our ranks? Everyone seems ecstatic about it," Theo quietly asked.

Draco snorted. "The only reason they're ecstatic is because they now know that she's a Pureblood, otherwise, she wouldn't have been sorted into our House, would she? Try telling them that she's a Muggle-born, I doubt she'll receive the same welcome she's receiving right now."

Blaise and Theo exchanged bewildered looks. Did they hear him right? Had the ultimate Pureblood snob just championed the entire Muggle-born population against the age-old Slytherin prejudice? Was it because of Granger? Was he really serious about her? Did he know that she was missing? How would he react if he learned that the Muggle-born he seemed to fancy did not make it to the Registration?

Perhaps I should start asking him, Theo thought.

"I saw you two this morning, you know, walking down the hallway hand in hand. So, I'm quite surprised why you're not rejoicing now that she's been officially made a Slytherin," Theo said, leaning forward on the table.

The look Draco gave him could've turned a lesser man into a puddle, but Theo was on a mission. He needed to know if his best mate of six years was truly just another cold-hearted snake.

"What do you mean by that, Nott?" Draco sneered.

"She's obviously a Slytherin by heart, cold and conniving. Look, Snape said that she just arrived last night yet she's already got you wrapped around her little finger. She works fast, doesn't she?"

"She arrived here last night?" Blaise interjected, his eyes moving between his two friends with a strange expression - somewhere between amusement and annoyance.


"And you're already on friendly terms with her?" Blaise turned to Draco with a smirk.

Draco nodded evading Blaise's probing eyes, casually spreading butter on a piece of toast.

"The Headmaster had called me to his chambers and introduced her to me last night. As she was she left to my care, I showed her around."

"Is that why you were not in our dorm last night? And you didn't even think to tell us where you were?" Theo threw his napkin on the table in disgust.

"What the fuck is this, Nott? Are you my mother now?" spat Draco as he reached for his goblet.

Blaise burst into laughter. A few heads turned to them quickly earning him a glare from both Theo and Draco. "I-I'm sorry! It's just that Theo hardly slept a wink worrying about you, mate. He
thought that you went after Granger and pulled her out of that train or went with her to Malfoy Manor," Blaise sputtered, his laughter winding down into soft chuckles.

Draco choked on his juice, spluttering in the process. "What? Are you daft, Nott? Why should I do such a thing?"

"What was I supposed to think? You ran out of the dorm like the very devil was after you yesterday when we talked about how Granger could be in danger at the Ministry!' Theo whispered furiously, not wanting to catch the other Slytherins' attention again. Draco just stared at him. "Which is why I was shocked when I saw you being more than friendly with that American dimbo!"

"Watch your mouth, Nott. You don't even know her."

"Well, I'm not dying to get to know her," Theo grumbled.

"Then stop judging her before you even do. You might get the surprise of your life."

"I'm not much into surprises."

"What the fuck is up with you, Nott? Why are you acting so strange? And what did you mean by me being 'more than friendly' to Her-Ms. Adams?" Draco snarled, turning away from Theo.

"I saw you walking together hand in hand, Draco. And I saw how you looked at her. Is she your new conquest now? Granger was just a 'passing fancy' then?"

Draco snorted and shook his head. "Why are you bringing Hermione into this, Nott?"

"She was, wasn't she? Are you even aware that your 'passing fancy' seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth? You didn't really care about her, did you?"

The deadly glint on Draco's eyes should have been enough warning for Theo, but he was too incensed to notice. He couldn't believe that Draco was what he thought him to be - a cold, heartless snake. Thankfully, Blaise was paying attention. He stood up at the same time that Draco made to grab at Theo's tie, his hand holding on to his blonde friend's hand.

"Now, now, boys. Let's not do anything we'd all regret later," Blaise breathed, pushing Draco back into his seat. Draco was fuming, but he sat back down, his eyes throwing daggers at Theo. He was about to speak when Snape's voice rang in the Great Hall.

"Mr. Malfoy, will you please come forward?"

Draco rose without a word and walked to where Snape and the former Ilvermorny student stood. Snape gave him lopsided grin then turned to Ms. Adams.

"Ms. Adams, since you already know our Head Boy, I will leave you in his charge until you've acclimated yourself with the castle. He will take you to your new quarters at the Slytherin Dungeons, is that clear?"

The girl nodded and smiled, "Yes, Headmaster. Thank you." She glanced at Draco and gave him a most brilliant smile which the Head Boy returned in all earnestness. He extended his arm toward her in invitation. The blonde witch giggled and took it readily.

The Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Gryffindors groaned while the Slytherins hooted and cheered. Most of the Slytherins, anyway, but not quite all; one of them was still seething.
Hermione couldn't stop laughing as Draco recounted to her how Theo grumbled about seeing them together in the hallway that morning. She had reverted to Hermione once they were in the safety of the Headmaster's chambers. At Snape's insistence, they had gone here straight after dinner. They were sitting on the couch waiting for the Headmaster to arrive when Draco regaled her with Theo's antics during dinner. She spent most of the time laughing at the brown-haired Slytherin and only took pity on him when Draco told her that the reason why Theo was so pissed at him was because he thought that Draco was cheating on her.

"Aww…that's so sweet! It seems that Theo is one conscientious Slytherin," she said.

"Yup. Sometimes I wonder if the Sorting Hat didn't make a mistake in placing him into Slytherin House. He doesn't exhibit much of the typical Slytherin traits," Draco chuckled.

"But why would it matter to him if you're cheating on me? I would understand if it was Harry acting that way, but Theo? We're not even friends!"

"He probably feels guilty for treating you like dirt for so many years. Or maybe it's because he takes dating too seriously. Theo believes in faithfulness, he doesn't play around."

"Not like you do," Hermione said with a raised brow.

"Hey! Hey! Are you implying that I'm not being true to you?" Draco retorted.

"Well…not really. But you have to admit that you've played the field quite well."

"Not as much as people accuse me of. Besides, could I help it if girls fall all over themselves at the sight of this marvelous male…OW! Must you always resort to violence?" Draco complained, rubbing at the arm that Hermione had just slapped.

"Oh, you're such a baby!" Hermione snickered.

"And you're such a bully!" Draco sneered.

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are!"

"And you're a prat!"

"Bully! Bully! Bully!"

They continued their playful banter until they heard the Headmaster walking into his chambers.

"Enough of that, children. We have work to do," Snape walked and sat behind his desk.

Draco and Hermione stood and followed him to his desk, sitting on the high-backed chairs facing it. As soon as they were settled, the Headmaster

"Now, tell me the reactions of the students at meeting 'Ms. Adams' here."

"Well, everyone seemed to take to her, Headmaster. Except for Theodore Nott," Draco chuckled.

"And why is that?"
"He thinks that I'm cheating on Hermione and Theo, being his usual prudish self, disliked Abigail Adams on sight," explained Draco. The Headmaster's brows shoot up in amusement.

"Really? I didn't know that Mr. Nott had such honorable inclinations."

"He can be such a pain in the ar…(some loud throat clearing)…neck sometimes, Headmaster. But he is a good and decent man."

"Yes, I know. He is so very unlike his father, which is a good thing."

Draco grimaced, painfully reminded of his own situation with his father.

"I'm sure Theo will die from embarrassment once he learns who Ms. Adams actually is," Hermione laughed. Draco and Snape laughed as well.

"It wouldn't be for a long time, though. So be prepared to be treated like dirt again, Hermione," Draco chuckled.

Hermione covered her face with her hands and shook her head in mock sorrow.

Snape cleared his throat to catch their attention. "I'm afraid you'd have to change into Ms. Adams again, Ms. Granger. There's a visitor coming in a few minutes. He'll be helping you with your assignment to the US. He is a trusted member of the Order, but I'd rather keep Ms. Granger's identity a secret for now. We can't be too careful, you know. The fewer people who know of your whereabouts, the better our chances of hiding you. Now, if you may, Ms. Granger, do turn back into Ms. Adams."

Hermione nodded and smiled sadly at Draco. She knew that Draco preferred her looks to that of Ms. Adams, but it couldn't be helped, it was for her safety; for as Snape had told them, the best place to hide is in plain sight. So, she took her wand, swept it over herself from head to toe and muttered the incantation that would transform her into the blonde beauty. She had practiced that spell with Draco for most of last night; luckily she was able to master it before daybreak. If she didn't, they would have had to resort to Polyjuice potion, which was really not as effective and long-lasting as this enchantment. Within seconds, Hermione's brown curls turned into the straight, blonde tresses of the blue-eyed Slytherin witch named Abigail Adams. She wasn't really sorted into Slytherin House, but Snape thought that it would make it easier for Draco to keep an eye on her if she were to share the same dorm with him, so Abigail Adams became a Slytherin.

"Headmaster, I was just wondering. Didn't the Ministry notice that Hermione wasn't at the Registration? Her name was on that list, after all," Draco asked.

"Yes…I suppose you hadn't thought of that when you 'kidnapped' Ms. Granger here, did you?"

Two pink spots bloomed on Draco's cheeks. Snape smirked at the evident embarrassment of the young Slytherin.

"I admit I didn't plan that far, Headmaster. I was so focused on keeping Hermione from going to that Registration… I-I forgot to consider the consequence…” Draco stammered.

"Never mind that, Mr. Malfoy. I've already taken care of the Ministry," Snape replied.

"What do you mean, Headmaster?" Hermione queried.

"I sent an owl this morning telling the Ministry that Ms. Granger had to be detained in Hogwarts due to an unfortunate case of Dragonpox" Snape replied with a smirk.

"Dragonpox?" the two asked in unison.
Just then, the fireplace roared and emerald-green flames erupted as a dapper, young man in Ministry robes stepped forward. He brushed the soot from his robes as he walked towards them.

"Ah! I see we have company, Uncle Severus," he grinned.

"Emmet," Snape warned, but his eyes twinkled as he said it.

"Alright! I suppose you're not as proud of your nephew as he is of his uncle," Emmet laughed.

"This is Mr. Emmet Fawley," Snape gestured to Emmet who gave a theatrical bow.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said, his eyes fixed on Draco.

"And these two are Ms. Abigail Adams and Mr. Draco Malfoy."

Something flashed in Emmet's eyes at the mention of Draco's name, but whatever it was he quickly hid behind an engaging smile.

"Emmet, these are the students who would be using your Floo Network this weekend. I hope you can have everything prepared by then."

There was that undeniable tension in the room now. Emmet was looking pointedly at Draco, his eyes taking on a hardness that wasn't there before. Draco noticed and shifted uncomfortably under the Ministry wizard's gaze.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask me, Mr. Fawley?" Draco squared his shoulder and looked at the other wizard straight in the eye.

"I was just wondering if the Minister's only son and heir could truly be trusted with something as important as this," Emmet said quietly, his lips twisting in a sneer.

"Is that a question or an accusation, Mr. Fawley?" Draco retorted with his trademark smirk.

"Take it whichever way you choose, Mr. Malfoy. My only concern here is the safety of my family. I wouldn't want you running to your father to report my participation in this enterprise."

"Would the Headmaster entrust me with this undertaking if he wasn't confident about my loyalty?" Draco was practically snarling when he turned to Emmet who was casually leaning on the Headmaster's desk, an amused smile adorning his face.

He wasn't even sure what their assignment would be as Snape hadn't expounded on the subject yet. All he knew was that he would be traveling to America with Hermione (under the guise of Ms. Adams, of course). Their cover story was that he would be accompanying Ms. Adams to Ilvermorny to settle some school-related matters. The real reason why they would have to go to America was still yet to be revealed, however. But what had got him truly riled up was the way Fawley insinuated that since he was a Malfoy, he couldn't be trusted. How long must he live under that dark shadow? Couldn't people look at him without judging him offhand?

"Now, now, boys. Enough of this prejudicial nonsense! No one's accusing you of anything, Draco. And no one's threatening you here, Emmet. And just so you know, Draco has my full trust and confidence. Regardless of the fact that he is the Minister's son, Draco is as loyal to our cause as you and me, so you can be assured of his full cooperation in all of our undertakings," Snape had risen to his feet and was now leaning on his desk with his splayed hands. There was a dangerous gleam in his dark eyes, a subtle warning that he wasn't enjoying the way the conversation was going.
Draco sighed and leaned back in his chair. Emmet raked his fingers through his hair and plopped himself on an armchair. Hermione let out the breath that she wasn't even aware she was holding back. Snape had left his perch and was now pacing before them. He had removed his robe and was now in his usual black attire - long-sleeved casual shirt and loose trousers.

"We have to work as a team here. Learn to trust each other. It's the one thing that can make or break us. Without trust, we're fucked."

Three heads shot up, mouths hanging open as they gawked at the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"What? I'm only human. Being a Headmaster doesn't exempt me from uttering crude words every now and then," Snape smirked.

Hermione and Draco tried to hide their laughter behind a sudden bout of coughing. Emmet didn't even make any attempt; he was guffawing like mad in his armchair. Before long, all four of them were laughing like crazy.

The atmosphere had lightened immensely after that. Draco peeked at Emmet and gave him a short nod. Fawley returned it with an inclination of his head. Snape gave Hermione a quick wink which almost knocked her off her chair; she still wasn't used to a Snape who wasn't a tight-assed snob.

"Headmaster, may we know what our mission is about?" Hermione (aka Abigail Adams) asked.

A meaningful look passed between Emmet and Snape. Draco's loyalty would be tested to its limit with this, Snape thought.

"What I'm about to tell you and Mr. Malfoy has been a long-held secret known only by a select few in the Order. In fact, I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of people who knows about it. Suffice it to say that knowledge of this matter is set on a need-to-know basis," Snape leaned against the edge of his desk and folded his arms on his chest.

"Now, Draco, you know that I trust you, but I must tell you that after hearing what I'm about to say, there's no turning back. You have to decide now if you are willing to risk everything, not only for the love of your life (Snape smirked as his eye turned to Hermione) but more importantly for the fight against the Dark Lord."

"Headmaster, I had already risked everything the moment that I stepped into your chambers," Draco replied, looking briefly at Hermione. She was beaming at him. It was more than enough for Draco. He could handle anything with her by his side; he would risk everything, even his own soul, for her. He would give up his own life to ensure her safety. And bringing down the Dark Lord was the only way to keep her safe for all time. So, yes, he was one hundred percent sure of his commitment to the Order or to anyone who could destroy the Dark Lord and his twisted regime.

Snape sighed in relief. He was afraid that Draco would have second thoughts. He was, after all, a Malfoy, and that clan was known for their fierce loyalty to their blood and family. Snape took a great risk in bringing Draco into the inner sanctum of the Order. He wasn't sure if this Draco was any different from the one he had come to know for six years. The one he knew had also hated his father, he could even be sympathetic to those who were opposing the Dark Lord, but he was sure that that Draco would never risk his neck for them. And if this Draco was no different than the other, then he could blow Snape's dearly protected façade faster than he could say 'Petrificus Totalus'. For despite his image as a supporter of the Dark Lord when he was younger, Severus Snape was now a dedicated and trusted high-ranking member of the Order. He and the Order had kept it secret and had made sure that he was still viewed as one of the Dark Lord's loyal followers just to remain privy to the goings-on in the Death Eater ranks. He was the Order's most reliable
source of information. He was their spy.

But his true sympathies would soon be revealed, especially with this next move that he was about to put into motion. He would lose his place in the Dark Lord's ranks and would be branded a traitor by every Death Eater. And the Order must have someone who could take his place. That's the reason why Hermione's and Draco's participation must remain a secret to the other Order members. Draco and even Hermione, with her new disguise, could infiltrate the Death Eater ranks. None of the other Order members was a gifted Occlumens, and that was a vital skill in penetrating the Dark Lord's forces. Their skills and their complete cooperation were critical because, in truth, a big chunk of their operation's success was riding on the two of them. They were both exceptionally gifted and they were the only ones who had actual experience in opposing the Dark Lord. They were the only ones who had actually survived a full-blown wizarding war. And only the two of them had actually seen The Chosen One in action. It didn't matter that all that happened in a different timeline. They had everything the Order and the Resistance required.

He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy, on Saturday, the two of you will be going to New York; to an orphanage in New York, to be precise. You are to retrieve a treasure that the Order had kept hidden for sixteen years. It's time that you bring that treasure back to the wizarding world - the man who could vanquish the Dark Lord."

"The man who could vanquish the Dark Lord," Draco slowly said, glancing at Hermione. The expectant look on her face told him that, like him, she had only one person in mind. "The treasure of the Order is a man…who, Headmaster?"

Snape smiled a brilliant, genuine smile no one had ever seen before. Then, he leaned forward and whispered, "Harry Potter."

Chapter End Notes

A/U: Thanks for reading! How was it? Sure hope it wasn't too disappointing. I had a hard time writing this one (headaches are just too hard to ignore!) so please forgive the errors. Anyways...please leave a comment, I'd really like to know how you feel about the story. Is it boring? Dragging? Total crap?

Til next time! Have a nice weekend everyone!
The cells in the dungeon were much quieter now. There were only about twenty of them left in the 'care' of the Minister for Magic. James nearly choked at the word 'care' - that was hardly the word that would describe their situation at Malfoy Manor. If this was how the Minister 'cared' for his guests, then he'd rather not be given that honor.

It's been four days since the Registration. Four days since they were segregated from the rest of the Hogwarts students. Four days since their ordeal had started. An ordeal that no underage wizard or witch should have been subjected to. Yet here they were, held in this damp dungeon against their will, tested every day like lab animals.

James slumped against the wall behind him, exhaustion and hunger overtaking his senses. The cots were gone when they returned that Monday night from the Ministry. Thankfully, his borrowed wand was still there tucked under the blankets left in the corner where his cot used to be. Twinkle must have visited their cell and placed it there for him. He knew that things were about to get worse the moment the cell door clanged shut behind him. And things got worse indeed that very night.

Twinkle never came to bring them their evening meal. They had to contend themselves with the chunks of hard, moldy bread which the guards had thrown through the bars, laughing as they told them to eat sparingly for that would also be their meal for the next day. Water came later in a pail with a wooden goblet floating on top. Their trunks had also been confiscated so they had no change of clothes. Angus had been griping that he had never, in his entire life, ever slept in the same clothes for even a day (he was a bit fastidious when it came to cleanliness). And James could sympathize, his clothes already stank and he was getting itchy. Even Dennis had lost his usual cheerfulness. Of course, that could also be due to his brother's absence. Colin, like the others, had been sent back to Hogwarts right after the Registration.

If there was one wish that James would've wanted to be fulfilled this very minute, it would be the chance to go back in time - to the moment when he was first tested for his abilities at the Ministry of Magic. If he had known that passing that test would've landed him in this godforsaken place, he
would've exerted enough effort to fail it. But, of course, none of them knew that flunking the test would've given them their freedom. In their thinking, failure was never rewarded. Unfortunately, it was the opposite of what happened to them. Looking back, James wished he had done things differently.

When James entered the Registration room at the Ministry, he went through the motion of answering questions - routine stuff that they had expected, like the names of their parents, their jobs, when their abilities first manifested, etc. What they had not factored in was the last bit of the procedure. After they had signed their names on a piece of parchment where their answers were recorded by the witch or wizard that had conducted the interview, they were led one-by-one to a dimly lit room with two doors at the far end. It was devoid of furniture except for a long table that stood in the middle. On it were their wands lying side by side. James immediately recognized his 10" Hawthorn lying on the far left, near the edge of the table. His hand itched to grab it, but he held back and waited for the tall, dark-skinned wizard that stood next to the table to give him instructions instead.

James noticed that there were also two boxes sitting on top of the table. One was white, the other was black. The white one had more parchments on it than the black one. He also noted that the doors at the back of the room were also painted the same - one black, one white. He would soon find out what those colors meant. The wizard looked down at the parchment that James had handed to him. It was the same one that he had signed just minutes ago. The wizard's brows were arched as he read its contents.

"Both of your parents are...working? Can you explain the nature of their jobs?" the wizard asked, scanning the rest of the parchment.

"Yes, sir. My father is a doctor, that's the same as a Healer here. He's a neuro-surgeon," James replied after taking a deep calming breath.

"Neuro...sturgeon? He heals fishes?" the wizard cocked his head, his eyes wide in astonishment.

"No, sir. He's a Neurosurgeon. He...uhm...repairs people's brains," James tried to make it sound as simple as possible. He didn't want to tell the wizard that his father opened up people's skulls to operate on their brains. The wizard might consider that too barbaric for his taste.

"What about your mother? What does...'trial lawyer' mean? What is her expertise?"

"Uhm..." James paused as he tried to look for the right words that could make the older wizard understand the nature of her mother's work. "Let's put it this way...she goes to court...and tries to prove or disprove a person's guilt or innocence...depending on the case she's handling. A court is like the Wizengamot in the wizarding world."

"Ah! I see. Are those lucrative...ah...endeavors? Are you considered rich in the Muggle world? And are your parents highly respected in Muggle society?"

"Quite lucrative, sir. We live a comfortable life and yes, they are well respected by the community. They are law-abiding citizens, after all," he did not feel like telling the wizard that his parents didn't even need their 'lucrative endeavors' to get rich. Nor did he feel like telling him that his grandfather had been 'knighthed' by the Queen of England or that they had two summer homes - one in Italy and another in France, a Manor in Surrey, a condominium in London, a flat in New York, a mansion in Toronto or a vacation house in Ibiza. He definitely did not feel like telling the nosy wizard that his parents had five luxury cars, a private jet and two yachts (one for his father and one for him), either. None of his friends, except for Angus (but only because they were distant cousins - on his mother's side of the family) knew of those things so why would he tell this Ministry
hack about such private matters? Why should he tell this Ministry worker that his parents, Harold Toffler and Angela Weston, came from old money? If they were so interested in him, let them stretch their sinews and do some legwork.

"Very good, then," the wizard was making notes on his parchment. James wondered why the Ministry was interested in his parents' social and financial standing. They wouldn't be welcome in the Wizarding world, anyway, regardless of their wealth and social status. He was still pondering on that when the wizard started talking to him again.

"Alright, enough of that for now. It wouldn't matter anyway if you fail this test," the wizard swept his eyes at the wands lined up on the table. Then, he walked towards James and stood beside him, his wand loosely held at his side. "I want you to summon your wand."

James thought that the wizard was joking, but when he saw the inscrutable look on his face James realized that he was really expected to do it. Was this the test that the wizard had mentioned earlier? This was wandless magic! They hadn't even started learning that in school so how could the Ministry expect them to pass this test? Did the white box contain the names of the ones who failed? Fear now coursed through his veins, chilling him. He hated failure, yet he didn't know if passing this test was the best thing for him right now.

"Uhm…sir, we haven't been taught wandless magic yet. I've never done any summoning without my wand," he ventured, hoping for the wizard's sympathy and understanding.

"We are aware of that, Mr. Toffler. Summoning is a simple skill, easy to perform even without a wand…if your magic is strong enough," the wizard replied, his dark eyes glinting in the firelight.

"But, sir…"

"Just try, Mr. Toffler. Concentrate on getting your wand. Wands know their masters, call to it. And please, don't fail this purposely. I would know if you're not trying hard enough," the warning, subtle though it may be, was not lost on James. This was no ordinary Ministry wizard and this was no ordinary test. Somehow, he knew that this would determine his future. Was it better to pass it or fail it? He would find out soon enough.

"Stretch out your hand, Mr. Toffler, then call to your wand," the wizard was saying, stepping away with his own wand pointed at James. "This is just a precaution," he nodded at the wand in his hand, "just in case you started thinking of being heroic." There was a hint of twisted humor in his words which puzzled James. Why would he even think of being heroic?

Let's just get this over with, okay? James implored himself. Just concentrate on your wand. He took three, deep breaths, cleared his mind and focused it on the black, hawthorn wand at the far end of the table. He stretched his arm and said in a loud voice, "Accio wand!"

There was a rustling of air and then his wand came zooming to his waiting fingers. His first reaction was one of surprise; he didn't even think it would move! Then, pride and joy washed over him. Too bad he couldn't share this moment with anyone important to him. Hermione's face flashed in his mind's eye. She would've aced this one, he thought. Would she have been proud of him if she knew? He became wrapped up in his mini victory that he almost forgot about the wizard standing just a few feet away. It was only when he heard the rustling of robes behind him that he took notice of the hand that wrapped its fingers around his wand.

"Well done, Mr. Toffler. I'm afraid I'd have to take this from you, though," the wizard said as he gently pulled the wand away from James. Panic crawled inside James making him grasp his wand even more tightly.
"Please…don't force me to disarm you," the wizard whispered in his ear.

Swallowing his pride, fear and whatever emotion he was feeling, James slowly opened his hand and let the wizard take his wand away from him.

"That was actually impressive, if you ask me," the wizard was saying. "The few who passed this test had to do it three to four times before their wands responded. But you did it on the first try. You should be proud of yourself," he finished, a hint of bitter sarcasm lacing his voice.

"They must've been nervous…" he muttered, not at all proud of himself anymore.

"And you weren't?"

James refused to answer that. He would never confess to weakness and he wouldn't put his friends in a bad light by admitting that he had performed well in spite of it.

The wizard was writing on his parchment again. When he was finished after a couple of minutes he rolled it up and dropped it inside the black box. He turned back to James, the unreadable expression in his eyes telling James that the time for useless banter was over, he will soon learn of his fate. As it turned out, his fate was sealed the moment his wand answered to his summons.

The loud sniffing coming from the cell beside theirs pulled James back from his thoughts. Someone was crying again, probably Emma or that fourth-year girl from Ravenclaw. She was the youngest in the group. Mercifully, none of the lower years had exhibited any 'advanced' magical abilities. He hated to think what would've happened to them if they did.

Time passed slowly in the dungeons. If not for the daily 'assessments' they were subjected to, they wouldn't even know the time of day. Every morning, they were given their usual meal of bread and water. Then they would be led upstairs to face the 'examiners', as the guards called them. There were always two of them - one to conduct the test, the other to observe and record. Their beefy guards were also there, of course. They couldn't risk having a mutiny on their hands, could they?

Today's tests involved Divination and Transfiguration. For Transfiguration, they were told to turn a goblet into a rat. Again, they were asked to do it without their wands. No one was able to, naturally. Seeing that they were not just faking it the examiner gave each of them a wand (not their own) to see if their performance would improve. Only a few, including Chris, Emma, Angus, Dennis and James were able to accomplish their tasks. The rest either ended up destroying the object or having no result at all (probably due to nerves). Divination was a total bust, not even one of them was able to see into the future (which strangely delighted their examiners).

And so now, James sat with his back to the wall, his fingers unconsciously going to the pendant on his neck. It's been days since Neville had sent the message telling him that Hermione was at the Infirmary, quarantined due to Dragonpox. Although that was also what he had overheard Madam Crowe telling the Registration wizard, deep inside he knew that it wasn't true. The big question now was why the Headmaster kept on covering up for Hermione's absence? Did he know where she was or was he conducting his own investigation regarding her disappearance? Or was she (as he fervently prayed) really at Hogwarts being concealed and protected from the Ministry by the Headmaster?

James was still pondering on the Headmaster's hidden agenda when a loud crack startled him. He turned around and saw Twinkle staring at him with her big, baby-blue eyes swimming in tears. She slowly walked towards him, her back hunched from the weight of the basket she was carrying in her gnarled fingers.
"Twinkle is so sorry for not bringing food, sir. Twinkle was sent away by master to prepare the house in America for a very important visitor," the elf sniffed as she handed the basket to James. Smelling the delicious aroma of freshly-baked bread, Angus and Dennis jumped up from their corner and rushed to the elf's side, grabbing at whatever they could get their hands on.

"Hey! Hey! Save some for the others!" admonished James.

"Oh, it's okay, sir. Twinkle brought food for everyone," the elf piped in. To prove her point, she snapped her fingers and two more huge baskets overflowing with food items materialized beside her. She smiled when all three wizards gasped at the sight.

"Good Merlin! There's more than enough to feed us all for a week!" exclaimed Angus.

"We need to hide them, though. The guards must not know that we're being fed this luxuriously," James said as he plucked an apple from the bunch. The sweet juice that flooded his mouth when he bit into its flesh almost made him cry from sheer gratitude. Never before had an apple tasted this good, he mused.

"No worry about that, sir. Twinkle put a spell on the baskets. Horrible people will not see them," the young elf nodded with a satisfied grin on her face.

"I'll pass these two on to the others. I'm sure they're all starving by now," Angus said, snatching the two heavily-laden baskets from off the floor.

"Thank you so much for this, Twinkle. And please thank your generous master for us," James said, rummaging through the basket for a bottle of pumpkin juice. He realized that the basket seemed to never run out of food because whatever they took was immediately replaced magically.

"Master enchanted the basket. When good witch or wizard puts hand inside basket, food is summoned from kitchen," she explained.

"Wow! That's some amazing spell work!" Dennis mumbled as he chewed on a shepherd's pie.

"Master is afraid that good witches and wizards will go hungry if Twinkle ordered to go somewhere again."

"That's very thoughtful of your master. We really need to know him so we can thank him properly," Angus said as he sat beside James, his hands going for a large chicken leg and a bottle of pumpkin juice.

"Twinkle forbidden to tell master's name," Twinkle mumbled, her bat-ears flapping as she shook her head sadly.

"That's okay, Twinkle. Just let him know that we are very grateful for his help," James said. The elf's face broke into a wide, joyful grin. "By the way, who's the very important guest that would be visiting your master's house in America?" James continued. Twinkle's face broke into a wider grin (if that was even possible).

"It is a big secret, but master not wanting to keep it from you," she whispered.

"You mean your master wanted me to know about the secret?" James whispered back.

Twinkle nodded, leaning forward until she had reached James' left ear.

"The Chosen One," she breathed.
Ginny Weasley was not one to indulge in rumors, especially when it pertained to who's going out with whom. She had bigger problems than that, she contented. In truth, however, she just didn't care…as long as it did not involve her. Which was why she was now fuming mad as she stomped over to the lone Slytherin lounging under the shade of the trees near the lake.

"Zabini! Get up, you good-for-nothing freak!" she growled.

The dark-haired wizard answering to the name was currently slumped against the trunk of a large Elm tree, his eyes hidden behind an arm. He was dozing but hearing his name being screamed at him seemed to bring him out of his stupor. Not as fast as Ginny would have liked, though, because he was obviously still in that blissful spot between sleep and wakefulness when Ginny's strong fingers clutched at his robes and pulled him to his feet. A piece of parchment was brutally shoved against his face before he could even regain full consciousness.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ginny snarled between gritted teeth. How could she have thought that this…SNAKE..was any different from the rest of that brood of vipers inhabiting the dungeons of Hogwarts. And to think that she was grateful for his help, carrying her all the way to the Infirmary when she fell off her broom! She should've known that it was just an act.

Blaise shoved her arm away and snatched the torn piece of paper from her hand. He glared at her while he bandied the paper in her face.

"I don't know what you're talking about! And what's this piece of crap you just shoved into my face? Don't you have any respect for other people's personal space?"

"Respect? Do you even deserve any respect? Why don't you read that 'piece of crap that I just shoved into your face' and tell me if you're qualified to even say the word 'RESPECT'!" Ginny screeched.

Huffing indignantly, Blaise smoothed the paper in his hand and started to read the 'piece of crap' that was actually the front page of the Daily Prophet. And it indeed was crap with a capital C!

Blaise's face gradually turned pale as he continued to read what was written on it.

"HAD THE ZABINI HEIR FINALLY SNATCHED THE HEART OF THE ELUSIVE PRINCESS OF THE NOTORIOUS WEASLEY CLAN? Turn to page 3 and find out more about this budding romance between these two unlikely lovers!"

Below it was a picture of an unconscious Ginny lying in Blaise's arms. She noted that Blaise's fingers were now clutching at the corners, absentmindedly crumpling the nearly tattered piece of newspaper. His widened eyes slowly turned to her, his mouth moving soundlessly.

"Well? Tell me now if the word 'respect' is even in your vocabulary," Ginny sneered.

She had noticed the genuine shock in Blaise's face as he read the headline, but she was too incensed to acknowledge it for what it was. The article had embarrassed her beyond belief! The whole school was talking about it now. How was she going to explain this to her parents, to her brothers, particularly to Ron? That brother of hers had an obsessive hatred of anything Slytherin and this would only push it to greater heights. True, he had somehow turned it down a notch when some of them had joined the Resistance. But that didn't mean that he was completely at peace with
them. He still believed that they were not worthy of his trust and this would only reinforce that belief. She shuddered as she thought of what Ron would do to Blaise when he gets wind of this.

*Wait! What? Why am I even concerned about what Ron would do to him? He probably connived with the writer of this article to shame me in front of everyone, so he'd probably deserve whatever Ron dished out to him, right? RIGHT?*

Before Ginny could convince herself of Blaise's guilt, a terrifying roar thundered in the air, chilling her whole body. It was Ron and he was on the warpath! Fear sliced through her as she realized that Blaise was in mortal danger. Without a thought, she grabbed onto Blaise's hand and ran; tugging him behind her with such force that her arm felt like it was slipping out of its socket. Thankfully, the fool had stopped resisting and was now running along with her.

She didn't know where she was going and she didn't bother to look. All she wanted was to get as far away from Ron as fast as possible. She couldn't let him pound Blaise to an inch of his life before she even got to the bottom of this mess. There could be a logical explanation to this and she would give Blaise the chance to give her that. If his explanation did not please her, then she would pound Blaise to an inch of his life!

They had been running far longer than she had planned. Her sides were now hurting and she was nearly out of breath. As she slowed down to a jog, her senses picked up on the sudden whoosh of air above them. If not for her quick reflexes, both she and Blaise would have been pummeled to the ground by the thick vines violently swiping at them. The tree seemed to be determined to crush them to a pulp as it swirled and twisted its branches, reaching for them with deadly intent. The two of them were now crawling backward when she accidentally touched a root protruding from the ground. The tree seemed to shiver momentarily then all its branches and vines sagged and remained still.

Relief bubbled up her throat and soon she was laughing mindlessly along with Blaise, both of them leaning against the thick, gnarly trunk of the demented tree.

"Now, that was totally unexpected," she blurted in between quivering breaths.

"Absolutely! Who would have thought that Hogwarts cultivated homicidal trees in its own backyard," Blaise huffed, holding a stitch in his side. "Where are we, anyway? Is this still Hogwarts?"

"Of course it is, moron. There's only one way out of Hogwarts and that's through the gates," Ginny replied, slumping lower down the tree's rough trunk.

Blaise had risen to his feet and was walking around the tree, exploring it without moving near the vines and branches lying still on the grass. "Hey! Look at this," he called out, half his body disappearing into a cavern-like hole near the base of the tree.

"Zabini! Don't go poking your head into unknown openings will you?" Ginny cautioned, jumping to her feet to follow Blaise.

Blaise stepped back from the hole, smirking. "Worried about me, Weaslette?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and huffed, "In your dreams, fool!" she said, pushing Blaise aside. "Didn't your mother tell you never to stick your head inside strange holes?" She glanced back when she heard Blaise snickering behind her. "Ugh! You're such a prat! Come on, prat, let's do some exploring," Ginny snapped, easing herself onto the smooth rock that sloped down to what seemed like a twisting passageway below.
"Where do you think this leads to?" asked Blaise, brushing off bits of soil and grass from his robes when he landed beside Ginny.

"I don't know. Want to find out? Or are you scared of dark underground pathways," Ginny asked with a challenging quirk of her brows.

Blaise pfft'd with a smirk, "I'm a Slytherin, my dear Gryffette. Have you forgotten that I live in the dungeons of Hogwarts?"

"How could I forget," Ginny muttered to herself. She fished out her wand from her robes' pocket, waved it in a circle and said, "Lumos!"

"Good thinking, Gryfette! I wouldn't want to stumble all over you in here. You might think that I couldn't keep my hands off of you," Blaise chortled. Ginny snorted.

They walked in silence the rest of the way, with an occasional squeak (followed by colorful cursing) from Blaise every time something scampered across his shoes. Each involuntary shriek gained a snort or a snigger from Ginny, frustrating Blaise immensely. They reached the end of the passage in a few minutes where they found a rickety-looking ladder that led to what appeared to be a trapdoor.

"Do you want to continue or would you rather turn back?" Blaise asked.

"Why not? We've come this far, we might as well find out what's up there. Or are you quaking in your expensive, Italian boots already?" teased Ginny, jabbing her elbow at Blaise's ribs.

"Haha. For your information, I'm not wearing boots," Blaise retorted. "I think I should go first."

"Why? So you can protect me from the big, bad wolf hiding up there?" Ginny cooed, batting her lashes at Blaise.

"I would fear more for the wolf, not you. I need to go up there first so I can pull you up in case this rather delicate contraption collapses under our combined weight. If you haven't noticed, I'm bigger and heavier than you so you'd have a hard time pulling me up if you went first," Blaise reasoned.

Ginny scowled, "Alright! You're always so defensive! And apparently devoid of any sense of humor, too!"

Blaise chuckled in response. He walked past Ginny and placed his foot on the first step. He held onto the sides and hoisted himself up the next step. When his head bumped against the trapdoor, he turned the latch holding it closed, and slowly pushed it up. He climbed through the door, disappearing for a few minutes; when he came back he leaned down with a huge grin on his face.

"Come up here, Gin. It's amazing," he said, holding his arms out to Ginny.

Ginny followed without question, holding on to Blaise as he pulled her through the door. She stepped into what turned out to be a run-down bedroom of some sort. There were boarded-up windows on the opposite wall while a large four-poster bed with moth-eaten sheets sat in the center of the room. Two stained armchairs with its insides showing prominently were pushed against one wall, a tall armoire with chipped paint beside the bed and an empty bookshelf near the door comprised the rest of its furnishing. The sconces nailed to the walls were covered in cobwebs. It was a room that must've looked quaint in its time but had later been left to ruin. What captured Ginny's attention was not its state of neglect but the large claw marks that ran across everything - from the ancient-looking sheets to the armchairs, even the walls. It looked like a deranged animal had run amok inside that room.
"What's amazing about this room, pray tell? It looks like a scene from a low-budget horror movie!" she exclaimed, not noticing that they were still holding hands.

"A what? A low-budget horrid movie? What's that?"

"A horror movie. It's a Muggle thing where you see stories being performed by actors on a big screen. Dean used to take me to them during summer vacation," she answered casually.

Blaise nodded, "Okay…I still don't understand what horrid movies are for…but that's not important. When I said it's amazing, I wasn't referring to this shack, but to what's beyond it. Come, I'll show you," Blaise pulled her to the windows. "Peek through there," he said, pointing to a gap in the boards where light filtered through.

Ginny gasped when she recognized the streets of Hogsmeade laid out in the distance. How could they be in Hogsmeade? The tree was in Hogwarts, wasn't it? How could they have ended up here? Unless of course…

"Do you realize where we are right now?" Blaise was asking.

Suddenly, something clicked in her brain. "You don't suppose we're in the…Shrieking Shack?"

"Exactly! The haunted shack in Hogsmeade that had terrified people for years! Who would've known that it was actually a secret entrance to Hogwarts, eh?" Blaise laughed.

"Wow! What a place to have a first date!" Ginny blurted, biting her lip when she realized the implication of what she had just said.

Blaise stopped laughing, his greenish, gray eyes pinning Ginny's with an intensity that made her insides melt. "Is this what it is, Ginny? A first date?" he asked, his deep, warm voice caressing her in a way no one had ever been able to.

"W-what? Don't be ridiculous, Zabini. Why would I even go out on a date with someone like you?" she countered. She tried to extricate herself from Blaise's grip, but the young wizard pulled her to his chest instead as he leaned back against the boarded windows. He snaked one arm around her waist while his other hand went under her chin, tilting her head up to his.

"Why wouldn't you, Ginny? Am I really that terrible?" there was a tinge of hurt in his soft voice and Ginny's heart ached. He wasn't terrible, never ever that. But the things she'd heard about him, about how he'd dated a different girl every month…she didn't want to be just another 'flavor of the month' to him. She'd die if she did.

"I-it's n-not that. I…I j-just don't think we'd suit," she stammered, lowering her face to stare at the knot in his tie. She must not gaze into his hypnotic eyes lest she forgets that she was a lady.

"What made you think that?" Blaise was tilting her face up to his again, forcing her to look into those gorgeous, heart-stopping eyes of his.

"W-what…made me..th-think that?" she could barely get the words out, she could barely form a coherent thought actually. "I…I..don't…d-don't know…your parade of g-girlfriends..maybe…"

"Parade of girlfriends? Don't tell me you believe all those rumors?"

"W-were they just rumors?" she asked in a small voice, her fingers unconsciously going to Blaise's chest, making lazy circles as she looked up at him hopefully.
"Most of them were," he replied, leaning closer to her.

She could smell his minty breath and his fresh, clean scent, was already turning her legs to jelly. If not for Blaise's arm around her she would be on the floor by now.

"Most…of them? So…some were true?"

Blaise chuckled softly, his forehead now touching hers. "I'm a man, Ginny. I was bound to be with a few girls at one point or another. But can we please stop talking about the girls in my past? I'm actually more interested in the girl presently with me…and desperately hoping that she would be kind enough to grace my future with her presence as well."

Had she been paying more attention, she would have noticed that Blaise had both arms around her now and that her body was leaning into him in a very intimate way. She would have also noticed that Blaise's lips were just a hairsbreadth away from hers. She would've been prepared for the tidal wave of emotions that was about to sweep them both off their feet.

But, since she wasn't, the first kiss that she shared with Blaise came at her like a thunderbolt. It was sweet and gentle, yet it blazed through her like a supernova, bathing her whole body with warmth, burning through her chest.

In fact, her chest was getting too warm for comfort. Too warm it was getting annoying.

"Ouch! What was that?" she cried, pushing Blaise away.

Apparently, Blaise was feeling the same. They both slipped their hands inside their shirts and pulled out their identical crystal pendants.

On it was written: **THE CHOSEN ONE LIVES**

"What the fu…is this a joke?" Blaise groaned.

Draco sighed in contentment as he felt Hermione snuggling against him. This was the life he wanted to have; quiet, peaceful, comfortable, with nothing but the woman he loved sleeping in his arms. He was thankful that they still had the Room of Requirement as their haven; otherwise, he would've already lost his mind. What Snape had revealed to them about Harry Potter made him wish, for the millionth time, that he was back in his original alternate reality.

The boy the Order had asked them to bring back from America was not Harry Potter. Yes, he was, but not really. He didn't go through the same things that Harry did growing up. He did not have the experiences that helped shape Harry into the man he later became. The Harry in that orphanage was an eighteen-year-old boy with no real magical experience, no history, and no real ties to the wizarding world. Merlin's arse, he didn't even know who he really was! He grew up with Squibs, children rejected by their Pure-blood parents, taken in by the Order clandestinely from relatives who took pity on them. Those children didn't know about their parents or their real identities, either. And now, that clueless Harry would come sashaying back into England to save a world he wasn't even aware existed.

How were they going to convince him to come back with them and assume the role of savior? How were they even going to tell him about his parents, about Voldemort, about his role as the Chosen One? How could they even make him understand about the prophecy? How could they make him accept that out of the millions of young men in Britain, he was the only one who could put an end to the Dark Lord's reign of terror? Sometimes Draco really wondered at the sanity of the Order
members. Why couldn't they just think of other ways to bring the Dark Lord to his knees? Was the prophecy really the Be-All and End-All of the wizarding world?

"Draco? Are you awake?" Hermione's soft voice broke the silence.

"Yes, Luv. Go back to sleep, Hermione. We still have a couple of hours left," he replied, kissing her strawberry-scented curls.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" she asked, shifting in his arms. She tilted her head, kissing the soft skin at the base of his throat. It sent shivers up his spine...and somewhere else in his anatomy.

Merlin! She would be the death of me yet!

How he wished he could take her now, every cell in his body was screaming for it. But as they had agreed on before, they would not rush into anything they might later regret. That had actually pricked at his pride. He knew for a fact that he would never regret making love to her so that only meant that Hermione was the one who wasn't sure of how she would feel if they went through with it. But as he later thought back, when he was no longer seething, it was probably just her diplomatic way of saying that she wasn't ready for it yet; that it wasn't him she wasn't sure of, but the thing itself. That he could take and even respect. He wouldn't dream of forcing her into doing something that important to both of them, anyway. He could wait for something he knew was worth waiting for.

If she would only stop torturing him like this!

"Uhm...Hermione...dearest..." he breathed.

"Yes, Draco?" she whispered against his ear. She had moved from his neck and was now nibbling at his earlobes, her hot breath making the hairs on his nape stand on end.

"Uh...you better stop what you're doing..." he whimpered. Her tongue was now tracing his ear.

"Stop what, Draco?" she was teasing him, her hand going under his shirt to caress the smooth skin of his stomach. Draco's fully aroused member was close to bursting through his pants. He groaned when her fingers started making lazy circles around his nipple, her warm lips moving down the column of his neck, her tongue darting out to taste his skin intermittently.

When Hermione's palm started rubbing at his distended nipple, Draco lost control.

In one swift movement, he twisted around pinning Hermione beneath him, his lips crushing down on hers. He rimmed her luscious lips with his tongue, begging entrance, plunging deep inside when it was granted. He could feel the pounding of her heart as her soft breasts were pressed against his hardened chest. She moaned when he disengaged from her mouth and concentrated on her neck, licking and nibbling as he moved farther down, towards the indent on her throat. His hands moved under her shirt, inching towards those delicious, tempting fruits on her torso. She gasped when his fingers found her hardened knob. Her fingers raked through his silky mane, pulling him closer to her as he stroked her supple flesh. He continued his exploration of her neck, his tongue tracing over her velvety skin. Hermione shivered when he lifted her shirt up, exposing her to the cold air. He quickly captured her puckered bud in his mouth, laving it, caressing it with his warm tongue. Hermione's breathing was becoming erratic, matching his own. Her legs were now wrapped around his waist, encasing him in a sensual embrace, the proof of his arousal pressing against her.

His body was crying for release, but his more tenacious, noble self was brutally invading his consciousness, trying desperately to douse the flames of passion that their intimate play had
Ignited.

"Hermione…dearest…we really have to stop now…" he panted.

"Why?" she panted back in his ear.

"I'm beginning to lose control…I can't promise…I might…not be able to…stop myself later," he stammered, shivering from all his pent-up desire.

Hermione giggled while she nibbled on his ear. "Oooh…that sounds rather tempting to see. The ever-so-collected Draco Malfoy, finally losing his much-guarded control," she teased.

"Damn you, woman! If you don't stop what you're doing I'm going to tie your hands and feet to this bed and have my wicked way with you," he growled as he pinched her side, eliciting a feigned cry from Hermione.

"Ow! You're such an ogre!" Hermione said; pushing him away from her with such force that Draco tumbled onto his back with a grunt.

"And you're a fickle witch," he retorted with a chuckle.

He slumped back against the pillows, closing his eyes as he tried to catch his breath. He was still fully aroused, but at least it was now manageable. After a few more deep breaths, his heightened senses started to settle down, returning his breathing to its normal pace. Hermione had left the bed and was now puttering around the room, gathering books and stuffing them inside her tote.

"What the hell are you doing now?" he asked, his eyes following her as she disappeared behind the folding screen that she had put up in one corner. He found it amusing that she would still hide behind that contraption to change her clothes. He had practically seen much of her body (well, not all of it, of course; they hadn't gone that far yet) so he didn't see the point of hiding from him what he had already seen.

"Must I remind you again that we're due to meet with Emmet right after breakfast?" she answered from behind the screen.

Draco grunted as he left the bed to change his own clothes. How could he forget that cloud in his beautiful, morning horizon? It wasn't that he didn't like the young wizard; it's the fact that she'd have to be Abigail Adams again that's bothering him. He still couldn't understand why Snape didn't want Emmet to know that Abigail was in truth Hermione. Snape emphasized their need to trust each other, yet he had no qualms in hiding Abigail Adam's true identity from Emmet.

Truth be told, he didn't like Hermione's disguise very much. Okay, so it kept her from going to that damned Registration. And he was right in keeping her away; not all of the Muggle-borns had returned to Hogwarts. Some were still being held in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor, getting their magical abilities tested and catalogued. But still, her disguise had complicated things for them. It had also alienated him from one of his best mates. Gallant Theo still hasn't forgiven him for 'cheating' on Hermione. Although he was talking to him now, Theo would always excuse himself whenever 'Abigail' was around. Hermione, the darned wicked witch, found it very amusing, however, and she would taunt him with it every time. Plus, there were those questions from Astoria. The moment she learned that 'Abby' was from Ilvermorny, she never stopped badgering her about that arse of a friend of hers. Good thing she was oblivious to Draco's Legilimency skills, otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to give Hermione the right answers to give her. Nevertheless, he would prefer not to keep on doing something like that.
Hermione stepped out of the screen clad in an ordinary Muggle shirt and denim pants. They had agreed that 'Muggle' Harry would be more comfortable seeing them dressed much like he is when they come to meet him. But that was, of course, the least of their worries. He doubted if Harry would even notice their clothes once they start divulging the true reason for their visit.

Draco stepped in front of the full-length mirror to see what he looked like in Muggle clothing. He had to admit that Hermione had great taste. In fact, he actually looked quite…

"Gorgeous! Muggle clothes suit you, sweetheart," Hermione chirped as she slid her arms around his waist, nuzzling against him.

Draco snorted, turning around to wrap his arms around his beloved witch. "Your opinion is biased, my dear. It could've just been influenced by too much snogging."

Hermione huffed as she rolled her eyes at him. "I would still have thought it even if I wasn't snogging you! But, of course, you already knew that. Humility isn't one of your strong points, after all, honey," she smirked.

He laughed at that. "Ah! You know me so well, sweetheart. And here I was thinking that I could earn points by pretending to be humble."

"Oh, you don't need to do that to earn points with me, hon. Just snog me to oblivion and you'll get all the points that you want," Hermione breathed, batting her lashes at him.

"You're such a tease, did you know that?" Draco murmured before capturing her lips in a passionate kiss. Hermione's hands snaked up his neck to pull him closer. It was a few minutes later that Draco was able to wrench himself away from her intoxicating lips. His breath caught in his throat when he saw the desire blazing in Hermione's eyes. He was flattered that she apparently found him as desirable as he did her.

"Merlin, you really can make a man lose his mind," he said, nuzzling her nose.

"Nah, just you. And that's only because you're already crazy about me," she laughed.

"No, you really could. But I'd rather that you do not try your feminine wiles on anyone other than me. I'd hate to think of what I'd do to that unfortunate bloke that you'll be experimenting on," he warned, trying to sound serious in spite of the laughter that was threatening to burst forth.

"No need to worry about that, sweetheart. You're more than I can handle," she said, pulling him down for another soft kiss.

Draco was about to deepen the kiss when they heard the chiming of Hermione's alarm clock. She always brought it with her whenever they slept in the Room of Requirement. It irritated Draco sometimes, especially when it interrupted his amorous activities with Hermione.

"Damn that clock!" he grumbled. Hermione chuckled as she pecked his cheek.

"Time isn't on our side, I'm afraid," she said. Draco couldn't agree more.

"Hmph, yes…especially in this 'world' that we're in. So, are we having breakfast with Snape in his chambers?"

"Yes. Emmet will also be there, I think. I'm not really sure."

"I thought you said we're to meet him after breakfast."
"I know, but it could be during breakfast. Snape just implied that it would be after breakfast," she explained as she reached for her book bag.

"Do we really need all those books?" Draco asked while grabbing two other bags that contained their clothes. They were heavier than he expected. "Are you sure these have only clothes in them? Why are they so heavy?"

"There are also some potion bottles, quills, ink, some pots and pans, tents, canned food, toiletries…" she replied.

"What? Why in Salazar's name do we need tents? We'll be staying at the Orphanage for one night and another in Emmet's house when we get back."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Hermione grabbed one of the bags from Draco and started taking out several items - tents, pots and pans, canned food and oil lamps, "it's just that…well… when Harry and I were on the run looking for the Horcruxes things weren't so predictable. We didn't know where we'd end up that I had gotten used to being prepared for anything. We spent lots of times outdoors, sleeping in tents…or even on the ground…scavenging for food…"

Draco reached out and pulled her into a tight embrace. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't know how difficult that time had been for you."

"It's okay. I know you had also gone through some horrible times back then. Let's just hope that we don't have a repeat of them here."

He wanted to assure her that things would be better this time, but even he wasn't sure if that was true. One thing he could be certain of was that if war ever broke out in this alternate reality that they were in, they would definitely be in the thick of it. This first 'assignment' that the Order had given them was proof enough that they would be playing even bigger roles in this timeline's battle against the Dark Lord than they did before. Just being reminded of that mission brought chills up his spine. Whatever happens, his mind was already made up; his priority was Hermione. If it ever came to choosing between saving Hermione or Potter, he would not even think twice. Hermione would always come first. Fuck Potter! Fuck the Order! Fuck Voldemort, for that matter.

The second chiming of Hermione's clock cut into the silence and their thoughts. Hermione pulled away after giving him a quick kiss and with a toss of her head returned to zipping up her bag which was now (thankfully) several pounds lighter. She tossed it to Draco and slung her book bag back on her shoulder.

"Come on, Draco. We'll be late for our breakfast with the Headmaster," she said, striding towards the door.

"Have you forgotten something?" Draco said, smirking. If she wouldn't be put in danger by it, he wouldn't have reminded her; he very much preferred her present look to the one she must assume.

Hermione frowned in thought then gasped when she realized her oversight. "Damn! Thank Merlin for your presence of mind, Draco! I would've blown our cover if you hadn't been paying attention. Thanks for keeping an eye on me," she said, blowing him a kiss.

"That's what I'm here for, sweetheart - to always keep an eye on you," Draco winked to cover up for his lack of enthusiasm at her upcoming transformation.

Waving her wand with a flourish, Hermione chanted the incantation that turned her into the blonde, blue-eyed Abigail Adams. "Like what you see?" she teased Draco as she twirled on her
"Not as much as the one that I was looking at a minute ago," Draco snorted, turning the knob to open the door for her. Hermione laughed, leaning her head against his chest.

"Aww…you flatter me too much, sweetheart. You know, I actually never thought that you liked brunettes." Hermione stepped out the door, linking arms with Draco.

"I normally don't. There's just one brunette that caught my eye and it was only because she was so obnoxiously annoying. Her hair color was just incidental, though. She would've annoyed me to death even if she were as blonde as I am."

Hermione playfully slapped his arm causing Draco to cry in mock hurt. They continued their playful banter until they reached the gargoyle statue that led to the Headmaster's quarters. Draco spoke the password and the gargoyle jumped aside to let them through. They found Snape buttering a piece of toast as he listened to Emmet rambling about something. The young wizard looked distraught.

"Morning Headmaster, Emmet," Hermione greeted them with a brilliant smile. Draco mumbled his own greetings, nodding at the two men who had immediately stopped talking.

"Ah! There you are! Come on, sit down and tuck in. You have a very long day ahead of you," Snape said, gesturing to the two empty chairs placed around a small table laden with food. Emmet eyed them whilst sipping from his tea cup. Something in his look made Draco wary.

When they were both seated, Snape poured pumpkin juice into two tall glasses and handed each to Draco and Hermione.

"Anything the matter, Headmaster?" Draco inquired, reaching for two plates which he filled with muffins, scrambled eggs, and sausage. He gave one to 'Abigail', who in turn gave him a green apple.

"Eat, you're going to need it," was Snape's answer.

Certain that he would not be getting any intelligent reply from the Headmaster until they did as they were told, Draco momentarily set aside his questions and concentrated on the delicious fare before him. He quirked an eyebrow at 'Abigail' when he saw that she was eating with gusto, but in a ladylike manner. Even Emmet seemed to relax as he munched down bits of sausage and muffins smeared generously with jam and butter. Snape was also busy with his toast and scrambled eggs.

Once they all had their fill and their plates were cleared from the table, the Headmaster leaned back in his chair with a sigh, dabbing at his lips with a white, linen napkin embroidered with the Slytherin crest on one corner. "I'm afraid I have a bit of…bad news," he said, glancing briefly at Emmet.

Draco nearly blurted 'I knew it' as soon as he heard those words. If only Snape wasn't an Occlumens, he would've delved into his mind the moment they had sat down for breakfast.

"What sort of bad news, Headmaster?" Hermione asked, her hand slipping into Draco's under the table, squeezing his fingers.

Emmet leaned forward with his elbows resting on the table. He took a deep breath before saying, "I just found out that due to my father's prolonged absence, our Floo network had already been placed under surveillance by the Auror Office. A trusted friend who works there sent me an owl late last night to inform me of this new development. It was confirmed to me this morning by Madam
It was now Draco's turn to squeeze Hermione's fingers. He had a bad feeling about where this conversation was going.

"So…you're basically saying that we cannot use your Floo Network, right?" Draco said.

Snape and Emmet nodded at the same time, their faces sporting matching grim looks.

"What about a Portkey? I know it's quite difficult to do for international travel, but we can use several can't we?" Hermione volunteered with a hopeful grin.

"Too dangerous. And obviously too late to do now. Besides, the Ministry had also placed traces on Portkey travel; you'd be apprehended the moment you make two consecutive jumps," Snape replied.

"Well, then. Are we shelving the mission?" Draco asked, secretly hoping that the two would answer in the affirmative; hoping against hope that they would send someone else to fetch the savior of the wizarding world.

"No, we're not. Time is of the essence here, Draco. We have to mobilize as soon as possible. We can't let the Dark Lord gain more ground than he already has!" Snape nearly snarled.

"Then, how are we going to get to New York?" asked Hermione.

"You would have to fly," Emmet said, eyes darting to Snape.

Draco's shoulders slumped in relief. He could fly with his eyes closed. But then he remembered that Hermione had a fear of heights and had never enjoyed flying. Riding a broomstick could be very exhausting as well; they would have to make several stop-overs before they reached their destination.

"That could take several days, Headmaster. And Her...I mean, Abigail, from what she had told me, is not very fond of riding a broomstick, either," Draco protested almost gleefully. The Order would be forced to send someone else now, he thought. The gleam in Snape's eyes, however, made him uncomfortable. And all of a sudden, he wasn't sure if he wanted to hear the Headmaster's reply.

"You won't be using broomsticks, Draco," Snape drawled, smirking.

What? What is he talking about? Please don't tell me that we're going to use a flying carpet or a Hyppogriff! Fuck! I'd rather get on my mother's ancient flying carpet than ride on the back of one of those damned, violent, unpredictable beasts!

But before Draco could air his grievance, Hermione's giggling distracted him long enough to make him lose his train of thought. When he turned to look at her, she had a mischievous grin on her face. She had apparently guessed what their mode of transportation would be and was pretty amused by it. A sudden crazy idea bloomed in his head, making him sweat in spite of the cold. Without Snape confirming his deduction, Draco jumped to his feet and glared at the smiling faces of the three people before him.

"No way! I am not going to ride that flying apparatus that Muggles call an airplane! Never! Go tell the fucking Order to fetch Wonderboy themselves! Come on, Luv, we're not doing this," Draco snarled as he grabbed onto Hermione's hand and stormed out of the room, pulling his sniggering girlfriend behind him.
If not for his name, Henry James contended that he would've lived a quiet, uneventful life. He didn't know if the people who had christened him were obsessed with the famous American-born British writer or if they didn't know who Henry James was. What he didn't know was that the reason why it had been given to him was because it was a fairly common name in America. As it turned out, though, Henry had been niggled by peers and strangers alike because of it. But that was, as he would soon realize, the least of his worries.

Because Henry James' life was a lie - every bit of it.

For one, his real name wasn't Henry James at all. And his parents did not die in a car crash, for another. He wasn't any ordinary boy, either. Well, at least that one he already suspected. For no one could explain how he could do the things that he did without a thought.

When Henry was five, his playmate's bunny slippers turned into real rabbits after he had wished them to. Sean, one of his roommates, missed his pet rabbit when it died of old age (it was donated by an elderly lady's estate, so it was probably really old). To console the boy, Mrs. Figg, their House Mother, had given him a pair of white, bunny slippers. But of course, they weren't as good as his lost pet, so he didn't like them much. Henry wanted to hear Sean laugh again, so he closed his eyes and wished with his whole heart that the slippers were real rabbits instead. When he opened his eyes, Sean was crying with glee because he had one fluffy, white rabbit in each arm. It was a good thing that Mrs. Figg had an unlimited supply of good humor and had ignored the fact that the rabbits came out of nowhere.

Then, when he was seven, Jean, his best friend for as long as he could remember, left the orphanage after her real parents (who turned out not to be dead) had come and taken her home. For one week, it had rained in the room that he shared with his other best friends, Ronnie, Neil, and Sean. It wasn't his fault, of course. Mrs. Figg explained in no uncertain terms that there was a problem with the sprinklers. What she could not explain was how the sprinklers seemed to burst whenever Henry walked into a room. If not for Mr. Figg's exceptional plumbing skills, the whole of St. Milburga's would've turned into one big swimming pool.

No one could explain, either, why things seemed to explode when he was upset or why colorful bubbles float in the air when he was happy. Stranger things happen when he gets mad. He was ten when he first lost his temper. One of the older boys, Greg, had been picking on one of the younger girls, Emily, by pulling her hair and ruining her toys. Henry had warned Greg to stop being mean to her, but since Greg was bigger than Henry, he hardly came across as threatening. Then one day, Greg went too far. He chased Emily down the stairs causing the girl to fall down and break an arm. When he was confronted by Mrs. Figg, Greg just shrugged and said it was an accident. Henry knew that Greg was lying so he went after him. Of course, Henry was aware that Greg had the upper hand, but that didn't stop him from challenging Greg. Before Greg could get his hands on Henry, though, he was thrown against the wall by an unseen force rendering him unconscious. Henry didn't know how that happened, but what Henry found even odder was how Greg seemed to have forgotten about the incident altogether. Greg never forgot any slight made against him.

Then, on his eleventh birthday, Henry received an unusual gift from Mrs. Figg. It was the best gift he'd ever had - a Magician's Kit, complete with a make-believe wand, a deck of cards, a top hat, and a black cape. There was also a book, 'The Standard Book of Spells, Grade One' by Miranda Goshawk. He figured that it was a book for amateur Magicians. He wondered how Mrs. Figg had known that he wanted to be a Magician. But since he loved his gift so much, he never bothered to delve deeper into the mystery. The only admonition he received from the House Mother was that he should keep it a secret. Since he couldn't share it with his friends, he ended up practicing the
tricks in the book on his own whilst hiding inside the room that Mr. Figg had prepared for him down in the basement. Mrs. Figg, in turn, made him show her his progress every month. She always clapped her hands in delight every time that he did.

Soon after, Mrs. Figg gave him more books about Magic. She said that if he wanted to be a real Magician, he should immerse himself in 'magic'. Henry, of course, knew that magic wasn't real (that's what all his friends thought so he didn't want to think differently) and what he was learning from Miranda Goshawk's book were just 'tricks'. Yet, he still became fascinated with the intricacies of the make-believe world of Magic. He particularly enjoyed reading 'A History of Magic' by Bathilda Bagshot. It was a very good piece of fictional literature in his opinion, clearly, one that could rival even his favorite, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. He sometimes wished that Magic really existed for it seemed that something close to it once did, during the Medieval times (if he were to base it on the tales of Bathilda Bagshot). But even in the Lord of the Rings, true magic eventually disappeared, leaving in its wake man's futile attempt to recapture it through contrived tricks and sleight of hand.

Little by little, Henry learned how to perform the 'tricks' in Miranda Goshawk's books. Mrs. Figg was ecstatic. She promised Henry that she would keep on getting new books for him as he developed his skills. And true to her word, Mrs. Figg gave him a new Spellbook for his every birthday. There were some that he had difficulty performing, but as he thought that they would not be too entertaining for his future audience, anyway, he'd skipped them altogether. There was one trick that he'd always wanted to try. However, since none of his friends seemed to be interested in becoming a Magician he couldn't ask them to practice it with him. He wished he could meet another magician so he could try out that Expelliarmus trick in Miranda Goshawk's 'The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Two'.

Through the years, Henry had also become quite skillful in controlling his feelings. As he became more adept in his tricks, the 'accidents' also lessened. He never had another 'Greg incident'. Well, not as intense as that one, anyway. A light bulb would still explode every now and then, usually when he's extremely annoyed or aggravated. As usual, Mrs. Figg would brush it off and blame it on substandard materials, so Henry never thought much about that anymore.

Then, two years ago, Mrs. Figg introduced him to a very brilliant magician. Henry could tell that he was a stage performer for no one would've worn his beard or hair that long if he wasn't. He also wore brightly-colored robes printed either with silver moons or multi-colored stars. His half-moon spectacles would've made him look stern if not for his twinkling blue eyes. They shone with a deep intelligence and good-willed humor at the same time. He said his name was Albus and that he would help Henry practice his tricks. And so every last Saturday of the month, Henry was tutored by Albus. He never missed a session with Henry, teaching him much more than the books were able to. In time, Henry had become fond of calling Albus his Professor. One of the things Henry would never forget was how his Professor praised him when he successfully used the Expelliarmus trick on him with ease. Albus told him to never forget that trick as it would come in handy in the future. He wished he knew what his Professor meant by that.

During the summer of this year, however, his Professor had stopped coming to their Saturday meetings. At first, Henry thought that the old man had fallen ill (it wouldn't have surprised him since the Professor was quite thin and nearly ancient). But when he failed to show up for their next session, Henry had started to worry. When he asked Mrs. Figg about his absent tutor, though, the woman burst into tears and locked herself up in her room. It was Mr. Figg who later told Henry that Albus had gone missing. That night, all the light bulbs in St. Milburga's blew up when Henry threw all his books against the wall of his secret room in the basement. Never before had he felt so helpless in his life. He would've looked for his old Professor if he only knew where to start. He tried to get as much information from Mr. Figg, but all the man told Henry was that he should wait.
Wait for what, he almost screamed. He had already turned eighteen and by law, the Figgs no longer had any hold on him. It was only out of gratitude to the two people who had become more like parents to him that he had stayed on to help out in the orphanage. Soon he would have to leave, though. If only to find out what really happened to his old professor.

Henry had always been an early riser, but more often than not, he spent his early mornings with his roommates. As they were adopted one by one, Henry learned to cope with their absence by going down to his basement room to read or practice tricks before breakfast. He would tiptoe past the Figgs' room to get to the rickety steps that led to the kitchen. From there he would open the door that Mr. Figg had disguised as a cupboard and go down the steep ladder to the basement. He would always hear the familiar sound of Mr. Figg's snores whenever he passed by their door.

This morning, however, the hallway was as silent as the grave. Curious (and a bit worried, too), Henry turned the knob (the Figgs never imposed a 'knock before entering' policy ever) and pushed the door to peek inside.

His heart nearly stopped upon finding Mr. and Mrs. Figg sat before their tiny fireplace listening to a dismembered talking head floating in the flames. He was about to run out screaming when the head mentioned his professor's name.

"Would you know if Albus had already told him about his parents?" the head asked.

Although he still found the situation strange, Henry's curiosity got the better of him, making him stay hidden behind the door, actively listening in on their conversation.

"We can't be sure, Headmaster. He never said anything about his parents, so we could never know for sure. As far as I know, the Minister had been training him in spellcasting. But he never told us if the boy already knew about his true identity," was Mr. Figg's reply.

"Have you heard anything about the Minister, Headmaster?" Mrs. Figg asked quietly.

The head shook before speaking. "The Order had sent scouts everywhere, but to no avail. All we know is that the Ministry doesn't have him. Otherwise, they would've paraded him like a trophy. Let's just hope that he is in good health…wherever he is."

What are they talking about? And who's that boy that they're referring to? And why was Mr. Figg referring to Albus as 'Minister'? Minister of what? And was that Albus they had been discussing the same one as his 'Professor' Albus? Henry wanted to rush in and ask all the questions burning inside his head, but the stranger's next words stayed him.

"Two people will be coming for Henry - a boy and a girl. They are both about his age, but they are both exceptional wielders of magic."

_What? Why would wielders of magic come for me?_

"Who will you be sending, Headmaster?" asked Mr. Figg.

"Two Hogwarts students, Draco Malfoy (the head paused when both Figgs gasped)...I know what you're thinking. He's not like his father and I trust him. The girl's name is Abigail Adams. She may be young, but she's a very gifted witch. She'll be the one to Obliviate you when they leave, as we've agreed before. Don't worry, I will tell her to extract your memories before she does. They will be returned to you when it's safe. I wouldn't want you to forget us for all eternity, after all," the head chuckled while the Figgs sighed in relief. Mr. Figg put his arm around a sobbing Mrs. Figg.

"Will I forget my children?" she sniffed.
"No, of course not! Ms. Adams would just…shall we say…remove the dangerous ones and replace them with less volatile memories. It would be more like a memory modification, not complete deletion. Not everything will be erased," the head reassured the crying Mrs. Figg.

"Alright, I understand. What about Henry? Will I still remember him?"

Henry stiffened at that. He knew that Mrs. Figg referred to them all as her children. Why then would she be afraid of not remembering him? She was just told that she would still remember the children, wasn't she? So why would he be an exception?

"Yes, you would still remember Henry, but not his true identity. When he steps out of St. Milburga's the layers of enchantments surrounding the place would start to fade so not even you can know that Henry James is in truth Harry Potter."

Henry felt his insides grow cold and warm at the same time. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his hands twitched at his sides.

"WHO THE HELL IS HARRY POTTER?" he yelled before he could stop himself.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So? How was it? Was the sexy scene too short or lacking? Would you like to have more steamy scenes between our lovebirds? Is the story feeling too dragged out? Let me know, please?

And as always...thanks for reading! Luv yah all! Mwah! :)

Wheels in Motion

Chapter Summary

The Potter temper finally shows up, Lucius gets stressed out, the Resistance moves to their new headquarters, and of course, a smidgen of Dramione moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An awkward silence enveloped the Figgs' bedroom as Henry stared in utter disbelief at the two people who had meant the world to him for most of his life. He could not fathom the depth of their reasoning. How could they have kept something as important as his own identity from him this long? And why were they telling him now? What had changed? Or was this part of the plan - keep him in the dark for as long as possible then slam him with the truth when the time was right? And who made up such a crazy plan, anyway?

The talking head, who had introduced himself as Professor Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts, had tried to clarify things for him, but still, Henry found the things that he had been too hard to believe. He hardly knew Snape, after all. And he had come into Henry's life in a most peculiar way. Even now, Henry was still waiting to be awakened from this nightmare.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"It wasn't our place," Mr. Figg said.

"Not your place? Then whose place was it? You practically raised me from infancy! You're like my…parents! You're the only parents I've ever known, in fact, and I trusted you! I believed you!"

"Henry, you must listen to us, please…" implored Mrs. Figg with a sniff.

"I had been listening, but still I don't understand," he sighed. How could he explain to them that he understood everything that they were telling him, just not the reason behind them?

"Tell us what you don't understand, son," said Mr. Figg.

'Son'…right. He wished he truly was their son then none of this would be happening now. He could feel the tension building up inside him so he stood from his chair and started pacing before the couple. He found that it helped keep him from blowing up all the light bulbs in St. Milburga's.

"Okay…let's see if I got this right…based on what that talking head had said…you're welcome to butt in any time, by the way," he said. Both Figgs nodded. "First off… Magic is real…and what I've been doing since I was a kid was because I have magical blood…correct?"

"That's correct," answered Mr. Figg.

"Good…now…let me see…oh, right! And that's because my real parents had magical blood as well - dad's a wizard and mom's a witch. And my name isn't really Henry James but Harry Potter. Am I correct so far?"
"Yes, you are correct."

"Now... you two being British is pretty obvious. Well, am I British, too?"

"Yes... you and all the other children," said Mr. Figg, squeezing his wife's shoulder.

"Aha... So... why are we here in America?"

"The Order figured that this was far enough away from Wizarding Britain. We had to keep you and the children safe..." mumbled Mrs. Figg, sniffing into her white handkerchief.

"Safe? From what or from whom?"

"Everything will be explained to you tomorrow when Headmaster Snape's people arrive here in the morning. I'm not sure if I'm really the best person to tell you about the Wizarding world..." Mrs. Figg was cut off by Henry's snort.

"I'd rather hear it from you than some stranger," Henry nearly snapped at her.

"Alright...I understand. I'll try my best to answer your questions. You see... there was a Dark wizard by the name of..." Mrs. Figg stopped and looked up at her husband. Mr. Figg gave him a short nod before turning to James.

"His name was Tom Riddle, but he preferred to call himself Lord Voldemort. He became very powerful, tried to take over Wizarding Britain. Dumbledore formed an army of witches and wizards to fight against him - the Order of the Phoenix..."

Henry raised his hand to cut him off. "Dumbledore? As in the Albus Dumbledore? My Professor Dumbledore? So, what was he, a rebel?"

"Oh, no! He wasn't a rebel. Far from it, far from it! He tried to put order back amidst all the chaos that Voldemort was wreaking. He even took on the job of Minister of Magic, in spite of his abhorrence for politics just to thwart Voldemort's plans."

"Okay... Now... where do I come into the picture?"

"Your parents were known to be members of the Order. And somehow they had caught Voldemort's eye. One night, he came to your parents' house and... killed them... then he tried to kill you," Mr. Figg's shoulders slumped at the memory of James' and Lily's deaths. He may not have been a member of the Order, but he had heard of their valiant fight against the Dark Lord and his band of snotty Blood Supremacists. That alone had made him admire the couple. He wished he could tell Henry more about his parents, but he didn't know them personally and it would be unfair to give him information that he had garnered from rumors and conjectures. He also wished that he could comfort the young man who was now pacing before him like a caged lion - fierce and strong, yet deeply troubled.

"He tried to kill me? Why? How old was I then?" Henry had stopped and stood before the Figgs, his emerald green eyes reflecting the turmoil within.

"You were nearly two... I think."

"What? Voldemort tried to kill a baby?"

"Well... he was a Dark wizard... and there were rumors... about a Prophecy..."
"What Prophecy?"

"We don't know for sure...just something about the downfall of the Dark Lord...or the arrival of the one who would bring that about - the Chosen One."

"And my parents were somehow connected to that Prophecy?"

The Figgs looked at each other then, Mr. Figg continued, "Yes, they were."

"How? Didn't anyone ever try to explain it to you?" Henry went back to wearing the carpet down. He didn't want to lose control because at the rate his ire was rising, he just might cause real damage or even harm to the Figgs.

"We're...we're not really part of the Order," Mrs. Figg stammered.

Henry rounded on her, his dark brows knotted in a frown.

"What do you mean you're not part of the Order? If you weren't then how was I entrusted to your care? I'm really getting confused here..." Henry turned away, his fingers raking through his dark hair, mussing it up real good.

"That's exactly why you were left in our care, Henry. We were never associated with the Order or with Dumbledore...not publicly, anyway. No one would even think of looking for us. We were not even considered a part of the Wizarding world anymore," Mr. Figg turned to his wife when he felt her fingers squeeze his arm.

"Not you, dear. Just me...I'm the one who was exiled from our world," Mrs. Figg said with a sad, shy smile. Mr. Figg leaned down to kiss his wife's forehead.

"When they exiled you, they exiled me as well," he said, smiling down at her.

"Wait...you were exiled from...Wizarding Britain? Why?" Henry asked.

"You have to understand, Henry. Those were dark times...the Blood Supremacists were rising...and I, being a Squib...was one of the first to be targeted. I wasn't really banished by the Wizarding community...but I might as well have been," Mrs. Figg said in between sniffs.

"Squibs were being hunted down by the Dark Lord's followers. It was either death or self-exile. We chose the latter. The Order helped us get out without anyone knowing," Mr. Figg finished for his wife. He pulled her to him and kissed the top of her head.

"Squibs? What are...Squibs?"

"Squibs are people who were born to magical parents but without any magical abilities. We're the exact opposite of Muggle-borns," Mrs. Figg explained.

"Muggle-borns? What are those? And, by the way, what are Blood Supremacists?"

"A Muggle-born is a witch or wizard born to Muggle parents. Muggles are people without magic. And Blood Supremacists are those who believe that people should be classified according to blood status - Purebloods, Half-Bloods, Muggle-borns, and Squibs - and in that order, too," explained Mr. Figg. Henry was shaking his head, a look of incredulity written on his face.

"You mean to say that there's a group in Wizarding Britain promoting that kind of biased crap?"

"Unfortunately, yes."
"What about you, Mr. Figg, are you also a Squib?"

The older man shook his head while smiling at his wife. "No, I'm a wizard who fell in love with a Squib. It didn't matter to me, but my parents disowned me when I married my Merlinda."

"What? Your parents disowned you for that?"

"Yes…I'm not proud to say that my family was also very particular about the social caste system."

"And what about the kids here? Did they come from the wizarding world, too?"

"Yes…they're all Squibs like me," answered Mrs. Figg.

"This Orphanage was put up by the Order to protect those poor children from their prejudiced families. We change their names to hide their true identities and put them up for adoption by Muggle couples. The Order thought that it would be better for the children to be assimilated into the non-magic world than be put in danger in our own world," added Mr. Figg.

"In danger? Why would the children be put in danger? Because of the Supremacists?"

The Figgs shifted uncomfortably in their seats. "Not just them, but sometimes because of their own parents or relatives. Having a Squib in the family is considered a disgrace, so some parents either abandon their Squib child or…let them starve to death," Mr. Figg shuddered. "My Merlinda was lucky that her parents loved her and did not do either to her. It was only when the Squib-hunting started that she was really put in danger and was forced to leave Britain for good."

"This is just so…unbelievable!" Henry grimaced, bitter bile rising in his throat. "Blood Supremacists, bigoted parents, Dark wizards - that is what the magical world is about? And you want me to go back there? Are you nuts?"

"No, Henry! That is not all there is to the Magical world," Mr. Figg jumped to his feet and grabbed Henry by the arm to turn him around. "There are multitudes of good people out there like Dumbledore, Snape, the members of the Order, your parents!"

"And for that, they were killed, weren't they?" Henry growled, his eyes blazing with something that made Mr. Figg's skin crawl with fear.

"Y-yes…but only because they fought back…tried to make the world a better place…"

"And that's what you want me to do now? Go back there and take my parents' place in the Order? You told me yourself that Dumbledore was missing. I suppose I can safely assume that it wasn't because he was performing magic tricks at the circus," the venom in Henry's voice caused both Figgs to cringe. "You haven't even told me what happened to this…Dark wizard…this Voldemort. After he killed my parents, he tried to kill me…didn't he? What happened to him then? Was he arrested for murder and attempted murder? Was he killed by the Order? What? Tell me!"

Mr. Figg gulped and returned to sit beside his wife. "H-he tried to use the Killing curse on you…but it went wrong. We do not know how…b-but we heard that he went into a deep sleep…for ten years…"

"Ten years…so that means that he's awake now. He came back several years ago?"

"Yes…"

"And up to his old tricks, I suppose?"
"We've been told that he's become more dangerous and vicious than before."

"So, he's terrorizing Wizarding Britain again…is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes…and that's why you have to go back, Henry."

Henry's head snapped up to look at them with narrowed eyes, then he laughed; a hollow, mirthless laugh. A laugh that somehow sent chills up Mr. Figg's spine.

"What? Have you gone insane? Why should I? After everything you've told me?"

"Precisely because of everything we've told you," it was Mrs. Figg's turn to convince Henry now.

"You still haven't told me why!"

"Because a lot of people are depending on you…" she replied.

"Depending on me? They don't even know me!"

"Oh, believe me when I tell you that everyone in the Wizarding world knows all about you, Henry. And they are all anticipating your return," Mr. Figg said, his watchful eyes never leaving Henry.

"This is totally stupid! Why would a bunch of people be waiting for me to return?"

"Because of the Prophecy," said Mr. Figg.

"That freaking Prophecy again? What have I got to do with it?"

Mr. Figg took a deep breath before getting up to stand before Henry.

"Henry, you are the Prophecy…You are the Chosen One," he said, placing his hand on the younger man's shoulder in an attempt to soften the blow.

Suddenly, the room seemed to close in on Henry…suffocating him…burning his lungs. Then, the lights started to flicker and one by one the light bulbs in St. Milburga's went off in a symphony of soft explosions. Next, the sprinklers burst, bathing everything in cold, freezing water. Henry looked around at the destruction he had caused and before either of the Figgs was able to stop him, he bolted out the door, ran down the stairs and out into the busy streets of Manhattan.

o-O-o

Lucius Malfoy had always prided himself on being a good judge of character. He always knew who would be beneficial or detrimental to his cause in the long run. He could tell which trend would remain nothing more than a passing fancy or would later on become a household staple. He also had a knack for predicting the rise and fall of a politician or influencer. And that was why he staked his all on the new rising power who called himself Lord Voldemort. He knew even from the start that his old Hogwarts mentor, whom they all knew as Tom Riddle, would reach great heights, even if he was inclined more in the Dark Arts. That was not really a problem for young Lucius since the Malfoys had never shied away from the practice of that more frowned upon branch of magic. Admittedly, but only due to certain developments, the dominance of Albus Dumbledore to be precise, their family had kept their acceptance of it…quite tempered.

Through the years, Lucius slowly made his way up the elite ranks of the Dark Lord's growing force. It was not that hard to do, actually. The Dark Lord recognized the influence that the Malfoy name still exerted in the Wizarding World, so it gave Lucius an unfair advantage over the others.
Soon enough he was considered by the most powerful Dark Wizard of all time as a trusted ally and a valuable supporter. They would have taken over the whole world in one fell swoop had it not been for that bloody 'Prophecy'. Lucius tried to dissuade the Dark Lord from giving much credence to it, but to no avail. The 'Prophecy' became Voldemort's obsession and the biggest thorn in Lucius' side. Had it not been for his quick cunning everything would have been lost on that fateful night in Godric’s Hollow.

Indeed, they did lose everything in the years that transpired after that night - if not for that ancient trinket that had been left in his family's possession. Its original owner, as his grandfather had told him, was a descendant of Corvinus Gaunt, whose family was a known patron of the Dark Arts. And it was probably that which had imbued that precious heirloom its unusual powers.

When Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord in the final battle at Hogwarts, Lucius' world crumbled. Not only because of the Dark Lord's death, but more so because his only son and heir had turned against him. Instead of coming to his aid during the battle, the misguided arse decided to join forces with the Order of the Phoenix's even more misguided fools. His wife, Narcissa, came running to her son's side, of course, leaving Lucius alone to fend for himself. Thankfully, he found a way to escape without anyone noticing him. He hid in caves and abandoned cabins for months, living off whatever food he could find. He didn't stay in one place for too long so he always evaded his pursuers. It was only when he came across a decrepit cottage that bore the Gaunt crest that he remembered the treasure that he had hidden in his son's room during the time that the Ministry was raiding homes suspected of withholding 'illegal' Dark artifacts.

When he learned that his wife had left the manor and was staying at her family's ancestral home, he made his move. He knew that his son would be returning to Hogwarts now that he had been accepted by the 'other' side so he would have the whole house to himself. The only fear that he had was that his son had discovered his prized possession's hiding place. When his fingers finally latched onto the cold metal body of the Time-turner, he almost wept in gratitude and relief. Fate was on his side that night for he got away scot-free. The very next day, inside the same house that flaunted the Gaunt crest on its door, he changed history.

He returned on the night that he knew the Dark Lord had lost his powers. He had planned on stopping the Dark Lord from going to Godric's Hollow, but since he didn't know the exact time that Voldemort had originally gone there, he had to make do with an educated guess. As it turned out he was just in time to cast a Shield Charm around the Dark Lord when he saw the Killing curse Voldemort had cast on the Potter boy rebound. Still, it rendered the Dark wizard unconscious - for ten long years! He would also have taken Harry with him (just so he could examine the charm protecting the child) had he not heard the arrival of an unknown wizard. Hearing the tell-tale sound of an apparating body below, he didn't waste time in finding out who the intruder was because all he could think of was getting the Dark Lord's unresponsive form somewhere safe. Good thing that the Potter house had no anti-apparition wards protecting it (or, as he later realized, could have been obliterated by Voldemort when he arrived) enabling him to disapparate with the Dark Lord from where they stood and apparate to Malfoy Manor immediately.

For ten years he protected the Dark Lord, downplaying the extent of his 'incapacity'. He maintained Voldemort's power by acting on his behalf. Not even one among his trusted healers could explain the Dark Lord's condition. It could have been brought about by the rebounding killing curse, they said. They could not guarantee that he would ever wake up from his deep sleep either. But Lucius understood the risks and the benefits of keeping the Dark Lord alive. In his assessment, there was much more to gain by remaining loyal to the Dark Lord when the Dark Lord eventually recovers. He had no doubt that such a great wizard would be able to overcome this temporary...hindrance.

And, as his instincts had predicted, the Dark Lord did wake up from his slumber - more powerful
and more terrifying than ever.

Gradually, the Dark Lord regained his stature, spreading his influence not only in Wizarding Britain, but also abroad - with Lucius by his side, of course. It was just a matter of time before the beleaguered Ministry of Magic fell under his 'persuasion', ousting even the very popular Albus Dumbledore on trumped up charges. Naturally, the Dark Lord could not entrust such a sensitive post to just anyone; he had to ensure the Ministry's loyalty so it came as no surprise that he chose Lucius Malfoy to take Dumbledore's place. Everything that Lucius had worked for was now bearing fruit. He had all he ever wanted - prestige, power, wealth (although, he didn't really need the Dark Lord for the latter).

Except for one.

HARRY FREAKING POTTER!

He had hoped that after awakening from that long sleep the Dark Lord would have gotten over that blasted 'Prophecy'. But, no! He was still as obsessed with it as he was before. That was also the only thing that smeared Lucius' sterling reputation with the Dark Lord - his inability to deliver the Potter boy!

In truth, he had searched for the boy right after he had secured the Dark Lord, but his efforts proved futile. It was as if the earth itself had swallowed the child, like he had never existed at all! Not even his money or the Death Eaters' infamous techniques could loosen tongues. The Potter boy disappeared without a trace and it grated on Lucius' pride. One good thing that came out of the Potter child's disappearing act, though, was the public's opinion. Since no one could prove that the last of the Potter lineage had survived the massacre in Godric's Hollow he, together with the Order's touted 'Prophecy,' had turned into nothing but a myth, a bedtime story at best. Lucius' camp, of course, propagated a different story – Harry Potter died together with his parents in Godric's Hollow, the Dark Lord had succeeded in disproving the truth of the 'Prophecy'.

As the years went by, and with the Order's inability to produce a living Harry Potter, more and more people had started to accept Lucius' version of the Godric Hollow tragedy. It was further reinforced when the Dark Lord regained consciousness and went about conquering the Wizarding world like nothing had changed. Now, the Order had been diminished into a nuisance group, an assembly of misfits who sought nothing but to promote chaos and unrest. They had nearly succeeded in finally crushing the Order with the expulsion of Dumbledore and the new laws imposed on the Muggle-borns (a pet project of the Dark Lord) when disturbing news sprouted once again. Rumors, spread mostly by members of the Order or those sympathetic to them, had begun making the rounds claiming that Harry Potter, a.k.a. 'The Chosen One' and 'Vanquisher of the Dark Lord', was alive and would be returning to Wizarding Britain soon. They tried to squelch it as soon as it started but that effort only backfired, making Voldemort's camp look like terrified dogs with tails clamped between their legs. At the Dark Lord's sage advice, Lucius decided to ignore the rumors and focus more on the Dark Lord's favorite endeavor – the subjugation of Muggle-borns (or Mudbloods as he preferred to call them).

If Lucius were to be given a choice, he would rather spend his precious time in tracking down the Potter boy than sift through file upon file of Muggle-born data. However, since the Dark Lord's lust for power had now included the Muggle world, Lucius' assignment was to seek out Muggle-borns with remarkable magical abilities or influential parentage and turn them into 'apprentices'. Lucius couldn't help but snort at that. Clearly, the Dark Lord would never treat a Muggle-born as anything more than a slave, no matter how exceptional he or she was. They would always be a couple of steps lower in the social caste, always beneath him and his privileged Purebloods whom he liked to call his 'vassals'. A 'favored slave' might be a notch higher than an ordinary slave, but would still
be a slave – subject to his master's whims and demands. A vassal, in contrast, would enjoy protection and certain liberties from his master in exchange for loyalty and service. A slave's service need not be compensated but would always be required. 'Favored slaves' on the other hand, may be (and that's a big maybe) granted a few liberties and some sort of protection (ex. no one may harm or kill them without their master's express approval) in exchange for their complete servitude. They would still be as disposable as an orange rind, their survival depending on how much they could contribute to the advancement the Dark Lord's goals.

Of all the Muggle-born files Lucius had the pleasure of perusing, several had stood out. Two were especially promising – James Toffler and Angus McDermot, distant cousins and both Hogwarts students. They both came from rich and influential (both favorite traits of the Dark Lord) Muggle families and both exhibiting remarkable magical skills. The other Hogwarts students, Emma Smythe, Chris Havelock and Dennis Creevey, had also exhibited impressive skills, but since they came from average-income Muggle families with no political or social clout, they would not be placed in top priority. Thirteen former Hogwarts students and twenty-four older Muggle-borns also showed great potential. They would have to be invited back to the Ministry for further 'interview', but only as a last resort. The Dark Lord preferred his 'apprentices' young because they were easier to persuade and mould into his twisted ways. That's the reason why they prioritized the evaluation of the Muggle-borns at Hogwarts.

As Lucius was about to sign off on his written instructions to Alecto Carrow whom he had placed in charge of the investigation of all 'questionable' Muggle-borns, a name flashed inside his head. It was a name that he did not see in the files but had actually been expecting – Hermione Granger – or as his son liked to call her – Princess Mudblood. Ever since Draco had started school at Hogwarts he had expressed frustration at the ability of that girl to top him in every class. Why, then, was that girl's file not here with the rest of the Hogwarts students? Did she not pass the evaluation during the initial interview? Was she just a very accomplished bookworm without any real magical skills? Oh, how Draco would cackle with glee when he finds out.

Still, it nagged at the back of his mind and so Lucius called into his office the man who had supervised the evaluation. Within minutes, a dignified looking wizard with mocha-colored skin walked into the room. He stood ramrod-stiff at the door before giving a short bow. Lucius had heard good things about him, Artemis Heathridge, half-blood, with a maternal bloodline from the Pureblood lineage of the Shafiqs. Known to be ruthless and ambitious (a great combination in Lucius' book) Heathridge was also eager to please and compensate for that stain in his credentials – his grandmother's marriage to a Muggle-born wizard named Amicus Heathridge.

"You summoned me, sir?" Heathridge bowed, his eyes fixed on the marble pattern of the floor.

"Ah! Mr. Heathridge, thank you for coming by so quickly," Lucius drawled, leaning back in his chair to observe the man before him.

"I live to serve, Minister," Heathridge said as he straightened to his full height.

Was it just me or did I detect a hint of sarcasm in that syrupy reply? Lucius thought. Perhaps Mr. Heathridge is not as I was made to believe him to be.

"Very well. Now, tell me...were you the only one who conducted the practical evaluation of the Muggle-borns?" Lucius decided to use the derogatory term for the Muggle-borns to see Heathridge's reaction. He was not disappointed. The brief glimmer of amusement in the other man's eye told him everything he wanted to know – Heathridge despised Muggle-borns and took pleasure in the knowledge that his bloodline was superior to theirs.

"Yes, Minister, that is correct. Madam Carrow had generously entrusted that pleasure to me and me
alone," Hearthridge replied, puffing his chest out as he did. He reminded Lucius of a prancing peacock.

"And these are all your recommendations as well?"

"Yes, sir, that is also correct."

"I seem to recall a name that my son Draco had often talked about – a girl named Hermione Granger. I can't seem to find her file in here. Did she not pass your evaluation?"

Heathridge seemed to pale at the mention of the girl's name. He shifted from foot to foot before answering in a hesitant voice, "She did not come to the Registration, sir."

"What? Where was she? Why was I not informed that a Muggle-born Hogwarts student failed to register?"

Heathridge paled even more. Gone was the confident, arrogant, young man that sneered at the mention of the word 'Mudblood'. "W-we di-didn't think it necessary to trouble you with such a trivial matter…sir," he stammered.

"Trivial matter? If this was such a trivial matter, Mr. Heathridge, did you think that the Ministry would've even bothered with it? Would I have wasted time and energy in an endeavor that was nothing but a trivial matter?" Lucius snarled.

He was close to losing his temper with the incompetency of his staff and he hated to think that this latest foible could be the last straw. Taking a couple of deep, calming breaths, Lucius leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He couldn't add this to his growing list of failures. He was given this assignment solely because the Dark Lord trusted him to be thorough. And now this stuck-up Half-blood had taken it upon himself to decide on which he, the Minister of Magic, would deem important or not.

"Do you have any idea who Ms. Granger is, Mr. Heathridge?"

The younger wizard swallowed hard before answering, "I-I have no idea, sir."

"Hmm…yes, I thought as much. Well then, I suppose I should educate you a little, Mr. Heathridge. As it happens, Ms. Granger is in the same year as my son, Draco, at Hogwarts. And as my son had lamented, she had been consistently at the top of most of their classes. Every. Single. Year. My son had dubbed her 'Princess Mudblood', not because of her looks, mind you, but because he thought her the best or the worst, depending on how you would look at it, of her kind. It takes a lot to infuriate my son so I'm sure she was a right horror as he claimed. She also excels in Charms and Transfiguration, particularly. And don't we all know that those were the skills that the Dark Lord had told us to look out for? So, I'm not really sure what made you think that Ms. Granger's inability to register and undergo evaluation was just a trivial matter."

"B-but…the Head of Registration told me that Ms. Granger was detained at Hogwarts due to a nasty bout of…dragonpox…" Heathridge's face turned a greenish shade when Lucius jumped to his feet.

"DRAGONPOX? Dragonpox? And you fools believed it?" Lucius sneered.

"Minister, we received a letter from the Headmaster of Hogwarts himself," Heathridge said.

Lucius could not believe his ears. Snape sent a letter excusing his top Muggle-born student from the Registration mandated by the Dark Lord himself due to dragon pox? It's either Snape was
telling the truth or he had just lost his mind - thinking that he couldn't see through that flimsy excuse. Who in this time and age ever contracted Dragonpox anymore?

"And did anyone of you even try to verify this claim?" Lucius said, sitting back in his chair.

"I do not know, sir. I was just informed of the Mud…ehem…Ms. Granger's absence during the evaluation. I didn't think it necessary to confirm it myself as it was not part of my job," Heathridge said, recovering a bit of his typical arrogance.

"Therein lies the problem with you lot…you don't THINK!" Lucius spat back. He was close to losing it, but nearly smiled when he saw the man before him cringe at his words. "Very well. Since none of you imbeciles seem to have the predisposition to take things seriously, I will do it myself. I will go to Hogwarts first thing in the morning to check out Ms. Granger's excuse."

"Should I send an owl to the Headmaster to inform him of your arrival?" Heathridge bit his lip when the Minister skewered him with a malevolent stare.

"Perhaps you should. That would give him enough time to concoct a believable cover-up for his story, won't it? Are you daft, man? Are all Half-bloods as thick as you?" Lucius laughed sarcastically.

Heathridge's face now sported a sickening greenish tinge while his ears burned bright red. He held his head high, but his eyes were swimming with unshed tears. Lucius swallowed the disgust that he felt for the man as he averted his eyes, silently returning his attention to the files before him.

"Tell no one that I would be making a visit to Hogwarts and send me the file that we have on this Princess Mudblood. I suppose even you can find it in our Records Section."

"Yes, Minister. I will get to it right away," Heathridge said, clicking his heels before turning away and heading out the door like a pack of Dementors were on his tail.

As soon as the door to his chambers slammed shut, Lucius leaned back in his chair and rubbed at his throbbing temples. He could feel a massive headache coming on, but he couldn't just lay back and take things slow, could he? The Dark Lord's right-hand man didn't have the luxury of rest and recreation; one slip on his part and everything could all go down the drain.

Perhaps one of Narcissa's potions could ease the pain, he mused. The thought of his wife somehow calmed his raging nerves. He looked up at the clock hanging on the wall opposite his table - almost lunchtime. Lucius smiled as an idea popped into his mind. It wouldn't hurt if he took his lunch with his lovely wife just for today, would it?

Everything would have to wait…even the Dark Lord's grand scheme on Mudbloods.

For now, he would go home and take solace in his wife's arms.

Even the second most powerful wizard in the world needed comforting every now and then...

o-O-o

Fighting the forces of the Dark Lord had always been the preoccupation of the Order of the Phoenix. It was formed by Albus Dumbledore when Voldemort became more than just an over-ambitious wizard with a love for the Dark Arts almost twenty years ago. At first they were just a handful - friends and colleagues who believed in him. But as more and more people who opposed the Dark Lord's climb to power disappeared or turned up dead, their numbers also grew. And with the appointment of Dumbledore as Minister of Magic, the Order started to exert its own influence
in the Wizarding world. In fact, they had a bit of an advantage over Voldemort's army. The Order was comprised of Purebloods, Half-bloods and Muggle-borns while the Dark Lord's penchant for Pureblood Supremacy had limited his to fanatical Purebloods and ambitious Half-bloods only. Truthfully, it seemed ironic that the one who promoted Pureblood supremacy was not even a Pureblood himself. Of course, Voldemort had denied, even erased, his connection to his Muggle ancestry.

Among the Purebloods who supported Dumbledore, none could be foremost than the Weasleys. During the first conflict with Voldemort, Molly and Arthur were among the very first to stand behind Dumbledore and join the Order. This was despite the fact that Arthur was a rising Ministry employee and both of them belonged to the Sacred Twenty-Eight - the purest of the Purebloods. The two had always abhorred the concept of blood superiority and had taught their children the same. So, now that another clash with Voldemort's forces was brewing on the horizon, it wasn't surprising that even their children would be inducted into the Order as well. On Bill, Charlie, Percy and even the twins - Fred and George - Molly and Arthur no longer had any control since they were already of age; they could make their own decisions for themselves. It was only Ron and Ginny whom the couple tried to dissuade from signing up into the Order. However, blood was blood and the two youngest Weasleys had warriors' blood in them.

Or at least that's what Ron and Ginny told their parents when they were confronted with their involvement in The Resistance - a younger version of the Order. It took them a while to convince their parents, but when they did, they received as much training from their older siblings as possible - at their own parents' instigation.

And now, they would be passing on what they had learned to the other members of the Resistance. Today would be their first day at teaching their fellow Resistance members Defensive and Offensive Spells not being taught at Hogwarts. Sadly, not all could be present. A few of their members were still being held at Malfoy Manor; which was also why they should practice as often as their schedules allowed. Neville had hinted that they might have to embark on a rescue mission in the near future.

Saturday usually found students lazing about the castle or practicing Quidditch. Today, however, a few of them would be making their way to the new 'hide-out' of the Resistance. It was an unlikely spot, suggested by the youngest of the Weasleys, Ginny, after she and Blaise had accidentally discovered it. She had also sent an owl to her brothers Fred and George in their shop in Hogsmeade asking them to come over. The two had agreed to meet with them there.

Although there arose some tension between Blaise and Ron over The Daily Prophet catastrophe, it was promptly smoothed over when Ginny threatened his hot-headed brother with her famous Bat-bogey Hex. It was an invention of her own and none of her brothers knew the counter-curse to it. Being a very uncomfortable and embarrassing hex, no one crossed her ever again after she had made a demonstration of it on Fred. Blaise in turn was very thankful for her 'protection' which she had promised him provided that he prove himself worthy of it (as if he would risk being ganged up on by a bunch or redheads, his 'protector' being the most dangerous of all).

To avoid any suspicion from the rest of Hogwarts, the Resistance members trooped to the tree (which they had later on learned was called the Whomping Willow) that opened up to a path leading to the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade in groups of threes. Ginny, Neville and Blaise were the first to go there to do some last minute clean-up. Neville also brought a couple of shepherd's pies and pumpkin juice while Ginny and Blaise brought clean blankets that they could spread on the floorboards for the rest of their gang to sit on. After seeing that they had done what they could to make the ancient structure as presentable and cozy as possible, they discussed the Spells that they would be practicing on today. They had agreed to brush up on their Defensive spells first,
Expelliarmus and Protego in particular. Although those had been discussed in school, they were not really extensively trained in casting them and only a few of their members could perform them with ease. They were still finalizing a training program for the group when they heard voices coming up from below. Neville walked over to the trapdoor and pulled it open to let in Daphne, Sebastian and Tracey. A few minutes later, Luna, Jasmine and Theo were climbing up the same trapdoor, followed closely by Colin, Padma and Ernie. Next came Ron, Lavander and Parvati followed by Seamus, Dean and Susan. The group was completed with the arrival of Nigel, Terry and Hannah.

Neville had feared that they would be squeezed tight in the rundown room, but he saw that it was quite spacious enough to accommodate them all once the large bed and rotting armchairs were dissolved into powder by Ginny's very effective Reductor curse. They would still have to take turns in practicing the spells to avoid bumping into each other. They were just getting settled on the blankets that Ginny had brought when a couple of hollers sent her running down to the ground floor of the shack. Soon after, she came back up with Fred and George trudging behind her levitating two huge boxes in front of them.

"We brought some things we thought could liven up this place," said George as he put the box down and opened it to reveal its contents.

"That's great, guys! Thanks!" Neville said, taking out several squishy pillows and throw rugs.

"We left a few things downstairs in the kitchen - pots, pans, a kettle and some other cooking utensils. We figured you might want to do stuff without magic since you'd be mostly tired from all that practicing you'll be doing. We'll try to remodel that ancient kitchen downstairs later and turn it into something serviceable," Fred flipped open the lid of his box and took out several bottled food items - jams, juices, sauces, etc. There were also some dried fruits and pickled veggies.

"Wow! That's fantastic! I could teach this lot how to do pancakes the Muggle way" Dean laughed. Being a Half-blood and used to spending summer with his non-magical half-siblings, he quite enjoyed doing things the Muggle way. Seamus groaned. He was also a Half-blood with a Muggle father, but he still preferred doing things the magical way.

"So, are we really going to turn this into our Headquarters?" asked Daphne.

"Well, we can use this for training, but not necessarily for meetings. We can still do that inside the school grounds," Neville replied.

"Alright! Now that we're all here, I suppose we could start practicing. We can't stay too long here, people might start looking for us," Ron said, as he jumped to his feet.

"That's right. So…Hermione had outlined the spells that we need to practice on. She wants us to brush up on our Defensive Spells. We'll start with Expelliarmus and Protego," Neville looked up to see if they were listening then he rolled up the parchment that Hermione had given him before she left for the Registration. "Let's each find a partner and practice with them, okay?"

Everyone started getting on their feet to grab a partner. They spread around the room, some to the sides, others in the middle. Within minutes they were all absorbed in perfecting their skill at disarming an opponent and casting a Shield Charm. Seeing that Ron, Ginny, Blaise, Theo, Luna, and Daphne were already quite adept at the spells, Neville called them over to where he was standing.

"Let's go downstairs to Fred and George. We need to discuss something with them."

The others nodded and followed him to the kitchen where the twins were busily transforming it
into something functional. They gasped when they saw what the two had done to that part of the	house. It was barely recognizable. There was a large island counter in the middle complete with a
porcelain white sink and tall stools on one side. The ugly rotting boards which were nailed
haphazardly on the far wall was gone revealing an old-fashioned brick oven, now clean and ready
for use. There were lit sconces on the walls to brighten up the place and even the floors were
buffed and polished to show off its intricate tiling. The windows over the counters at the back
looked out to a lovely, tiny garden. The twins had also placed a door that opened out into a path
that led to a gazebo.

"Shouldn't we have left the windows boarded up? We don't want people noticing us in here,"
Daphne asked as she sat on one of the stools.

"Ms. Greengrass, have you forgotten that we are wizards? We put a spell on them to make them
look even more terrifying from the outside so no one would even attempt to venture a look at our
little hideaway," replied Fred with a wink.

"Wow! You seem to have really thought about this," said Daphne.

"Of course! We do have functioning brains behind this sexy exterior. People just tend to assume
that we don't," chuckled Fred, winking at Daphne again. She blushed and averted her gaze, greatly
amusing Fred.

"We put the food in the overhead cabinets, cutlery in the drawers and the pots and pans below,"
George said, bowing majestically at Luna's enthusiastic applause. "Thank you, Ms. Lovegood.
We're glad you appreciate our insignificant efforts."

"But that's not all! When we come back we're going to refurbish the Dining Room and the Parlor.
And if you hadn't noticed, the boarded up hallway upstairs leads to two more rooms. We'll be re-
doing those as well. We're going to turn this place into a proper headquarters in no time. We had
thought of repairing the fireplace and linking it to the Floo Network, but we wanted to ask you
first," Fred leaned against the kitchen counter, his eyes sweeping to Neville.

"That would be convenient for communicating with the Order, but is it safe? Are we sure that the
Ministry is not monitoring the Floo?" Ron said, settling into one of the stools.

"What does your father think about that?" Neville asked, turning to the twins.

"We haven't told dad anything yet. We'll drop by the Burrow tonight and discuss it with him. He
might know some of the goings on at the Ministry," answered George.

"That would be a good idea, George. Perhaps you could also ask dad about the Muggle-borns. We
haven't heard from any of them since yesterday," Ginny said, leaning against Blaise. The twins
raised their brows but said nothing. It was Ron who grunted and turned a beet red. Both Ginny and
Blaise ignored him.

"What do you mean you haven't heard from them since yesterday? You mean you could
communicate with them? How?" George asked leaning on the counter with a curious look on his
face.

"Oh, right! You haven't seen our crystals yet! Here," Neville walked up to George and took out his
pendant. "We use this to send messages to each other."

"A Protean charm! But that's hard to do...I haven't perfected it myself," said Fred, moving to sit
beside George.
"That's amazing! May I see it?" George said, reaching out for the pendant.

"I'm sorry, but I can't seem to take it off."

"What do you mean you can't take it off?" Fred's eyes were focused on the pendant as he tried to analyze the crystal without touching it.

"It has some sort of charm…none of us can take it off," Luna explained.

"Whoa! That's some complicated magic there," George was leaning closer to Neville, his face mere inches from the pendant. "Can I touch it?"

"Uhm…yes, I think so."

George reached out and clutched the pendant in his fingers. It was cool to the touch, but he could feel the magic emanating from it. "How does it work?"

The twins listened raptly as Neville explained the intricacies of the pendant.

"That's cool! Can we get one, too?" Fred practically squealed in anticipation.

"Uhm…not until Hermione comes back, I'm afraid. She's the one who did this."

"Hermione Granger? The Princess of Mudbloods?" quipped Fred without thinking, earning him an elbow in the ribs from George and a dangerous glare from, of all people, Theo. "Ow! What? That's how she was called by half of Hogwarts, wasn't she?"

"We're not part of that half, Fred," Ginny had two, bright spots on her cheeks as she gave her elder brother an exasperated look.

"And please, stop using that term," Theo said behind gritted teeth.

"Oh, that's rich coming from a bigoted snake," Ron muttered loud enough for everyone to hear.

"What did you say?" Theo snarled.

"Alright, alright! That's enough, boys! I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean anything by it. Just something that had stuck in my mind all these years. I have nothing against Hermione or any other Muggle-borns. Actually, I've always thought that she was brilliant and I guess this just proves it, doesn't it?" Fred said in all seriousness. "Just tell her that we also want in on this when she comes back."

"Uhm…that's going to take a while, I think." Neville hesitated.

"What do you mean?"

"We're not sure where she is…"

"Wait…what? Isn't she at Malfoy Manor with the other Muggle-borns?" asked George.

"She didn't make it to the Registration…" said Colin in a quiet voice.

At the bewildered expressions on the twins' faces, Neville explained what had happened. They snorted when he told them about the 'dragonpox' excuse.

"I think Snape is hiding something…" ventured George. Fred was nodding vigorously.
"That's what we thought, too, but we couldn't be sure."

"Well, hasn't anyone of you tried to confirm it by going to the Infirmary yourselves?"

"Of course we did! We're not daft, you know!" was Ron's heated reply.

"Part of it was cordoned off - 'OFF LIMITS DUE TO CONTAGIOUS BREAKOUT' - was posted on the partition put up a day after the Muggle-borns had left for London," explained Neville.

"So…you couldn't do anything to check out that cordoned off area?" Fred smirked, shaking his head at George who also had a mischievous smile gracing his lips.

"We can't risk getting caught…"

"Neville, my man. I think it's time that we taught you lot some things that you would never in a million years learn in school," Fred said, winking at George. Their matching grins told them that they were about to find out how the famous Weasley twins had earned the most notorious reputation in Hogwarts.

o-O-o

Hermione couldn't stop herself from laughing. She knew it was a bit cruel, but Draco snoring and drooling on her shoulder was a right rare sight. He would be horrified when he wakes up and finds himself in such an undignified position. However, since that would not be for another hour, Hermione slouched back in her seat and closed her eyes. They still have two hours left in their 6-hour London to New York flight and the Sleeping Draught she slipped into Draco's drink would last at least five hours, so she still had enough time to prepare for the next hurdle that she would face upon landing in New York. A new battle between them would surely ensue as they would have to ride another Muggle contraption to get to St. Milburga's Orphanage in upper Manhattan. They could go by subway, but that would take longer and would unnecessarily expose Draco to too many Muggles. She didn't want to discomfort him too much as he would surely look like a fish out of water riding side by side with Muggles.

Draco shifted in his seat, his hand instinctively grasping hers. Hermione reached up with her other hand to caress Draco's hair, glad that he was at least sleeping peacefully. She had made sure that the Sleeping Draught she requested from Snape was the one for a dreamless sleep. She would've brewed it herself had she not been so preoccupied with Draco. The whole of Saturday was spent mostly in calming him down and convincing him to get on a British Airways plane. When simple logic failed, she resorted to cajoling and eventually to grave threats. Had she not adamantly told him that she would do the errand on her own Draco wouldn't have been 'persuaded' to travel the Muggle way. She didn't know how Snape and Emmet had been able to acquire passports and tickets for them that quickly, but at least they were able to do it without her help. She had actually agonized over the idea that she would be forced to do something illegal to get their passports.

What really concerned her now, however, was the inevitable meeting with Harry, or as he preferred to be called (according to Snape), Henry. The Headmaster had briefed them on what to expect when they come face to face with Harry/Henry and it wasn't encouraging. It could cause some discomfort on Hermione since she was the one who was closest to the 'other' Harry and she didn't know how she would feel when faced with another best friend who was no longer that. Her encounter with Ron was painful enough, how much more would it be with Harry? Harry was like a brother to her, but this Henry would not even know her - would not even see the real her until he agreed to come with them back to England. Or maybe not even then. It would all depend on Henry's disposition regarding his new role as The Chosen One.
Henry, though in every physical sense looked exactly the same as the Harry from their timeline, based on Snape's description, was an entirely different person. He had grown up not knowing about the Wizarding World but had still exhibited surprisingly inherent magical skills. He could already satisfactorily perform several basic spells, but he would not be as adept in the more complex ones as the Harry they knew. His knowledge of Hogwarts was based on what he had read in books and so had no real connection to that place. He knows nothing about potion making or flying on a broomstick, which was one of their Harry's trademark skills. The one thing that Henry shared with the Harry they knew was his attachment to Albus Dumbledore. But since Henry did not really grow up under the tutelage of the great wizard, that bond would not be as strong as the one that the other Harry and Dumbledore had shared.

The greatest difference between the two Harrys, though, was probably how they were raised. Harry, from his very first day at the Dursleys had been bullied by his cousin while Henry had grown up without that aggravation. Henry had actually been looked after and cared for by people who acted like he was their own son, had lived among friends who treated him like a brother. How that difference in upbringing had influenced Henry's psyche would greatly determine his personality. Harry hated bullies and championed the weak and oppressed because he knew how it felt like to be bullied. That was also one of the motivating factors in his desire to fight Voldemort and end his reign of terror against those he deemed weaker than him. Would Henry have the same motivation considering that he never experienced that form of oppression? Would he also have what Draco annoyingly called Harry's 'hero complex'? Would that be good or bad?

There were so many things that could go wrong with this mission, the most prominent of which would be Henry's acceptance of his importance to the Magical world. As Draco had pointed out, they could be risking their necks for nothing. Snape had told them that Henry had overheard his conversation with the Figgs and he was not happy about it. The Figgs had later informed Snape that Henry was furious when he learned about how the truth was kept from him all these years. That's probably another thing that Henry had in common with the Harry she knew. Harry could also be quite hot-tempered when terribly upset. She just hoped that she would discover more similarities between the two. Otherwise, it would be really hard to convince this other Harry to come back with them to England.

It would really be strange going back to the Muggle world. She had spent most of her adolescence in the Wizarding world and now that her parents do not even remember her there just wasn't any reason for her to leave it. She had also been so used to doing things magically that she knew she would feel...disconnected (for lack of a better term) in the Muggle world. She wondered how Harry, or rather Henry, had been able to keep his magical abilities at bay. Would he have felt weird being able to do things that others couldn't? She knew that she did. Her magical abilities had manifested at quite an early age. She couldn't even remember the exact moment since she had always been able to do...unusual things. From the time that she had been old enough to be aware of herself and the world around her, she had been doing, as her father liked to call them, 'extraordinarily magnificent' things.

Her mother used to tell her that she could mend broken toys and dresses at the age of two and that she made flowers bloom from a dried up twig when she was three. She also remembers turning her toy turtle into a real, live turtle when she was five. When she started attending school, her father had warned her not to show her 'abilities' to the other kids. It started to bother her that none of her classmates were like her. That's when she realized that she was the odd one. She wasn't like them...she wasn't normal. She refrained from doing anything weird in school lest her classmates tease her like they do the boy who could twist his body into a pretzel. It was only when she was in the safety of her room that she let go of her 'magic' (although she didn't know that it was that at the time).

When her letter from Hogwarts arrived, her parents were ecstatic. They knew that she was special
and the letter had confirmed it. At first, she was shocked. She had delegated her abilities to something more scientific like telekinesis or something of the sort. Not even once did she think that what she was doing was 'magical'. Magic was just for entertainment, tricks done by trained performers. She was even skeptical about the letter, thinking that it was a trick or a prank. Thankfully her parents were less cynical than her. They followed the letter's instructions on how to find Diagon Alley and when they did, her world changed forever.

She sometimes wondered what would have happened if her parents, like her, didn't believe the letter. What if they didn't go to that pub in London? What if she had been able to persuade her parents to send her to The Henrietta Barnett School instead?

Then, she wouldn't have known about magic…wouldn't have known about Hogwarts, the Black Lake or the merpeople and the giant squid. She wouldn't have learned how to brew potions, or how to translate runes, or how to draw an astronomy chart. She wouldn't have met Harry or Ron…or Neville and Ginny and Luna…and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Sirius, Lupin, Tonks or Hagrid. She wouldn't have known how brilliant Dumbledore was, wouldn't have seen the daunting skills of McGonagall or the bravery of Snape. She wouldn't have known about the existence of the Dark Arts, or Horcruxes or Voldemort. She wouldn't have been part of the war that led to the downfall of the Darkest wizard of all time. She wouldn't have been forced to obliviate her parents…

She wouldn't have met Draco…would not have fallen in love.

"Hermione?" Draco whispered.

"Yes, Draco?"

"Are we there yet?"

Hermione chuckled at his childlike voice, "Soon, honey. Go back to sleep."

"No, thank you. I think I’ve had enough sleep to last me for a month. How long have I been sleeping, anyway?" Draco straightened in his seat and stretched his arms in front of him.

"Uhm…four and a half hours," Hermione said after glancing at her watch.

"Are you sure? It felt like I had been sleeping for days!" His head twisted to glare at her as he seemed to have realized something. "You put something in my drink, didn't you?"

"Of course not! Why ever would you think that?" she retorted, twisting away from Draco's penetrating look.

"Admit it! You used a Sleeping Draught on me! Admit it, Hermione!" Draco insisted, brusquely shoving his shoulder against hers.

"Shhh…will you keep it down! Alright, alright! Yes, I did! You left me no choice! You were going on and on about how you would not be comfortable sitting in a Muggle flying tin can. I didn't want to risk having you making a scene on the plane," Hermione said in between chuckles.

Draco snorted as he slumped back in his seat, arms folded in his chest.

"Malfoys never make a scene," he pouted.

"Well…at least we're even now," she pouted back.

"What do you mean…oh, that! Not the same. You were in danger; I did what I did to save you."
This is different. You purposely tricked me just because you didn't want to be embarrassed by me."

"Hmph…think whatever you want. And I didn't do it to save myself from humiliation. I saved you from making an arse of yourself in front of all these Mug…ehrm…people."

"Really? And how could you have predicted my behavior, my dear Ms. Trewlaney? Do you have a crystal ball hidden under that coat, hmm? OW! You are one violent witch, did you know that?" Draco cried as he rubbed the arm that Hermione had punched.

"Hmph! Serves you right, you fiend!"

"Oh, I'm the fiend now? Who was it who went about putting Sleeping Draughts in other people's drinks, huh? How would I know if you didn't take advantage of me while I was out?"

"Hah! As if I would have to drug you to take advantage of you…” she whispered, her lips pouting seductively as she batted her eyelashes.

"Oh, you can take advantage of me anytime, my lady," Draco breathed, leaning down to plant a soft, chaste kiss on Hermione's lips.

It wasn't enough for her, though. She reached up and pulled him back down, capturing his lips in a deep, lingering, and passionate kiss. Draco wasted no time in responding, throwing his arm around her waist, encasing her in a heated embrace. Only the sound of some loud throat-clearing pulled them apart. Hermione peeked past Draco's shoulders to see the smirking face of a middle-aged man seated across the aisle.

"Sorry," Hermione said shyly.

"Newly-weds, I gather?" he ventured, folding the newspaper that he was reading. "Don't worry about me, I wasn't bothered. I remember the wife and I were very much the same when we were your age. Oh, probably even more adventurous than you two,” he chuckled. "Just don't let those stuck-up bimbos catch you. They're a bunch of hypocrites if you ask me."

"Thanks for the warning," said Draco, giving the older man a thumbs up.

"Not a problem. Carry on, my dear man," the man chortled, unfolding his newspaper to continue with whatever it was he was reading.

Both Draco and Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the consenting older man.

"You heard him, my dear," Draco wiggled his eyebrows suggestively at Hermione, earning him another punch in the arm. "OW! You're getting more vicious, you know."

"And you're turning into a very big baby," she laughed, leaning her head on Draco's shoulder. Hermione still felt tingly all over. Not only because of their abruptly ended kiss but because of what the man had said about them being newly-weds. Somehow, it felt…right, like something she would like to do someday. But would he? Would he want to take it that far?

"Yes, I would, Hermione…most definitely," Draco said, squeezing her fingers.

She almost jumped from her seat when she realized that Draco had replied to her question.

"You used Legilimency on me again!" she hissed, annoyed at his impertinence.

"Sweetheart, you were thinking rather loudly. Your walls were down again, too. I didn't even have
to use Legilimency on you."

Hermione stiffened at his words. Was she really that careless? She should really practice Occlumency more often.

"Besides, you should know by now that we have a rare connection with each other. Your thoughts are often open to me," Draco continued, pulling her to him to nuzzle her neck.

She didn't know if she should be happy or horrified by what Draco had said. If they really were connected in some way, then how could she not read his thoughts as easily as he did hers?

"Because you're not trying hard enough, Sweetheart. And I'm a better Occlumens than you," Draco chuckled when she snorted. "I'm sure you'll get better…if you practice more diligently."

"Well, how can I practice with everything that's going on around us?"

"You can practice now, Luv. It doesn't take much time or effort."

"I know, but I find it hard to concentrate. I have too much on my mind."

"All the more reason for you to practice, Luv. There are more powerful Legilimens out there than me. You can't risk giving them a free pass into your mind," Draco counseled her gently.

Hermione sighed, she knew Draco was right. There will come a time when they might have to face powerful Death Eaters or even Voldemort himself. Snape had even hinted that they would have more demanding assignments after this, she would be putting Draco in danger if her mind remained open for all to penetrate. She must learn to shield her thoughts.

"Okay…I promise to try harder," she said, planting a soft kiss on Draco's cheek.

"That's all I needed to hear. It's for your own protection, Luv," he replied with a smile.

As they discussed the things that they would be doing when they get to the Orphanage the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign flashed up front. Draco tensed, his face turning paler than usual. Hermione reached for his hand and squeezed.

"It's going to be okay, honey. No need to worry," she said, kissing his cheek.

Draco turned and smiled, "I know. How could it not be when you're here with me."

She smiled back and clutched his fingers more tightly, assuring him of her support. Everything went smoothly after that. They moved through the routine of getting off the plane, going through customs and since they had no luggage to claim as everything they needed was in their carry-ons, exited the airport within the hour. They hired a cab and gave the driver instructions to take them to St. Milburga's Home for Children in Manhattan. Draco fidgeted a little, but was quite calm and collected the whole way. After paying the driver with the Muggle money Emmet had given them, the two finally stood outside the doors of St. Milburga's with mixed emotions. They were relieved that everything, so far, had gone according to plan, yet they could not shake off that feeling that things just couldn't be this easy. Not in their world, anyway.

Hermione pressed the buzzer, her heart pounding in her chest like never before. Unconsciously, her hand reached for Draco's like a security blanket. After a couple of minutes, the door slowly opened to reveal the slight figure of a middle-aged woman in a cheerful dress of bright spring colors. It greatly contrasted against the wan look on her tear-streaked face.
"Yes? How may I help you?" she sniffed, clutching a lace-trimmed hanky to her chest.

"Uhm…my name is Abigail Adams and this is…"

Before Hermione could finish introducing Draco the woman grabbed her hand and quickly pulled her inside. Draco, whose hand she still held, was roughly dragged behind her. As her eyes gradually grew accustomed to the dark hallway which they had been drawn into, Hermione immediately saw the man standing behind the woman whom she now assumed to be Mrs. Figg.

"Thank Merlin you're finally here," the man said, his arm going around the shoulders of Mrs. Figg. "I'm Elphias Figg, by the way, and this is my wife, Merlinda. The Headmaster had informed us that you were to arrive yesterday. We've been waiting for you since then."

"We're so sorry for the delay, Mr. Figg. There had been some…complications…regarding our travel arrangements," Hermione explained.

"Is there any problem?" asked Draco.

The Figgs looked at each other, alarm and fear evident in their eyes. And without meaning to, Hermione saw what they were thinking and it terrified her in turn.

"Henry's not here, is he?" she asked.

"I'm afraid he didn't take the news regarding his identity well. He stormed out of the house yesterday and had not returned since," Mr. Figg replied, holding on to a sobbing Mrs. Figg.

Hermione felt Draco stiffen beside her, his colorful curses exploding in her mind as he opened his own to hers.

I knew something like this would happen! Fucking Order! They should've been the one to come for him, not us! What are we supposed to do now? He was fuming mad.

I don't know. One thing I do know is that we need to find him.

How? We're not even familiar with this place.

I know. But they are. Maybe they know some place where he would go.

Go ask them, then. I'll try to contact Snape.

Alright, I'll ask Mr. Figg to take you to their fireplace while I talk to Mrs. Figg.

Good! Draco withdrew from her mind and Hermione was left alone with her convoluted thoughts. She couldn't believe how this assignment could turn out to be this problematic! Damn that Potter temper! Apparently, Harry and Henry were quite more similar than they had expected!

Only time will tell if she should be thankful for that or not.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Please share your thoughts. Should I still continue writing the story or should I just
quit? Let me know...
Happy weekend, everyone!
Exposed

Chapter Notes

A/N: Apologies again for not updating sooner. You know all my issues, so I won't bore you with them anymore. Anyway, thank you so much for choosing to read this story.

So, this is probably the longest chapter I've written so far for this story. It was a bit difficult to write...had to make some tough decisions regarding the characters. This story will also be turning a bit darker in the next chapters, so if you're not into that...

Anyways, hope you all enjoy this next installment.

WARNING: A bit of torture and violence near the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning silence in the dungeons was shattered by the loud thumping of boots marching down the corridor. It was quickly followed by the banging of steel doors being brusquely opened by the guards. James, Angus, and Dennis hurriedly rose from their sleeping mats to see what was going on. The guards never visited them this early and this was the first time that more than the usual two had come down here. Clearly, this was not to be an ordinary day.

"Get up! Get up! We don't have all day!" the guard, who James had dubbed Dumbguard1, was saying, his hand waving lazily at them.

The three of them were hustled out of their cell as soon as they were on their feet. The others were already lined up before them, their frightened faces evident in spite of the dim light.

"Mulciber! Stop dragging your feet and bring those girls here!" a tall, lanky wizard they had never seen before was bellowing from the front.

"I'm not dragging my feet! One of them seems ill. I can't wake her up and she's burning with fever," the one called Mulciber replied irritably.

The lanky guard muttered something under his breath and stomped toward the cell where Mulciber was. A few minutes later, he came out carrying an unconscious girl in his arms, his face sporting a dark scowl. As he quickly shuffled past, James recognized the girl as Merryl Green, a fourth-year Ravenclaw and the youngest in the group. In just a few strides, the lanky wizard disappeared up the stairs leaving behind the bullish Mulciber with his two wards. He had Merryl's cellmates in each hand, Janice Porter and a fifth-year Hufflepuff named Leanna. Janice looked mutinous as she tried to wrest her arm from the big man's grip while Leanna was sniffing loudly, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Will you quit bawling your eyes out? Don't make me punch them shut for you!" Mulciber growled, his hand clenching around Leanna's thin arm, shaking the poor girl.

If James had not been trying to tamp down his own rage and holding back a thoroughly outraged Dennis, he would have noticed Angus sweeping past him, hands clenched with murder in his eyes. What happened next was something none of them ever expected.
Angus tackled Mulciber to the ground, his big hands pummeling the man's face repeatedly. When
the bigger man found purchase on Angus' shirt, he lifted himself up and slammed his body against
the Gryffindor beater and threw him against the cell bars, knocking the young man unconscious.
With his back turned, Mulciber did not see Chris and Justin coming for him. They lunged at him in
concert and were fervently punching and kicking Mulciber by the time complete pandemonium
finally broke out. Janice and Heather joined the fray with both of them pulling Mulciber's hair and
scratching his face. There were screams and grunts and curses; voices of the guards and students
mingling in a cacophony of anger, frustration, fear and shock.

The retaliation of the students took everyone by surprise that not even the guards were able to
respond immediately. They also seemed to have forgotten that they were wizards since not even
one of them had taken out a wand to use magic on the brawling rabble before them. Two were
pulling at the now screaming Janice and Heather while the other two, Dumbguard1 and
Dumbguard2, their regular guards, were grappling with Justin and Chris as they continued to kick
Mulciber who was now lying still on the ground.

"Let go of me, James!" screamed Dennis, struggling against James' vice-like grip.

"Stop it, Dennis! Don't make matters worse!" was James' furious reply. He cursed under his breath.
He understood where his schoolmates were coming from. It really was just a matter of time before
they all snapped. He was feeling mutinous himself, but being a non-violent man, he preferred to
mull over his problems than solve them with his fists. Still, he should have anticipated something
like this. He should've been more attentive. He should've stopped Angus. He should've done a
million things except gawk like a fool at his schoolmates. Now it was too late to act. There was no
way that they were getting out of this mess unscathed. If the Minister did not punish them, the
guards surely will. And he hated to think what Mulciber would do in retaliation. Only a miracle
can save them now.

"STUPEFY!"

The two men holding Chris and Justin, Dumbguards 1 and 2, were hit by the spell from behind,
sending them sprawling on the floor face down when both boys moved away from their falling
bodies.

"What is going on here?" a familiar voice shrieked from the stairwell.

James sighed in relief as he turned to look at Mrs. Crowe and Emmet standing at the foot of the
stairs. Mrs. Crowe's eyes were as big as saucers, her cheeks flaming red. Emmet's face was livid,
eyes hard and glinting with malevolence. He looked ready to kill. Despite their differences in
expression, both their wands were steadily pointing at the guards.

"What have you done?" the wizard holding on to Heather screamed.

"Mr. Rockefort and Mr. Bellows, will you be so kind as to remove your hands from those young
girls. I'm sure they pose no threat to you," Madam Crowe said as she walked towards the group.
Although her voice was shaking, the wand in her hand was not.

"No threat? Have you seen how they clawed at Mulciber's face? These two are hellions, I'm telling
you!" cried the wizard who was holding on to the now smirking Heather.

"Yeh! They nearly scalped him, too!" said the one whose arms were tightly wound around a
thrashing Janice.

"Well, I'm sure they were both given enough reason to act so recklessly," Madam Crowe said, her
eyes twinkling with amusement. If James didn't know better, he could've sworn that there was pride in the older witch's voice.

"Enough reason? Are you justifying the violence of these...these...filthy Mudbloods?" screamed the man holding Heather, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets.

"Shut up, Rockefort! I will not tolerate such language from you," Mrs. Crowe's face took on a hardness that they had never seen before. She looked formidable in spite of her small stature. James found a new respect for the Ministry witch growing within him.

"The Minister will hear about this!" shouted Rockefort.

"Oh, I highly doubt that," Mrs. Crowe chirped as she glanced meaningfully at Emmet who was now standing beside her. The young wizard grinned and nodded. Then, they turned to the two guards and said in unison, "Stupefy!" The two were thrown back a few feet before landing hard on their backsides. They slumped to the cold, damp floor with a loud thud.

Emmet went down on his knees and pointed his wand at one of the two unconscious guards. "Obliviate," he whispered. He repeated the same spell to the others then, moved over to where Mulciber was sprawled out. He was badly beaten, his face a bleeding mess. Emmet swept his wand at his cuts and bruises and whispered healing spells. When he was satisfied, he also erased the unfortunate incident with the students from the man's memories.

Angus was now slowly getting up on his feet, rubbing at the bruise on his head. Mrs. Crowe moved behind him and cast a healing spell. When she was assured that Angus was no longer feeling any pain, she walked away from him, took a deep breath and scowled at the students standing nervously before her. She asked the students to come forward. When they were near enough, she cast a Muffliato spell around them; just to make sure that none of what they were about to discuss will be heard by anyone beyond their protected circle.

"Now tell me what happened," she said, her eyes locking onto James. "Mr. Toffler, since you seemed to have been able to refrain from getting involved in this...mess...perhaps you could enlighten me about how this all started."

Angus snorted, mumbling a few choice curses beneath his breath. He caught James' eye and was about to launch into a scathing tirade against his cousin when Mrs. Crowe gave him a quelling look. She turned back to James and gave him a short nod of encouragement.

"Uhm...I don't know what happened. I mean, I don't know how...this...mess started," he said, avoiding the flaring eyes of Angus and Heather.

"You don't know because you do not care about what's happening around you," screamed Janice. "You act like you're not one of us...always so wrapped up in that bubble of yours...thinking about your dear Hermione! Well, she's not here! She bailed on us!"

James felt his ears burn. How could she say that? It was not as if he could do anything about their situation! And what was she saying about Hermione bailing out? They did not even know if she was okay or not! How could she jump to such unfounded conclusions! It was just too much to take and James snapped.

"And what would you have me do, Janice? Incite a rebellion? Abscond with all of you? We don't even know how we are going to get out of here if we're even given the chance to flee! Violence is not the answer here, Janice! If Madam Crowe and Mr. Fawley did not arrive when they did, what do you think would those guards be doing to us now, huh? Do you think they'll spare us? And it's
not as if I'm living under different conditions, am I? In case you haven't noticed I'm also being tested like the rest of you!" Even more than you, he wanted to add.

But of course, he didn't.

For what purpose will it serve if he told them that his tolerance for the Imperius curse was also being tested every day? Will it help if he told them that he was constantly being interrogated about his parents and their so-called influence in the Muggle world? Will it make them more tolerant of his silence and seeming distance if he told them that his memories were now being extracted one by one? Will he gain their sympathy if he confessed that Heathridge, the wizard conducting their tests, had been trying to teach him Legilimency so that he could probe into his fellow students minds? Will he gain their confidence if he admitted that he actually had an inkling as to why they were still here while the others were sent back to Hogwarts?

No...the only things he will gain from them were suspicion and fear. That's why he tried to keep to himself...inside his 'bubble', as Janice had so succinctly pointed out. He was slowly being singled out...being set apart from the rest of them and what scared him the most was that he somehow knew why. But he also knew that he needed to plan for the inevitable and try to escape before he was faced with it. And mutiny was not the way to do it. He needed to outsmart them. He needed to come up with as foolproof a strategy as possible.

For once in his life, James needed to rely on his wits and nothing else.

And he needed to do it alone.

"Ms. Porter, I believe that Mr. Toffler is right. Had Madam Crowe and I not arrived just in time...," Emmet shook his head before continuing, "Well, I'd really rather not think of what might have happened to all of you. These men are not ordinary sentries. They are Death Eaters, soldiers in the Dark Lord's army, wizards trained in the Dark Arts. You should be grateful that they were thoroughly caught off guard that they somehow forgot to draw their wands on you," Emmet said, his soft-spoken words carrying the weight of a death knell. Janice, James noted, was now as pale as freshly fallen snow.

"I'm not trying to scare you, but you should beware. This is not Hogwarts where the only bad thing that can happen to you when you get out of line is that you spend two hours of every day polishing the trophies in the Headmaster's office or rearranging and labeling the bottles in Prof. Slughorn's Potions cabinet. This is real life with real consequences. You may be exceptional witches and wizards, but you're still no match for these goons. They will not hesitate to use Dark magic on you...especially since you are...nothing but disposable Mudbloods in their eyes." Emmet let out a deep breath as he turned to Madam Crowe, silently turning the discussion to her.

"As of now, you are under the...protection...of the Minister, so they might not do anything worse than throwing a Crucio at you. But don't push the limits of the Minister's patience...he won't be very tolerant...or forgiving," Mrs. Crowe said, her sad eyes more humane than they had ever seen before.

James just realized that these two had taken a great risk in helping them. Should anyone find out what they had done...he shuddered at the thought.

"We're sorry about what happened, Madam Crowe. It was a lapse in judgment. I promise that I will never let anything like that happen again," said Chris, moving forward and taking charge and acting like a responsible Prefect at last.

The Ministry witch nodded, smiling benevolently at the tall, young man. "I certainly hope so, Mr.
Havelock. We will not always be here to protect you. And as Mr. Fawley had said, these men are trained in the Dark Arts..."

"I understand, Madam Crowe. Thank you for helping us out."

"Not a problem, my dear. Just be more...ah...sensible from now on, alright?"

Chris nodded, his arm moving around Emma who had come to stand beside him.

"Now...about your missing schoolmate...Ms. Granger, is it? The Headmaster told us that she is currently in Hogwarts due to Dragonpox," Mrs. Crowe held up her hand when several voices rose up in protest. "We have no reason to doubt the Headmaster, so let's leave it at that. Let's just hope that she recovers quickly so that she may resume her duties as Head Prefect."

There were a few grumbles and whispers, but they were quickly dispersed when Mrs. Crowe continued with her talk. "You are probably wondering what we're doing here. We were actually given permission by the Minister to visit you, on behalf of Headmaster Snape, of course. The Headmaster had sent an appeal for your release directly to the Minister and Minister Malfoy has assured us that it will be granted within the next few days. So I want you all to be on your best behavior!"

Her last words were drowned out by the cheers that resounded around the stark walls of the dungeons. The students were hugging each other, their eyes misting with tears of happiness. Dennis had left James' side and was wrapping his arms around a crying Leanna and a sobbing Heather.

Only James stood apart from the impromptu celebration. A small voice was telling him that the Minister was bluffing. He would never let them go back to Hogwarts.

Not all of them, at least.

Not one James William Toffler, in particular.

o-O-o

Theodore Nott did not like being kept in the dark. He never prided himself in being smart or intelligent, but he had enough common sense and a keen understanding of people. There were only two people in the world that he had difficulty reading - his father and Draco Malfoy. And one of them was now standing before him, his hooded eyes swiveling up and down the Slytherin Common Room.

"It's a pleasure to have you visit me here, father," he said between gritted teeth. Was it not enough that he had to tolerate this man's presence during the holidays? Now he had to visit him in what he had long considered his real home? Something wasn't right.

"Cut the crap, Theodore. I know for a fact that you'd rather kiss the Giant Squid than have your old man looking over your shoulder. Rest assured, son. This is not a social visit," his father grumbled, his eyes still moving around the large room.

"Cut the crap, Theodore. I know for a fact that you'd rather kiss the Giant Squid than have your old man looking over your shoulder. Rest assured, son. This is not a social visit," his father grumbled, his eyes still moving around the large room.

Theo nearly chuckled at the older man's statement. At least he still had the decency to admit that their relationship was far from being the ideal father-son affiliation. Alphonsus Theodore Nott, Sr. saw Theo as nothing more than an heir to the Nott name, a continuation of his family's legacy; while Theo saw him as nothing more than a means to an end - the provider of a vast treasure vault in Gringotts and parcels of land around the country (which he will use to abolish the abhorrent traditions of his family as soon as he had his hands on them).
"Even so, father. It is still good to see you," Theo said. Nott Sr. grunted.

"Now, boy, tell me about this Mudblood that's being housed in the Infirmary."

Theo stiffened at the use of that disgusting word, but he kept his silence. He waited for his father to continue. He resolved to not give the man any straight answers. Let him sweat for it, he thought defiantly.

"Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"About what, father?"

"About the Mudblood in the Infirmary!" his father growled.

"Oh! Are you talking about Ms. Granger?" he smiled innocently at the fuming man.

"I don't care to know about her name!"

"Well...I thought you wanted me to tell you something about her, so I'm starting with her name. Mudbloods still have names, don't they?" Theo smirked when his father glared at him. He so loved seeing the old man seethe and stew in his own juices.

"I really don't know what they are teaching you in this school, son. Perhaps I should take this up with the Dark Lord, have him review the curriculum of this...sad excuse for a school."

A bubble of laughter threatened to escape Theo's lips. He, for one, knew that his father always had a way of making himself look more important than he truly was. Theo doubted if the old man had ever even had a real conversation with the Dark Lord. He was more like Malfoy's errand boy than a close associate of Lord Voldemort.

"That would be very helpful, father. I'm sure the Dark Lord will be very interested in what you have to say," Theo said. Nott, Sr. sneered, his son's sarcasm obviously not lost on him.

"What else can you tell me about her? I'm sure there's more to her than her Mudblood name. Otherwise, the Minister would not have sent me on this important assignment."

Aha! I knew it! Malfoy's errand boy! Theo said to himself with satisfaction.

"What would you like to know, father? Aside from her name, of course," said Theo.

"Tell me why the Minister is so interested in her. What is so special about her that the Minister deemed it necessary to send his best man to verify her excuse for not being at the Registration?"

That came as a no surprise to Theo - the Minister's interest in Granger. He, himself, had warned Draco that she would be foremost in the Ministry's hidden agenda regarding Muggle-borns. He ignored that bit about his father being the Minister's 'best man'. Let him brag for as long as he likes, nobody's listening, anyway. His dilemma now was how much to reveal to his father about Granger. The man may be obnoxious in so many ways, but he was no fool. He must not downplay Granger's abilities too much. The old coot will be suspicious.

"Hmmm...let me see," he paused, buying time to formulate a believable tale for his father. "I really do not know her that well (which was true, he did not 'know' Granger on a personal basis), she belongs to a different house, you know. But she has always been ranked first in all of our classes...except for Potions. Draco's still the best Potioneer in our year."
"Are you saying that she outranks Malfoy's son in all subjects except Potions?" an evil grin spread on Nott Sr.'s face at Theo's nod. Next, he was cackling like crazy, thumping Theo hard on the back as he tried to compose himself. Theo laughed along, finally getting what his father found amusing. It was the closest that they would get to sharing a father-son moment.

"Now I understand why Lucius is so adamant in finding fault with this particular Mudblood," Nott Sr. said in between gulps of air. "He can't get over the fact that his son came in second to that girl! What a shame Draco's turning out to be, eh?"

Theo's laughter instantly died with his father's words. The old fool had just insulted two people who meant something to him - Granger, he respected (after he had gotten over his bigoted views); Draco, he loved like a brother. It took a lot of his well-cultivated self-control to stop himself from pummeling his father senseless.

"Why exactly are you here, father?" his clipped tone earned him another glare from his old man.

"I already told you! Lucius sent me to verify Snape's claim that the Mudblood girl has Dragonpox!" Nott Sr. spat, his eyes darting around them furtively again.

"Why did he send you, of all people? Why didn't he just send his assistant to do the deed?"

The older Nott rolled his eyes, evidently exasperated with his son. "Because I'm his most trusted friend, of course! Haven't you been listening?"

Trusted friend? Servant, is more like it! Theo mused. His father really had an amazing way of deluding himself. Lucius Malfoy doesn't have friends, he has minions, subordinates, servants, people he enjoyed ordering around! The man held himself in such high esteem that he was always above the rest, except perhaps the Dark Lord. But even that is subject to conjecture. Chances are that Lucius is also using the Dark Lord to advance the Malfoy agenda. According to Draco, Lucius didn't even treat his own wife as an equal, how then could Alphonsus Nott think that he was Lucius Malfoy's friend?

"My apologies, father. You know how distracted I can get sometimes." His father grunted.

"Alright, suppose I can act as your guide. Should I take you to the Headmaster's Office or straight to the Infirmary?" Theo asked, leaning back against the wall in feigned boredom. He did not want his father to see how eager he was to get inside the Infirmary himself. The Resistance had been planning on inspecting the Infirmary, past the cordoned-off area where Hermione was supposed to be recuperating from Dragonpox. And now it seems that he will be able to do it without much effort. He only had to suffer the company of his pompous, self-absorbed father for a bit longer.

He almost laughed at the irony of it. He never, in his wildest dreams, ever thought that his father's arrogance and butt-kissing would inadvertently make him an accomplice of the Resistance. Unconsciously, his hand went to the pendant hidden underneath his shirt. He will send a message to the Resistance as soon as his father agrees to let him come along.

"Are you daft, boy? The Headmaster doesn't even know that I'm here. I made an appointment with Slughorn. He's the one who admitted me in. Snape is not supposed to know that I'm going to take a tour of the hospital wing," growled Nott Sr.

"Ah! How clever of you, father. Trying to catch the Headmaster unawares are you now?" Theo's skin crawled at the implication. If the Minister is harboring doubts regarding the Headmaster's loyalty, then Hogwarts is truly no longer safe. He must pass this information along as soon as possible. For now, he will just inform the Resistance of his father's 'surprise' visit to the Infirmary.
"But of course! Lucius is quite adamant that I confirm with my own eyes the truth to Snape's claim that the Mudblood girl has contracted Dragonpox. I've always been suspicious of that man's true allegiance. Now, we'll see if he's still worthy of the Dark Lord's trust," his father cackled.

"Very well, then. I will come with you to the hospital wing. Let me just put on my robes," he jumped to his feet and ran to his dorm room before his father could say anything. Blaise was at his Quidditch practice and Draco was off to parts unknown so he had the room to himself. Still, he made sure that the room was indeed empty before he took out his pendant. Within seconds Theo had informed the Resistance members that he will be visiting the Infirmary with his father to check on Granger. *Will report on it later - TN*, he added before stashing the pendant back inside his shirt.

The Infirmary or hospital wing was located on the fourth floor of the Hospital Tower. It was quite a long walk from the Slytherin Dormitories and Theo had to spend the better part of it shutting out his father's annoying voice. He only tuned back in every now and then just to make sure that he was not being asked a question. One thing that perked his interest was when his father spoke of the Muggle-borns still in residence at Malfoy Manor.

"...as I had told Lucius, time and again, those Mudbloods should not be allowed to return to Hogwarts. I said, just Obliviate them all and send them back to where they came from. But no, he said the Dark Lord has other plans for them. I really don't see..."

"You mean they're coming back here?" Theo interjected. His father scowled at the interruption.

"Well, not all of them from what Lucius told me. Some will be staying for training, he said. I do not really understand what he will be training them for! It's ludicrous if you ask me. Sometimes I'm beginning to wonder if that man is getting soft. I remember when we were still here at Hogwarts..."

Theo tuned out the rest of his father's ramblings. The word 'training' somehow got stuck in his mind. What did Lucius mean by that? What will he be training the Muggle-borns on? Well, whatever the Minister had in mind, it couldn't be good. His father's voice pulled him back from his thoughts again.

"At last we're here! I think I'm getting old. I don't remember the hospital wing being this far from the dungeons! I feel like I had just spent an entire hour crawling up those blasted stairs. Son, don't be surprised if you find yourself the Head of House Nott sooner than you anticipated." There was a bit of humor in Nott Sr.'s words yet Theo experienced a short pang of sadness. Just a very short one, though. He and his father shared a very flimsy bond. And that is what's really sad.

When they entered the Infirmary, they found Madam Pomfrey conferring with the very person that his father had wanted to catch off-guard - Headmaster Snape. Theo had to stop himself from laughing when he saw his father's face crumble in dismay and annoyance.

"So much for catching the Headmaster by surprise, eh, father?" he whispered. Nott Sr. ignored his barb but his face turned a motley red, a clear indication that he heard what his son had said.

The Headmaster's head turned toward them after being informed by Madam Pomfrey of their presence. Snape's face broke into a smile as he walked forward, hand extended to Alphonsus Nott.

"Alphonsus! What a pleasant surprise! I see you can't wait for the holidays to see young Theodore here," Snape said, unmindful of the baleful glare that his visitor was giving him.

"I'm not here to visit my son, Severus. I am here on an errand for the Minister. Lucius wanted to come himself but the Dark Lord had summoned him this morning so he sent me instead," Nott Sr. replied with a sneer, puffing his chest in self-importance.
"Oh? And how may I assist you?" Snape asked.

"I would like you to take me to the Granger girl. Lucius told me that you sent an owl to the Ministry excusing her from the Registration due to a case of...dragonpox," Nott Sr. said, his shrewd eyes looking for any change in Snape's expression. When he saw none, he scowled.

"Are you sure you're up to this? It's a nasty one, not really pleasant to see," Snape said.

"I didn't come here to ogle her. I just want to see if it's really Dragonpox," Nott Sr. said.

"Alright, follow me then," Snape spun on his heels and led them to the farthest end of the hospital wing where an area was cordoned off with a warning sign.

"She is in there, resting," Snape stopped just a few feet from the area covered with a thick, white sheet. Nott Sr. scrunched up his nose as a pungent smell wafted from the enclosure.

"What is that smell?" he asked, covering his nose with his hand.

Theo took out a handkerchief to cover his nose. His eyes were starting to tear. Snape also had a thick cloth over his nose.

"That's from the emulsions and balms Madam Pomfrey had administered on the poor girl's skin. She caught a really vicious case of it. The pustules are just erupting, so she's really covered with medication from head to foot," the Headmaster explained.

Theo's stomach started to turn at the Headmaster's description of Hermione's condition. He wanted to run for the door, but he steeled himself and swallowed hard. He must find out if it's really Hermione in there.

"Be that as it may, I still must see her for myself. I will not leave until I do, Severus," his father insisted. He could really be a stubborn arse sometimes; especially when his literal arse was on the line.

"I understand. However, due to the highly contagious nature of the disease, you cannot approach her. Even Madam Pomfrey uses her wand to tend to Ms. Granger. We have placed a...for want of a better term...viewing window here on the side. Come with me," said Snape as he walked to the side of the tent-like structure. He lifted a part of the white covering to reveal a small, square shaped cutout where one can see inside.

What greeted them was something that Theo would have preferred not to see. Lying on the bed was a sleeping Hermione, her bushy brown hair spread on the white pillows, her sickly green skin covered with large, red, ringed pustules. A thick white blanket was covering her body up to her neck so they could not see her arms and legs. Just as well, Theo did not want to have the full extent of her malady exhibited before him.

"Is that really her, Theo?" his father asked, disgust written on his weathered face.

"I believe so. Yes, it's her. I will recognize that bushy head from anywhere," Theo replied.

"Very well, I trust your judgment," his father said, turning away from the ghastly scene. "There are still a few things that I need to discuss with you, Severus."

"All right, let's get out of here, shall we? I don't want you getting ill yourself," Snape said as he led Nott Sr. away from the sick bay.
Theo made to follow the two men out when something caught his eye - a slight movement somewhere in the middle of the bed. Was that a foot? Hermione's legs couldn't be that short, could they? He moved closer to the square opening and observed the sleeping girl. There was something about her that was nagging at the back of Theo's head. In spite of the green skin and red pustules, he was sure that it was Hermione. So what was it that he found strange about her?

As Theo continued to stare at the girl on the bed something strange did happen - the part of the bed where her abdomen was supposed to be started to quiver and move. Then, when Theo looked up he saw two, startled green eyes looking at him with trepidation.

Green eyes?

He may not know Hermione that well, but he would bet his favorite broomstick that her eyes were not green. They were brown!

He doubted if Dragonpox changes its victim's eye color, too. If that's the case, then who the hell is lying there pretending to be her?

And where in Merlin's red socks is the real Hermione Granger?

o-O-o

Draco slumped against the back of the flowery couch in the guest bedroom and closed his eyes. His feet were killing him! All he wanted to do now was curl up in bed and sleep for days - preferably with Hermione in his arms. It's been three days since they had arrived in New York, three days of searching for the blasted, temperamental Chosen One, three days of walking and walking and walking. Never before had he walked such long distances and he had just had enough. If it was up to him, he will end this search now and go back to Hogwarts. If Harry or Henry, or whatever he preferred to call himself, did not want to assume his role as savior of the Wizarding World then, so be it. He was just so tired of running after Boy Wonder.

He was instantly on his feet, wand out, when the door was flung open.

"Draco! What in Merlin's beard are you doing?" Hermione cried.

"Oh! Sorry, Luv! Battle instincts," he said, smiling sheepishly as he put his wand away.

Hermione smirked and dropped beside him on the couch.

"I talked to Prof. Snape. I told him about Harry or Henry...or whatever. He's not happy, of course. But he's given us permission to take the earliest flight out tomorrow," Hermione said, sighing.

"Thank Merlin for that!" said Draco, leaning back to pull Hermione against him.

"I really think it's for the best. There's no point in searching for him if he's not interested in coming back with us anyway," she said, snuggling closer to Draco. "I just wish we were at least given the chance to talk to him...let him know all about the Wizarding World."

"It's not our fault that this Harry grew up to be such a brat...Ow! You really should refrain from pinching me or I'll be left with no choice but to pinch you somewhere...hidden," Draco said as he rubbed the arm that Hermione had pinched.

Hermione chuckled and reached up to pull him for a quick, chaste kiss. "I'm sowe Dwaykie...Hermininy vwewy meany. Kissie, kissie..."
Draco laughed heartily, pulling Hermione onto his lap. "You've been a very bad girl, Hermininy. I think I really should punish you now," he said as he lowered his lips down to hers. Hermione's response was instantaneous and heated, making Draco groan and squirm as some parts of his anatomy responded as well.

His hand started traveling underneath her shirt, tracing lacy circles on the smooth skin of her abdomen. It was now Hermione's turn to squirm at Draco's ministrations. She wrapped her arms around Draco's neck and pulled him closer, deepening their kiss. Draco's fingers were slowly tracing the lacy trimming of her bra when two loud knocks brought them scrambling up their seat and straightening their clothes.

_Fuck! Talk about bad timing!_ Draco silently cursed. "Yes?" He said in a slightly higher octave.

Hermione snickered, earning her a glare from the blonde, discomfited young man beside her.

The door opened a fraction and Mr. Figg's head peeked inside. His haggard appearance told them that he hadn't slept in quite a while. His wife, as he and Hermione had both seen during breakfast, was in no better state.

Damn that Potter! Draco grumbled.

"May I come in?" Mr. Figg asked quietly.

"Of course, do come in, please," replied Hermione.

Mr. Figg shuffled inside and closed the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the small trunk near the door. He seemed more worried than usual.

"I've spoken to Headmaster Snape. He told me that you will be leaving tomorrow..." he paused, looking up hopefully at them.

"Yes, we are, Mr. Figg," answered Draco. The older man's shoulders slumped visibly. Draco felt sorry for the man, but there really was nothing more to do here. Harry/Henry had made his choice.

"I-I w-was hoping that y-you...well..."

"Keep on searching for Harry?" Hermione said. The older man shifted in his seat and nodded. "I don't think it will do any good, Mr. Figg. Harry obviously does not want to have anything to do with the Wizarding World..."

"Oh, but he does! He grew up wanting to be a Magician!" Mr. Figg blurted.

"Mr. Figg, we all know that a Magician is very, very different from a Wizard," Draco said, unable to hide his annoyance. Has this man forgotten his heritage? A Magician is a trickster, a person who does 'magic' tricks for entertainment and money! If that's all Potter wanted to be then he doesn't deserve to come back to the Wizarding World that he was born into!

"No! No! Don't get me wrong. He wants to be a part of the Wizarding World! All his life...even when he thought magic wasn't real...he wanted it to be real!"

"Because he wants to perform magic tricks," Draco smirked.

"No! Yes! Well...not really. I mean, it's not just magic tricks he wanted to do. He's fascinated by the history of the Magical World. Of course, back then he thought that it was just a very good piece of literature, a well-written work of fiction. But, still...he had hoped that it was all real," Mr. Figg
explained, his brow breaking into a sweat.

"Then why did he run when he found out that everything was real? If he really wanted it to be real then he should have been ecstatic when he found out the truth," Draco asked.

"I don't know...scared, maybe? Damn! I'm not very good at explaining things. Hang on a second, I'll call Merlinda. She's better at these things," Mr. Figg said, jumping to his feet and running out the door. After a few minutes, he came back with his wife in tow.

Mrs. Figg looked even more distraught than she did that morning. Her face was blotchy, her nose red and her eyes even puffier than a bullfrog's. But there was a determination in her eyes that they had never seen before. She sat on a wooden chair that her husband had conjured for her.

"Elphias told me that you are determined to give up the search for Henry, is that correct?" she asked, her voice steady and strong.

Hermione and Draco nodded in unison. The older woman sighed; the sadness in her eyes touching even Draco's hardened heart.

"Henry was always a...complicated child. He always felt different. He always wondered why the other kids could not do the things that came naturally to him. He thought he was weird. But he has a good heart. He never used his...ah...talents to bully the other kids. He used them to bring joy and laughter to this place. He also used it to protect the weaker ones."

Hermione squeezed Draco's fingers. He squeezed back and thought - Yes, typical Potter, I know.

"When I gave him that supposedly Muggle toy - a Magician's Kit, he admitted that he had been hoping to be a Magician someday..."

Draco snorted, disgusted that Muggles had the gall to turn Magic into a child's plaything.

Mrs. Figg took a deep breath before continuing. "Only it wasn't really just a toy. The wand was a real one. It couldn't perform to the best of Henry's abilities since it did not choose him. Still...you should've seen how he made do with it."

"Then, that was your chance to tell him everything about Magic, wasn't it? Tell him that the wand was real and that what he was doing was real Magic," Hermione exclaimed.

"You have to understand, we were told not to divulge anything to him. We wanted to tell him about his parents, about the Magic in his blood...we wanted to tell him the truth," she paused and looked up at her husband who smiled at her encouragingly.

"Then why didn't you?" Hermione asked.

"Albus...Minister Dumbledore, that is, told us not to. He made us swear that we wouldn't. He wanted Henry to have a normal, ordinary life. He actually hoped that it would not be necessary for Henry to go back...that he wouldn't have to...fulfill the Prophecy."

"He thought that the Dark Lord was finished for good; that he wasn't going to recover from his Deathly sleep, is that it?" Draco asked, leaning forward.

Both Figgs nodded. "He said that Henry did not need to know about the Prophecy. Not yet, anyway. Not until it was absolutely necessary, he said," said Mr. Figg.

"But then, the Dark Lord did recover. And when he did...he was even more powerful and
dangerous than before..." Hermione said.

"What did Dumbledore do then?" asked Draco.

"As Headmaster Snape had told you, he came here to...uhm...tutor Henry," said Mrs. Figg.

"But he didn't tell him the truth?"

"Apparently, he didn't," answered Mrs. Figg, slumping back in her seat, her hand reaching for her husband's.

"Why didn't he?" Draco asked in a harsher voice than he intended.

"W-we don't know," stammered Mrs. Figg.

"And now...it's up to us to convince Harry...er...Henry to come back," Draco almost sneered. He hated how they were entrusted with such a vital part of the plan to save the Wizarding World from Voldemort. Why didn't they just send someone more experienced in talking to hard-headed, runaway teenage wizards?

"If you could only stay just one more day...Henry might turn up any time now. He doesn't really know the city that well. He's never been out there on his own. In fact...oh, Merlin! Why didn't I think of this earlier? What if the reason why he didn't come back was because he got lost?" Mrs. Figg gasped.

"We actually thought about that. And that's actually the only reason why we stayed this long. But then, we realized that Henry's a smart man. Even if he didn't know his way around the city, he still would have found St. Milburga's," Hermione said.

"Not if he's using an ordinary Muggle map. This place is unplottable," Mr. Figg replied.

"Does he even know how to use a map?" Draco asked.

"Of course he does! It's one of those things that used to fascinate him. He liked copying old maps and putting his own landmarks or renaming the ones already there," Mr. Figg explained.

"Why did he do that?" Hermione asked.

"He said he's marking the places he will be visiting when he's finally allowed to roam the city on his own. He did look forward to touring the city," Mr. Figg slapped his forehead with an open palm. "Merlin's beard! Why didn't I think of that? Of course, he'll go someplace he already knows of!"

"Wait...do you still have any of those maps?" asked Draco, an idea forming in his mind.

"Uhm...yes...I think I still have a couple of his old ones. But he made them when he was...hmmm...ten or eleven, I think."

"Before he became more fascinated with his Magician's Kit?" Draco felt nauseous at being reminded of such travesty. He'll deal with the outrage later.

"Yes, actually," admitted Mr. Figg.

"Give me the very last ones that he made and get me a real map," he told Mr. Figg. The older wizard was out of the room in a flash.
"There's also something else that you should know," Mrs. Figg was saying. Her face was ashen as she fumbled with the ends of her pink jumper.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other, their hearts sinking. Is there no end to these revelations? They both thought.

"This place is not only unplottable, it is also protected by Henry's presence and it, in turn, protects him. The only reason why the Ministry of Magic was not able to detect underage magic in this place was because of Henry."

"I don't understand," Draco said.

"Dumbledore created this place specifically to protect Harry Potter from the Dark Lord. The enchantments protecting this place are tied to him. To his blood, to be exact. As long as he is within the confines of the orphanage, he is protected - shielded from anyone's eyes, his magic untraceable. And so long as Harry is within the premises, this building's enchantments are in full force. We do not know for how long they will remain in place. If Henry does not return soon, he will be exposed. We will be exposed," Mrs. Figg's voice broke at the end.

"The children..." Hermione mumbled, her hand gripping Draco's.

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner?" Draco said, exasperation creeping into his voice.

"I-I didn't want to alarm you..."

Mr. Figg burst into the room carrying a bunch of papers in his arms. He suspended them all in the air with a wave of his wand. "These two are the most detailed," he said, pointing to two multi-colored hand-drawn maps. "And this is the latest map of Manhattan."

Draco moved forward, his eyes darting between the drawings and the map of Manhattan. "Alright, based on Henry's drawings as compared to the official map, there are only three places left that Hermione and I haven't visited yet - the zoo, the museum of modern art, and the Cathedral. We don't have time to check out all of them. Which of these three will Henry be most comfortable in?" he asked, turning to the Figgs.

"Henry loves art and animals, but he is also very confused right now, so he will need a quiet place...somewhere he could think," Mrs. Figg said.

"It's the Cathedral, then. But it is too far from where we are! A cab will not do...we'd have to apparate" said Hermione as she paced before the Figgs. "We have to think of the other children, first. How many are still in your care right now?"

"Seven, four girls and three boys," replied Mr. Figg.

"You have to leave this place...go somewhere safe. Anyone looking for Henry will not able to hurt you if you're not here. Draco, where are you going?" Hermione shouted after Draco's retreating form.

"To talk to Snape. It's a great risk, but we need Emmet," he threw over his shoulder.

He ran down to the Figgs' bedroom and threw himself in front of the fireplace. He stuck his head inside it and said in a clear voice, "Severus Snape, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts Castle." He felt the swishing of warm air around his face as he was being connected to the Headmaster's Office. After a couple of minutes, he saw the Headmaster looking down at him in surprise.
"Draco! What in Morgana's name are you..."

"We need to know Emmet's address here in Manhattan. I don't have time to explain. Just tell him to send someone over there to let us in," Draco said in a rush.

"What..."

"Please..."

Snape nodded and gave Draco the address, which he quickly memorized.

"Thank you, Professor. I will tell you everything later...Fuck! What was that?" His blood froze when he heard two loud bangs coming from below.

"What's wrong, Draco? Was that an explosion that I heard?" Snape asked, his dark eyes clouded with fear.

"I think they found us, Professor. Fuck me! This is bad! I have to go..." he quickly pulled out of the fireplace and tiptoed to the door. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and slowly snuck out of the room. He could hear voices, people talking to each other downstairs. He could not make out what they were saying, but his instincts told him that they were not friendly. Carefully, he made his way to the guest bedroom. Turning the knob, he gently pushed open the door and slipped noiselessly inside. The room was now pitch black. Afraid that he might give their position away if he accidentally bumped into furniture, he decided to just open his mind and reach out to Hermione.

_Hermione, where are you?_ After a few seconds, Hermione's mind responded.

_Draco! We're here behind the couch. What was that loud noise downstairs? I turned off the lights when I heard it, just to be sure. Are you okay?_

_Yes, I'm okay. Are Mr. and Mrs. Figg with you?_

_Mr. Figg went to get the children. Mrs. Figg is here with me._

_Fuck! Hermione, I think we're all in danger. The enchantments must have come down sooner than the Figgs expected. I already have Emmet's address. Snape will tell him to send someone to wait for us there. We need to go now. Cast a Disillusionment Charm on yourself and Mrs. Figg and walk toward me. I'm here by the door._

_Okay. He listened as Hermione performed the charm. All done. We're moving towards you now._

Within seconds Hermione's hand was fumbling around for him. He grabbed her flailing hand and pulled. He could now feel her breathing next to him.

_Relax, Luv. We can do this._

_I fear for the children. How are we going to leave this place?_

_Ask Mrs. Figg if there's a...secret exit or something...whisper to her, okay?_

_Okay. A few moments' pause as she questioned Mrs. Figg. She says there's a fire exit in the children's room on the third level. It will lead us to a back alley. Stairs are at the far end of the corridor. Turn right when we exit._

_Alright...let's do this. Hold on to me._ Draco said as he rose to his feet. They made their way to the end of the corridor as carefully as they can manage, gingerly taking the stairs one step at a time.
When they finally reached the top, Mrs. Figg broke away from Hermione and ran for the door. She flung it open just in time for Hermione to lift the Disillusionment Charm on her. Draco lifted theirs.

The room was dark, the only illumination was coming from the moon shining through the windows, just enough for them to see. As soon as Mrs. Figg stepped into the room, she opened her arms and called out in a hurried whisper, "My children!"

All at once the children ran towards their House Mother, crying and hugging her at the same time. Mr. Figg was also in tears as he flung his arms around his wife.

"What is going on, Mrs. Figg?" asked the tallest girl in the group.

"We're going on an adventure, okay? Remember the door at the back of the room that I told you never, ever open unless there's an emergency?" Seven heads nodded. "Well, we're going to break that rule tonight. We're opening the door and going down the stairs. But very quietly, okay?"

"Are we playing hide and seek?" a blonde boy of about five asked. Draco couldn't help but think of himself when he was that age. He never played any games with anyone.

"Yes, we are! That's why we have to be very quiet. We don't want to be found just yet, do we?" said Mrs. Figg in a very cheerful, but quiet voice.

"What's our prize if we win?" the blonde boy asked again.

"Uhm..." Mrs. Figg seemed to have run out of answers.

"We get to take a trip to a beautiful house where there are lots and lots of chocolate!" Draco cut in, kneeling down to look at the blonde boy.

"Wow! Really? I like your hair!"

Draco chuckled as he ruffled the young boy's hair. Mrs. Figg beamed at him.

"Right! So, let's go now, shall we?" Draco said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Hermione was smiling sweetly at him.

*Shut up, Hermione.*

Hermione chuckled.

Mr. Figg turned the lock and pushed open the door that led to a metal landing. He then waved his hand at Draco and Hermione. When they were on the landing, Mr. Figg took them aside and whispered, "Take Mrs. Figg and the children. I will try to see what the people downstairs are doing. I will stall them if necessary."

"There's no need for that! We can all go together," Hermione said, not liking what Mr. Figg was saying. Draco was also about to protest when Mr. Figg held up his hand to stop him.

"I knew this would happen sooner or later. I've prepared myself for this. Trust me, I'm not trying to be a hero here. If there's a way for me to leave this place alive, I will. But my wife and the children are the priority now. I will do anything to keep them safe. Just promise me that you will, too," the old wizard said, gripping Draco by the shoulders, his desperate eyes pleading.

Draco could not do anything but nod. "I promise," he said eventually.
"Thank you! Now, go! Go and don't look back, you hear?" Mr. Figg gave them a big smile before he turned to his wife. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. Before he let go, he tilted her face to his and gave her a kiss. Mrs. Figg was now crying in earnest, understanding. Then, Mr. Figg stepped back and disappeared into the darkened room.

"Mrs. Figg, we have to go now!" Hermione said as she led two of the older children, the tall girl and a shorter one, down the stairs. They nodded when Draco whispered something to them. Next, came the blonde boy, followed by two boys and two girls. Draco told Hermione to follow them down the stairs, while he went back for Mrs. Figg.

"Mrs. Figg, please. We have to leave now," he said, extending his hand toward the woman.

"Thank you for doing this for us. Tell Henry that we love him and that he should not be afraid, we will always be with him. Please take care of the children," she said, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You don't have to do this, Mrs. Figg. I'm sure Elphias can take care of himself. He said he would follow us," Draco said, desperate to get away, but not without the older woman.

Mrs. Figg gave him a sad smile and said, "I'm sorry...I can't leave him..."

Before Draco could say anything, she was running back into the room. He wanted to go after her, but Hermione's voice was inside his head.

*Draco, we have to go! The children are getting scared!*

With one backward look, Draco turned towards the stairs and ran down as fast as his feet could carry him.

o-O-o

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine was a truly wondrous structure. Its size alone was impressive - covering an interior area of 11,202 sqm., it was the fourth largest Christian church in the world. Or, so the guide in Henry's hand said. Based on the leaflet, which he had been perusing since early this morning, the Church was built in 1892 and has undergone numerous changes and additions over the years. The nave itself has a length of two football fields combined and can hold up to 5,000 worshippers. It has an eclectic design with Byzantine, Gothic and Romanesque elements. Most notable was the lovely Great Rose Window, which was the largest stained glass window in the country. There were also numerous amazing tapestries, beautiful paintings and magnificent sculptures to please the eye. The Cathedral also has seven Chapels branching off from the central chamber. It is in one of these Chapels that Henry was now seated.

Henry had spent years dreaming of seeing this famed structure for himself. The Figgs made it a point to educate them well and two of the subjects that Henry thoroughly enjoyed were Art and Architecture. That's the reason why he was able to appreciate the architectural and artistic merits of the cathedral. But what Henry really loved about it was the sense of peace and solitude that no other place could give him. And right now, they were the two things that he needed the most.

Leaning back against the hard wooden back of the chair, Henry closed his eyes and sighed. He couldn't hide here forever, he knew that. In fact, he would be forced to leave when the cathedral closes in less than an hour. He had less than an hour to make a decision. He should have done it three days ago, but everything was happening too fast and he felt hemmed in. Honestly, who could have blamed him for bolting when he was slammed in the face with the truth? Who wouldn't have panicked after being told that
an entire world depended on them for its salvation?

A better man than me, Henry concluded bitterly.

All his life, he knew he was different. He felt it in his heart, in his soul. There was something...different...running through his veins. He could do things not even one of his friends could do. At first he thought that he was unusual...strange...weird. He was scared at first, afraid that he would be ridiculed and rejected by his friends. But then, when he started doing things, albeit unintentionally, that made them laugh or smile, the fear lessened. Still...there was that underlying concern that something about him just wasn't...right.

A slight movement behind him caused Henry to open his eyes. Slowly, he turned around in his seat to see what it was and was instantly greeted by the smiling face of a young girl of about 9 or 10 with big, hazel eyes and curly brown hair.

"Hello," she said, waving her hand at him.

Henry smiled and waved back.

"Can I sit beside you?" she asked.

"Uhm...sure, why not," Henry replied, looking around the chapel. The girl jumped to her feet and moved toward where Henry sat. She took the seat to his right.

"My name's Amerlaine, by the way," she said as she extended her hand to Henry.

"Oh, right! I'm Henry," he said, taking her hand and shaking it.

"Are you here by yourself?" Amerlaine asked.

"Yes...what about you?"

"My mom's in the main church, ogling the tapestries again. She loves looking at those. She can spend hours just looking at them, you know," she said, giggling. "Want to see a neat trick?"

"Uhm...sure," Henry said, chuckling. What do you know? An amateur magician like myself!

Amerlaine took out a small plastic turtle from the tiny bag dangling from her shoulder and placed it on her palm and made a fist. Then, she closed her eyes real tight and mumbled some words Henry could not make out. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and smiled. "Hold out your hand, Henry," she said, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

Henry did as he was told. Amerlaine put her small hand over his and opened it. When she removed her hand, Henry gasped. The plastic turtle was alive! Its color had darkened into an olive green and its feet and head were moving as it tried to crawl off of his palm.

"I've always wanted to show that to people other than my parents. But my mom said that I shouldn't because it might scare people away. My dad loves it..."

"Wow! How did you do that?" he blurted before he could stop himself. She eerily reminded him of the time when he turned Sean's bunny slippers into real, live bunnies.

Amerlaine pffted at him and said, "Magic, of course! As if you don't know. I bet you can do something way much better than that."

Henry was speechless! How could this girl know that he knows about real magic? And as if she
could read his mind, too, she patted his hand and gave him a knowing smile. Then she took the turtle from him and put it inside her bag.

"I know you're a wizard, Henry, just like my dad. I felt it the moment I entered this chapel. Your magic is quite strong, you know. It's a special talent, my dad said - my ability to tell between Magicals and No-majes. He's an Auror, you know, my dad, I mean. That's what I'm going to be, too. When I grow up, of course. I have to go to Ilvermorny first, naturally. And...

"Wait! Stop! Stop! I'm...new at this, Amerlaine, so please bear with me. What are Magicals and No-M-majes? I don't understand what you're saying," Henry said with a shy smile.

"New at this? You mean...you didn't know that you're a wizard?" Amerlaine exclaimed.

Henry shook his head and gave her a tentative smile.

"Wow! That is...well..." she paused and narrowed her eyes at Henry as if sizing him up. Then, she shrugged, obviously making up her mind. "All right, listen. Magicals are people with magic in their blood, like witches and wizards and No-Majes or No-Magic are people without magic."

"You said your dad is an Auror? What is that?"

"An Auror is like a...hmm..a policeman! Yes, a policeman. Only he carries a wand and not a gun. Do you have a wand, Henry?"

"Uhm...I'm not sure if it's a real wand," he said.

"Can you do magic with it?"

"Y-yes...I think so," Henry said, thinking of the time that he made Dumbledore's wand fly into his own hand. Henry's gut wrenched at the memory.

"Well, then. It's a real wand, for sure. Can you do magic without it?"

"Uhm...yes...maybe...I'm not really sure," Henry said, raking his fingers through his head, flipping a few strands from his forehead.

"Whoa! What's that on your forehead?" Amerlaine said, squinting up at Henry.

"It's a scar. I've had it since I was a baby, I think," he replied, moving closer to Amerlaine so she could see it better.

"That's amazing! Have you heard of Harry Potter?" she asked, her eyes not leaving Henry's scar. Henry nearly choked at the question. How did she know about that?

"Uh...no," he lied.

"Well, my dad used to tell me all about him. He's a boy who survived a Killing curse from a very, very bad wizard. Daddy said that he had a scar on his forehead, too. And he lives in England. Daddy says that Harry Potter is the Chosen One, the savior of the Wizarding World, whatever that means," she chuckled. "Anyway...mom says it's just a bedtime story because no one can survive the Killing curse especially when done by a Dark wizard."

*Harry Potter, a bedtime story...right.*

"Is your mom...uhm...magical, too?" he asked just to get her mind off the subject of Harry Potter.
"Oh, yes! But she can't do magic. I don't know why. She said it's always been like that. It's a bit
sad, actually. She loves magic, though! And she can sense it when she shakes someone's hand. She
can also tell if you're a good Magical or not," Amerlaine said, fumbling inside her tiny bag.

A Squib! Her mom's a Squib...just like...

Everything seemed to snap into place for Henry and he could not wait to go back to Mr. and Mrs.
Figg. He has finally made his decision.

Just then, a tall, slender woman with the same hair color as Amerlaine's walked inside the chapel,
looking a bit frazzled.

"There you are! I was looking all over for you," she paused when she saw Henry, "I hope you're
not bothering this young man," she said, smiling shyly at Henry.

"Oh, no! She's no bother at all," Henry said, getting up from his seat.

"Mommy! I have loads to tell you," Amerlaine jumped to her feet and grabbed Henry's hand,
dragging him behind her as she ran towards her mother.

"Mom, this is my new friend, Henry," she said when they stopped in front of the woman.

"Hello, Henry, nice to meet you. I'm Mathilda...Mathilda Prescott," Mathilda smiled and extended
her hand to Henry. Her eyes flared just a fraction when Henry shook her hand.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Prescott," he said.

"Oh! Just call me Mathilda," she said with a wave of her hand.

"He's also a wizard, mom," Amerlaine whispered conspiratorially.

Mathilda chuckled softly before saying, "I know. And he's a good wizard, too."

"Bet you didn't know that he's new to magic and that he has a scar the same as the one Harry Potter
has," Amerlaine said, smiling smugly up at her mother.

"Oh! Really? Uhm...No, I didn't know that," Mathilda replied, trying hard not to look like she was
looking at the scar on Henry's forehead. "I-I'm so sorry about Amerlaine. She can be a
bit...obtrusive. I hope she didn't annoy you too much."

"No, she's actually very...informative," Henry said, winking at Amerlaine.

"Is it true that...you're new to magic? Did your abilities manifest rather late?" she asked with
genuine curiosity. Henry did not know how to explain his situation to her.

"Uhm...no. But I was not aware that it was...magic," he said, hoping that Mathilda understood what
he meant. It seemed that she did since she was nodding her head.

"Well, Henry, the Magical community here is really a tightly knit one. We like to keep track of
each other; just in case we need to extend help, especially now that..." she broke off and glanced
nervously around. Henry caught on quickly.

"What do you mean...especially now?" he asked.

Mathilda moved closer and said in a voice that was barely above a whisper, "There have been
rumors about the return of a Dark Wizard from the Wizarding community in Britain. These are
dangerous times, Henry. But I really can't talk about it here now. If you want, you can visit us when my husband's at home. He can explain it much better than I. He works for the MACUSA as an Auror," she said as she took a pen and a piece of paper from her bag. She scribbled on it, folded it and gave it to Henry.

"Come visit us, Henry, so I can show you my other tricks," Amerlaine said with a big grin.

"I'll try, but I really have to get going. My...my folks must be waiting for me now," Henry said in a rush. He pocketed the piece of paper and shook Mathilda's hand again. When he shook Amerlaine's hand, he felt her press something into his palm. Looking down, he saw a small, round mirror.

"It's a magic mirror. Call to me when you want to talk," she said, giggling.

"Uhm...okay. T-thanks!" Henry said, not really understanding.

"We'll also be going now. The church will be closing in a few minutes anyway," Mathilda said.

"Great! Henry can walk out the church with us," Amerlaine said as she took Henry's hand and led the way out of the Cathedral.

When they were outside, Amerlaine reluctantly let go of Henry's hand and blew him a kiss before waving goodbye. Henry blushed. As soon as the mother and daughter pair got on the bus, Henry turned around and walked in the opposite direction. It would take him about forty-five minutes to get to St. Milburga's if he took the short-cut that he discovered in Central Park just the night before. He didn't realize that he had gone so far from home.

His stomach started to rumble at the thought of home. He hadn't had a decent meal for three days, living mostly on hotdogs and chips, and he was now eager to tuck into some scrumptious shepherd's pie that Mrs. Figg cooked to perfection. Mr. Figg had been giving him weekly allowances ever since he turned eighteen which he judiciously kept locked up in his locker. Thankfully, he had not yet stashed away the last one that had been given him so he had a couple of bills and some coins in his pocket when he ran out of the orphanage, otherwise, he would have ended up scavenging for his daily meal.

As he walked down the streets of Manhattan, his mind went over his baffling encounter with Amerlaine and her mom. He could not get over the fact that there was an actual Wizarding community right under his very nose. A shard of hurt slashed through him again as the feeling of being cheated out of his true heritage returned. If he had been brought up knowing who and what he really was, he would have become much more adept at wielding magic. He could have been a part of that secret community of wizards and witches. He could have learned more about magic, about the Magical world, about his parents, and about himself.

It also hurt to know that his existence, or the real him - Harry Potter, had been dismissed offhand as nothing more than a bedtime story! Mr. and Mrs. Figg told him that it was for his own protection...because of the Prophecy...because he was the Prophecy. But what was the Prophecy all about? And why did they not trust him enough to tell it to him?

He took three, long and deep breaths to calm himself. He did not want to have an 'episode' right here in the middle of Central Park. He will get his answers soon enough. And he will not stop until they tell him EVERYTHING! He willed himself to stop thinking and just soaked in the nice, crisp night air of the park and its accompanying sounds. Before long, he was rounding the corner and bending under the break in the wall that opened up to the sidewalk that was right across St. Milburga's.
The moment he stepped on the curb and glanced up at the only place he ever called home, he knew that something wasn't right. He crossed the street cautiously, turning his head from left to right not only out of habit, but because he could feel the heavy cloud of doom floating closer, almost settling down on him. When he set his foot on the first stone step, two things happened at the same time. Two loud cracks and a blood-curdling scream slashed across the still air. Rushing through the rest of the steps, he flung the black double-doors and ran into the dark receiving area. The sight that greeted him was something right out of the crime novels that he used to read. It was an execution scene, but instead of guns, the executioners were holding wands.

*These are dangerous times, Henry.* Mathilda's voice seemed to echo inside his brain.

Four men in black hooded cloaks, their faces covered with painted masks, were spread around the room, wands pointed at the kneeling figure of Mrs. Figg. Even in the darkness, Henry could see the bruises on her face and the pure terror in her eyes as she stared at the writhing figure of Mr. Figg on the ground. A fifth man was standing near Mr. Figg, laughing maniacally as he watched the old man foam at the mouth and convulse sporadically. Henry wanted to scream, but his throat had closed up, his body paralyzed by the incomprehensible horror before him.

One of the men pulled at Mrs. Figg's hair, his wand pointed at her throat. "Tell us who you were hiding in this place. Why was this rundown hovel so heavily protected by magic?"

"He said that this was an orphanage, but we didn't find any children anywhere," the one on Mrs. Figg's left was saying. "Where are the children, Squib?" He snarled pulling harder at her hair. Mrs. Figg whimpered.

The man torturing Mr. Figg sneered then pointed his wand at the old man again. A red light flashed from it and connected with Mr. Figg, sending him into another bout of thrashing and spitting. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, blood seeping from his nostrils and lips. Mrs. Figg screamed again.

The man on her left slapped her hard across the face as the other man continued to send those red flashes at Mr. Figg.

"Shut up! Just tell us what we want to know!" Another flash of red light and Mr. Figg was crawling on the floor, retching as convulsions wracked his body.

"STOP IT! STOP IT!"

Six sets of eyes swiveled to where Henry stood. Two wands were also now pointed in his direction. It was only then that he realized that he had left his perch from behind the column. Mrs. Figg's face turned deathly pale.

"Henry! Run! Run!" she shrieked.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here," the heavy-set man nearest Henry said. "Who are you, boy? Are you the son of these two useless fools here?"

"Perhaps he knows where the children are. Ask him," another one of the hooded figures said.

The man standing beside Mr. Figg kicked the old man. "Is that your son? Maybe I should try my hand on him, eh?"

When Mr. Figg did not respond, another red flash from the man's wand caused him to writhe and twist, his fingers clawing at the wooden floor.
"I SAID STOP IT!" Henry shouted. His body felt like it was on fire, his fingers twitching as he tried to control the building rage inside him. There was something clawing at the pit of stomach, inching upward, wriggling into the pores of his skin...

"Oh-ho-ho! We have a spunky one here, Rowle. Why don't you practice the Killing curse on him. I hear you're in sore need of it," the one on Harry's right laughed.

"Fuck you, Avery! If you don't shut up I'll practice on you!" Rowle, who turned out to be the man torturing Mr. Figg, snarled, his head whipping toward Avery.

The other hooded figures, except for the one standing a few feet to Henry's left, snickered. Henry had the distinct sensation that the man was intently watching him.

"Henry, please go! Leave us and don't come back!" Mrs. Figg pleaded, earning her another backhanded slap from the man holding her by the hair. "I told you to shut up!"

"Let's kill them all so we can get out of here. This is a waste of time," Avery said.

"Wait! Take a look at the boy, doesn't he look familiar? He looks like someone we used to know, doesn't he?" the one to his left, the one who had been silent this whole time said. The other wizards followed his lead, their masked faces fixated now on Henry's.

"Fuck me...he does look a lot like James Potter, eh?"

The Silent One waved his wand and Henry felt the hairs on his forehead lifting.

A collective gasp broke the silence then, all wands were instantly pointing at him.

"Well, well, well...if it isn't the Chosen One himself," Rowle snarled.

"We're done here," the Silent One said as he waved his wand again. Henry felt what seemed like invisible cords lashing around his torso, pinning his arms to his sides, immobilizing him.

"Dispose of those two. We have no use for them anymore. It appears that we have found what we have come for. We're leaving now," the Silent One said again.

Rowle pointed his wand at the now unconscious Mr. Figg and said something that Henry could not understand. A flash of green light surged from his wand and hit Mr. Figg with such force that it made his body bounce on the floor like a grotesque ragdoll. Mrs. Figg let out a bloodcurdling screech, her hands reaching out for her dead husband.

The man holding her pointed his own wand at the distraught Mrs. Figg and uttered the two words that Henry will never, ever forget - "Avada Kedavra!" The stream of green light that came from the man's wand hit her squarely in the face and Mrs. Figg fell on the floor spread eagle, head twisted in an unnatural angle, the eyes that were staring at Henry just a few minutes ago now woefully blank and devoid of life.

"MRS. FIGG! DAMN YOU ALL!" Henry screamed and the creature rearing from within finally burst forth from the pit of his innermost being; raging, stampeding, breaking through every pore of his body, setting every nerve ending aflame, bathing his skin in a blinding white light which exploded in a tidal wave of fury and pure, unadulterated hatred. It shattered the unseen bonds around his body and the last remnants of his personal restraints, both physical and mental.

The sheer force of Henry's wrath shook the building to its rafters, burning everything in its path, eating away at the very air that had grown heated and volatile.
And when the dust had finally settled, only one man was left standing.

The man fell on his knees, barely able to open his eyes, barely breathing, totally spent.

The last thing he saw before wearily giving in to the darkness that was swiftly pulling him down its sweet embrace was a pair of blue eyes and a soft voice calling him by a name he was given at birth but cannot bring himself to accept just yet.

HARRY.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So? How was it? Please let me know. I'm looking forward to hearing from you all. Again thanks for reading!
A/N: Hey, guys! So sorry for the long interval between chapters. I could've posted this one at an earlier date, but I didn't like how it turned out so I had to scrap about half of it and do a rewrite. I hope this comes out better and that you enjoy it.

So, in this chapter, we're finally going to get a glimpse of the Dark Lord himself and some members of the Order. It might feel like just a filler chapter in a way, but I feel it's necessary to establish where this story will soon be heading.

Warning: The ending's sooo cliche! Hope you like it anyway :)

The silence in the room was deafening. And if not for the frantic beating of his heart, Lucius would have thought that he had actually gone deaf. It was eerie, but it was to be expected. No one dared breathe while the Dark Lord was expressing his disappointment. The sorry figure on the floor had stopped writhing; the only evidence that it still lived was the intermittent twitching of its limbs.

The Dark Lord turned to Lucius, his pale face expressionless. "Get him out of here, Lucius. Give him time to recover. When he regains command of his faculties, question him again," he said.

It took a moment for the words to sink in and Lucius almost kicked himself for showing the Dark Lord that his actions still affected him. When he recovered from his lapse, anger nearly overwhelmed him. He must never show weakness! Especially not to this sadistic maniac in front of him. Whipping his head to the side, he caught sight of two gaping, young Death Eaters.

"You two," he said, pointing to the young men, "take this trash to the dungeons."

The men scrambled toward the unconscious figure on the floor, hauled him up and rushed out of the room without even glancing at Lucius or the Dark Lord. Lucius grimaced as the trio left a trail of blood on his pristine marble floors. He waved his wand and vanished the grim reminder of the day's events. Still, the stench of blood clung to the air like a death shroud.

"Now, that made me hungry! Let's eat, shall we? I can't wait to sample the exquisite cooking of your House Elves, Lucius," the Dark Lord laughed as he moved toward the head of the long dining table. He took his seat with a flourish and sat back, rubbing his hands together in almost childlike glee and anticipation.

Lucius felt sick to his stomach. How could this man think of food after what he had just done? Well, perhaps because he was less of a man and more of a monster, Lucius scoffed inside. He mentally slapped himself and hurriedly closed his mind. It wouldn't help to harbor such thoughts whilst in the presence of one of the most accomplished Legilimens he had ever encountered.

Carefully reining in his wayward musings, Lucius focused his attention instead on the other lower-ranking members of the Dark Lord's army who were still hovering around; all looking unnerved and anxious.
"You may go now," he said with a lazy wave of his hand. There was an almost inaudible sigh of relief as the cloaked figures hastily withdrew from the room.

The rest of them - Voldemort's 'Inner Circle' - Adolphus Nott, Randall Crabbe, Ormond Goyle, the Lestrange brothers - Rodolphus and Rabastan, Pollock Avery, Antonin Dolohov, and Thorfin Rowle, took their pre-assigned seats. Lucius was, of course, seated at the right-hand side of the Dark Lord. The seat directly across him, reserved for Severus Snape, was currently empty. Two other seats normally taken by Corban Yaxley and Bellatrix Lestrange were also devoid of their occupants, most likely out on separate assignments for the Dark Lord. Voldemort never trusted his followers with the whole picture, assigning them instead into separate work cells, not one really knowing what the others were doing. Even Lucius was not privy to all of the Dark Lord's plans, just those that he was entrusted with - which were usually the most important and critical of all - those that have a direct impact on their Lord's larger plan.

"Lucius, will Severus be joining us tonight?" Voldemort asked, leaning back in his chair. His relaxed posture belied the tension that Lucius glimpsed in the Dark Lord's eyes. Lucius knew that the Dark Lord was itching to grill Snape about the Mudblood students of Hogwarts.

Before Lucius could reply, however, the Headmaster of Hogwarts was already sweeping into the room, his dark cloak billowing behind him.

"Apologies, my Lord, for my tardiness. I was held up," Snape said, kneeling beside the seated Voldemort, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"Look at me, Severus," the Dark Lord breathed. Snape complied, locking eyes with Voldemort. Apparently satisfied with what he'd seen, the Dark Lord tapped Snape on the shoulder and gave him a big, wide smile. "Well, take your seat, Severus. We're just about to be treated to another sumptuous dinner by our kind host here."

Snape glanced at Lucius as he rose to his feet. They exchanged sneers.

Once Snape was seated, Lucius clapped his hands and six House Elves came in bearing heavily-laden platters of food. They disappeared with a loud crack after everything was laid out in perfect order on the table. They re-appeared carrying several bottles of Superior Red, pouring them into the crystal goblets sitting on the right side of each guest placement.

Lucius lifted his and said, "To Lord Voldemort."

Goblets were raised, toasting the Dark Lord who acknowledged it with a nod of his dark head.

Voldemort sniffed the blood-red liquid before taking a dainty sip. "Mmhmm...brewed to perfection as always, Lucius," he said, raising his goblet to toast his host.

"Thank you, my Lord. I've always considered it the best product of the Malfoy Apothecaries," Lucius replied, returning the toast.

The following minutes were spent in silence as everyone partook of the scrumptious assortment of foods from the famous Malfoy kitchens. There were salads, thick pumpkin soup, buttered veggies, various roasted meats, and an extensive selection of puddings.

"So, Severus, how is Hogwarts doing?" Voldemort asked as he sliced through a thick slab of lamb smothered with gravy.

"Quite well, my Lord. Thank you for asking," Snape replied, his eyes darting to Nott Sr. The man seemed to take no notice, very much occupied with his dinner.
"Lucius told me that one of the Muggle-borns was not able to come to the Registration. Why is that?" Voldemort paused and skewered Snape with a penetrating gaze.

"Yes, my Lord. She was taken ill by a nasty case of Dragonpox," Snape replied.

Randall Crabbe choked and nearly splattered Pollock Avery with his drink.

"Watch it, Crabbe! I just had this made," Pollock snarled, brushing the sleeve of his exquisite dark, silk robe in irritation.

"S-sorry, Pollock! I-I didn't mean to," Randall stuttered with a wince.

"Dragonpox? I didn't know that anyone could still contract such a disease," Rabastan said.

"Oh, believe me, it really was Dragonpox. I saw it for myself. A very nasty case of it, too! If the girl wasn't a filthy Mudblood I would have found it my heart to take pity on her," Adolphus Nott interceded, nodding at Snape.

If you even had a heart, Lucius wanted to say.

"Well, then. She can register as soon as she's fully recovered. Lucius will accommodate her. Wouldn't you, Lucius?" the Dark Lord said, turning to Lucius.

"As you please, my Lord. I will make it a point to clear my schedule for her," Lucius replied.

"Oh, no need for that, Lucius. I know you're a busy man. I don't want to trouble you that much. She's just another filthy Mudblood, after all," Voldemort said with a mirthless grin.

"It would be no trouble, my Lord. Actually, I'm quite intrigued by the girl and I would very much like to meet her in person."

Voldemort raised his eyebrows at Lucius, unable to hide his own surprise.

"Really? I didn't know you're into young girls now, Lucius," Voldemort said, smirking maliciously.

Lucius felt his cheeks burn up at the quiet snickers from the table. With a forced laugh, he replied, "Oh, no, my Lord. Even if I were into such an interesting...(perversion, he almost said)...ah, diversion...I still would not sully myself with such filth. It's just because I've read her file and had heard stories about her from my son, Draco. They're both in the same year at Hogwarts."

"Ah! I see. That explains it then," Voldemort leaned in and whispered to Lucius, "But still, I recommend that you not limit yourself too much, Lucius. Mudbloods can be quite...entertaining and enjoyable; especially the young, virginal ones. They are quite easy to...persuade to do things you would never even dream of asking a Pureblood wife. You don't know what you're missing, my friend. Their screams are enough to make you forget that they're filthy," Voldemort finished with a chuckle, his dark eyes glinting with malice.

He could not tell if the temperature in the room had dropped dramatically or what, but Lucius felt goosebumps suddenly crawling up his arms. There were times when this man could really creep him out. Torturing their enemies, or even their wayward followers, for information, punishment, or leverage, he could tolerate and even participate in. But doing it for fun or for sexual gratification? He could confidently say that he hadn't gone down that path, yet. Nor did he intend to do so.

Of course, he could not let the Dark Lord know that so, he swallowed the bile in his throat and laughed along with him. It took him two, large gulps of wine to steady himself again.
"So, what else can you tell me about the Mudbloods? Have you found anyone worthy enough to serve our cause?" asked Voldemort.

"Yes, indeed, my Lord. I have actually found a few promising prospects," Lucius replied, relieved that the Dark Lord had reverted to his normal, politically scheming self.

"All students of Hogwarts, I suppose?"

"Not all of them, my Lord. But the most encouraging ones are. There's one that is particularly interesting, a boy from a very rich and influential Muggle family, close to royalty in their world, actually. He's already under further...evaluation," Lucius said, his eyes involuntarily going to Snape. The Headmaster seemed uninterested in their exchange as he was currently in a serious discussion with Pollock Avery.

"Splendid! Severus, did you hear that?" the Dark Lord said, turning to Snape, who immediately disengaged himself from his dialogue with Avery.

"Forgive me, my Lord. I had not been listening. Pollock and I were discussing the possibility of marketing Wolfsbane. It seems that there's a sudden clamor for the potion," Snape replied.

"Yes, I've heard about that. Someone must really get that Greyback in stocks. He's becoming more of a nuisance than an effective tool. What's the point of having the whole world under my thumb if everyone's been turned into an animal, eh?" the Dark Lord spat as he skewered a piece of steak. "Lucius, tell Bellatrix to rein in that pet of hers or else I will be forced to destroy it."

"Yes, my Lord," said Lucius. He never really did care for that half-breed. If it were up to him, Greyback would be incinerated faster than anyone could say 'werewolf'.

"Lucius was telling me that he found a very promising candidate for the position of apprentice amongst your students, Severus. You should be proud of yourself, you know. It was a brilliant move - letting the Mudbloods into Hogwarts. If I didn't know better, I'd say you've been planning this all along," Voldemort said, leaning back in his chair as he watched Snape's reaction.

"You give me too much credit, my Lord. You're the one who had found it prudent to keep an eye on the Mudbloods. And what better way to do it than put them in a school that we can control?" Snape said. The Dark Lord laughed and clapped Snape on the shoulder.

"A brilliant move on our part, if I may say so! And now, we're about to reap the rewards of our benevolence to these filthy creatures," the Dark Lord sneered as he took a swig of wine.

"If I may ask, my Lord? Who amongst my students had been chosen for the prestigious honor of training for an apprenticeship?" Snape asked. The Dark Lord turned to Lucius with raised brows.

"I haven't decided on the others, yet. But your student in seventh-year, James Toffler, will surely be on the top of my list of new apprentices," Lucius said, sneering at the word 'apprentices'. The students would be nothing more than slaves; trained to do as commanded - disposable soldiers. As he looked at Snape, Lucius could have sworn that something flashed in the Headmaster's eyes. However, it was gone in an instant and Lucius decided that it was probably just a trick of the light.

"Ah, yes. James Toffler is one of Hogwarts' best students. He also comes from a prominent Muggle family; father's a doctor, mother's a lawyer. Quite gifted, too, when it comes to wielding magic. I'd say he's a very logical choice," Snape said.

"I'm glad you agree with me, Severus," Lucius said. The Headmaster nodded in return, his face devoid of emotion.
"Will the others be sent back to Hogwarts, then, my Lord? The ones who did not make the cut?" Snape asked, turning to Voldemort whilst taking a sip from his goblet.

The Dark Lord gave a low chuckle as his eyes turned to the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Why, Severus, I do think you're growing a soft spot for your Mudbloods!"

Lucius smirked when Snape nearly choked on his wine. Foolish move, Sev, he thought. Careful you don't slip, my slithery friend.

"I couldn't care less what happens to those anomalies of nature, my Lord. But as you're well aware, the Muggle-born Registration in itself has garnered much criticism and is now being used by our opponents to rally support. I'd hate to think what they would do if word gets out that underage witches and wizards are continually being held against their will in the Minister of Magic's dungeons no less," Snape sighed, "My Lord, I'm merely looking after the reputation of the Ministry...and by extension, yours, of course. We wouldn't want to add more fuel to the pathetic crusade of the Order, do we? Plus, I don't want to impose upon Minister Malfoy's hospitality longer than necessary,"

Voldemort seemed to contemplate Snape's words. Then, he shrugged and returned to slicing his steak. "You've got a point there, Severus. Very well, send the useless ones back to Hogwarts, Lucius. No need to sully your home with their presence any further."

"As you wish, my Lord," Lucius replied, sending an icy glare in Snape's direction. The Hogwarts Headmaster reciprocated in kind.

The next hour was spent enjoying their meal whilst discussing mundane matters. After which, Lucius led his guests to the Drawing Room to let them sample his wide collection of brandies and imported cigars. Whilst the Dark Lord went over his other plans for the Muggle-born 'apprentices' with Lucius and Snape, the rest of the party were left to while away their time in useless chitchat. The atmosphere was, if not pleasant, then at least not unpleasant - a rarity in their clique. The quiet interlude, however, was brutally shattered when shouts from without rang in the air. Lucius was just getting up to investigate the commotion when two badly burned figures burst through the door and fell on the floor.

"Merlin! Who is that?" yelped Randall Crabbe.

Rabastan Lestrange cautiously moved toward the nearest inert body. He went down on one knee and poked it with his wand. His effort was rewarded with a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a whimper.

"Turn him over, man! Let's see who he is!" cried Nott.

Lucius saw the other cloaked figure moving, trying desperately to rise. He was about to rush to the man's side but Snape beat him to it. As the Headmaster of Hogwarts helped the injured man to turn over and lie on his back, a collective gasp came from the rest of the group. It was Thorfin Rowle, Jr. His father pushed past the other men and dived to his son's side, clutching his badly burned hands.

"What happened to you, son? Who did this to you?" Rowle Sr. screamed.

The younger man tried to speak, his lips soundlessly. Tears ran down his cheeks as he continued to mouth silent words.

The Dark Lord moved toward Rowle, Jr. and glanced at Snape, a subtle message exchanged
between the two. Snape pointed his wand at the boy and muttered an incantation under his breath. Thorfin Jr. whimpered, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. Then, he collapsed in his father's arms.

"Junior? Fuck's sake, wake up, boy! Junior, open your eyes! Severus, what did you do to him?" the elder Rowle howled at a frowning Snape.

"Oh, shut up, Rowle! I just put your son in a deep sleep so you can take him to St. Mungo's," Snape spat at Rowle.

"You should be grateful that I am in a merciful mood tonight, Rowle. Your son's incompetence deserves nothing but death. If he ever pulls through, I do not want him within a mile of me, you understand? I'm revoking all his rights and privileges as a Death Eater. Now, get him out of here before I change my mind," the Dark Lord said, his dark eyes blazing at the cowering, broken man.

"T-thank y-you, my L-lord," he stuttered, struggling to lift his unconscious son upright.

Lucius pointed to Crabbe and Goyle, "Help him, you fools! Put those muscles to good use for once!" The two quickly did as told, not wanting to catch the Dark Lord's or Lucius' ire. As the quartet shuffled out of the room, Lucius felt a gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach. What if that was Draco? He and his son may not have the perfect relationship, but Draco was still his offspring, flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood - his only child and heir. How would he have felt had it been Draco who had been dismissed just like that by this spawn of evil standing beside him?

Get a grip, you imbecile! Now is not the time to dwell on such matters, he castigated himself. Brusquely brushing his moment of weakness aside, Lucius focused his attention on the other badly burned Death Eater instead.

Rabastan was now helping the injured man to sit up. As he did so, the hood fell back to reveal his mangled face. In spite of the peeling flesh and non-existent brows, he was still recognizable. It was Yaxley.

Avery gasped when he seemed to have realized something. He rushed to the front and kneeled before his longtime friend. "Corban, where's my son? Where's Cedrick?" he asked in a quivering voice.

Yaxley held out a trembling hand to Pollock. Avery gazed at the burnt hand with revulsion but took it gingerly into his own just the same.

"I-I d-don't k-know if he...survived. Junior...Junior and I...barely m-made i-it...out of there," Yaxley rasped, grimacing at each word.

"Who did this to you, Yaxley?" the Dark Lord asked in an eerily quiet voice.

Yaxley shuddered as he tried to rise from the floor, his wild eyes radiating fear and something akin to excitement at the same time. He swallowed hard and said, "I-it was him, my Lord! I saw him with my own two eyes! He lives! The boy lives!"

Lucius noticed the abrupt change in the Dark Lord's demeanor. His body stood ramrod-straight, but his hands were twitching at his sides. When Lucius glanced at their leader, an unwelcome tremble slithered down his spine. The Dark Lord's pupils had turned a brilliant red as his pale face contorted into a mask of utter disgust and hatred, his lips pulled back in a macabre sneer. It was the face of evil.

"Who lives, Yaxley?" Snape quietly asked, inadvertently giving voice to the one question that was
itching at the back of their throats.

Yaxley closed his eyes and said in a voice that could barely be heard, "HARRY POTTER."

o-O-o

"I don't think this is a good idea, Blaise," Ginny said, lazily stretching her arms above her head. The man beside her chuckled as his hand slid under her shirt.

"Hmmm...you weren't complaining earlier," he said, nuzzling her neck.

"Stop it! You're changing the topic," Ginny tried to push Blaise's hand away, but he was doing something so wonderful to her neck that she couldn't help but lean back against his broad, warm chest.

"Do you really want me to stop?" Blaise whispered into her ear, his tongue flicking at its lobe.

Ginny sighed and reached up, entangling her fingers in Blaise's soft curls. "Oh, Merlin! Please don't...you'd kill me if you do!"

Blaise chuckled again and started trailing soft kisses down the column of her neck, his fingers tracing lazy circles on the velvety soft skin of her abdomen. His other hand was also now under Ginny's shirt, moving up to cup her lacy bra. Ginny squirmed under his touch, leaning further back into him. Blaise responded by pressing against her, showing her irrefutable proof of his arousal. It was now Ginny's turn to chuckle.

"Oh, Merlin, Blaise...is that your wand or are you just excited to see me?" she snickered. She'd always wanted to say that line, no matter how corny it sounded. The man behind her growled and nipped her neck. She pulled his hair in retaliation.

"Ow! That hurt, Ginevra!" Blaise cried, tugging Ginny's hand away from his hair. Unfortunately, her fingers got tangled in his curls so he ended up losing a few strands when he did.

Ginny quickly sat up and turned to Blaise, a look of horror dawning on her face.

"Bollocks! I'm so sorry, Blaise! I didn't mean to!" she gasped.

"Damn, woman! Are you trying to scalp me? I'd probably end up bald within a month if you keep up with that!" Blaise complained, rubbing the spot where Ginny's fingers were.

If the situation hadn't been a tad awkward, Ginny would have been horrified by what she had done. But seeing Blaise looking so put out and glancing menacingly at the strands of hair still trapped in her fingers made her burst into laughter.

"I'm really sorry, Blaise! Here you can have them back," she giggled, thrusting the strands of dark hair at Blaise.

Blaise swatted her hand away with a glare. "Ha-ha. Not funny Weaslette," he sniped, "By the way, thanks for the bald spot, she-cat!"

Ginny guffawed shamelessly, clapping her hands together in obvious glee. Blaise rolled his eyes at the antics of his girlfriend. He snatched one of his pillows and threw it in her face. Something he should not have done as he belatedly realized after seeing the ferocious gleam in the redhead girl's eyes.
"Oh, no, tell me didn't do that, Blaise Zabini," she growled. Growing up with six brothers did not make her meek. On the contrary, it made her just as combative as any full-blooded male. Copying her boyfriend's move, and even improving on it, Ginny threw not only one pillow but three in quick succession. Seeing that Blaise was temporarily incapacitated by the pillows, Ginny wasted no time in jumping on top of him and pummeling him with another one. Blaise tried hard to dislodge the laughing hyena on top of him but to no avail. And had they not been interrupted, Blaise was sure that he would've either died from excessive laughing or from suffocation.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?"

They both froze and slowly turned toward the source of the sound. Ginny quickly scrambled from her perch, her cheeks flaming redder than her hair as she averted the glaring looks that a thoroughly annoyed Theodore Nott was giving them. Blaise huffed and cursed, dismayed that their rowdy interlude was abruptly cut short by his tactless roommate.

"What does it look like, Nott? Can't you see that I'm having fun with my girl?" he spat.

"You call being straddled and almost suffocated by a ton of pillows fun? You really need to have your head examined, mate," Theo scoffed.

"What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were off to see Longbottom?" Blaise asked, sitting up. He pulled a still blushing Ginny into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

"Oh, right!" Theo said as if remembering the real reason why he was there. "Well, Neville actually sent me to get you. I told him about what I told you and he wants to talk it over with you."

Blaise felt Ginny's questioning look before he even saw it.

"What is he talking about?" she asked.

He sighed and turned to the inquisitive redhead. "I think we better just go see Neville. I'll tell you all about it when we get there," he said, swinging his legs to the side of the bed. He stood and turned to Ginny to help her to her feet. Ginny scowled but took his hand without complaint. They then followed Theo to a deserted classroom on the third floor where they found Neville and Luna reading an upside-down magazine together. They both looked up when they heard the door squeak open.

"Hey! Glad you could make it," Neville said, smiling. He whispered something to Luna which made the young witch close her magazine and stash it back inside her bag.

"Okay, now that we're all here, you owe me an explanation, Zabini," Ginny said as they pulled out chairs to sit on. Blaise grimaced at the demanding tone of his girlfriend.

"Alright! Let me have a seat first, please?" he retorted. Ginny smirked at him.

"Actually...I think it's better if Theo tells you all about it," Blaise said, clapping Theo on the back.

"WHAT? Damn it, Zabini! How many times do I have to repeat this blasted story? Why didn't you just tell her while you were being smothered?" Theo grumbled.

Blaise quirked an eyebrow and chuckled, "Well...it's better coming from you. First-hand info and all that. Besides, I wouldn't want to leave anything out."

Theo sighed, resigned to his fate. "Fine! Listen, Weaslette and listen well. I'm not going to repeat what I'm going to tell you, okay?"
Ginny pouted, she obviously did not like being called Weaslette. "I'm listening, Nott."

"Okay. So...remember what Snape said about Hermione being unable to go to the Muggle-born Registration because she had Dragonpox? That's the reason that he gave the Ministry, wasn't it? Well, yesterday I found out that it was a big, fat lie," Theo said with emphasis on the last three words.

"W-what? What do you mean by that?" Ginny asked.

"As you already know, since I sent you all a message through this (points at his crystal pendant), yesterday, my father came here on an errand for the Minister of Magic. Apparently, Lucius wasn't buying Headmaster Snape's excuse regarding Granger's absence so he sent my father to verify it. I'll bet you my entire collection of Chocolate Frog cards that he volunteered himself...but that's beside the point. The fact is, I saw something strange things when we visited 'Granger' at the Infirmary. Luna, what color are Granger's eyes?" Theo said, turning to Luna.

"Well...it depends on her mood...or the lighting," she said in her usual dreamy voice.

Theo rolled his eyes, "Generally speaking, Luna."

"Oh! Then they're usually brown," she chirped happily.

"Exactly! That's what I thought! But, lo and behold! When the 'Granger' who was allegedly recuperating in the hospital wing opened her eyes...they were not brown, but green!" Theo exclaimed.

"What? How could they be green? Does Dragonpox do that to its victims?" asked Ginny.

"I wondered about that, too! So, I went to the library and did some digging. There's never been a case where Dragonpox affected the stricken person's eyes! If the change in her eye color was due to Dragonpox, then this would be a first," said Theo, leaning back in his chair with a smug look.

"Tell her about the the...other thing that you noticed, Theo," suggested Neville.

"Right! How tall do you think Granger is? 5'2"? 5'4"? No need to be accurate, just take a guess," Theo said, grinning.

"Hmm...I'd say around 5'4". She's just a couple of inches shorter than I am and I'm 5'6"," Ginny said.

"And how long, do you think are the beds at the Infirmary? 6 or 7 feet?"

"Around six, I think. George used to complain about them whenever he had to stay overnight due to Quidditch injuries. He used to say that they were designed for midgets."

"So, a 5'4" witch in a 6-foot bed would have just a few inches legroom left, wouldn't you think?"

"Yes...but what does it have to do with Hermione, Theo?" groused Ginny.

"Because my dear Gryfette, the 'Granger' staying in the Infirmary was much shorter than 5'4"," Theo said with a triumphant gleam in his eyes.

Ginny frowned. "I still don't get it. How could you tell that she was much shorter than Hermione? Did you get a measuring tape to confirm your theory?"

"I didn't have to. I saw her feet moving. And they didn't reach even halfway down the bed. It
clearly wasn't her! Either that or Dragonpox also has the ability to shrink its victims," Theo said.

"It was a House Elf," Luna piped in. Ginny's and Blaise's jaws dropped to the floor.

"WHAT? What are you talking about, Luna?" asked Blaise.

"Luna, Theo and I were discussing earlier the possibility of Prof. Snape posting a fake Hermione in the Infirmary to cover up her disappearance. And based on Theo's description of the impostor, we concluded that Snape probably enchanted one of Hogwarts' House-elves to look like her," Neville explained.

"And inflicted it with Dragonpox? That is so mean!" Ginny grimaced, disgusted by the thought.

"Oh, no! We're quite sure that it was also just cosmetic. Snape wouldn't do that to the poor creature. You know how he is about treating them with respect. I'll bet you a ton of Gillyweed that the Elf volunteered for the task, too," Neville winked.

"But what about your father, Theo? Didn't he notice anything?" Ginny asked.

Theo laughed. "My father, bless him, was in one of his rare trusting moods yesterday. He asked for my opinion and I gave it without batting an eye. I told him that the 'girl' lying there with green skin covered in disgusting red pustules was indeed Hermione Granger and he readily believed me. Besides, he couldn't stand the rancid smell coming from the tent, so he left as soon as he could."

"That was probably the Mimbulus Mimbletonia. Snape asked me for a few cuttings just the other day. I really thought that he was getting interested in exotic foliage. Smart man," Neville laughed, shaking his head in clear admiration of the Headmaster's cunning. Few people could stand the stench coming from the stinksap of the cactus-like plant. It would've driven even a fearless Death Eater away.

"If that Granger in the Infirmary is not the real Hermione, then where is she?" Ginny asked.

"That's what we'd like to discuss with you. Luna and I have been throwing around a couple of theories," Neville said, turning to smile at Luna.

"Well, let's hear them," Theo said. "I've been entertaining a few of my own, too."

"What if she was taken from the train - kidnapped by some Death Eater?" Neville said.

Theo shook his head. "I doubt that. Why would Lucius send my father here if he already knew where she was?"

Neville's face fell. "Right...he wouldn't have," he mumbled.

"But what if Lucius didn't know? What if it was a rogue Death Eater trying to make a name for himself?" said Ginny. Neville and Luna were nodding in agreement.


Suddenly, Blaise was laughing; causing four pairs of eyes to look at him like he had grown a second head or an extra arm.

"Care to share what it is that you find so funny, Zabini?" asked Theo.

"I'm sorry! I just realized how brilliant Snape truly is!"
"Well...tell us, Blaise! We're hanging on your every word," Ginny snapped.

"Look...before I tell you, we need to agree on something first, alright?"

"It depends on what we would have to agree on, Zabini," Neville said with a smirk.

"I need you all to promise me that this doesn't leave this room. It could put a few people in danger if this ever goes out. And we need to do a little sleuthing of our own to confirm my theory," Blaise said.

"Alright! Alright! Tell us already!" Ginny grumbled, impatience written on her face.

Blaise took a deep breath before plunging ahead. "I think I know where the real Hermione is," he paused, searching his audience's faces. "She's been here in Hogwarts all along, right under our noses - hiding in plain sight!"

"I-I don't understand. How could she be 'hiding in plain sight', Blaise? It's not as if Granger's been living under a rock for six years, mate. In case you haven't noticed, she's quite popular around here," Theo smirked, confident that he had just shot down Blaise's ridiculous theory.

"Right! She's just the freaking Head Girl, for crying out loud. She's very recognizable, too. Damn, that hair alone would give her away!" exclaimed Ginny.

"Unless she changed it," said Luna in her typical airy voice.

Ginny and Theo had to scrape up their jaws from the floor. Strangely, both Neville and Blaise were nodding, knowing smiles painted on their lips.

"Crap! Of course! She could be running around in disguise!" Ginny said, clapping her hands to her mouth.

Theo stared at all of them with blank eyes then gasped.

"Oh, fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Theo said as he thumped on his temples with his fists.

"Whoa! What's gotten into you, mate?" Blaise cried, pulling Theo's arms down.

"Bloody hell! Why didn't I think of that? I'm such a moron!" Theo cried, slumping back in his seat. He sighed and leaned his arms forward on his knees. "Remember what I told you about Draco acting strange, Blaise?" he asked, turning to Blaise.

"Well...Draco does that sometimes, mate," Blaise chuckled.

Theo rolled his eyes and huffed, "I know! But more so lately, right? First, I caught him getting cozy with Granger in the hallways..."

"Wait! Draco Malfoy getting cozy with 'Princess Mudblood'?" Ginny interrupted, smirking.

"Please don't call her that," Theo warned, glaring at Ginny.

"Hey! I never called her that! But Malfoy and your gang did!" Ginny retorted heatedly.

Theo and Blaise winced. They didn't want to be reminded of that embarrassing truth.

"Yeah, we did. But that was before, okay?" Theo grumbled, his cheeks flaming.
"Water under the bridge. Get back to what you were saying, Theo," Neville said.

"Alright, but don't cut in on me again. It messes with my train of thought," Theo threw a warning glance at Ginny who gave him a deadly glare, "Please? (Ginny rolled her eyes and nodded) Great! Okay, so as I was saying...Draco had been acting really, really odd lately. First, I saw him getting much too friendly with Granger...and in the hallways no less! Then, he gets all defensive when we call her 'Princess Mudblood', even though he was the one who started it. So, if I were you Gryfette, I'd not bandy about that epithet around him. (Ginny threw a raspberry at him, Theo snorted) Anyway, when the Muggle-borns were about to leave for the Registration, we got into talking about Granger...about how exceptional she was...IS! (he corrected after getting dagger looks from Ginny)...and how she could be in danger if the Ministry found out about her...abilities. Draco got really worked up about it and ran after her. Perhaps to warn her, I don't know. But then, he didn't come back that night. And the next time that I saw him, he was fawning over that girl from Ilvermorny - Abigail Adams!" Theo finished triumphantly.

"So? What's your point?" Ginny asked.

Theo threw his arms in the air and gave Ginny a look that seemed to say 'How thick can you get?' "Duh! Were you not listening?"

"Of course I was, moron! I just don't get it! Malfoy's always been a known player. Girls practically drop at his feet. He changes girlfriends as often as he changes his shirts. So, he probably got tired of Hermione and found a new conquest in Abigail," Ginny scowled.

Blaise sighed and took Ginny's hand in his. "Gin, we grew up with Draco. We know him like the back of our hands. Okay...sometimes he's difficult to read. But, major things like these, he can't really hide from us. He was serious about Granger. And he really cared for her...like...a lot!"

"Draco may be a git, loads of times, but he's not really that bad. Those girls that you're talking about...most of them were just rumors spread about by the girls themselves. But, he's never been protective of any girl. He's never spent as much time with one either...until Granger," Theo said.

"So...it's impossible for him to transfer his affections overnight unless..."

"Unless it's the same girl," Luna finished for her.

Ginny gasped and mumbled behind her hands, "Oh, Morgana!"

"Plus...take this into consideration...Abigail Adams appeared the day after Hermione was supposed to have gone to London for the Registration," Neville added. "Only, we learned later on that she really didn't get there. She disappeared!"

"Exactly!" Theo laughed triumphantly, relief written on his face. Then, as if remembering something, his face froze and turned deathly white. "Oh, Blaise! Fuck me!"

"I'd rather not, mate," chuckled Blaise.

The others laughed as Theo playfully punched Blaise's arm.

"Well, you're not my type either, dolt! But, seriously! I'm a complete moron!"

"I'm not gonna argue with that," Ginny mumbled. Theo glowered at her.

"What's got your knickers, Theo?" Neville asked, smirking.
"Well...from day one, I had been a complete horror to Abigail. Now, if our assumption is correct...I would definitely owe her a HUGE apology!" Theo cried.

"That you will, mate, that you will," Blaise thumped Theo on the back.

"But...wait! We seem to be forgetting something. If Abigail truly is the missing Hermione...does that mean that Snape knows all about it?" asked Ginny.

"Well...I suppose so. He's the one who introduced Abigail in front of the whole student body. The question is...why did he allow it? Did he do it to protect her from the Minister?" Theo asked.

"Perhaps...Maybe Draco went to him and asked for help," Neville suggested.

Blaise shook his head, "No...Draco's not like that. He's not big on asking for help."

"Damn! This is getting much too complicated for my simple brain. Stop snickering Weaslette!" Theo said, but not without humor.

"Well...at least we've solved the mystery of the missing Head Girl," Blaise smiled.

"Yes...and in the process opened a deeper, bigger, can of worms," Theo griped.

"But we also know now that Prof. Snape is not really such a terrible Headmaster," Luna piped in.

"So...what are we to do with this new 'revelation'?" asked Ginny.

"We'll keep it to ourselves for now. We've not even confirmed if our deductions are spot on, so let's keep it quiet. On second thought, even if we're proven correct, we still should not advertise it. As Blaise had pointed out, it could put people in danger," Neville said.

"But what if the others ask about what I found out yesterday? What are we going to say to them? I did send everyone a message, you know," Theo said.

"Just say that as far as you could tell, it was indeed Hermione at the Infirmary," said Blaise, grinning. Ginny and Neville gave him encouraging smiles. Luna just stared blankly at him.

"You want me to lie to everyone else?"

"It's not really lying per se, Theo. You're just...camouflaging the truth."

"It's still lying in my book, Blaise."

"Oh, come on, Theo! It's a white lie!"

"Think of it as doing something for the greater good," Neville said, giving Theo a thumbs up.

Theo seemed unconvinced as he nodded reluctantly.

"By the way, has anyone seen either Draco or Abigail?" Neville asked.

"Uhm...Draco said that he was going with Abigail to her old school," Theo said.

"To America? Wow! Talk about devotion," Ginny mused.

"It's just a cover story..." Luna said.

"For what?" Ginny and Theo said in unison.
"I don't really know yet...but, I'm sure going to find out," smiled Luna serenely.

o-O-o

Number 12 Grimmauld Place had always exuded a forbidding aura. Not only because it belonged to the Blacks - a family of Pureblood wizards and witches known for their inclination toward the Dark Arts and Blood Supremacy views, but also because of the stories surrounding it. Rumor has it that a number of Muggles and Mudbloods had been tortured and killed within its walls. And that's the reason why no one in the Wizarding World would willingly go near it much less step through its forbidding doors.

So, it really seemed strange, if anyone cared to notice, that it had been getting a steady coterie of visitors all of a sudden. This curious activity began just a little after midnight and had continued on until the wee hours of the morning. Thankfully, it was enchanted to be hidden from Muggle eyes, therefore, even if inquisitive Muggles were to sit before it, all they would see were people disappearing somewhere between No. 11 and No. 13 Grimmauld Place. Of course, they would not tell their neighbors about it lest they are branded as going loony. They would more likely dismiss the incident offhand and reason that they really didn't see anything.

This haven of dark tales was now under the care of the Black family's only surviving son, Sirius Arcturus Black - another puzzle in his own right. Basically because, Sirius, despite his family's views and stringent traditions, was a known good friend to Half-breeds, Half-bloods, Blood traitors, and Muggle-borns. He would even have added a Muggle or two to his list of acquaintances if he only knew how to befriend them. As of today, however, with the steady stream of people going in and out of his home, making friends was the farthest from the man's mind.

"I'm telling you, Sirius. There's something big going on in his camp," Remus Lupin, Sirius' Werewolf best friend since his Hogwarts days, insisted.

"Even if that's the case, we have no way of confirming it. We'd have to wait for Snape," Sirius said as he poured drinks for Remus and himself. "No matter how distasteful that sounds," he muttered under his breath.

"I feel like we're flying blind here," Remus muttered.

"Welcome to the club, my friend," Sirius said, raising his glass. After one of his friends, Peter Pettigrew, the traitor, had tried to set him up for the murder of a dozen Muggles, Sirius had been on the run without any real news from Wizarding Britain. He was only able to return to England after Dumbledore became Minister of Magic and had cleared him of all charges. So Sirius very well knew what Remus meant by 'flying blind'; he had a year of mastering the feeling.

A loud wailing from the foyer told them that another body would be added to the visitors of 12 Grimmauld.

"I had just been to the Ministry and there were a lot of people running around there like headless chickens," a breathless Kingsley Shaklebolt said as he took a seat near the fireplace. He was one of the few members of the Order who still held a job at the Ministry mainly because he was a Sacred 28 Pureblood with 'no known political affiliations' (he's working undercover for the Order); which meant that the Ministry considered him 'harmless and persuadable'. Most of the group's other members were either in hiding or branded as an 'Undesirable' and therefore banned from holding any Ministry job.

"I bet they are," Arthur Weasley, Blood-traitor and a certified 'Undesirable', scoffed as he placed a tray laden with delicious smelling pudding on the table.
When Dumbledore was ousted, Lucius Malfoy's first order of business was to rid the Ministry of Blood traitors (Muggle lovers) and anyone even remotely suspected of having ties with the renegade Order of the Phoenix. Hardest hit of that mass layoff were the Weasleys since they fit in at least two categories of what the Ministry deemed Undesirable. Arthur and his son, Percy, were the first ones to receive a termination notice. Even Bill, who worked for Gringotts had just been put on 'indefinite leave', which was a nice way of telling him that he should start looking for another job. The twins, Fred and George, had also been receiving threats, but at least they were not yet being pressured to close down their business. Only Charlie, who was breeding dragons in Romania, was the only one who was not directly affected by the Ministry's 'purges'. Molly and Arthur, who were now in full-time service for the Order, had basically taken over the running of 12 Grimmauld Place, to Sirius' everlasting relief.

"Alright, everyone. Grab a bite, grab a bite! Kreacher and I will be preparing more so don't be stingy. There's also lots of tea for everyone," Molly came bustling in with teapots and cups. Trudging behind her was the Black family's house-elf, Kreacher, bearing trays of assorted finger sandwiches. For the next few minutes, nothing but the clinking of teacups was heard as the group took their fill.

Number 12's nearly domestic peace was shattered when another blood-curdling shriek came from the foyer followed by mumbled cursing and the heavy clomping of boots.

"Mad Eye's here," said Arthur, sipping his tea. The others nodded. Sirius quietly laughed; his mother hated Moody and the feeling was mutual.

"Sirius! When are you going to take down that horrible, screeching portrait of Walburga from the foyer? If this house wasn't heavily shrouded by magic, she'd be waking the whole damn neighborhood every time someone came in through that blasted door!" growled Moody, his magical eye whizzing maniacally inside his empty eye-socket.

"We tried everything, Moody. It just won't come off! My lovely mother apparently put a permanent sticking charm on her portrait just to piss me off," Sirius griped.

"Well, you better make sure it is kept covered, then! She's getting on my nerves!" grumbled Moody, taking a seat beside Kingsley. "So, Shacklebolt, what's happening at the Ministry?"

"Chaos reigns, Moody. Nobody knows anything, but they're all on high alert," Kingsley replied. "Typical! What a bunch of nitwits!" barked Moody. He was 'retired' from his post as Auror when Lucius Malfoy was appointed Minister of Magic.

They had just begun to settle in a quiet discussion of the day's various events when another ear-piercing screech cut the air.

"Damn that woman!" Moody roared. "Do something, Sirius!"

"I'll take care of it," said Remus as he set down his cup and rose from his seat.

"Blimey! It's war, I tell you! We're gonna have war! Le' me go, ye deranged bird!" cried an agitated man who a young woman with purple hair was dragging along by the scruff of his neck.

"Tonks! Where did you dig up that filth, cuz?" laughed Sirius.

"I saw him lurking around the corner. Probably trying to peddle these," she said, throwing a dirty bag on the floor.
Remus reached down and opened it. "You better take a look at this, Sirius. I believe Mundungus had been pilfering from your treasury again," he said, casting a jaundiced eye on the culprit.

Sirius took the bag and turned it upside down, spilling its contents on the table. There were a couple of necklaces, three watches, some silver cutlery and picture frames, an ancient-looking bronze candelabra, two silver platters, a crystal ball, and an ornate box decorated with Gaelic symbols.

"Well, well, well, you've been very resourceful, Dung," Sirius said with a raised brow.

"It's Mundungus!" he protested, shaking himself from Tonks' grip.

"You're such a lowlife, Fletcher! I've a mind to slap shackles on your scrawny legs and throw you in the dungeons of Azkaban!" snarled Moody.

"Oh, please, Moody! Yer got no autho...auto...power over none anymore! Don'tcha go actin' like ye still git juice! Ye've been sacked!" laughed Mundungus.

Before anyone could react, Mundungus turned stiff as a board and fell flat on his face. The sickening crunch as he made contact with the hard marble floor was his nose breaking.

"Oh, Merlin, Moody! Did you really have to do that?" Molly groaned. Moody sneered and went back to eating a pudding.

Molly sighed, whipped out her wand and pointed it at Mundungus Fletcher. With another wave, she wordlessly flipped Mundungus right-side up. As Mundungus stirred awake, Molly cast a healing charm on his nose and cleaned up all the blood. Mundungus' eyes flew open and catching Moody's malevolent sneer, quickly scampered behind Molly.

"Aw...Molly! Why do you always have to take pity on scum like him?" complained Sirius. "Look at all these," Sirius waved at the scattered loot on the table. "He took all of that from this house, from me! He clearly cannot be trusted!"

"Now, now, Sirius. Mundungus may have a pair of sticky hands on him, but he is as loyal to the Order and to Dumbledore as anyone of us in here. He deserves better treatment than a common criminal," Molly said, hands resting on her plump hips.

"Yeh! Tell 'em, Molly!" Mundungus yelled from behind her.

"Now, don't you go getting sassy with me, Mundungus! I'll be bending your ear in a moment. Don't you dare for a minute think that I'm okay with your thievery! You need to have more self-control or I'll tell Dumbledore what you've been up to," Molly admonished the cringing man.

Mundungus may be a lowlife - a sneaky, little thief, but he would not think twice about putting his life on the line for Dumbledore. He's also useful in getting information from the underground world of outlaws - places where none of the other Order members would be welcome to visit. And that's the reason why Molly promised Dumbledore, before the great wizard went into hiding, that she would not let the others kick Mundungus out of the Order, no matter how much they wanted to.

"I'm sorry, Molly. I was gonnae giv' 'em back! If not fer this yer bird 'ere! I was on me way to tell yer all 'bout wha' I 'eard! Down at the pub, they was all talkin' 'bout war!" Mundungus said, twisting and untwisting his grimy bonnet.

"What war are you talking about, Fletcher? You must've downed quite a bit of rum again, you're most likely drunk when you heard that," scoffed Moody.
"I was nae drunk! I tol' yeh, they was all talkin'! Dem 'ooded bums showin' off 'em dark marks! They was askin' people ter join 'em before war broke out!"

An uncomfortable hush fell in the room. Mundungus may not be well educated, but he was street smart and he could tell the difference between a rumor and the real deal. He also has a knack for remembering entire conversations that he can quote word for word. The only reason why he's never been caught eavesdropping was because of his innate ability to blend in - no one ever saw him when he didn't want to be seen.

"Tell us exactly what you heard, Mundungus," Kingsley said, moving forward. The others followed suit as they waited for Mundungus to start his tale.

Mundungus sighed and sat down before Kingsley. "There were two blokes in black 'oods who came in jest past mi'night. They was not in a good mood. Dem t'rew one of 'em drunks out on the street for bein' too loud. Then, one of dem blokes called the ones playin' cards in the corner. I did nae know dem pers'nally, but dem thugs thru 'en thru. Then, the two blokes shewd 'em their arms. The others nodded 'en asked 'em ter sit wi' em. Bloke one tol' d' thugs 'bout how d' DL will be roundin' up all of dose aginst 'im. Bloke 2 sez," Mundungus then took on a different voice and said, "'After what happened tonight, after what they did to Yaxley and Rowle, the Dark Lord is done being patient. So, before war breaks out, choose your side. We're looking for soldiers. Choose OUR side for we'll be the only ones left standing after this.'" Mundungus paused and reverted to his normal speaking voice, "I di'nt stay long afte' dat! I ran owt and came 'ere ter tel yeh all 'bout wa' I 'eard!"

They were just digesting what they had just heard when another wail from the foyer made them all jump. Moody cursed and angrily thumped his staff. Sirius sighed and ran out, muttering to himself.

When he came back, George and Fred were trudging right behind him looking flushed.

"Bloody hell! Are we having a meeting? Why are you all here?" asked George.

"Fred! George! What are you two doing here?" Molly asked, frowning. She had tried dissuading the twins, all her children, in fact, from getting involved in the activities of the Order.

"Uhm...we might have...some sort of...information," George stammered, blushing. He clearly didn't savor delivering his news in front of his parents, much less his mother.

"Well, don't hold back. Tell us all about it, boys," Arthur encouraged.

The twins looked at each other, then both nodded and took their seats.

"Alright...so...we were out...uh...partying (Molly glared at the twins)...when three asho...erm...men burst into the bar and disrupted the peace. Then, they started brandishing their ugly tattoos. We knew trouble was brewing so we made to leave," Fred paused and glanced at George.

"But when we got to the door, another one of them came striding up," George continued.

"It was Thornton Parkinson, the Slytherin git from our year. His cousin, Pansy, is in Ronniekin's year. Anyway, he started bragging about the coming 'war' and how all of us Blood traitors are going to get our due...blah, blah, blah," Fred said, rolling his eyes.

"He was so annoying that I almost forgot that I'm one of the good guys and therefore not allowed to use any of the Unforgivables. If he hadn't gotten me so bored with all his talking, I would've Avadaed his ass right then and there!" George chuckled, high-fiving his twin. Sirius and Remus
were laughing together with Tonks while Moody's magical eye was going crazy in its socket.

"George!" Molly shrieked in outrage.

"Sorry, mum," the twins said, blushing profusely.

"Is that all? Is that what you came all the way here to tell us, boys?" Arthur sighed, sounding just a little bit more exasperated than amused.

"Uhm...actually, no," Fred said, turning to George.

"We actually thought that he was just letting off air, but he said something that caught our attention," George glanced at Fred, who nodded encouragingly.

"He said that we started the war."

"You and Fred started the war..." said Remus.

"No! US - the Order! He said that we just declared war when we attacked Yaxley and his men!"

"That's why we came here as soon as we could. We wanted to know if what he said was true. Because if we did have an operation involving Yaxley, then it just triggered a war," Fred said, his eyes scanning the faces of the people before him, looking for answers.

"As far as the people here are concerned, there wasn't. Heck, we're barely surviving! How can we even think of mounting an operation against his forces," Sirius said in barely concealed ill humor.

"We're not even doing surveillance, are we, Moody?" said Kingsley, turning to Moody. The retired Auror grunted in agreement.

"That's what we thought," George and Fred both said.

"See? I tol' yeh! They's blamin' us fer sumthin'," exclaimed Mundungus.

"But why? And what happened to Yaxley?" asked Tonks, more to herself than anyone else.

"He almost died," said a voice coming from the alcove. They all turned to see Severus Snape leaning against the wall with a deep scowl.

"Severus! Merlin, you almost gave me a heart attack!" squealed Molly.

"How did you do that? Why didn't Walburga scream when you came in?" growled Moody.

"You didn't apparate, did you?" asked Kingsley, biting his tongue as soon as the question left his lips. The wards around 12 Grimmauld were almost as powerful as the ones protecting Hogwarts.

Snape smirked, sauntering into the room. "Such a silly question, Shacklebolt. You very well know that not even Sirius is allowed to apparate into this place. Perhaps, Walburga had just taken a liking to me. She even smiled when I passed by her portrait."

"Well, enough talk about my mother. What news do you bring, Severus?" asked Sirius. "What did you mean by what you just said?"

Snape's eyes roved around the room before settling on Mundungus. "Molly, would you please take Fletcher to the kitchen?"
Molly started to protest but Arthur pulled her aside and whispered in her ear. The matronly witch nodded and rose to her feet.

"Come on, Mundungus. As punishment for your little slip, I'm going to make you peel potatoes without using magic," she said as she grabbed Mundungus by the arm and marched him to the kitchen. When Mundungus' grumbling was beyond hearing, Snape took a seat and sighed.

"Now, talk, Severus. What happened to Yaxley and why is the Order being blamed for it?" asked Sirius, taking a seat right across the Hogwarts Headmaster.

"That's only what the Dark Lord is telling his minions. He wants to flush out the Order," Snape replied, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

"So...Yaxley...you said he almost died. How?" Remus asked.

"He was apparently sent to America on a mission. It's not really clear how he was almost burned alive. We'd have to wait until he's somewhat recovered. He's now in St. Mungo's together with Thorfin Jr. The Dark Lord sent Avery, Crabbe, and Goyle to...retrieve the others."

"Are you saying that Yaxley's mission wasn't connected to the Order?" Arthur asked, frowning.

"Not exactly..." Snape hedged.

"What do you mean, not exactly? It's either it is or it isn't!" barked Moody.

"Is there something you're not telling us, Severus?" Remus asked as he tried to figure out what Snape was leaving out.

"Did you orchestrate an operation without consulting us?" Sirius asked quietly.

"Look, it wasn't my idea to hide...this...from all of you. It was just easier and safer if we kept it to ourselves...to keep everyone in the dark...until it was absolutely necessary. After what happened to...the Potters...we didn't know who to trust with something as big as this," Snape said.

"We? Who's we, Severus?" Arthur asked.

"Him and Dumbledore," Molly said, settling on the chair beside her husband.

Arthur and the twins gaped at their mother.

"W-what? Are you in contact with Dumbledore? Why didn't you tell us?" cried Tonks.

"Where's Fletcher?" Snape asked, purposely ignoring Tonks.

"Don't worry about him. He's busy peeling a sack of potatoes. He won't be able to hear anything nor leave that room without me," Molly replied with a smirk.

Snape nodded. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hand through his dark hair. He knew there would be hell to pay once he started telling his tale. But there was no way that he could keep this from them any longer. He must come clean if he were to get their help and complete cooperation. The next twenty-four hours would be crucial to the survival of the Order.

But he needed to clarify something first.

"Molly, how did you know about what Dumbledore and I did?" he asked.
"Oh, I don't know what you two did! But I know you would not do anything without his consent or
guidance. And since it seems to be such a big secret, then it definitely involves him," Molly
explained with her usual maternal smile.

Snape slowly exhaled the breath that he didn't even realize he was holding. He felt foolish
doubting Molly. He'd been under a lot of stress lately and it made him more suspicious than
normal. The real reason why he was, until just now, reluctant in telling them about Harry was
because he feared that the group had a breach in security. When Draco told him that the orphanage
had been exposed, he thought that someone in their group had found out about Draco's and
Hermione's assignment and had squealed to the Dark Lord. It was a very, very remote possibility,
but he still could not dismiss it out of hand.

"Well? Aren't you going to tell us what's the connection between us and whatever happened to
Yaxley?" Sirius asked, barely hiding his irritation and impatience.

The Hogwarts Headmaster took a deep breath and said, "Yaxley and his men were sent by the Dark
Lord to check out an 'unusual occurrence' in America. I don't know how they did it, but they
learned about the existence of a certain orphanage in America - the orphanage where the greatest
secret of the Order was hidden.

"Greatest secret of the Order? Wow! I didn't see that coming," chuckled Fred. George elbowed
him, scowling. Fred blushed and mumbled an apology.

"What are you talking about, Snape? I'm getting tired of your cryptic nonsense!" moaned Sirius.

"Spit it out, man! We don't have all day!" snarled Moody.

And indeed, we don't, Snape mused.

"Harry Potter. He's the greatest secret that Dumbledore and I hid in an orphanage in America. And
the Dark Lord had just found out."

Snape hated the Muggle cliche about hearing a pin drop, but it was very appropriate to what was
happening now.

"Wait! WHAT? Are you saying that HARRY POTTER, the son of James and Lily Potter, the
prophesied Chosen One, MY GODSON, is ALIVE?" roared Sirius. Snape nodded.

BAM!

Fuck! Now, I didn't see that coming!

Those were Snape's last thoughts before everything in his world turned black.

o-O-o

If not for the events of last night, Hermione would have thought that this was heaven. The Fawleys'
house was like a five-star hotel, complete with impeccable room service and first-class amenities. It
was three stories high, with seven bedrooms (each one with its own bathroom), a study/library, a
game room, a fully equipped modern kitchen, a cozy sitting room and a quaint dining room. The
four-poster beds were made of thick, marshmallow-soft mattresses covered in fragrantly clean,
white sheets and lots of fluffy pillows. And the food! The children had to be physically restrained
from raiding the cupboard filled with all kinds of cereals, candies, jams, biscuits, and chocolate!

It was actually better than a five-star hotel. Even Draco was impressed. And that's saying a lot!
They had arrived there last night, bedraggled, hungry and terrified. At first, they thought that they
would not be able to find the house since neither she nor Draco recognized the name of the street.
Thankfully, the tall girl, Jamie, shared Henry's fascination for maps and had a photographic
memory. When Draco gave her the Fawleys' address, she took over and led them straight to their
destination within an hour of walking. They didn't know what to expect when they got there, but it
was way better than they had hoped for. After Draco whispered the password to a sleepy Owl
door-knocker, it opened to reveal two, smiling house elves in neat, periwinkle dresses. A bed and a
hot bowl of soup would've sufficed, but what they were treated to made even the terrible
happenings at St. Milburga's temporarily forgotten.

But only temporarily. Because neither of the Figgs had shown up last night. And that did not bode
well. Exhaustion overtook them all, however, so they were not able to dwell on it and had to set
their concern aside to be dealt with after their much-needed rest.

"Good morning, beautiful."

Hermione smiled, leaning back against the bare chest of the man whose arms were wrapped around
her waist. She could feel his breath tickling the back of her neck.

"Good morning to you, too, handsome," she said, turning around so she could see him even though
she knew that he had gone back to sleep. But it was okay. She actually preferred watching him
while he slept. She tended to drown in his hypnotic silver-gray eyes when he's staring at her. She
would never get tired of looking at him. He was just so beautiful - especially when he's all sleepy
and relaxed. There were no hard lines or frowns to mar his elegant brows, no implacable slanting of
his lips, no arrogant smirks, no masks of any kind. And that's what she loved the most - when he's
just plain and simple Draco. Although, with his aristocratic features, he could never, ever be
considered plain.

She leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his lips. Hermione shivered. How could he make her
melt with just a simple, chaste kiss? It seemed unfair - the way he had so much power over her.
Still, she would happily grant him that. Hermione chuckled inside. If anyone told her a year ago
that she would be snuggling in bed with Draco Malfoy, the biggest prat she'd ever known and the
bene of her existence, getting all girly and giggly after kissing him, she would have hexed that
person to kingdom come.

Yet there she was, getting weak in the knees just staring at his sleeping face, thinking of the wicked
things she'd like to do to him and with him. What she felt for Draco, however, went way beyond
the physical. And it wasn't even because of his looks. She had long ago acknowledged, even when
she still 'hated' him, that he was indeed a very fine male specimen, but that was just an added bonus
and not the basis of her attraction to him.

At first, she really did hate him. For years, she had tried to brush off his taunting and annoying
barbs. She wanted to show him that she was not being affected by his obvious disdain and hateful
words. She figured that if she just kept on ignoring him, she would get used to his mockery. But
then, she realized that only Draco had that ability - to wound her with just plain words. She had
been called 'Mudblood' by almost the whole of Slytherin House, yet it didn't hurt as much as it did
when it was him saying the slur to her face. It didn't help either when she came to the conclusion
that deep inside, she wanted his approval.

And she battled with that thought for years. Why ever would she want him to see her in a different
light? Why did she care if he liked her or not? It wasn't as if she was starved for attention, she had
enough of that from her doting parents and loving friends. Still, she felt that there was something
missing. She even came to a point where she begrudgingly admitted to herself that she was
infatuated with the 'Slytherin Prince'. That admission horrified her too much, however, that she did everything in her power to disprove it. She reasoned that she was just intrigued by him and her interest in Draco Malfoy was 'clinical', like the way one studies a bug.

In sixth-year, things changed a little. Her concern for him grew. She knew that something wasn't right with him. He seemed withdrawn and always brooding. He didn't hang out with his usual gang so much either. She had told Harry and Ron about her observations, but of course, they thought the worst of him. Then, strange things started happening. Harry kept on accusing Draco of being the one behind all of them because he was a Death Eater. She tried to reason with him, but Harry was not to be dissuaded and had taken it upon himself to expose Draco for what he believed he truly was, the culmination of which was when he almost killed Draco with a curse that he learned from the mysterious Half-Blood Prince's Potions book. She was beside herself with worry, although she convinced herself that it was only because she didn't want Harry to become a murderer. Her belief that Draco was not really doing anything bad, as Harry and Ron kept on insisting, was cruelly quashed when he let Death Eaters into Hogwarts resulting in the death of their beloved Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore. By then, she had to accept Harry's view of Draco. So, she focused her attention on Ron and for a while, she really thought that she was falling for her best friend. She should've known that the mind may be changed, but the heart cannot.

When they were captured and brought to Malfoy Manor, she had prayed that she would not be forced to see him. She didn't want to look at his gloating face or hear his cruel jibes. She was slightly taken aback when she saw him, though. He looked terrible, thinner than she remembered, with dark circles under his eyes and a furtiveness that wasn't there before. And when Bellatrix tortured her right in front of him, she could've sworn that he suffered just as much as she did, if not even more. It reinforced her premise that Draco wasn't truly evil. She wasn't really shocked when she saw him fighting on their side during the Battle of Hogwarts.

When things with Ron fell apart and she was forced to work closely with him, Hermione saw a side of Draco that she never saw before. Slowly, the feelings that she had savagely buried inside started crawling up to the surface. Was it any surprise that it only took one little nudge for everything to come spilling forth? And she has as yet to regret welcoming him into her arms.

He could calm her fears, make her believe in herself and that things would always work out fine. Yet, he, himself, seemed to be perpetually plagued with so many fears and insecurities. He was perfect in his imperfections. And she loved him with every bit of her heart and soul. She would do anything for him, be everything to him.

"I love you, Draco," she whispered, certain that he wouldn't hear.

"I love you, too, Hermione," he whispered back, his lips breaking into a self-satisfied grin.

She gasped and playfully slapped his arm.

"You sneak! You've been awake the whole time!" she groaned.

He laughed and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "I greeted you first, didn't I? That should've clued you in on my state of wakefulness."

"Ugh! I take back what I just said! I don't love you! I hate you, Draco Malfoy!"

He chuckled and gently pushed her away so he could look into her eyes. "No, you don't. I would've felt my heart breaking into a million pieces if you truly had stopped loving me."

"Really? Would I break your heart if I stopped loving you?"
"Most definitely, sweetheart. You should know by now that your love is the only thing that keeps me going."

She reached up, pulled him down to her waiting lips and kissed him with all the passion she felt burning inside her. She moaned into his lips when he responded in kind. Their kiss would've progressed to something more had it not been for the loud rapping on the bedroom door.

Draco cursed and hid his head under the fluffy pillows. Hermione laughed as she threw the comforter aside and jumped to her feet. When she opened the door, Jamie and Elena (the shorter girl) were standing outside, their tear-streaked faces looking up at her.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, a cold shiver of fear running down her spine.

The two girls burst through the door and lunged at Hermione, hugging her waist as their bodies were wracked in heart-rending sobs.

"What happened?" Draco asked, pulling a shirt on as he walked towards them.

The girls only wailed louder.

"Okay, okay. Tell us what happened. Please?" Hermione pleaded.

Draco gently pulled Elena away, cooing words of comfort as he did so. Elena looked up and seeing Draco's encouraging smile wrapped her arms around him.

"They're gone. They're gone, aren't they?" Jamie said, over and over, her tears soaking Hermione's jumper. "They're gone! And we left them there!"

"Who's gone, sweetheart?" Hermione asked, although she somehow knew the answer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Figg!" Elena cried.

Draco gave her a look that told her that he had already anticipated Elena's answer.

"Who told you that?" Hermione asked, gently extricating herself from Jamie's arms.

"N-no one. B-but...they didn't come here last night…and…t-there's a-a man downstairs. T-twinkle c-called him M-Master," Jamie mumbled.

"Fawley? He's here?" Draco said, turning to Hermione. Without waiting for her to reply, Draco went rushing out the door, dragging a sobbing Elena behind him.

"Come on, Jamie. Let's go downstairs. I think we're about to meet our host," Hermione said, leading the girl out of the room and down the stairs.

She had expected to see Emmet but saw a bespectacled, older version of him standing in the foyer talking to Draco in his place instead. He must be Emmet's father.

"Mr. Fawley?" she asked tentatively when she reached the two.

"Ah! You must be Ms. Adams! Call me Gordon. My son has told me all about you...both of you! (He added the last after seeing Draco's scowl), "Happy to make your acquaintance. I would have preferred meeting under different circumstances, but what can we do, eh?" the older Fawley said, offering his hand to Hermione, which she gladly took.

"Honored to meet you, Gordon," Hermione said.
Draco leaned down and whispered something to Elena who was still holding on to his hand. The girl nodded, grabbed Jamie's hand and pulled her in the general direction of the kitchen.

Gordon Fawley nodded and led them to the sitting room, "I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad news this morning, Ms. Adams, Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps we should all have a seat," he said indicating the plush couches and comfortable-looking armchairs. When they were both seated, he went to the mini-bar and poured himself a shot of Firewhiskey. "I know it's a bit early for Ogden's Old, but after I tell you what I had seen, you will understand." He downed the drink in one big gulp, wincing as he put the glass down.

"Arg! That didn't go down so well," he groused, sitting on one of the armchairs, directly in front of Draco and Hermione.

"By the way, how are you finding your accommodations? Twinkle and Mimsy are treating you well, I hope?" Gordon said, his eyes smiling behind his spectacles.


"Good, good," the man said, nodding absently, seemingly lost in thought.

"Sir, you said that you're the bearer of bad news..." Hermione paused, turning to Draco.

"Yes...it's about the Figgs..."

"Did you see them, sir?" asked Draco. "Sir? Are you okay," he said after Gordon failed to reply.

"Oh! Sorry! Sorry, I was just...thinking. What was your question?"

"Uhm...the Figgs. What happened to them, sir?"

Gordon took a deep breath, shook his head, leaned forward, elbows on his knees. His eyes had a haunted look that chilled Hermione in spite of the thick jumper that she was wearing.

"When we arrived at St. Milburga's before dawn this morning, it was already crawling with cops. Thankfully, my companion and I had anticipated this so we were wearing our own conjured NYPD uniforms, giving us the ability to blend in. The scene that greeted us, we weren't prepared for, though. The place was practically destroyed, but the Figgs were still there..."

"Still there? Were they badly injured? Why weren't they taken to the hospital right away?" Hermione asked, hoping against hope that her fears would not be realized. But it was not to be.

With another shake of his head, Gordon looked up at them, the horror of what he had seen clearly reflected in his eyes. "What we saw...is beyond words. It's a sight that no one should see. Their bodies were badly burned in the fire, but we still saw faint traces of the curses that were used on them. The Muggle policemen did not recognize the tell-tale signs of dark magic, of course, but we did," he paused and took another deep breath before continuing. "They were tortured...really bad, by Death Eaters. I regret to say that they died horribly."

Hermione felt the tears falling before she even realized that she was crying. She hardly knew the Figgs, but from what little she did know about them, garnered from the short time that they had stayed at the orphanage, she saw a glimpse of how wonderful they were, of how they loved the children like their own, and would do anything for them. She saw how they were strong, courageous and had hearts of gold. They stayed behind - sacrificed themselves - to give her and Draco enough time to bring the children - their children - to safety.
They could have come away with them, but that would've raised the possibility of being followed, thereby putting the children at greater risk. By staying behind, they had ensured that the Death Eaters’ attention remained focused on them and them alone. A warm arm wrapped around her shoulder and she leaned back against the familiar comfort of Draco's body. When she looked up at him, she saw mournful gray eyes brimming with unshed tears looking down at her. There was sorrow in those orbs, but behind that she also saw a ferocious anger brewing just beneath the surface. He would never let this incident go unpunished or unavenged. She felt the same way.

They would mourn later, his eyes seemed to say. And she agreed wholeheartedly. For now, they needed to find the culprits behind this tragedy.

"Gordon, you said that they were tortured by Death Eaters. Just how did you know that? Were there bodies other than the Figgs? Bodies with the dark mark?" she asked.

"No, only the Figgs remained. However, there was a Death Eater mask left behind. I was able to take it without any of the Muggle cops noticing. I know they are quite unique and designed specifically for its owner - like an identification of some sort. I thought it might help us find their killer."

Draco disengaged himself from Hermione and leaned forward. "May I see it?" he asked.

Gordon seemed to hesitate. He looked like he wanted to ask Draco something, but thought better of it. He reached into his coat pocket and took out a small, silver item. After returning the object to its normal size with a tap of his wand, he passed it on to Draco.

Hermione looked at the mask with a combination of disgust and admiration. If it didn't signify something so vile, she would've considered it beautiful. The mask was formed to mould the wearer's face in a dull silver finish at the front and the back, the one that touched the skin, was covered in soft, black velvet. The intricate etching that framed the eye sockets and the cheekbones were proof of the maker's impeccable craftsmanship while the tiny diamonds and emeralds that arched to form eyebrows screamed of wealth and privilege - things that characterized the elite.

"It's Yaxley's," Draco said as he turned the mask delicately in his hands. "You're right in saying that each mask is unique, Gordon. It helps them identify each other easily even with masks on."

"Yaxley? Are you sure? Isn't he…"

"In the Dark Lord's inner circle, yes," Draco said, nodding.

"Then, that means that the Dark Lord himself sent them," Hermione said.

"Yes…possibly. Draco, would you know if Yaxley is allowed to work on his own, I mean, go on a mission without the Dark Lord's knowledge or approval?" Gordon asked.

Hermione felt Draco stiffen beside her. This was not their original timeline, after all, and things could be different here. She understood why Draco was hesitating to answer, he didn't want to give out false information if he could help it.

"Uhm…you mean, is he allowed to act independently? (Gordon nodded) I-I'm not really sure. To be safe, though, we have to assume that he was acting under orders from the Dark Lord. As far as I can remember, only my fa…," he choked. Hermione squeezed his hand. "Only Lucius had been given that… pleasure and privilege," he finished, nearly hissing at the end.

"If that's the case, then we need to act quickly. You have to go home as soon as possible. This could be the beginning of war…" Gordon trailed off as he slowly stood from his chair, his eyes
focused on something behind them.

"War, indeed. If it's what they want, then that's what they'll get," said a very familiar voice.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as Draco turned to her, his eyes as big as saucers. He recognized that voice as well. Holding on to Draco's arm, Hermione let him guide her to her feet. Tears fell down unabated when she turned to see the most welcome sight she had ever seen since they were viciously flung into this alternate timeline. Standing by the entrance of the sitting room was the very image of her best friend, her brother, her hope. She would've flown into his arms and hugged him until he passed out, if only she didn't remember that in this substitute reality, he wasn't really all that to her. Still, she couldn't help but feel relief at finally coming face to face with this timeline's version of him.

"Henry? Henry James?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"No, Henry James is dead. My name is Harry Potter."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: hahahaha Wasn't that last line just horribly cliche? hehe (Couldn't help myself, sorry!) Anway...I'd really like to hear from you, my dears. Is the story dragging? Are the chapters getting too long and hard to read? Please let me know...I live to please! harhar

'Til next time, my sweeties!

xoxoxo
A/N: Apologies, apologies, my dears! Life just happened. My unattended chores caught up with me and didn't let me go until I screamed bloody enough!

Anyway...my thanks to all those who are still keeping track of this story, I really appreciate it. With all that said, I hope I don't disappoint with this one. We'll be taking a step back into the past...just a short jump, so it wouldn't be too confusing. I just wanted to show what happened to Harry before he came to the Fawley townhouse and blurted that horribly-so-cliche ending to the previous chapter.

It started as a murmur. Then, it got louder and turned into that sound akin to what a thousand bees made while circling a honeypot. His body felt numb, but his mind was abuzz with thoughts and voices and everything else that would not let him return to the world of slumber. And all he truly wanted now was to sleep forever. Perhaps, if he did, he would not have this hollow space in his heart, this emptiness that was eating up whatever was left of him. Perhaps, if he didn't wake up, he would not see their faces again...he would not see the agony in their eyes...would not hear the sorrow and fear in her voice. Perhaps, he would finally find peace.

But life was never fair, was it? And it didn't give a damn about what one thought or felt or wanted. It just kept on moving forward – with or without anybody's consent, dragging everyone along for the ride. It sucked, but it was the sad truth.

Life went on - whether anyone wanted it to or not.

The sounds started to take form – voices. Yet he recognized none, so he kept his eyes closed and feigned sleep. He wanted to learn more about these people conversing around him before he revealed himself. Surely, they would talk freely if they assumed that he was still out for the count.

"Is it really him? Are you sure?" a man with a deep baritone said (Voice 1).

"How could I be sure? I've never seen him before," another male whispered furiously. His voice sounded younger than the first speaker but not as young as him (Voice 2).

Voice 1: "Well...he has the mark..."

Voice 2: "I know. And the place was nearly leveled. Only someone with powerful magic could have done that. But I still advise caution. We can't be too careful about something as important as this."

Voice 1: "How did you find him again?"

Voice 2: "I told you, Leo came running here last night about his wife Hillary's vision. You know that she's a Seer of the First Order, right? Her visions are almost always accurate."
The soft creaking of a door halted their conversation.

Voice 1: "Peter! What have you found out? Has anyone gone back to the place, yet?"

"Gordon went there with Leo. They haven't returned," the newcomer, Peter, replied.

Voice 2: "What about Hillary?"

Peter: "She's outside talking to your wife. Is this him?"

Voice 2: "Well, he's the only one at the orphanage that fit Hillary's description."

A stretch of silence, then, the door creaked open again.

"Is he already up?" a small, female voice that he recognized quietly asked. It was Amerlaine.

Voice 2: "Lanie! You shouldn't be here! Go back to your mom!"

"But, Dad! I wanna see him! He's my friend! And please, don't call me Lanie. I'm a big girl now," Amerlaine cried. The thought of her face all red and pouty almost made him smile.

Amerlaine's dad (previously Voice 2): "I'm sorry, sweetie. I forgot. Tell you what, I promise to call you as soon as he's up. How's that sound?"

She let out an exaggerated sigh and said, "Okay. Call me the moment he opens his eyes and not a minute later, promise?"

"I'll try, sweetie. Now, run along and help mommy fix breakfast," her dad said, chuckling.

The next thing he heard was the door opening and closing again.

Peter (chuckling): "She's quite a handful, isn't she?"

"Tell me about it," Amerlaine's dad replied with a snort. "She's really smart and growing up into a powerful witch. Have I told you that she can also feel magic coming from other people?"

Peter: "Really?"

"Yeah! That's how they met him. She said that when she walked into the chapel she was immediately drawn to him because his magic was so strong. She said that it was 'humming'."

Voice 1: "Humming? Is that significant?"

"Well...according to Lanie, yes. Normally, she would have to be standing next to you to feel your magic. It may be an evolved version of Matty's ability to detect magic by holding a person's hand. But with powerful wizards, Lanie said that she could feel it even from afar...like a sort of vibrating energy," Amerlaine's dad explained.

Peter: "Is that how you found Albus?"

He perked up at the name. But he wanted to hear more, so he stayed 'asleep'.

"Yes. We were on holiday in Toulouse. He was badly hurt, nearly dead. But Lanie felt his magic as we walked down that alley on the way to our hotel. I guess, even half-dead, Albus' magic was still more than enough for my Lanie to latch on to."
Voice 1: "Lucky for him that Lanie was with you. He wouldn't have survived, otherwise."

"Oh, I don't know. That old man would have found a way. He's very clever and resourceful. I suppose you can say that he deserves to be called a legend."

Voice 1: "Unfortunately, he's currently the most wanted man in Wizarding Europe, too."

Peter: "Not only there, I'm afraid. Our department just received a memo, not two days ago. He's now on our watch list. It seems that MACUSA is no longer immune to that blasted Dark wizard's persuasions. Something big and terrible is in the works."

Voice 1: "Rumor has it that he's planning on extending his influence to the Non-Magical world."

"Are you saying that he wants to abolish the Statute of Secrecy?" Amerlaine's dad asked.

Peter: "I wouldn't be surprised if that's part of the plan. What really scares me is the fact that his influence has already reached MACUSA."

"That really is not good. If half the stories we've been hearing about the happenings in Wizarding Britain is true, then we need to do something. We can't just sit by and watch our government be taken over by the bigots and Blood Supremacists. We fought too hard and too long for the American wizarding world to get to this level of equality and freedom and cooperating with such scum will be a huge step backward."

Voice 1: "I know, Archie. That's why we're doing everything we can to prevent that from happening. And why we're helping Albus bring down that madman. Let's just hope that it would be enough. We can't afford to be drawn into another wizarding war."

Peter: "We might not have a choice when that happens."

He heard Amerlaine's father groan, "There's always a choice. The problem lies in choosing that which will bring about the greater good - will we elect to do that which is easy or what is right?"

The door squeaked open followed by the sound of shuffling feet.

Voice 1: "Albus! You look better than the last time we saw each other, my friend."

"Thank you, Herbert. I owe it all to the hospitality of Archie and his family here," the voice that he would never, ever forget said.

And with that, Henry ended his charade and broke his silence.

"Professor? Professor Dumbledore?" he croaked, not recognizing the man who turned to him at the sound of his voice. The man that was looking down at him was sporting short, cropped hair, graying but not white. Nor did he have a beard; just a thick, salt and pepper mustache and a neatly trimmed goatee. His clothes were also different. Instead of the usual flowing robes with silver moon and stars, he was wearing a dark, blue flannel jacket over a maroon sweater and black slacks.

But when Henry looked at the eyes behind the rectangular spectacles, he saw the same intense and intelligent blue ones that used to look at him with such fatherly affection.

"Henry!" Dumbledore breathed, rushing to his bedside.

"Professor...I-I..." he stammered, the tears that had been kept at bay finally breaking loose and flowing down his cheeks.
Dumbledore reached out and gathered him in his arms, cooing gentle, soothing words as the younger man was wracked with heart-rending sobs. Henry wrapped his arms around the thin frame of his old mentor, afraid that if he did not, the man would disappear.

"It's okay, son. Everything will be okay," Dumbledore said over and over as he let Henry cry his eyes and heart out.

After what seemed like a lifetime and there were no longer any tears left, Henry slowly pulled away from the old man and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He looked up to find Dumbledore studying him. A memory from last night flashed in his mind. Those blue eyes...they were the ones that he saw before he blacked out! How could he have been there?

"You were there, weren't you? Last night...at the orphanage..." he said.

Dumbledore nodded, but said nothing, his eyes boring into Henry's.

"But...how? Why only then? Why didn't you come for me earlier? Why didn't you save them?" he asked, his voice getting louder with each word.

The old wizard sighed and glanced at the others standing quietly behind him. They seemed to have understood his silent message because they all nodded and wordlessly left the room.

"Henry...I am really sorry about what happened to...Elphias and Merlinda..."

"Please...don't say their names. You have no right to say their names! You left them there to die! You could've come earlier! You could've SAVED them!" Henry screamed, all the anger and hurt that he had been bottling up bursting to the surface.

How dare this old man act like he really cared for them! How dare he put them in such danger when he knew that they would be no match for those MURDERERS! How could he have played them like pawns in a game of chess!

"You sacrificed them! You let me stay with them this long knowing that they would be put in danger because of me! You should've just taken me out of that place! You should've...y-you sh-should h-have..." he swallowed the bile in his throat as he was plagued with guilt.

He wanted to run until his legs could no longer carry him...to cry until his lungs no longer had air...to scream until his throat bled raw. Because deep inside, he knew that it wasn't Dumbledore's fault that the Figgs had died. It was his! They died because they would not tell those freaking arseholes the true secret hidden within the orphanage. They were tortured and killed because of him! If he hadn't ran...if he hadn't left them...if he hadn't been such a freaking coward!

He should've been there to protect them not Dumbledore!

"Henry, they both knew the importance of their assignment..."

"And that gave you the right to let them face the wolves? Because they signed on willingly for it?" he spat, still unwilling to completely take the blame.

Dumbledore knew what he was doing! Dumbledore knew more than he did. He masterminded the whole thing! And he left them there...defenseless!

The lights started to flicker and the air took on a stifling, warm consistency. Henry closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. He recognized the rage that was slowly building within him and he had to control it. Dumbledore was not the real enemy here. Yes, he had made some very big
mistakes...but so did he. He continued with his routine, consciously willing himself to calm down. When he felt the air returning to normal, he opened his eyes and walked to the bed, sitting stiffly at the edge, shoulders slumped in resignation.

What was happening to him? Was he turning into a monster? He could've destroyed this place like he did the orphanage. He needed to learn how to manage his magic.

"Henry..." Dumbledore's voice broke through his thoughts.

He turned and looked at his mentor anew. He saw traces of scars on his face, scars that were not there before, dark circles also ringed his eyes and he seemed unable to straighten his left arm. It was then that he noticed the cane that the old wizard was leaning on. As far as he could remember, Dumbledore never carried a cane with him.

"What happened to you, Professor?" he asked with real concern.

Dumbledore gave him a small, sad smile as he sat on one of the armchairs near the bed. Even such a short walk seemed to drain the old wizard.

"Suffice it to say that I had a hard time getting away from my pursuers," he answered.

"Pursuers? Who were after you?"

"Tom Riddle's forces. I knew that Tom wouldn't be satisfied with just ousting me from the Ministry. He wanted me dead. So I went into hiding with some members of the Order. But they found me...accidentally. I barely got out. Luckily, Archie and his family stumbled upon me in France and they helped me get out of the continent. During that time, the MACUSA - the Wizarding government here, was yet to be infiltrated by Tom's puppets, so they were able to smuggle me in without much trouble. But I'm afraid that's no longer the case. Riddle's slowly building an army here, extending his influence in the American wizarding community just like he did in most of Europe. That's probably how they found the orphanage so quickly," Dumbledore said.

Henry had the feeling that there was more to what his old mentor was saying. But he was too tired to dwell on the mysteries of Albus Dumbledore right now. He would have to save his questions for another day. What he needed to know was what really happened at St. Milburga's and why.

"Professor...can you tell me more about what happened last night? How did you get there so quickly?" Henry asked.

"I gather that you have already met Mathilda and her daughter? (Henry nodded) Mathilda's brother, Leopold is married to a powerful Seer, Hillary. She had a vision last night...about you. She didn't know who you were...only that you were in immediate danger. Her visions can be very detailed but not necessarily about the timing of the incident. She could not tell if the vision was just about to happen or was already happening. However, she saw the exact location of the orphanage so she sent her husband to inform Archie, Mathilda's husband. When Leo mentioned St. Milburga's, I knew it was you. Both Leo and Archie are skilled Aurors working for the MACUSA so we wasted no time in getting there. But...as you well know...we were already too late. Our only consolation was that you were still alive..." Dumbledore leaned back when he finally finished, looking much older and thoroughly exhausted.

"So...all this time...you've been here, hiding with the Prescotts. Why didn't you come to the orphanage? Why did you stop tutoring me? Why didn't you even tell Mr. and Mrs. Figg?"
"When I came here...I wasn't in top form. It took me months to recover just enough strength to walk. The dark curses that were used on me left injuries that couldn't be cured by spells or potions. I was permanently damaged. But the real reason why I didn't go to St. Milburga's or even sent word of my presence, was because we weren't sure if it was safe for me to see you. And if I sent word...I feared that you would not stop until the Figgs let you leave the orphanage to visit me."

Henry nodded, reluctantly admitting that it was a likely scenario. He had actually thought of searching for his missing professor. Had he known where he was, he would've insisted on seeing him.

"I also wasn't quite confident that I wouldn't be traced by Tom's minions. I could not take the chance of unintentionally leading them straight to you. Besides, Archie had put wards in this house that protected me. As long as I was in this house, I was invisible...my magic untraceable. If I left, the wards would be broken and would in effect put the Prescott family in grave peril. Last night was the first time for me to leave the house."

A cold shiver went down Henry's spine. Somehow, Dumbledore's last words seemed to hit too close to home. Was that what happened at St. Milburga's? He now understood that he was not placed there randomly. The place existed for the very purpose of hiding him from this Tom Riddle's evil army. Were there wards placed around the orphanage specifically to protect him? Did he break those wards when he foolishly ran out? Was he the reason why they were traced?

Henry found it suddenly hard to breathe. Was that what Dumbledore wasn't telling him? That the orphanage was exposed when he left? That his absence was what caused the wards to break down?

The man calling himself Prof. Snape had told him that he was sending people to tell him more about his true identity. Was it because the wards were already failing? Or was it only because of that damned Prophecy? Did Dumbledore know that this Snape fellow had already spoken to him and the Figgs about his...role in the wizarding world?

"Professor...do you know anyone by the name of...Snape?"

The old wizard sat up straighter in his chair, looking more attentive than he did when he came in earlier. He looked at Henry from the top of his spectacles, his eyes exhibiting their usual keenness.

"Professor Snape, Henry. He's the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and a very good friend of mine."

"So...you do know him."

"Yes, of course. Why did you ask?"

"Before...b-before the incident last night, Snape...I mean, Prof. Snape...talked to me and Mr. and Mrs. Figg. He said that he would be sending people to St. Milburga's...people who would explain everything to me. He told me a little about...who I really was...about magic being real..."

Henry was hoping that his professor would butt in to inject his own opinion, but Dumbledore remained silent, even his eyes were unmoving...staring at him with unnerving concentration.

"I take it that...you're a real wizard, then?"

Dumbledore nodded, "But so are you, Henry."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you have to keep my identity hidden from me? Why didn't you tell me about my parents...about the Wizarding world...about the Prophecy?"
At the mention of the Prophecy, the former Minister of Magic visibly stiffened in his seat, his normally placid face crumpling into a scowl.

"What do you know about the Prophecy?" his clipped tone told Henry that he wasn't happy about that last bit of information.

"Not enough. Only that I am the Prophecy..."

The old wizard slumped back in his seat and closed his eyes, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. Henry watched as Dumbledore's shoulders sagged, like his burden had become too heavy to bear.

"I now realize that my biggest mistake was not telling you the truth. I apologize for that, Henry. But you have to understand...I...we...had hoped that you would be spared from it. You see, Henry, the truth is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should, therefore, be treated with caution." (from JK Rowling's Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone) It cannot be bandied about without thought of consequence because, at times, it can be more of a liability than an advantage. That's why sometimes, the truth is better hidden than revealed; especially when it brings with it heartache and pain. We were hoping that it wouldn't be necessary to weigh you down with it. We were hoping that you would be able to live a normal life...as normal as your innate abilities would let you."

"What changed then? When did it become necessary to reveal everything to me?"

"When Tom Riddle woke up from his decade-long sleep," Dumbledore said without batting an eye. Somehow, it irritated Henry.

"So...you're basically telling me that had this Tom Riddle not woken up, I would have been kept in the dark my entire life; that I would never have been told about my real identity?"

Dumbledore remained mum still his silence was enough of an answer for Henry.

"You would've let me go through the rest of my life wondering what's wrong with me, why I could do the things that I could, why I was so weird. You would've let me live a lie, wouldn't you?"

"I admit that it sounds cruel if you put it that way. But it's actually for your own protection."

Henry jumped to his feet and started pacing the floor. This interview was truly becoming more and more frustrating by the minute. However, he needed to stay focused on the questions that still needed to be asked, so he took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He may not get the answers that he was looking for or any answer at all, but it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

"What about this...this...Dark Lord that Mr. and Mrs. Figg were talking about? He's also Tom Riddle, isn't he? What's my connection to him? They said that he tried to kill me after he killed my...m-my parents. Why? And please don't tell me that it's because I'm the freaking Prophecy! I don't even know what that goddamn Prophecy is all about!"

Henry felt a tiny sliver of satisfaction when he saw how Dumbledore was taken aback by his words. Yes, it wasn't entirely Dumbledore's fault - what happened at the orphanage - but a big part of it belonged to him. He reasoned that had the old man been more forthright with him, had he tried to ease him gently into this Prophecy thing, he wouldn't have reacted the way that he did. The Figgs said that they were told to keep the truth from him and he would bet his life that it was Dumbledore who gave them that order.

"Henry, as much as I want to tell you all about it now...I think it would be best if you gave yourself time to recover first."
"What? Do you really believe that I can do such a thing? Think of myself first when the people who treated me like their own son are lying dead because of me? They tried to protect me, but one of those masked goons recognized me because I looked like my father. I don't know if anyone of them survived. But if even one of them did, then Mr. and Mrs. Figg would've died in vain because they now know about me. I want to know what I will be up against in case they come after me again."

"The Order will protect you. When we get back to London..."

"No...I'm not going with you. Not until you tell me about the Prophecy."

"Henry..."

"And stop calling me Henry! My name is Harry! Harry Potter! I'm tired of this farce! This has gone far enough. It's about time that you told me the truth, Professor. The whole truth! I want to know everything! I want to know what the goddamn Prophecy is all about!"

A bulb blew up, a grim reminder of the Harry's growing fury. He sighed and raked his fingers through his dark hair. He must not lose control! He turned to Dumbledore and pleaded, "Please, Professor. Help me to understand."

Dumbledore's unblinking eyes were fixed on his, seeming to weigh his options. Then, the old man nodded and leaned on his cane.

"I cannot tell you everything right now, Harry. Some things, you would have to see for yourself. But I will try my best to make you understand why we had to hide the truth from you."

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

And so Dumbledore told him what he wanted to know. He told Harry about Tom Riddle and how he became the Dark Lord who went by the name of Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore told him about the Dark Arts, about the Blood Supremacists, about the Order of the Phoenix and their fight against the forces of Tom Riddle. After that, he told Harry about his parents, why Tom went after them, how Tom killed them and how he went into a decade-long sleep after he tried to kill Harry. Later on, the old wizard explained how they were able to smuggle Harry out of Britain and hide him in an orphanage in America. Finally, he told Harry about the Prophecy.

By the end of Dumbledore's tale, Harry was on his knees, crying. They were not tears of mourning or sorrow. They were tears of frustration, of outrage, of mounting hate.

He wanted to lash out at everyone...anyone...who contributed, even remotely, to the untimely death of the Figgs, of his parents, and possibly the other children at the orphanage.

"The children...what happened to them?"

"The children are fine, Henry. Gordon had sent word that they were all safe in his town house. Prof. Snape's emissaries helped them escape."

For the first time since he had awakened, Harry felt alive again. If not for anything else, the children were enough to give him purpose - enough reason to live. He would see to it that they were all taken care of, protected and kept safe at all times. He would not let them suffer the same fate that the Figgs did. And he would make sure that they were told the truth: that even though they could not do magic, they were still a part of the Wizarding World. Just like Mathilda and Mrs. Figg were. They deserved nothing less.
But first, he must deal with his own heritage. Those emissaries that Prof. Snape had sent would be a good starting point to start his journey back to the world that was kept hidden from him.

He was done running.

He wanted the truth and he got it.

Now he must face it.

o-O-o

There she was...the love of his life. The most beautiful, smartest girl he'd ever met. And she was waiting for him by the Elm tree, waving and smiling the most wondrous smile in the world. He ran and scooped her in his arms. She giggled as he twirled her around and around, both of them carefree and happy. He stopped and they tumbled down on the grass, laughing. He propped up on one elbow and looked down at her. She blushed as she reached up and wove her fingers through his hair, her beautiful brown eyes looking up at him with tenderness.

"James," she whispered. "Do you love me?"

"You know that I do, Hermione. I will do anything for you," he replied. "Do you love me, too?"

She smiled, but there was sadness in her eyes.

"James..."

"James..."

"JAMES!"

The last was whispered harshly and accompanied by a persistent, none-too-gentle shaking of his shoulders. His eyes flew open and Angus' scowling face greeted him.

"What the hell?" James grumbled, pushing his cousin away as he swung his legs to the side of the bed. He squinted at the bright light filtering through the lace curtains.

His heart fell when he realized that he was just dreaming. Why did his dolt of a cousin have to wake him before he could kiss her, even if it was just a dream?

"What's the big rush, Angus? Couldn't you have given me a few more minutes?"

"Have you forgotten that we're having breakfast with the Minister? Get up on your lazy arse, will you? We're running late as it is," Angus said, putting on his school robes.

Breakfast with the Minister? Shite! What's going on here? Are we back at Hogwarts? But this is not Gryffindor Tower, is it?

He shook his head, desperate to clear his sleep-befuddled mind. He turned around and saw that the room was larger than their dorm at Gryffindor Tower and it was decorated in various shades of green and silver - Slytherin colors.

Then, he remembered. He was in their new quarters, one of the rooms in the West wing of Malfoy Manor, which he shared with Angus, Dennis, and Chris. There were just seven of them now - Angus, Dennis, Emma, Chris, Meryll, Janice and himself. All the others were probably on their way back to Hogwarts by now. They had been transferred here yesterday after their usual 'exercises' and had not been told why, but who were they to complain? No one even wondered at
the sudden change in their accommodations.

No one...except him.

He knew that the Minister didn't do this due to a change of heart. There's a reason why they were being treated more humanely now. And he didn't think, even for a second, that this would come for free. This 'pleasant' development would surely come at a price.

And he shuddered to think what that could be.

"The bathroom's down there," Chris said, nodding toward the door at the far end of the room. "We'll wait for you, but please, hurry up. We don't want to anger the Minister this early."

James grunted but jumped to his feet just the same. He took a quick shower and threw on his usual school clothes. Somehow, he wasn't surprised to find their clothes, neatly folded or hung, in the adjacent walk-in closet.

"Are you done?" Angus hollered from the bedroom.

"Yes! I'm just putting on some lipstick and mascara," he quipped.

"Ha-ha. Make it quick, Cinderella!"

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered as he walked back into the bedroom.

Angus gave him a swift once over before heading for the door, Dennis and Chris following closely behind. James did the same.

The girls, Meryll, Janice, and Emma, were already standing in the hallway, flanked by Dumbguard1 and Dumbguard2, both still blissfully unaware that they had once been obliviated. James, however, suspected that Mrs. Crowe and Emmet did more than that to them since their attitude towards the students became a little less hostile after the incident.

"Are we all ready?" Dumbguard1 asked. They all nodded. "Good. Let's go then, we mustn't keep the Minister waiting, especially since he had something special prepared for you."

"Wha-" Dennis started to say, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him from saying more. He turned around and was met by James' frowning and shaking head. He got the point.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, with James running possible scenarios in his head. Still, none of his envisaged settings prepared him for what was, or rather who were, waiting for them in the elegant, formal dining room of Malfoy Manor.

"Ah! Here they are! Come in, children and greet your parents," the Minister said.

The girls did not have to be told twice. They all ran to their parents' waiting arms while the boys contrived to walk toward them with much more dignity and poise; besides Dennis, of course. But that was probably because he was the youngest male in the group.

"Mum! Dad! This is quite a pleasant surprise!" James said parents upon reaching his parents. They wrapped their arms around him as he tried hard to control his emotions. He must not give them a reason to worry, after all.

"What are you doing here?" he asked them. Before either of them could answer, the Minister's voice rang in the air, thereby preventing any further conversation.
"Will you look at that, they all missed you," Lucius said to the parents, his arm going around his wife's shoulder who seemed to be genuinely touched by the impromptu reunion.

"I wish our Draco was here as well," she said, leaning against her husband.

"Don't worry, my love. I will tell Severus to permit Draco to leave Hogwarts for a short visit to Malfoy Manor. I'm sure our son will be delighted to spend a weekend with us," Lucius replied.

After a few minutes, the families were led to the long dining table by four liveried men. The Minister sat at the head of the table while his wife took the other end. As soon as everyone was settled, the Minister clapped his hand and four women wearing traditional maids' uniforms came in with platters of food while the men who had sat them down went around filling their cups with either tea or coffee. The House Elves were nowhere to be seen. It should've delighted James, seeing that the poor creatures were given a much-needed day-off, but it had the opposite effect. He was now more wary of the Minister and his hidden agenda for the day. He just would not let himself believe that Lucius hid the elves to cater to his visitors' sensitivities.

"I would like to thank you all for accepting my invitation on such short notice," Lucius said, inclining his head at the parents. "I had actually planned on having you over for dinner, but my gracious wife said that it might not give you enough time to...bond...with your children. They have an early curfew, you see and we wouldn't want them staying up too late, would we?"

There were murmurs of assent from around the table, particularly from the parents. James glanced at his own parents, both wore bewildered expressions. Clearly, they were puzzled as to why the Minister of Magic (which was roughly equivalent of the British Prime Minister) had taken the time to have breakfast with them.

"Do you have any idea why we were asked to come here today, James? Are you in trouble with the law?" his mother whispered.

"Of course not, mum!" he replied, bothered that his mother immediately assumed the worst of him. Or maybe it was just her lawyer self speaking, he shrugged.

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with James' behavior, my dear," his father said.

"Our esteemed leader, Lord Voldemort, sends his apologies for not being here. He dearly wanted to come, but there were pressing matters that he had to attend to," Lucius said.

"It's quite all right, Minister Malfoy. We are more than honored to be in your presence," a sandy-haired man sitting beside Meryll Greene said.

"Thank you, Mr…"

"Greene, sir. Rupert Greene," he said, flashing a winsome smile.

"Ah! Mr. Greene, yes. You have a very fine daughter there. I've been told that you own a Broadcast network and telecommunications company. Forgive my ignorance regarding the Muggle or Non-Magical world, but what exactly does that mean?" Lucius asked, leaning forward.

"Oh, there's nothing to forgive, Minister. I'm hardly knowledgeable about your Magical world either, so I guess we're even on that matter," Mr. Greene laughed. Lucius raised a brow. Greene cleared his throat and said, "Anyway...ah...where do I begin? Our telecoms company provides service for private and government-owned telephone lines while our Broadcast network provides service to several affiliated TV and radio stations."
"Fascinating! Does that mean that you can reach a great number of people in a very short period of time?" Lucius asked with genuine interest. Clearly, the Minister was not as ignorant of Muggle matters as he would like them to think.

"Yes, that is correct. It really would be better if you could see it first-hand, though. I'd be delighted to give you a tour of our offices and facilities in case you're interested."

"That would be such a great help. Thank you, Mr. Greene. I'll keep that in mind."

"Oh, just call me Rupert, sir. Just tell me the time and day and I'll clear up my schedule for you."

"I'll surely do that. Now, Mr. Havelock," Lucius said, looking down the table at Chris and his parents, "I'm sure you're quite proud of your son there. House Prefect of Hogwarts! That is quite a feat, you know, especially for one who did not come from an old wizarding family. My own son, Draco, is the Head Prefect," he smirked.

"Ah, yes, Minister. We're very proud of our Chris. The name's Garrick, by the way, and this is my wife, Tracey," Chris' father said, pushing up his round spectacles up the bridge of his nose. Chris looked more like his mom, James noticed.

"So, Garrick…I was told that you and your wife are both working?" Lucius asked.

"Yes, Minister. I'm a Senior Accountant at Barclays, a bank in London, while my wife is a Clinical Psychologist at the Nightingale Hospital, also in London."

"Ah! So, let me see if I have this right," the Minister's grinned. "You work in a bank and your wife works in a hospital?" Garrick nodded. "Banks, I understand quite well, but what exactly does a 'clinical psychologist' do?" Lucius asked, turning to Tracey.

"Uhm…basically, I assess people and their behavior by conducting tests, interviews or close observation. After which I make recommendations on how to best alleviate their psychological distress and enhance their mental well-being," Tracey answered with a smile.

"Really? So, you're a sort of…healer of brains?"

"Yes…I think that's close to it," she said, chuckling.

"Well, how about that? We have two healers in the group! Mr. Toffler's father is also a doctor, isn't he, James?" Lucius said, looking directly at the Gryffindor Quidditch captain.

James practically choked on his muffin. He didn't even know that Lucius knew him by name! After a quick gulp of pumpkin juice, James cleared his throat and replied, "Yes, Mr. Malfoy…I mean, Minister! My father is a neuro-surgeon. He treats people's brains."

"Brains again? It seems that Muggles have this innate fascination for the human brain. Well, who wouldn't be, eh? The brain is a mysterious thing, after all," Lucius said. "So, James, aren't you going to introduce your parents?"

"Uhm…right. This is my father, Harold, the neuro-surgeon and this is my mother, Angela, the renowned trial lawyer. Well, renowned in our world, anyway. Ow!" James cried when his mother pinched his side.

"Trial lawyer? What does a… trial lawyer do, Mrs. Toffler?"

"Well…I go to court with my clients to prove their innocence or that they are right about
something. I present my case to a judge and a jury. A jury is a group of people called in by the court to hear the merits of the case and decide on its outcome. I believe that our court of law is very similar to your Wizengamot here," Angela replied. Lucius seemed stunned.

"I'm quite impressed that you know about our Wizengamot," the Minister said.

"I did a bit of research about the Magical world, too, Minister. I had to know what I was letting my son into. You didn't expect me to just blindly send him to Hogwarts now, did you?" Angela Toffler said, an elegant brow raised at the dumbstruck Minister. Way to go, mum, James wanted to cheer.

"Really? How did you manage to do that?" Lucius asked after recovering a bit.

"I have my ways, Minister. Not all Muggles are quite as clueless about your world as wizardkind seemed to think them to be," Angela said, smirking as she emphasized the word 'Muggle'.

"Ah! That is an unfortunate fault on our part, I suppose," Lucius said, sipping tea. "One that will soon be remedied, I assure you."

"Glad to hear that, Minister. I look forward to a more…open-minded…relationship between the Muggle and the Wizarding worlds," Angela lifted her teacup in a mock toast.

Lucius reciprocated the gesture then turned back to James - which made him squirm a little. He didn't like being singled out by the Minister of Magic.

"So, James. Mr. Heathridge said that you have a cousin here with us?" Lucius asked.

"Uhm...yes, Minister. That's my cousin, Angus McDermot," he said pointing to Angus.

"Of course he is! I should've noticed the resemblance," Lucius said as he nodding his head to Angus, who blushed profusely.

"Well, hello there, Mr. McDermot. Would you care to present your family?" Lucius said.

"Yes, Minister, this is my father, Bruce, he's a Royal Navy officer and my mum, Lilyana. She's into the real estate business," Angus said, hands sweeping at his parents. "My mum is a fourth cousin of Aunt Angie's. So...I guess James and I are fifth cousins or something...I can't really be sure..."

A smattering of soft chuckles was heard from the table. Angus smiled shyly.

"So, you're into real estate, Mrs. McDermot?" Narcissa asked, finally participating in the conversation.

"My wife is quite fond of acquiring houses. For what purpose, I do not know. We have only one son after all! It must be for the thrill of decorating them," Lucius said with a wave of his hand.

Lilyana laughed, "Believe me, I do understand. There's nothing more exciting than outfitting a new house, isn't there, Mrs. Malfoy?"

Narcissa dismissed the title with a lazy wave, "Call me Cissy. I have a feeling that we will have lots to discuss later on." The two women laughed and became engaged in their own world.

The conversation next turned to the other parents with Lucius carefully averting his eyes from Angela Toffler. In some way, James sensed that the Minister was a bit intimidated by his mother. He silently cheered for his mum again. As Lucius continued to interview the parents, they soon found out that Emma's parents, Jane and Patrick Smythe, were working as a nurse and college
professor respectively. Later on, they also learned that Janice Porter's mum, Eileen was a journalist working for Time magazine while her dad, Anthony, was a Wing Commander in the Royal Air Force.

As they finished up with their heavily-laden plates, Lucius turned to the Creevey family.

"Now, Mr. Creevey, I take it that you have two wizards in your family?" Lucius said, glancing to his left where Dennis and his parents were seated.

"Just call me John, Minister. And yes, we do! My wife, Pearl, and I were astounded when Colin received his letter from Hogwarts, but when another came for Dennis after two years…well, you can just imagine our delight!" John Creevey laughed as he ruffled his son's hair.

"I'm sure. It's very rare that Muggle families produce two Magical children. You and…Pearl…should be proud of yourselves."

"We indeed are proud, sir, but of our boys and not ourselves. Which makes me wonder about our Colin. Why isn't he here, Minister, if you don't mind me asking," John asked.

Lucius paused, as if in thought. Then, he smiled and said, "I suppose there's no point in keeping you in the dark. We will be working closely together soon, anyway, so you might as well know. Our esteemed Lord Voldemort had envisioned a united world of Muggles and Wizards. And your children will be our…what do you call them? Ambassadors? Yes, they will be ambassadors of the Wizarding communities to your Non-Magical ones. We've chosen your children based on their abilities to wield magic. They went through several tests and only those who passed with flying colors were given the honor to undergo further training as Lord Voldemort's apprentices."

The silence was deafening, they were all shocked speechless by Lucius' declaration.

But Angela Toffler recovered quickly.

"What do you mean by 'a united world of Muggles and Wizards'? What about the Statute of Secrecy? Are you saying that you are now going to reveal yourself to the Muggle world?"

"You really are beginning to amaze me with your knowledge of the Wizarding World, Mrs. Toffler," Lucius said with a mirthless grin, "But to answer your question, no. The Statute of Secrecy is still in force…for now. However, there will be major changes in our laws very soon. And you will be contributing to those changes. As the Wizarding World's ambassadors, you will be expected to help ease Lord Voldemort's entrance into it. We're not going to have any problems with that are we?"

James recognized the subtle threat in that last statement. Chancing a peek at his parents, he saw that it wasn't lost on them either.

The Minister's message was clear - cooperate or else.

Now he understood why their parents were brought here. Voldemort wanted to show the 'apprentices' that he knew who they were, where they lived and worked and that he could get to them anytime that he wanted. Parents and children were all going to be used by the Dark Lord to bridge the gap between the Magical and the Muggle world. Their survival depended on how satisfied the Dark Lord would be with their performance as his elite band of 'ambassadors'.

It, actually, all boiled down to this simple fact: If the children fail, the parents die; if the parents fail, they all die. There really was no room for error and only one means of escape, James knew.
Voldemort must die!

o-O-o

Never before had he been knocked out by a punch. But as the saying goes, there's always a first time for everything. He just wished that this 'first' in his life did not come by way of his teenage nemesis, Sirius Black. Well, to be honest, he could not really blame the man. He had hidden a very important truth from him for almost two decades. Surely, nemesis or not, he was entitled to that punch. Still...did that lunatic really have to hit him that hard?

_Fucking arsehole! I think he just dislocated my jaw!_

"Stop fidgeting with your jaw, Severus! You're going to make it worse! It's just a bruise and my concoction will make it as good as new in a few minutes. If only YOU WOULD STOP FIDGETING!"

"Well, what else would you want me to do, Molly? It still hurts like hell!" Snape snapped.

"Good! You're lucky I temporarily forgot that I was a wizard, otherwise, I would've Avada'ed your arse right then and there," Sirius spat as he poured another shot of Ogden's Old into his crystal goblet.

"Oh, shut up you mangy mutt!"

"What did you say?" said Sirius, slamming his goblet on the table. Lupin was at his side in a flash, ready to hold back his raging friend from pummeling the Hogwarts Headmaster again.

"Oh, for Godric's sake! You're both juveniles!" roared Moody.

"Will you two stop acting like children? If don't stop your arguing, I'm going to gag the both of you and throw you out of this house! Yes, including you, Sirius! I don't care if you own this house or not. There are more important things to discuss now than your childish disputes," cried Molly.

"Childish disputes? Molly, he hid Harry from me...from us! FOR YEARS! We all thought that he was dead, for Merlin's sake!" Sirius raked his fingers through his hair and threw himself on the couch.

"I know that, Sirius. But we have to listen to him. We don't know the whole story yet. And as he said, it wasn't his idea. It was Dumbledore's."

"I think Molly is right, Sirius. We need to listen to what Severus has to say," Lupin said.

"Yes, let the man speak," Shacklebolt said, leaning back in his chair.

"Alright! Alright! Let's hear it then, Snape. And please, don't spare us any details," Sirius said.

Snape looked around to see all eyes pinned on him - Shacklebolt sat beside Tonks and Moody, Arthur stood behind Molly's chair while the twins were leaning against the wall.

And so, Snape told them everything, beginning with that tragic night in Godric's Hollow. Then, he told them about how they smuggled Harry out of Britain, of how they left him with the Figgs and also about Dumbledore tutoring Harry up until before he disappeared. He told them about how Harry exhibited exceptional magical abilities at an early age and about how he used it to help the other children in the orphanage. Sirius seemed to take pride in that, puffing up his chest like a prancing peacock. Snape, of course, had to bring him down his high horse, so he also told them...
about Harry's quick temper and dangerous outbursts. Sirius looked murderous.

"But why didn't you tell any of us about this?" asked Arthur. "We would've taken Harry in."

"What? Harry should've been with me. He's my godson, after all!" said Sirius.

"Oh, Sirius, Harry was still a baby during that time. How could you have cared for a child when you were more like an overgrown child yourself back then?" Molly said, smirking.

"That's why we have nursemaids, Molly!"

"I would've helped Sirius care for young Harry," volunteered Lupin.

"What? A werewolf and an Animagus caring for a child? Are you off your rockers?" roared Moody. Soon, Tonks and even the Weasley twins were involved in what was slowly turning into a heated argument.

"That's precisely why," Snape quietly said, raising a brow at Shacklebolt, the only one who had the presence of mind to stay out of the useless discussion.

"Children, enough! There's really no point in arguing over who should've or shouldn't have taken care of Harry. In case you've forgotten, he's a grown man now and you're discussing something that you can no longer do anything about," Shacklebolt's deep baritone rode over the cacophony, effectively putting a halt to whatever hostilities were developing.

One by one, the Order members went back to their previous positions, the earlier dispute momentarily set aside. Snape absently rubbed his injured jaw, thankful that Molly's remedy was finally working its miracle. He might need it again soon, though. There were still a few tricky questions that he was sure were bound to come up. And he was right.

"You said that you were there…that night…in Godric's Hollow. How did you know that Voldemort would also be there?" Sirius asked, pacing like a caged tiger.

There's no getting out of this now, Snape thought. "Because he told me."

"He told you? Why? Did he also tell you that he planned on killing the Potters?"

"No. Not all of them…just Harry and James. He wasn't going to kill Lily. He promised to spare her," Snape knew what was coming next - Sirius' fist in his face.

Sirius stopped in his tracks and rounded on Snape. Lupin jumped in between the two men, using his body to prevent Sirius from lunging at Snape. Fred and George had also come up behind Sirius and were now restraining him by the arms.

"Fuck you, Snivellus! Voldemort promised you that he would spare Lily? Why? So she could go running back to you? Was that to be your reward for being his lap dog? She never loved you, you freak!" Sirius screamed as he struggled to get away from the three men that were holding him back.

"FUCK YOU! Did you think I didn't know that? I tried to convince the Dark Lord that the Prophecy was not about the Potters' son, but he wouldn't listen. He was so convinced that Harry was the Chosen One! He was beginning to doubt me, so when he asked if I still had feelings for Lily and if I wanted to beg him to spare her, I did! Of course, I truly wanted him to spare her…but not only her, her entire family if possible. So, I went to Dumbledore and asked him to protect them, but even he was too late! James chose to put his trust not on his mentor but on one of his so-called
best friends! And what did he get for that foolish show of loyalty? An early grave! As always, you Gryffindors think not with your heads but with your stupid hearts!” Snape snarled as tears flowed down his cheeks unheeded. "I was there, yes! But I was too late! They were already dead when I got there. I held her cold body in my arms! Can you even comprehend how that felt? But there was nothing more that I could do for her or her family. I could not leave her son alone in that house of death, so I took him away. I brought him to Dumbledore intending to hunt down that murderous anomaly of nature! Dumbledore, however, had other plans. He knew about the Prophecy, about the role of the Potter child in the final downfall of Voldemort. He told me about the Figgs and the orphanage that he had planned on putting up for Squibb children. Only this time, the orphanage would serve as the hiding place for the only hope of our world. We smuggled them all to America and protected that orphanage with enchantments that would have rivaled the ones covering Hogwarts. As long as the Potter boy stayed within the confines of that orphanage, he would be safe with the place unplottable and the magic within untraceable."

"Okay…I understand that now. Everything happened so fast, you had to ensure Harry's safety. But why didn't you tell any of us about it? All these years we’ve mourned the death of the entire Potter family. We thought he had also died! When we didn't find Harry's body in the wreckage, you said that Voldemort's magic must have been too powerful for the child that he was vaporized by the spell! That's why we gave up searching for him!” Sirius snarled.

"It was Dumbledore's idea! He figured that you would place the child in greater danger if you kept on looking for him. The other side thought that the child was dead! If the Order continued its search for the child then Lucius would've ordered the same! And after what Pettigrew did, Dumbledore didn't know who amongst you could be trusted anymore! He couldn't risk exposing the child! Later on, when Voldemort continued to remain in a Death Sleep, Dumbledore saw no compelling reason to tell the child anything about his tragic past. Dumbledore wanted Henry…I mean Harry…to have as normal a life as possible - away from the magical world that had cost him everything,” Snape replied.

"Wait…wait…you said - Henry. Is that what you called him? You changed HIS NAME? Does he even know who he is?” Fred asked, moving away from the wall. The others seemed to be only just realizing that slip as well. Sirius' mind was on something else, however.

"Dumbledore didn't know who to trust amongst us? Yet he trusted YOU, a Death Eater, a close confidante of that fucking Lord of Darkness? Did you confund the old man, Snivellus?” Sirius growled, stalking towards Snape.

"Former Death Eater, mutt! And you for one should know that Dumbledore is immune to such pathetic, elementary spells! He TRUSTED ME! And why wouldn't he? I brought THE CHOSEN ONE to HIM! I could've brought the boy to Lucius, but I brought him to Dumbledore instead! I sacrificed everything for that boy!"

"You brought Harry to Dumbledore because you were afraid of what Lucius and his minions would do to you once they learned that you're the one who warned Dumbledore! You were a coward and you always will be! You did all that to save your skin! You sacrificed NOTHING! " snarled Sirius.

"What do you know about sacrifice, eh, you mangy mutt? I had risked my life EVERYDAY…still risking it UNTIL NOW…just so you lot would know what's happening in Voldemort's camp. Do you even have any idea how dangerous it is to keep your mind guarded when you're face to face with a powerful wizard such as…Oh, yes!," Snape sneered, "Tom Riddle is indeed a powerful wizard, EVIL to the bone without question, but powerful nevertheless, so stop rolling your eyes at me, Black. One slip and I'd be dead! If I wanted my life to be worry-free, I would've just turned
you in! Yet, here I am... And what about you, what have you done for the Order so far? Where were you when James needed protection? Where were you when Pettigrew betrayed them to the Dark Lord? You haven't even killed that RAT to avenge your friends, have you? When everything fell apart, what did you do? You ran away and only returned when Dumbledore assured you that it was okay to come back. And when you got here, did you look for the traitorous hack? No, you spent your days hiding inside this decrepit house of ghouls! You're the coward, Sirius Black, not me! And I thought Gryffindors were supposedly noble and brave," Snape spat, disgusted.

Sirius roared and jumped at Snape. This time, the Hogwarts Headmaster was prepared. He whipped his wand out and cried, "STUPEFY!" Sirius fell on the floor with a loud thud and a crack, his nose had landed first. Molly screamed. Arthur and Shacklebolt held the twins back while Tonks ran out to the foyer where Walburga's portrait was screaming bloody murder again. Moody, on the other hand, only looked on with an amused expression, his magical eye going haywire inside its socket.

"Damn! That's one scary woman! Wait... what's going on? Why is Sirius on the floor?" asked a panting Emmet, his eyes seeking his unofficial uncle.

"He fell," Snape said, dismissing the question with a wave of his hand.

"You bastard! You did that to him," screamed Fred.

"Enough, Fred! If you and George don't behave yourselves, I'm going to send the both of you home! And I'm going to ban you from entering this house again," bellowed Arthur. That seemed to do the trick. The twins looked at each other, shrugged and went to sit quietly on the couch.

"Aren't you going to revive him, Molly?" asked Tonks as she walked back into the room.

"I think it would be better if he stayed that way for a while, might help him cool off. Don't worry; I already healed his nose," Molly said, waving her wand to clean up the blood on Sirius' face. "I just hope that this is the last time that I need to tend to either of you," she said, looking up at Snape. "Or else I'm going to be forced to make good on my earlier threat!"

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

"What brings you here, young Fawley?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Ah, yes! We're in deep shit, folks!" Emmet said, taking a seat.

"What's wrong? What happened?" asked Snape, sitting on the chair facing Emmet.

Emmet sighed, his fingers drumming on the table. "Bad news or good news first?"

"What kind of loony question is that, boy?" growled Moody. "Just spit it out!"

"Let's get the bad out of the way, first. That would at least give us reason to celebrate the good later on," George said. Frednodded in agreement, high-fiving with his twin.

"Yes, better the bad done with before anything else," Arthur said. The others agreed.

"Alright... I summoned Twinkle home last night. The Figgs are dead, tortured by Death Eaters."

Molly and Tonks gasped. The twins and Arthur cursed. Moody growled while Shacklebolt gaped, stunned speechless. Snape slumped against his seat, his face a mask of pained anger. Yaxley and young Rowle, Jr. had been rushed to St. Mungo's before he could get more information out of them. And since Yaxley didn't say anything about the Figgs, he had hoped that the Figgs were able...
to somehow escape the Death Eaters with the help of Harry.

"So…we can assume that the DL now knows about The Chosen One. We can expect more activity from that end in the coming days, so we better prepare."

"What about…Harry?" Snape asked.

"No word yet. I sent Twinkle back as soon as we were done talking," Emmet replied. "There's also this," Emmet said, pulling out the trinket that Snape had given him. The pendant was glowing with what seemed to be words continuously crawling along its length.

"What's that?" asked Shacklebolt, squinting at the crystal pendant.

"Granger's crystal pendant! It's what the Resistance uses to communicate with each other," Fred said, moving forward to gaze at the crystal hanging from Emmet's neck. "Neat trick, eh?"

"Really? That's an incredibly complicated spell…" Tonks said, fascinated.

"Is there a message on it?" asked Arthur with equal fascination.

"Yes. It says - DL 2 use MB and folks 4 MW conquest," said Emmet. "Translation: The Dark Lord will be using the Muggle-borns and their parents in his conquest of the Muggle world."

The twins cursed and punched the wall behind them while Moody and Tonks burst into colorful curses. Lupin slumped in his seat just as Molly, turning to her husband, wrapped her arms around his waist. Shacklebolt jumped to his feet and started pacing.

Only Snape remained stoic; he already knew about that part since the Dark Lord had expounded on it last night. It was one of the reasons why he had rushed here after leaving their 'dinner party'.

"We have to get them out of Malfoy Manor!" Arthur exclaimed.

"I know. But we also need to get to the parents. If the students disappear from the manor, their parents will surely be killed. We'd have to secure them first before rescuing the kids," Snape said.

"Are you done with the bad news?" he asked Emmet.

"Yes…so far, that's all the bad news that I've been carrying around." Everyone sighed.

"And the good news?" Snape asked, leaning forward.

"Your people got out safely together with all the other children. Twinkle's taking care of them. There's a bit of a snag, though. If all the children were to come with them back here, they won't be able to take a plane," Emmet replied.

"Hmmmm…not entirely good news, I see," Snape grunted.

"Well, that's the best that I can do," Emmet smirked in spite of their tremulous situation.

"Your people? You sent Order members to America without informing us?" Lupin said.

"They're not Order members, so don't get your knickers all twisted up, Remus. They're…Hogwarts students," Snape replied.

"What? You sent students to get Harry Potter?" Molly cried, outrage written on her face.

"Oh, don't fret, Molly! I'm not crazy enough to send either one of your offsprings, that you so
graciously left under my care, on anything more dangerous than re-potting a Mandrake. I sent people you wouldn't miss in case things fell through," Snape sneered. Molly's face turned a hellish red, but Snape ignored her and turned to Emmet. "Is there any way that they can travel by Floo? Have any more houses that the Ministry doesn't know about?"

"Actually, the townhouse isn't under surveillance. Dad did not register it when he bought it. He had no intention of using it back then. It was meant to be an investment; buy and sell, you know? But then he went into hiding. The house nearly slipped our minds, if not for Twinkle. She's the one who reminded us that it was still under her care. So, I suppose if we could find a place where we can connect it to a house here…" Emmet trailed off, thinking. "It has to be a place that's not registered with the Ministry…a Muggle place, perhaps?"

"Hey! What about the Shrieking Shack?" suggested Fred.

"Yeah! It's been abandoned for decades, right? No one really knows who owned that place, only that something horrible happened in there years ago," George added.

"No one ever lived there. It was Dumbledore who put up that house there…for me," Lupin said. "He had it constructed during my Hogwarts days…when he learned about my…affliction."

"So…all those tales about the ghouls and evil creatures..." Tonks said.

"Rumors…spread by James and Sirius to keep away curious cats…and snakes," Lupin said, casting a meaningful glare at Snape.

The Hogwarts Headmaster rolled his eyes before turning back to Emmet. "Can you summon Twinkle back so we can give her instructions on how to connect the two places together?"

"Yes…but I don't think she'd be able to do it herself. It would require the magic of a witch or a wizard…Oh! Yeah, right! Right! Your people can do it! Write down the instructions and I'll go back home and summon her," Emmet said. "But who's going to take care of the Shrieking Shack?"

"Leave that to us. Just write down what we have to do," Fred and George said in unison.

o-O-o

Draco saw Hermione stiffen as she stared at The Boy Who Lived. He sensed the tension emanating from her…and the wariness. It was only then that he really took a good look at the Henry/Harry sitting before them. Physically, he seemed exactly like the Harry he knew - the same dark, unruly hair, the same slim built, even the same round spectacles over bright, emerald green eyes. Yet, there was something about this Harry…something he could not place his finger on. It could be the stubborn, downward slant of his lips or maybe the hard glint in his eyes. There was also an intensity about him that somehow felt…raw and dangerous. He wouldn't be surprised if this Harry turned out to be less conscientious than the one he knew.

Unfortunately, he didn't really know the Harry from his own timeline that well. He had only begun a tenuous friendship with the bloke when they were abruptly hurled into this alternate reality. So, how could he really say that this Harry was any different from the other one? Still…he probably should keep a close eye on him. Hermione knew Harry best and if she appeared circumspect with this Harry, then there's a good chance that she noticed something majorly different about him.

But aside from his unexpected initial, albeit minute, mistrust of this Harry, what really unnerved him was the presence of Albus Dumbledore. His first reaction was shame - shame for his role in the great wizard's death. Then, he remembered that this was not that Dumbledore. He, however,
found it strange that this Dumbledore looked less intimidating than the one he knew. He actually didn't look much like a wizard but more like a Muggle college professor, or at least according to Hermione's Muggle magazines. This Dumbledore also appeared frailer because as far as he could remember, their Dumbledore never needed the aid of a walking stick. He just hoped that the difference between the two ended there. It would be a total shame if his image of Dumbledore was diminished by this one.

Although he and Hermione were shocked by the sudden appearance of Harry and Dumbledore, Gordon did not seem surprised at all. He just rose from his seat and silently ushered in his new guests. Quick introductions were made, after which, he instructed the two house elves to bring tea, coffee, and sandwiches. And so now, they were now sitting around the elegant coffee table sipping tea (or coffee in the case of Harry and the American wizard named Leo) and nibbling on dainty sandwiches. Dumbledore was in a quiet discussion with Gordon and Leo, leaving Harry in the company of the two Hogwarts students.

"So…you're the people that Snape…I mean… Prof. Snape sent to meet with me?" Harry said, putting down his cup, his eyes swiveling back and forth between Draco and Hermione.

Draco saw Hermione's tiny smile as she continued to sip her tea, pretending to not notice Harry's irreverent slip.

"Yes, that's right," Draco said, putting his own cup down.

"And you're both Hogwarts students?"

"Uhm…yes," Draco glanced at Hermione (in her Abigail Adams disguise), not sure if he should tell Harry that 'Abigail' was a transferee from Ilvermorny. Hermione, somehow picking up on his distress, turned to him and gave him an almost imperceptible shake of her head. So be it; let Snape make the decision on how much to share with this world's Harry.

"How long have you known that you were Magical?" Harry asked.

Draco didn't know why this line of questioning was making him uncomfortable.

"Ever since I can remember. You see, I come from a family of Pu-(shite!)…a long line of wizards," he mumbled, silently cursing himself for nearly saying the blasted 'P' word.

"Ah, I see. What about you, Ms. Adams?" Harry asked, turning to Hermione.

"I learned that I was a witch when I received my Hogwarts letter. I was eleven at the time," she said, smiling at the fond memory.

"But you didn't know before that…" Harry asked, leaning forward, elbows braced on his knees.

"Well…I sort of…wondered. There were things that I could do that none of my friends…or even my parents were able to. I thought I was weird," she said, chuckling in the end.

Harry smiled and nodded, "I know the feeling. I thought I was weird, too. Then, Mrs. Figg," he seemed to choke on the name, "gave me a Magician's Kit…"

"Yes…she told us," Hermione said, in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

A few moments of silence passed before Harry lifted his head. "What's going to happen now? You came here to take me back to England, right?"
"Uhm...yes..." Hermione said, her hand reaching out for Draco's. "But now that Prof. Dumbledore is here...there might be some changes to."

"No there won't be," Harry said, cutting her off. "I'm going to England with you. I want to know everything about Magic. I will study spells and charms and do whatever it takes to bring down this...this...Voldemort and his band of murderers. I will hunt them all down and I will not stop until they lie dying at my feet!"

Although Harry's words were delivered in a quiet voice, Draco's skin still crawled at the vehemence in them. He shivered at how Harry sounded so much like Voldemort. The Dark Lord could also make one squirm with a whisper. Hermione seemed a bit taken aback as well, based on how she sat up straighter in her chair after Harry's declaration of war.

"Look, Harry...there's..."

Whatever Draco was about to say was cut-off when Twinkle apparated right beside Draco with a loud crack. Harry shot out of his seat with a yelp, his eyes the size of saucers.

"What the hell?" he said, breathless.

Draco would've found the situation hilarious had the Boy Wonder not just uttered those disturbing words. "It's just Twinkle, the Fawleys' house elf," he said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Oh, yeah...right," Harry said, returning to his seat.

Twinkle beamed at him before turning to Draco with a bow.

"Master asked Twinkle to give this to Master Draco and Mistress Abigail," she said, handing over a folded piece of parchment.

"Thank you, Twinkle," Draco said as he reached for the parchment.

The elf smiled and disapparated with another loud crack. Harry, thankfully, did not shriek this time. Hermione, curious as ever, scooted over to Draco whilst he was unfolding the note.

"Instructions on how to connect this house to the Shrieking Shack? Why, in Salazar's name, would we want to be connected to that ghastly piece of crap?" he said turning incredulous eyes to Hermione. She just shrugged.

"I can't imagine. Look, there's a second page," she said, snatching the second piece of parchment.

Draco leaned closer so he could read over her shoulder.

"Thank Merlin we don't have to ride that flying coffin again!" Draco exclaimed after reading the whole thing through.

"Is that a message from my son?" Gordon asked, walking over to them. Dumbledore and Leo were quick to follow, taking a seat on either side of Harry.

"Yes, Gordon. He sent us instructions on how to connect your townhouse to the Shrieking Shack. I'm not sure if he already knows that you're here," replied Draco, passing on the pieces of parchment to Gordon.

"Oh, it's my fault. I told Twinkle to keep my presence a secret. I wanted to surprise my wife and son later on. I was able to make travel arrangements with the MACUSA, you see. But if there's a safe way to travel by Floo, then I would be more than happy to take that route. I've never really liked
traveling by Port-key…makes me queasy," Gordon ended with a grimace.

"The Shrieking Shack? Has the Order moved its headquarters there?" asked Dumbledore.

"Emmet didn't say. He just said that it's safe to use it," Draco replied.

"I didn't know that it had a working fireplace."

"Well…someone must've fixed it, Professor," Hermione said to Dumbledore.

"What are you all talking about?" Harry said, a deep frown creasing his brows.

"Oh…sorry, Harry. We forgot that-

"I know nothing about the wizarding world?" Harry cut her off with a quirk of his eyebrow. "It's okay. That'll soon change, anyway. I'm sorry if I get snappy so easily…I just feel like there's just too much catching up to do and I'm not sure if I'd be able to keep up."

"Don't worry, Harry. We'll help you," Hermione said, reaching out to pat Harry's hand. The young wizard gave a little start, but recovered quickly and grasped Hermione's hand, his eyes twinkling as he gave her a shy smile. Draco squirmed in his seat, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. Fortunately, Hermione had the good sense to let go of Harry's hand before her mildly irritated boyfriend had finished thinking of taking drastic action.

"I'm sure everything will be explained to us when we get there," Gordon said.

"Will the children be going with you to England?" Leo asked Harry.

Dumbledore was about to reply when Harry said, "As much as I want them to be with me…I think they would be safer here. Is there any way that they could remain in America?"

"Well…they could stay here. However, they still would require proper adult supervision. I'm afraid my house elf would not be able to provide that," Gordon said.

"Maybe we could ask the Child Services at MACUSA," suggested Leo.

"No, we can't involve anyone else from MACUSA. Especially now that we know that Voldemort has already infiltrated it," said Dumbledore. "We'd have to do this on our own. Perhaps, Archie could find families that would be willing to take them in."

"What? Break them up and send them to different families?" cried Harry.

"That was why they were in an orphanage, Harry. Or have you forgotten about your other friends who were adopted before? Our goal, even then, was to find them suitable parents - people who really wanted to have children," Dumbledore replied, looking at Harry from the top of his spectacles. He now looked very much like the Dumbledore they knew.

Harry looked like he wanted to contest the old wizard's point, but had thought better of it. He heaved a great sigh and said, "Alright. There're just a few conditions that I'd like to be followed. First, no more lying to them. Tell them the truth about who they are. I could be wrong about this, but based on my encounters with Mathilda and Mrs. Figg, even Squibs have some sort of magical powers. Mathilda can distinguish the Magical and Non-Magical just by touching them and Mrs. Figg…Mrs. Figg could always tell how we're feeling or what we want even before we tell her. I want the children to discover those hidden abilities that they have, as well."
"I suppose we can do that," said Dumbledore. Leo and Gordon nodded their agreement.

"Secondly, I don't want them to be placed in purely Muggle homes. There has to be at least one Magical person in the family, be a child or parent, even if he or she is also a Squib. I want them to grow up knowing about their true heritage, not some made-up history or something."

Dumbledore hesitated as he turned to Leo and Gordon. In the end, it was Leo who spoke for them. "That would take a bit of time... we might have to ask around or even enlist the aid of some MACUSA people, only the trusted ones, of course."

"I don't care how long it takes as long as I'm assured that it will be done according to my specifications. Otherwise, I'll stay here and do it myself," Harry said, his eyes blazing with determination.

Draco felt himself beginning to admire this new Harry. He had as much of the Slytherin cunning in him as much as the Gryffindor bravado and courage. This Harry could be a much more formidable friend and a terrifying foe than the other one. He just wished that this one also had the same moral compass as their Harry.

"Harry, there's no need to resort to threats," Dumbledore said, shaking his head.

"It's not a threat, Professor. I'm just telling you what I would do should my condition not be met. And since I won't even think of threatening my enemies, why would I then do it to my friends?"

Yes, very Slytherin of you, indeed, Potter! Draco thought.

Dumbledore did not respond verbally, yet his eyes fixed Harry with something that bordered between dismay and admiration. After a few heartbeats, the old wizard relented with a nod. "Okay, Harry. I promise that your second condition will be followed to the letter. Now... I suppose there is... more?"

The slight curling at the corners of The Chosen One's lips told Draco that he had heard what he wanted to hear although he didn't want to let the others know that.

"Finally... I want us to have a reunion at least once a year, all of us. I want to see how they are doing, if they're happy where they are. Basically, I want to know everything about them. It's what Mr. and Mrs. Figg would have wanted. Had none of this happened... I'd still be doing the same because that's what I promised them."

Dumbledore said nothing, but there was admiration in his eyes. Now, this, Draco thought, is the Harry Potter he knows - the noble Gryffindor who's always thinking of the welfare of those he cared about. Hermione seemed to share the same sentiments, as evidenced by her teary eyes. Draco had to tamp down the slight tightening in his chest; he must not let Hermione's affection for her friend, or at least the one she remembers and misses, get between the two of them and cause unnecessary tension.

"I'm sure there won't be any problems with that," Dumbledore said, smiling. Leo and Gordon nodded, also smiling at Harry.

"Thank you, that's all I ever wanted," Harry said. "May I see the kids now? Where are they?" he asked, turning to Gordon.

"They're upstairs. Come on, I'll take you them," Gordon said, rising to his feet. Harry followed him out of the room without a backward glance at the others.
Hermione leaned back against Draco, sighing. "He's not exactly as I'd expected," she whispered.

Draco nodded, "I know, but he's not too bad." As he shifted to accommodate Hermione's leaning frame, he accidentally caught sight of Dumbledore and Leo talking quietly, their eyes fixed on him. The old wizard did not even blink when he saw him staring back.

"Is there something wrong, Professor?" he asked, unable to contain his ire.

Dumbledore tilted his head, as if his sizing him up. "I'm just a bit surprised to see you here, Mr. Malfoy. Harry may not know anything about you now, but I'm sure that if he did he would also find it, shall we say - curious - that the Minister's son is doing an errand for the Order of the Phoenix."

Draco stiffened in his seat just as Hermione shot forward in hers.

"With all due respect, sir, but what exactly are you implying?" she asked.

"Oh, I am not implying anything…Miss…Adams, is it? I'm merely stating my curiosity. Everyone knows that Lucius Malfoy is the Dark Lord's right-hand man and an enemy of the Order. He's the one who had me ousted from the Ministry just so the Dark Lord could get control of it. Now, given those facts, can anyone really fault me for having some…reservations…regarding young Malfoy's presence here? And since when has Severus been entrusting his students with important assignments such as the retrieval of the Order's greatest secret?"

"I'm sure the Headmaster will be able to satisfy your curiosity when we see him," Draco replied, glad that his growing anger at the old wizard did not seep into his voice.

He could tell that the former Minister wanted to say more. He could almost hear the gears in his cropped head whirring busily. Eventually, though, the old man decided against it.

Dumbledore sighed and nodded, if a bit reluctantly. "I suppose you're right. I would just have to trust his judgment for the meantime. Now…why don't we get to work on that connection with the Shrieking Shack? Honestly, I never anticipated that stack of junk to serve any other purpose than help a student deal with his…unusual condition."

Draco's brows furrowed, what was the old coot talking about? He'd have to ask Hermione about that one later; for now, they must concentrate on creating a bridge between this house and the one in Hogsmeade.

The faster they were able to go home, the better, he mused as he followed his companions into the other room where the Fawleys' oversized fireplace sat.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know nothing much happened in this chapter. It's actually more like a filler chapter - not too exciting, but necessary to move the story along. Things are going to pick up soon, so hang on tight. Again, thanks for reading my dears! Til next time! Hope you all have a wonderful weekend!
Harry spent most of the morning with the kids from the orphanage, consoling and reassuring them. They had been uprooted from the only life and the only people they knew and in such a brutal and violent way to boot. It would take some time for them to recover from the trauma. Unfortunately, he won't be there to aid them in that as he had his own 'coping' to worry about.

After a quick lunch and Dumbledore's conference with another wizard through the newly connected fireplace, they went back to the Prescott House by way of apparition. Gordon did not want to risk walking through the streets of Manhattan, especially now that they knew that Voldemort's influence had already extended to America.

It was a very strange feeling, but Harry was able to maintain his composure in spite of the slight nausea that he experienced upon arriving at the steps of the townhouse. The feeling quickly passed, so he can safely say that he wouldn't mind doing it again.

He had barely stepped through the door when a body hurtled toward him, two strong arms tightening automatically around his waist.

"Henry! I'm so glad that you're back! I was so worried! And daddy did not tell me that you had already woken up!" Amerlaine cried.

Harry chuckled as he tousled the girl's hair.

"Why, thank you for your concern, Lanie," he said, purposely emphasizing her nickname.
The girl disentangled herself from him and looked up with a stern look on her face.

"Don't call me that! I'm a big girl now," she said, pouting.

"Oh, I know you are. But I think Lanie is a cute name. And it suits you well because you're also cute," Harry said, pinching her cheek.

Amerlaine blushed as she gave Harry a shy smile. "You really think so?"

He nodded and smiled back. "I know so!"

"Henry! It's so good to see that you're well. We were so worried about you," Mathilda said as she walked to stand beside Amerlaine. A tall man with sandy hair and an open, friendly face had a hand resting on her shoulder. He had the same eyes as Amerlaine's.

"This is my husband, Archie," she said. Archie leaned forward and shook Harry's hand.

"I would've preferred meeting you under better circumstances, Henry. But I'm still glad to make your acquaintance," he said, smiling.

"Same here, Mr. Prescott," Harry replied.

"Oh, call me Archie. Everyone else does."

Henry nodded, "Then Archie it is. And now that everything's out in the open, then I prefer if you started calling me Harry."

Amerlaine gasped, her hands going to her mouth. "So…it's true then? You're Harry Potter?"

"Yup, it is true, Lanie. I'm afraid that Harry Potter is not a myth or a bedtime story, but a live and breathing person." Harry said, glancing at a blushing Mathilda.

After a bit of awkward silence, Dumbledore then introduced him to the others in the room. The one with the deep baritone (Voice 1) turned out to be Herbert Goldstein, MACUSA's Chief Auror, while the 'Peter' voice was Peter Kowalski. A slightly roundish man with thick black curls and a friendly face, Peter works at the International Magical Cooperation Dept. of MACUSA.

"Archie, I'd like to thank you for your help…and for bringing me here to your home," Harry said.

"It's an honor, Harry. Don't worry about it. My family and I are here at your service," Archie said, beaming just like his daughter, who had yet to let go of Harry's hand.

They had just settled in the cozy family room when a breathless, strapping young man came bounding up the stairs and into the room, calling out to Archie the whole way.

"Leo! What in heaven's name are you hollering about?" Herbert reprimanded.

"Oh! Sorry, sir. I didn't know you were here," he said, wiping his brow.

"Henry, I mean…Harry, Leopold Graves or Leo, as he probably introduced himself, is my wife's baby brother. And as you already probably know, is also an Auror," Archie said, patting Leo on the back. "It was his wife, Hillary, who warned us of your, uhm, situation last night."

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to thank you earlier, Leo. I wasn't really myself this morning. And please, thank your wife for me as well."
"Don't mention it, Harry. It's our pleasure to help out in any way we can," said Leo.

"What's new, Leo?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well, after I left you at the Fawleys' this morning, I met with our contact at the NYPD. He said that he'll take care of the papers needed for the release of the bodies within the day. We can have the burial tomorrow. If that's what Harry wants, that is," he paused, his eyes darting nervously to Harry.

"Thank you, Leo. Can you please make the necessary arrangements?" Dumbledore asked.

"We'll take care of that, Albus," Herbert said. Dumbledore nodded his thanks.

Harry willed himself to remain composed; he must not break down in front of these people. Focus on the children, he urged himself.

"Uhm…there's something we'd like to discuss regarding the children," he began.

Archie whispered something to Mathilda. She nodded and tried to pry Amerlaine from Harry's side. "Come, sweetie. Help me fix Harry something to eat."

"I want to stay, mom," Amerlaine said, tugging at her mother's hand.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, but you can't stay," Archie said, leaning down to kiss her hair.

"Aww…Will Henry…I mean, Harry, be staying here with us?" she asked, looking hopefully up at Harry, her eyes pleading unashamedly.

"Harry's staying for dinner, aren't you, Harry?" Mathilda said with a wink.

Harry nodded, giving Amerlaine a cheerful smile, "Only if Lanie helps you prepare it."

"Of course I will! I already know how to bake cookies!" the girl said proudly.

"It's settled then! I'll be staying for dinner," Harry replied, winking at Amerlaine.

With that, the girl went bounding after her mother towards the kitchen. The rest of the men went into the sitting room to discuss the future of the children that the Figgs had left behind. There were some concerns raised by both parties, but in the end, they were able to iron them all out. Harry breathed easier after that. Now, he must focus on the other task ahead – the fight against Voldemort. Before he could air his question, though, Herbert spoke up.

"Albus, can you tell us more about this…Voldemort? Why is he only now extending his influence here in America? Of course, I'd rather that he did not, but I was just curious…if he's as formidable and as power-hungry as you say he is, then why is it only now that he's branched out into America?"

"Well…as I've told Archie before, Voldemort went on a decade-long, deathlike sleep…a sort of coma, in Muggle…er..No-Maj terms. It happened right after he tried to kill Harry," Dumbledore replied, casting a cautious eye on Harry. "That's what was missing in the legend…or bedtime stories that you've been hearing about. It only spoke of the boy who survived the killing curse of an evil wizard, but not what happened to the wizard afterward."

"The myth…or legend…about the boy, the Chosen One…did you have anything to do with it?"

"Yes, Herbert. The Order spread those stories around…to give people hope. Unfortunately, most of
the truth, we had to hide so it eventually turned into just another urban legend."

Harry snorted. Yeah, everyone knew about Harry Potter, the Chosen Savior of the Wizarding World; everyone except Harry Potter himself. He mumbled an apology when he saw six pairs of eyes trained on him in various expressions of disbelief and amusement.

"Is Voldemort really that…evil?" Leo asked, his youthful face mirroring the terror being felt by the others. They had all heard tales about Voldemort's bloody and ruthless campaign in the wizarding communities of Britain. And it terrified them that it could also happen in their own communities… had actually happened now if the massacre at St. Milburga's was to be taken into account.

"It doesn't matter if he truly is or isn't, does it? What's important is that we put a stop to his bid for more power," Archie said.

"What's the plan, then?" Harry asked, leaning his elbows on his knees, eyes focused on Dumbledore. The old wizard stared back, as if sizing up the young man before him.

"First, we need to train you up, Harry. I will make sure that you have the best instructors for that. The Order members are some of the best wizards and witches I'd come to know and I'm sure they'll be more than happy to help with your training," Dumbledore replied.

"We'll be doing our part here to stem his growing influence at the MACUSA. And should there be a wizarding war in Britain, count us in," Herbert said. Archie, Leo, and Peter all nodded in agreement, fierce determination written on their faces.

"Thank you for that. Still, let's hope that it doesn't come to that," Dumbledore said.

"I'd like to start training now," Harry said, the stubborn set of his lips giving proof to his words.

"We'll be happy to help," Peter said, straightening in his seat.

"Yes, we can start anytime you want," piped in Leo.

"How far have you gone in your training with Albus?" Archie asked.

"You've been training him, Albus?" Herbert asked, turning to Dumbledore.

The old wizard nodded, "Yes. That's why he already knows me. I've been teaching him some basic spells before I was…ah…seized by Voldemort's minions."

Dumbledore then told them about Harry's ability to do wandless magic even before he knew that what he was doing was magic. They marveled at how Harry, a boy who was not properly taught spellcasting, was able to disarm one of, if not the, greatest wizards of all time using a rudimentary wand. They later, however, expressed concern at Dumbledore's account of Harry's uncontrolled magic.

"Your capacity for magic is undetermined at this point, Harry. And that can be quite dangerous," Herbert said.

Harry did not have to be reminded of what happened at St. Milburga's. That would forever be etched in his mind. What was it that he did there, anyway? He didn't utter any spells, what burst from him was raw energy, the same thing he'd felt since he was a child, only stronger.

"Right now, your magic is tied too closely to your emotions. Which is why light bulbs or pipes explode whenever you're overwhelmed by your feelings," Dumbledore explained. "A proper wand
can help you channel and control that energy. However, we can't go around looking for a wand that would suit you in Diagon Alley. We'd both be apprehended the moment we set foot there."

"I couldn't go there either. I'm surely on the wanted list by now as well," Gordon grimaced.

"Well, if you want, we can go to Ish's place. That's where we got our wands," Archie said.

"Ish's place?" Gordon asked.

"Ishmael Guggenheim's Central Curios near Central Park," Peter replied.

"Yes, he has a variety of wands that may choose Harry. And we can go there without anyone else seeing us. We, Aurors, have a standing agreement with Ish. You know how we sometimes lose, damage or even destroy our wands during assignments," Herbert said with a chuckle.

"Wait…did I hear it right? You said – 'a variety of wands that may choose Harry'. Shouldn't it be the other way around?" asked Harry.

"Not according to Wandlore. You see, it's a long-held belief by wandmakers that it is the wand that chooses the wizard or witch and not the wizard or witch who chooses their wands," Dumbledore explained. The other wizards nodded in agreement.

Harry still didn't understand all that mumbo-jumbo, but as he did not want to waste time in delving into the intricacies of 'wandlore', he just nodded his head. "I see. Can we go there now? I'd really like to get my own wand as soon as possible." Since the others seemed to defer to Dumbledore, Harry addressed his question to the old wizard.

Dumbledore turned his eye to Gordon, a subtle message passing between the two.

"We can go now if you want, Harry," Gordon said.

"Great! Let's go then!" Harry said, jumping to his feet. The others followed suit wordlessly.

"Give me a second, I'll just tell Matty where we're going," Archie said, making his way out the room in a flash. He was back within seconds. "All right, let's go," he said, standing beside Harry.

"I'm afraid I'd have to pass up a visit to Ish's. I need to go back to the office…try to snoop around and see what's happening with my other Aurors," Herbert said.

"Me, too. I'll drop by my department and see what I can dig up," Peter said.

"So…it's just me and Leo, then, boss?" Archie said, grinning at the Chief Auror.

Herbert grunted. "You two are excused for the day. Just make sure that Harry gets chosen by the best wands in Ish's stock." The two Aurors both saluted with a grin. Herbert rolled his eyes and apparated with a soft pop.

Peter clapped Harry on the shoulder and gave him an encouraging grin before apparating.

"Can we apparate from here, too, Archie?" Gordon asked.

"Yes, I already made some modifications on the wards. Just think of Ish's backroom."

"Wait! We haven't been there, so we don't know where we're actually going," Gordon said.

"Oh, right! Sorry, I forgot about that. I can take you and Dumbledore. Leo can take Harry. I hope
you've recovered enough, Harry," Archie said, glancing at Harry.

"I'm fine. It wasn't that much of a bother, honestly," he grinned as he held on to Leo's arm.

Within seconds the motley group was standing inside the darkened storeroom of Ish Guggenheim's curio shop. Archie moved to the door, cautiously opening it. He popped his head through the crack, and seeing that the shop was empty, he stepped through and rang the silver bell on the counter. The floorboards overhead creaked, proof that the proprietor had heard the bell and was on his way down.

Harry, Leo, Dumbledore, and Gordon were also now standing by the counter. Archie had walked over to the front door to lock it, turning the signage to 'Closed' at the same time. They didn't want anyone accidentally walking in to find The Chosen One being 'chosen' by his first wand, after all.

"Ah! Mr. Prescott and Mr. Graves! What a pleasure to have you gracing my shop again," a ridiculously tall, hunched man with tufts of white hair growing on either side of his head boomed.

"Ish! Good to see you again, old man!" Archie said, walking toward the shop proprietor to shake his hand. Leo followed suit, earning him a thump on the shoulder from Ish.

"These are our friends from England, Albus, Gordon…and Harry," Archie said, noticing how the old wandmaker's eyes lingered for a bit longer than necessary on Harry. "It is young Harry who needs a wand, Ish. He…ah…he lost his a couple of days ago."

If the wandmaker believed Archie or not, no one could tell as he remained silently sizing up the young wizard standing before him.

"Hmmm…very well. Let's see what we have here," Ish said, waving his wand to reveal a new section of the shop, hidden from No-Maj eyes by a powerful concealment charm. The cramped, cozy antique shop now looked like twice its previous size. This newly exposed part was overflowing with magical items - floating, whizzing, popping and bubbling about. The right side was lined with shelves filled with stacks of boxes that reached up to the ceiling. Ish moved toward the shelves and started pulling out boxes from here and there. When his arms were finally full, he turned around and dumped his stash on top of the counter.

"Now, let's see which of these will connect with you," Ish said, opening the boxes and lining them up side by side. "What kind of wand did you have before?" the wandmaker asked Harry.

"UHmm…black and glossy?" Harry replied, not sure if that was enough.

"What was it made of, wood and core?" Ish insisted, his bushy brows rising.

"I-I…I don't know. It was just given to me…as a gift."

"Ah! No wonder it left you," Ish concluded. The wandmaker turned back to his boxes, "A wand that did not choose his wizard will never be loyal to him. Now, step up here, Harry and skim your hand over the wands."

Harry did as he was told without question, his hand gliding over the line of wands.

"Now, pick up the wand that seems to speak to you."

When Harry's hand reached the fifth in the line, he felt a tingling sensation. He picked up the wand inside the box. It was an elegant chestnut colored wand with a grooved handle.
"That's an interesting wand. American chestnut with a Jackalope horn core. It can produce powerful enchantment spells. Try to wave it around. Let's see how it will respond to you," said Ish.

Harry gripped the wood tightly and flicked his wrist. He felt a slight spike in his magic flowing into the wand, but nothing happened. His magic seemed to get stoppered once it reached the wand.

"Hmmm…try another one," Ish said, nodding at the other wands still lined up on the counter.

Harry hovered his hand over the wands again. This time, his fingers stopped over a lovely-looking wand with amber-red marbling.

"Sequoia with Uktena fang core. Another interesting wand. Let's see what you can do with it. Go on and give it a wave," Ish said, his observant eyes fixed intently on Harry. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, a slight smile adorning his face.

The wand felt heavier than the first one, but it fit in his fingers perfectly. He lifted it in the air and waved it carelessly. The air around them grew hot and the lights flickered before exploding in unison. Ish was at his side in an instant, grabbing the wand and prying it out of Harry's hand.

"I'm so sorry! I don't know what happened!" Harry cried in mortification.

"Don't worry about it. I should've known better. This combination is quite susceptible to its handler's emotions; although, it can be very powerful, loyal, and excellent for healing charms. You obviously have too much emotional baggage for this wand to handle," Ish said, smirking as he returned the wand to its velvet-lined box. "Let's just try another."

Reluctantly, Harry swept his hand over the wands again. This time, a dark, plain-looking wand flew into his hand. Its reaction to his grip was immediate. Sparks flew from the tip, a faint glow emitting from its entire length. A golden thread appeared from the handle and wound around Harry's wrist before disappearing in a puff of bluish green mist.

"I think your wand has found you. And it's powerful one, too!" Gordon said, smiling.

"Yes, that really is a very powerful wand, Harry. Koa wood with Snallygaster scale core. The Koa is perfect for duelists and Aurors since it is known for speed, balance, and power. It is also ideal for a witch or wizard who's embarking on a journey or searching for something," Ish explained.

Harry couldn't help but smile, he indeed was in search of something – revenge; and definitely about to embark on a journey – back to the Wizarding World, he did not even know existed until a few days ago. This wand would serve him well in both.

"The Snallygaster scale is very rare and it produces the most powerful magic known to wizardkind. A word of caution, however, and I hope you heed this. Try to avoid delving into the Dark Arts. The Snallygaster core of your wand has a tendency to embrace the Dark side when exposed much too often to it. And as we all know, the wand can influence its master. We wouldn't want to lose such a promising wizard to the Dark now, do we?" Ish's bushy brows were knotted in a frown, as if trying to figure out the new bearer of one of his most precious wands. Will he be a true Champion of the Light considering that this wand chose him?

All of his wands are precious to Ish, true, but there are a few that rise to the top of his list, due to the intricacy of design or powerful magic. And this one is at the very top of that list. He took a great risk in acceding to the demand of the wood for its core. Perhaps something wondrous would come out of it in the hands of this young warrior. For even if his guests did not tell him the true identity of the young wizard, he recognized him for who he really was – Harry Potter, the Chosen
One. He could not really hide his infamous scar now, could he? And Ish had very sharp eyes.

Truthfully, very few American wizards knew of the boy's existence. Most of them dismissed the tales about him as utter rubbish or plain and simple urban legend. But Ish had always made it his duty to be well informed about the goings-on in the various Wizarding communities all over the world. He was, after all, in a position to hear rumors and actual news disguised as rumors. His underground contacts had been buzzing about what happened in a Manhattan orphanage and the implications that went with it – both good and bad. So, yes, he was very much aware of the great battle that this seemingly unassuming youthful man would soon face.

He just prayed to the heavens that the wand from Ish Guggenheim's Central Curios would help the Savior of the Wizarding World achieve victory and glory.

For all their sakes.

o-O-o

There was nothing more enjoyable than a day spent with loved ones. Or at least that's what James thought. He could tell that his friends also felt the same way, judging by the content expressions on their faces as they gathered in the girls' bedroom to exchange stories.

Their parents had stayed until dinner, after an entertaining, well-guided tour around the Manor and its extensive grounds. The Creeveys loved the vegetable and herb garden at the back, being farm owners themselves. The ladies, of course, nearly swooned at the colorful flowers that bloomed majestically around the perimeter while the men thoroughly appreciated the grand maze (even after some of them got lost and had to be rescued by the Minister's liveried servants).

His parents, he knew were still wary of the Minister and his real intentions, but they also relaxed a little after seeing the rooms where they were staying. James didn't have the heart to tell them that they had just been transferred there after spending most of their stay in the dungeons. It would only rile up his mother and upset his father. So, he swallowed the bile in his throat and smiled through gritted teeth, pretending to be okay. As the day progressed, he found himself easing into a false sense of calm and contentment.

All in all, the day was the best they'd ever spent in their gilded cage.

James sighed, annoyed to be reminded of their real situation. They were nothing more than prisoners in this place, no matter how comfortable and grand their accommodations were right now. He just hoped that the others would not forget that.

Especially the part about their parents being virtual hostages, baits dangled in front of them to make them do Voldemort's bidding. Looking around at his fellow students' blissful faces, he feared that it would be very easy for them to fail to remember that.

A hard body flopped down beside him, nudging his shoulder. It was Angus. He didn't look very happy either.

"Look at those fools," he said, nodding at the giggling girls lounging on the plush carpeted floor. "They seem to have forgotten that nothing has changed, we're still prisoners here," he muttered, leaning back on his elbows.

"Let them be. Tomorrow will be too soon to remind them of that," James replied.

"What?" Angus spat, abruptly sitting up to peer at James, "Have you gone daft? Let them be. Yeah, right. Let them ignore the fact that the Minister's upping his ante. He's holding our parents hostage,
just in case you'd forgotten that!"

James raked his fingers through his hair, frustrated at his cousin.

"Of course I hadn't forgotten! I'm not saying that we should! I just want to let them enjoy this respite for a while longer! Is that so bad?" he said, turning to Angus.

Angus seemed to mull over what he said, his eyes going back to the three girls still gossiping merrily, oblivious to the growing tension between the two men.

"I suppose you're right. No sense getting worked up over something we can't control anyway."

James nodded, looking up when the door opened to let in Dennis and Chris.

"Hey! We thought you'd both be here. Are we having a meeting?" Dennis said, sitting Indian-style in front of Angus and James.

James chuckled as he shook his head. "No, Dennis. We're just trying to enjoy some peace and quiet," he said, absently twiddling his invisible pendant.

"Hmmm…yeah. I guess we should enjoy it for as long as it lasts."

Chris sat down beside Dennis with a mulish expression on his face. He glanced backward at the girls and smiled. "They look happy…for once," he said. "At least Emma's not crying anymore."

They all knew about how Emma cried herself to sleep almost every night.

"Let's hope she stays that way," Angus said, averting his eyes.

Chris' head snapped back to Angus, a frown creasing his brow, "And what's that supposed to mean? Are you saying that you're getting tired of hearing her cry herself to sleep every night? Well, I'm sorry it bothers you so, Mister! Not all of us are brave and fearless Gryffindors, you know!"

"Whoa! I didn't say anything like that," Angus said, raising both hands in surrender.

"You didn't have to. I saw it in your eyes," Chris said, glaring.

Angus grumbled, cursing silently. He hated how Ravenclaws were always so perceptive.

"All right, enough of that. We're all highly strung as it is. Let's just try to enjoy whatever else we can this evening. I'm sure tomorrow's not going to be as easy as today," James said, rubbing his eyes.

"Hey! How about we have a game?" Dennis chimed cheerfully.

"Uh…yeah, sure. What kind of game?" Angus said, exchanging curious looks with James and Chris. Both of them just shrugged, unable to guess what kind of game Dennis was suggesting.

In reply, the young Gryffindor rushed out of the room, coming back shortly with an empty bottle in his hand, beaming spectacularly at them.

James laughed, pretty much deducing what Dennis wanted to do.

"Ah! Let me guess…truth or dare?" Chris ventured.

Dennis' shoulders slumped as he sat back down beside Chris.
"Aww…I thought you didn't know that game," he said, hanging his head.

They all laughed as Angus reached out and ruffled Dennis' hair.

"It's okay! We'll still play. Let's just ask the girls if they want to join," Chris said, jumping to his feet. He walked to where the girls sat huddled around a large tome. They looked up as he talked. Then, he turned around and gestured for them to come forward, the girls giggling behind him. They formed a circle around the empty bottle, sitting cross-legged on the thick, burgundy carpet.

"So…truth or dare, huh?" Emma said, smirking at Dennis.

Dennis blushed, glancing nervously at Meryll.

Aha! Dennis has a crush on the young Ravenclaw! James thought, chuckling to himself.

Janice and Meryll were both clapping and laughing merrily. Soon enough all of them were caught up in the contagious giddiness of the two girls.

"So…who should start? Who gets to spin and ask the first question?" asked Angus.

"Dennis, of course! T'was his idea!" Janice giggled.

Angus clapped Dennis' shoulder and said, "Spin away, young Gryffindor!"

Dennis' cheeks bloomed a bloody red, but he smiled and reached forward to spin the bottle.

As the bottle spun around, the three girls clapped and cheered, chanting at it to bypass them. It finally wobbled to a stop, pointing at Merryl. Janice and Emma squealed in delight as Meryll feigned a loud groan, her hands covering her eyes.

"Argh! Why me?" she said in mock anger, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Uhm…sorry," Dennis mumbled, looking away.

"Hey! I'm just jesting!" Meryll laughed.

"Uh….okay. So…truth or dare?" he asked, eyes staring wide at the Ravenclaw witch.

Merryl skewed up her face, biting on her lower lip as she appeared to struggle over her decision. Then, she looked at Dennis and smirked, "Truth!"

"Oh! Yeah….right! Okay…uhm," he paused and turned to James, whispering, "Can I ask her anything? I mean…can it be a personal question?"

"Of course! She chose truth, after all," James replied, trying to keep his voice neutral.

Dennis nodded, paused, and turned back to Meryll, "Uhm…okay. Would you consider dating a Gryffindor?" he said in a rush, blushing profusely.

"Uhm…what? Can you please speak slower?" Meryll said, "I didn't really catch that."

Dennis looked like he wanted nothing more than for the floor to swallow him whole. James nudged him in the ribs and winked when Dennis turned saucer-sized eyes on him.

"Ask her again," James whispered. "It'll be okay, I promise." James saw how the young witch looked at Dennis and he would bet his favorite Quidditch team that she felt the same way for the
Gryffindor wizard. The bloke was just too clueless to notice. He smirked when Dennis nodded.


"Oh," Meryll said, her cute, pink lips forming a big O.

Now she's the one who's blushing, James noted with a smirk. Unfortunately, he also noted, Dennis didn't know what that meant for him.

"Uhm…Yeah. I mean…of course I would! But it would still depend on which Gryffindor is asking," Meryll answered, smiling shyly at Dennis.

Dennis gawped at her, his eyes nearly bulging out their sockets. James nudged him again. The young Gryffindor turned to him like a mechanized robot.

"Close your mouth, it's very unmanly," James chuckled.

"Right…Yeah." His head swiveled back to Meryll who was eyeing him curiously. "Oh…t-thanks Meryll. For answering, I mean," he said, looking down at the bottle.

"Oh. No problem, Dennis," Meryll said, looking a bit dejected.

"Would you go out with me?" Dennis blurted before he could stop himself.

Meryll's head snapped up, her lips forming a dazzling smile as she nodded vigorously.

"Yes! Yes, I'd love that!" she said, her voice rising by another octave.

Cheers and giggles broke out around the room. The girls were hugging each other while the boys were thumping Dennis on the shoulder, congratulating him for that out-of-the-blue suave move.

When their flighty moment had passed, Chris took over, reaching for the bottle.

"All right. It's your turn now, Meryll. Spin the bottle," he said, throwing the bottle to Meryll.

The girl put it down and spun it around. James crossed his fingers. He wasn't ready yet. Thankfully, it stopped on Emma. The girls burst into another fit of giggles.

"Emma, truth or dare?" Meryll asked, tweaking a brow at the older witch.

"Hmm…truth?" she said before bursting into laughter. She knew what they were hoping for.

They all groaned. "Isn't anyone going to choose dare?" Angus griped.

"Well, when it's your turn, Angus, you choose dare," Emma said, smirking.

"Maybe I would! You lot have got nothing to ask me anyways because I'm not hiding any secrets," Angus replied, winking dramatically at them all.

Emma rolled her eyes before turning to Meryll. "Ask away, Mer," she said.

Meryll looked at her, eyes glinting maliciously, "So…is Chris a good kisser?"

Emma's jaw dropped. "You catty minx!" she said, laughing as she playfully slapped Meryll's arm.

Chris' shoulders shook as he tried to contain his own laughter behind splayed hands.
"What? It's only a question!" protested Meryll above the catcalls and whistles of the boys.

Janice was by now rolling on the floor, clutching her stomach.

"Well? Is he or is he not?" persisted Meryll.

Emma's face turned red as she threw a quick glance at Chris who was now staring at her with an amused expression. She gave him an appraising look, her lips quivering.

"No, he's not a good kisser," Emma said, raising her brow wickedly at Chris. "He's an exceptional kisser! The best I've ever had the pleasure of kissing," she finished with a wink.

The girls launched into another fit of giggles while the boys cheered and whistled as they all thumped Chris's shoulders and arms. Chris looked like he wanted to die that very minute.

"All right! All right! The night's still young and we still have a few people around who haven't been thrown into the meat grinder!" said Chris over the din.

"Wait! I have a question," piped in Janice, her hand raised high.

"You have to wait for your turn, Janice," snickered Angus.

"No! No! This concerns the game," she said.

"Well…all right," shrugged Angus.

"What's the punishment if someone refuses to do a dare?"

"Good question! Guess we forgot about that one," said James.

"Wait! I think I have a suitable punishment," replied Angus, running out the door without a word. When he came back, he was carrying a bottle of Ogden's Old and a shot glass.

"Where did you get that?" asked Chris.

"You didn't steal it did you?" James asked, frowning at his cousin.

"Of course not! You're just a bunch of clueless blokes. I found it in our room. In case you failed to notice, the big armoire by the door's actually a bar. And to think that we're all sleeping in the same room," Angus said, shaking his head at the other boys.

"Take it back! Someone might go looking for it!" cried Meryll.

"It's the cheapest bottle in there, so I doubt if anyone's going to look for it," said Angus. "Unless… you're all too chicken for a little bit of Firewhiskey."

Protests and snorts rippled in the room.

"Besides, only those who refuse to do a dare need to drink from it, so where's the harm in that? If you don't want to take a shot then just do the dare," Angus said, wriggling his brows.

"Okay, okay! Let's just get on with the game!" cried Janice.

"Emma, it's your turn!" Meryll said, nudging the girl beside her.

Emma reached out to spin the bottle. It stopped on Janice.
And the boys were treated to another round of squealing. They all shook their heads.

"Dare!" Janice said before Emma could even ask her question.

"Ooooh!" the boys said in unison.

"Brave girl!" laughed Angus.

"So what's your dare?" Janice asked Emma, bouncing up and down.

Emma squinted at the girl, as if thinking of the most daring dare that she could throw at the over-excited Hufflepuff. She grinned devilishly after a heartbeat.

"I dare you to kiss the one that you find most attractive in this room," she said.

Janice's eyes took on a fiendish glint.

"Except for Chris, of course!" Emma amended.

"Oh, don't worry, Ems. I don't like sharing," Janice snorted.

"And it has to last for at least ten seconds!" Emma hurriedly added. If she thought Janice would back out now, she was sorely disappointed.

"What? Ten seconds! You can't call that a proper kiss!" Janice pouted.

"Well...we can't very well let you snog each other in front of us all! Just call this a nudge in the right direction. If he reciprocates then you can snog each other senseless later," Emma said, chuckling.

"Oh, all right," Janice said, turning her attention on the boys eyeing her.

She rose from her spot and slowly walked towards the other side of the room.

James saw that she was looking at him so he quickly averted his gaze and stared at the empty bottle temporarily forgotten in the middle of the room. He sighed when he saw her kneel in front of Angus, her arms going around his cousin's neck as she slowly lowered her lips onto his.

"Ten...nine...eight..." The others started chanting the countdown and he merrily joined in, clapping along. They'd already reached one, but Janice and Angus were still at it, snogging like there was no tomorrow.

Chris and Dennis wolf-whistled as Emma and Meryll screamed and giggled. Seeing that the two had gone deaf to their noisy attempt at breaking them apart, James slapped a hand on Angus' shoulder and tried to pry his cousin away from the Hufflepuff witch.

When that still didn't work, he jumped to his feet and said in a loud voice, "Minister Malfoy! We're so sorry about the noise."

It acted like a charm. The two flew apart in a flash, each one scrambling to their feet. When they realized the ruse, they both turned to James and playfully pummeled his arms.

"Sorry! Sorry! We were just starting to gag at your display!" he laughed, running away from the interrupted lovebirds chasing him around the room.

"You're just jealous because Granger's not here!" Janice chortled.
Angus stopped in his tracks and gaped at Janice. James swiveled to the girl and blinked.

Janice looked like she'd swallowed a canary. "I-I'm sorry. I d-didn't mean to," she whispered, her hand reaching out to James.

"It's okay. Let's just forget it, okay?" James said, twisting on his heel to return to his spot beside Chris. He felt Angus' eyes burning holes on his back, but he ignored him. His cousin could grill him later.

James' hardly noticed how his hand instinctively went for the invisible pendant hanging inside his shirt, too wrapped up in his thoughts about the missing Head Girl.

Where are you, Hermione? Are you okay?

o-O-o

The atmosphere in the Fawley townhouse after most of the men had left was quiet, though not gloomy. After all, kids would always be kids, especially the younger ones. And their current guardians, Hermione and Draco, did their best to keep them entertained enough to distract them from their present situation.

The two had come to know all seven children and were fast forming a connection with them. Elena was the eldest at 14, Jamie was 12, Aaron was 10, Jillian and Brian were both 8, Annie was 7, and Jason was the youngest at 5. The platinum-haired boy was by far the most active and the easiest to please among them all. Having the same hair color as Draco's (which he never failed to take note of), he naturally gravitated toward the Slytherin Seeker. Hermione couldn't help but smile at seeing how much Draco seemed to take pleasure in having the young boy around – something she never would've even thought possible. Who knew that the snobbish Pureblood had a soft spot for children?

Elena and Jamie, being the ones who somehow understood at least a little of what was actually happening, often sat brooding or staring out the window. Aaron, being the eldest male, tried his best to act mature, looking after the younger ones when Hermione and Draco were not present. Jillian and Annie liked following Hermione around while Brian was content to be left alone as long as he had a book in hand. The only time his head would appear from behind his book was when he had a question.

The whole afternoon was spent in the den amidst toys and books. At first, it was only Jillian and Annie who took interest; dolls always did call out to girls their age. Brian followed soon after discovering that the extensive library of the Fawleys contained numerous volumes about ancient cultures. Aaron amused himself with the Wizard's Chess set that he found already set-up on an elegant Victorian table. Now, as they prepared to be called to dinner, even Elena and Jamie were sprawled on the carpet, looking at an oversized and colorful, animated atlas.

"Miss Abigail, are you also from England? Mr. and Mrs. Figg said that we all came from England," Elena asked, looking up from the tome.

"Yes, I am," she replied, putting down the book on ancient spells that she was reading. Draco was giving Jason a piggy-back ride, which the young boy seemed to enjoy immensely.

"I knew you were because you speak just like us," Jamie said, smiling.

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, I do, don't I?"

Had the kids been more exposed to American children, they probably would be speaking with a
different accent, Hermione mused, as children preferred to conform rather than stand out. Of course, they did not know much about other children. St. Milburga's was the entire world for them. The only time that they saw the 'outside world', according to Mrs. Figg, was when she and Mr. Figg took them to the zoo a couple of years ago. And the field trip was so brief that it could have hardly made an impression on them.

"Are you going back to England with Henry?" Jamie asked.

"Harry, not Henry," corrected Elena.

"Oh, yeah! Sorry, I forgot."

"Uhm…yes, Draco and I will be going back with Harry," Hermione said, smiling sadly. She really wished the kids would be going with them. But Harry was right, they would be safer here. Even she didn't know what would greet them upon their return.

"I'm going with Draco!" yelled Jason as he ran towards Hermione, skillfully evading Draco's hands. He jumped onto the couch where she sat and started pulling on her arm. "Miss Abigail, I'm going with Draco, right? Pleaaasee!"

Draco plopped right beside the boy and pulled him onto his lap, his pained eyes going to Hermione. She realized that Draco had also become attached to the boy and being separated from him was going to hurt the normally stoic Slytherin. She could only imagine how Harry was feeling.

"I told you that you can't come with me just yet, didn't I? Draco's going to be very busy and won't have time to give you piggy-back rides. You'll get so bored you'll start to hate Draco," he said, playfully tweaking the boy's nose.

"No, I won't! I don't have to get piggy-back rides every time! I can play with toys by myself. And…and…I won't hate you if I get bored! I promise!" Jason cried, his tiny arms going around Draco.

"But Harry wants you to stay here with your friends because he knows they'll be sad without you," Draco tried the true and tested 'Harry' bit. He and Hermione had noticed that Harry held great sway over the children. Even when they're misbehaving or being difficult, just one mention of Harry's name was enough to get them to behave.

"No, he wants me to stay here because he doesn't want me to go with him," Jason pouted.

"That's not true, Jason, and you know it. Harry wants nothing more than to be with you. But he also doesn't want you to get hurt. Remember the night that we left the…uhm…your house? We left because there were bad people there. And those bad people will also be where Harry, Herm…uhm…Abigail and I are going. So, you have to stay here and be safe," Draco hoped that that would be enough for the young boy.

Jason looked up at Draco with his big, blue eyes, tears forming around the rim. He hugged Draco tightly and whispered, "Will you promise to come back for me?"

Draco closed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his forehead on the child's blonde head. Hermione reached for his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Her heart clenched when he saw the sadness, fear, and despair in those stormy gray eyes when they opened to look at her.

What should I tell him? I don't want to give him false hopes, Hermione.

I know…but…if it were up to you…will you come back for him? Do you want to?
YES! You know that I do! If I'm allowed to adopt him, I will!

Then, tell him that you're coming back for him.

But, what if…

What?

What if I can't…come back…

She knew what he meant, but she just could not let him go down that path. They must never give in to their fears. They will triumph over Voldemort! They did it once and they'll do it again.

Don't you dare think like that, Draco Malfoy! We're both coming back for that boy! I'll make sure that you get to keep your promise to him if it's the last thing that I do!

Draco blinked and closed his mind to her, ending their connection. The sadness in his eyes was still there and it pinched at Hermione's heart. Why is he always so pessimistic? She tried to reach into his mind again, but his walls were already up.

"Okay, okay. I promise to come back for you. But we'd have to ask Harry's permission first," Draco said, hugging the boy back.

"YAY! He's going to agree, I promise!" Jason whooped and hugged Draco. After which, he swooped down on Hermione and hugged her before giving her a sound smack on the cheek.

Draco and Hermione laughed as their eyes followed Jason running around the room screaming, "Draco's coming back for me! Draco's coming back for me! I'm going to live with Draco!"

The other children gawked at him in disbelief, thinking that it was just another of his pranks, but seeing the smiling faces of their temporary guardians they all clapped their hands and cheered with the boy. At least one of them already had a waiting home for him.

Twinkle's appearance announcing dinner did not put a stop to their impromptu celebration but rather extended it up to the dinner table. They continued to laugh and joke around as they enjoyed another excellent meal courtesy of the two house elves. After the last ice cream cone was consumed, Draco declared dinner finished and he and Hermione promptly ushered the kids up to their rooms.

Jason, of course, had to be tucked in personally by Draco.

Hermione watched as he brushed a soft kiss on the boy's forehead. Somehow, it felt too domestic…and sweet. If he could be like this to a boy he'd only known for a day, what would he be like to his own children?

Oh, shut up, Hermione! You're thinking too far into the future again!

Blushing in embarrassment at her eventually inappropriate thoughts, she hurriedly left the room and ran into hers. They had decided, for propriety's sake, especially now that Gordon and Harry would be in residence, that she and Draco take separate bedrooms. It would be lonely, as she'd already gotten used to sleeping beside him, but she figured she'd survive.

Draco seemed that he wouldn't, though. Within minutes, he was knocking at her door, begging entrance. Hermione sighed. So much for propriety, then!
"It's open," she called out.

The door swung open to reveal a fully-prepared-for-bed Draco, shirtless and donning emerald-green silk pajama pants. She noted a dark green bathrobe slung over his shoulders. Thanks to Leo and his contacts, their bags were delivered to them right after lunch so they had their own clothes back.

Well, at least he's thought of appearing decent.

She turned to him, hands on her hips, her usual confrontational stance. She was hoping he'd get the message and leave. It didn't work. The blasted ferret threw his robe on an armchair and proceeded to lounge on the bed, a hungry expression in his eyes.

"I thought we agreed that we'd sleep in different rooms?" she said.

"Agreed? Hmmm…I think it was suggested. By you," he replied, stretching lazily on the bed.

"As I recall, you didn't disagree with it. So, your agreement was implied."

"Implied…maybe. But not confirmed. There's a difference between the two, dearest."

"Draco…"

"Hermione…"

"Ooh! You're such a….Oooh!" she stomped angrily into the bathroom. She heard him chuckling as she closed the door. Sliding the glass panel of the shower stall and she turned the taps to get the right water temperature for her bath. Her gums nearly bled as she brushed her teeth furiously. When will she ever win an argument with that…slimy ferret?

And as if the said rodent had heard her thoughts, two, pale arms slithered around her waist, pulling her back against a perfectly sculpted chest.

"Draco! Get out of here! What if someone comes in and finds you here!"

"No one's coming in, sweetheart. I put intricate locking and silencing charms on the door," he said as he nuzzled her neck, his fingers tracing lazy circles on her stomach.

Hermione felt herself responding to Draco's touch, melting in his arms. How could she ever be truly angry with this man?

"D-Draco…please…I need to shower first," she said, feeling stupid the moment the words left her lips. Shower first? And then what? Hermione, you're in deep trouble!

"Oh, sweetheart, you smell so good already," Draco whispered in her ear. Hermione shivered. "You don't need to shower, luv. But if you insist…"

Before Hermione could process what he was saying, Draco was already pulling her into the stall and under the oversized showerhead. She shrieked as hot water pelted her fully clothed body. Draco quickly adjusted the taps, laughing as he went along.

"Damn, woman! Were you planning on boiling yourself?"

"I was too mad to notice the temperature!" she huffed. "And now it's too cold!"

Draco reached out for the taps to make more adjustments. "Is that to your liking now, Princess?" he
said, laughing.

"How can I bathe fully clothed?" Hermione grumbled.

"Well…we can easily remedy that, can't we?" Draco said with a mischievous grin.

Hermione gasped, "You wouldn't dare!"

"Really? What if I did? What would you do?" Draco's lips were tantalizingly too close and Hermione had to restrain herself from pulling him down to her own.

"Don't you dare, Draco Malfoy!"

"Oh, I definitely won't. Not while you look like that anyway. Can't I get my Hermione back? I'm tired of looking at this impostor," he said, pulling away from her.

"Aww…do you really prefer that big, bushy hair? Am I not prettier with these slick, blonde tresses and these deep, blue eyes?" she said, batting her lashes.

"Yes, I prefer that bushy, wiry, all-tangly chestnut hair and I'm rather fond of looking down those brown orbs that turn amber when the owner is happy," Draco said, kissing her pouting lips.

"Oh, all right! Hand me my wand, it's on the dresser behind you."

Draco relinquished his hold on her and walked the short distance to the dresser, returning a second later with her wand. He passed it to her with a smirk, "Now, I want to see my Hermione."

Hermione's heart fluttered at his possessive use of her name. Sometimes she still wondered if they're really together and this…his calling her 'my Hermione'…makes it more real for her.

"You sure you don't want to be with the pretty, blonde Slytherin?" she teased.

"My bushy-haired Gryffette is prettier by miles and I'd like to be with her now," Draco said, emphasizing the last word with a playful stomp of his foot.

Hermione laughed then waved her wand from the top of her head down to her feet, quietly muttering the incantation needed for her transformation. After the slight mist had dissipated, she walked over to her waiting Slytherin, a wicked grin gracing her lips.

"Well, my Slytherin prince, now that your bushy-haired Gryffette is here…what, pray tell, were you so impatient to do with her?"

Draco growled, grabbed her arms and pulled her back into the stall, under the pleasant shower of warm water. She was about to protest when Draco's lips came crashing down on hers, his tongue pushing between her lips, demanding entrance. Hermione granted him permission, welcoming his onslaught with complete abandon. Her arms went around his neck of their own accord, fingers clutching at his blonde hair. His hands gripped the hem of her shirt and started pulling it up. Hermione helped him along, heaving it over her head.

"I've always wanted to do this," Draco said, a mischievous smile gracing his lips.

He turned Hermione around and pressed on the shampoo bottle. Reaching up, Draco lathered her hair with the strawberry scented concoction, his fingers working in slow circles. When her hair was completely covered in suds, he shifted her toward the showerhead and rinsed her hair, twisting and flicking out the excess water. Then, he reached for the sweet, floral scented soap and started
soaping her back, the long fingers of his other hand working a lather on her skin, massaging her shoulders in the process. His hands moved down her back in a leisurely crawl, fingers tracing circles around her shoulder blades down to the small of her back. Then, his hands moved to her waist and worked its way up to her sides. Draco purposely bypassed her twin mounds, his fingers moving up to her neck instead. Hermione moaned as his hands finally made their way to her breasts, his thumbs rubbing at the distended peaks. He squeezed and pulled at them as he gently nibbled at the back of her neck, his tongue tracing the smooth column all the way down to her spine.

It was a sensuous and extremely arousing activity in spite of its seemingly innocent origin and Hermione had to brace her hands against the tiled wall in front of her to prevent herself from melting into the floor in a puddle. When Draco's hands began their descent, down to the buttons of her jeans, Hermione leaned back into him, her hands going around his neck. With one swift flick, the button was freed and Draco slid the zipper down. He slipped his fingers through the gartered top of her knickers. Hermione's breath caught in her throat as Draco's finger started rubbing on her heated bud. Another finger followed the first, sliding easily into her moist center. Thus, he began the sensual rhythm that made Hermione spread her legs to accommodate him further. His finger slid in and out of her sheath as his thumb continued to rub her now throbbing bud. She was so caught up in her own pleasure that she hardly noticed how Draco had started grinding into her from behind, the proof of his arousal pressing against her fully covered ass.

As Draco's fingers moved faster and deeper, a knot started to form low in Hermione's stomach…growing…building…getting hotter as Draco kept on rubbing and pounding into her slick opening. She was a bundle of flaming nerves…stimulated to near ecstasy by everything that's happening to her - warm lips sucking on her neck, hard hips grinding more feverishly against her, the water beating a frenzied tattoo on her skin - taking her to heights she'd never been to before. And when Draco quickened his pace, pressing more frantically into her, Hermione's restraint broke.

"Oh, gods! Draco!" she whimpered as she was wracked by pleasurable convulsions.

Draco grunted, slamming even more violently against her until he too, growled her name and gave into his own pleasure. They were both panting as Draco rested his head against the back of her neck. When they were both breathing normally again, Hermione turned around and pulled him into a deep, lingering kiss. He retaliated with his own demanding kiss, his warm tongue plunging deeply into her mouth. He pulled back and looked at her with eyes that spoke of unbridled desire.

"Salazar's sake, Hermione. The next time that I let myself lose it like that, it will be in bed and in between those gorgeous legs of yours," he chuckled.

Hermione blushed, biting her lip as an image of what Draco said assaulted her mind.

"Oh…please stop doing that or I'm going to strip you naked so fast and make love to you right here in the shower," he groaned.

"Haven't you already done that?" Hermione asked innocently.

"Believe me, sweetheart. That wasn't making love. You'll know it when I make love to you," Draco replied, nibbling at her earlobe. "Now, I believe we should finish our showers," he pecked her lips, "separately," he chuckled and kissed her one last time.

Hermione giggled as she watched her drenched lover saunter towards the door, thoughtfully pulling it closed as he stepped out. She promptly stripped off the rest of her clothes and continued with her now oh so boring shower. She had just finished dressing when three short raps made her turn to the door. Thinking that it was Draco returning for another snogging session, she ran to the door and
pulled it open without thinking. It wasn't Draco.

"Hello, Abigail, I was wondering if….wait…who are you?" Harry asked, frowning.

Shite! I forgot to change back into Abigail!

o-O-o

Hogsmeade had always been a quiet village. Except during Hogsmeade weekend, of course, when Hogwarts students would come en masse to partake of the delights offered by the shops dotting its famous High Street. Wizards from all over usually come and drop by Madame Puddifoot's for tea or Zonko's for a laugh or two. But aside from its shops, the only all-wizarding community in England also had another popular attraction - The mysterious Shrieking Shack. This seemingly ramshackle structure stood atop a small hill overlooking Hogsmeade. One of the reasons why it had been dubbed 'The Most Mysterious House in Hogsmeade' was the fact that no one could tell when it was constructed. In fact, if one were to ask the long-time residents of the village, they would say that it appeared out of nowhere. An old wizard who used to work at Zonko's even said that he remembered walking through the rocky plateau on which it stood one minute and coming out the house's front porch the next. Naturally, hardly anyone took him seriously. Zonko's was, after all, a joke shop and its personnel were known to be hard-core pranksters. Not one soul had even come close to the true origin of the place, which was to help a Hogwarts student deal with his rather rare and potentially deadly affliction.

These days, however, The Shrieking Shack serves a more important purpose being now the official headquarters of the Resistance and the second hideout of the Order of the Phoenix. Thanks to the Weasley twins’ exceptional talents at Charms and Transfiguration, this decrepit structure had been turned into a cozy and comfortable homestead almost overnight. Two of the three bedrooms on its second floor had been refurbished with beds, complete with beddings, armchairs and even closets. The Shack also had two working bathrooms now, one on each floor. The most spacious bedroom upstairs was left bare except for the thick rugs and oversized throw pillows that the twins had brought the first time that they visited the place. It would serve as a conference/training room as the Resistance planned on continuing their training here. The twins had also made sure that the Shack's reputation was maintained - howls and shrieks were still known to originate from it every now and then. More powerful wards were also placed around its perimeter to discourage overly curious onlookers from looking too closely.

But the most important function of the Shack now was its ability to transport Resistance and Order members through a newly established Floo network and, more significantly, without the Ministry's knowledge. Fred and George, with the help of Lupin, were able to fix the boarded-up fireplace and connect it to another one located thousands of miles across the North Atlantic Ocean. The discovery of this connection was a fortunate accident that came at a very opportune time - just when they were on the brink of war. And today, this connection would be tested to its fullest. The Weasley twins had spent the entire night exchanging messages, objects and finally two Pygmy Puffs with the people on the other side just to ensure that it would be safe for human travel. Finally, at half-past three in the morning, the Floo connection was declared to be 100% secure and harmless to humans. After which, Lupin gave the twins a much-needed break, literally pushing them up the stairs to enjoy the rest of the day snoring in bed, promising that he would keep an eye for any messages coming through the newly restored fireplace.

He, himself, stretched out on the squishy couch that they had placed facing it, hoping to get even a few winks of sleep. He figured that it would take a few more hours for Dumbledore and his companions to make their appearance. Lupin, in truth, had not yet overcome his surprise and delight at Dumbledore's reappearance. It was one of the reasons why he opted to stay and help the
twins. At first, he was just curious to see what had happened to his old hideaway. He had spent many awful nights here, true, but this had also been where he spent some of the best times of his life with his friends - James, Sirius and…yes, even Peter. They were the Marauders - sworn brothers by choice. Unfortunately, even blood brothers sometimes turn into enemies, what more with those who shared not one drop.

Lupin twisted in his make-shift bed, unable to contain his excitement at seeing his old mentor again. He owed Dumbledore more than just his life, but also his sanity. He didn't even want to think what would've happened to him had Dumbledore not offered to take him on as a student in spite of his unfortunate condition. His years at Hogwarts were not easy, but they were at least more than bearable. When Voldemort began his pursuit of power, he recruited many of his kind and tried to turn them into an army. What Voldemort did not realize was that his kind was not as easy to control as his mindless or overly ambitious followers. Werewolves had urges that were hard to ignore or subdue. They could also very vicious, violent and ruthless. They could kill without reason or provocation, so Voldemort ended up destroying most of his werewolf recruits rather than risk losing his more productive minions. Since then, Voldemort had treated werewolves with nothing more than revulsion, marking them for death when captured. Had it not been for Dumbledore and the Order, he would be pushing up daisies by now.

A quiet murmuring coming from the stairs made him sit up on the couch, his enhanced sense of hearing immediately identifying one of the voices as belonging to Neville. He was not mistaken.

The group consisting of two boys and three girls stopped short upon seeing him standing near the fireplace. He recognized the red-headed one as Ginny, Arthur and Molly's only daughter.

"Hey, Remus! We didn't think you'd still be here," Neville said, walking up to him. The young Resistance leader reached out to shake his hand, but Remus pulled him into a bear hug.

"I'm so glad to see you again, Neville! You look so much like your father," Remus said, painfully remembering Frank Longbottom, one of the first to suffer under Voldemort's reign of terror.

"Me, too, Remus! It's been so long!" Neville said as Lupin pulled away. "What've you been up to, anyway? Last I heard, you were in Armenia," Neville moved to sit on one of the armchairs.

The rest of his gang followed, spreading around the available seats. Lupin noted that Ginny sat beside a tall, good-looking young man with smooth, mocha-colored skin. He'd never seen the boy before, but there was something familiar about him. The girl with the white-blond hair also looked like someone he knew.

"Oh, that. Yes…I was doing Order stuff. But mostly, I was looking for Albus. By the way…aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?" he said, turning his eye on Neville's companions.

"Right! I completely forgot that you haven't met them all. They're all Resistance members, of course, otherwise, they wouldn't be here," Neville chuckled.

"I would hope not! This place is top secret, after all," Lupin said, smiling.

"Absolutely! Anyway….uhm….this is Luna Lovegood, my girlfriend," Neville said, draping his arm around the blonde girl's shoulder.

"Ah! Lovegood? Are you related to Xenophilius Lovegood, the owner of The Quibbler?"

"Yes, sir. He's my father," replied Luna in a very airy voice.

Lupin nodded glad that the mystery was explained quite easily.
"I won't introduce Ginny to you anymore, I'm sure you remember her," Neville said, turning to the one sitting beside Ginny. "This is Blaise Zabini."

"Glad to meet you, sir," the boy named Blaise leaned forward to shake Lupin's hand.

"Zabini….of the Pureblood Italian Zabinis?" he asked, staring straight into the young man's eyes. That explains it. He'd met the scion of the Zabini clan, Stefano, when he was searching for Sirius, what….18 years ago? Blaise wasn't the spitting image of his father, but they had the same air of privilege and wealth in their carriage. The Zabinis of Italy were considered 'royalty', being one of the last two Pureblood clans left there. Their political leanings were not clear, however. But at least, Lupin never heard of any Zabinis being involved with Voldemort before. And as far as he could remember, Stefano, who was an only child, died years ago so, if this young man before him was his son, then he would be heir to one of the richest and most influential clans in Wizarding Italy.

"Uh…yes, sir. I'm related to them," Blaise replied, glancing at Ginny. The redhead smiled sweetly, leaning back against him.

"And this is Theodore Nott," Neville was saying, turning to the lanky boy lounging beside Zabini. Lupin stiffened at the mention of the boy's name.

"Nott? Are you related to Adolphus Nott?" Lupin asked, his voice taking on an edge.

The boy straightened in his seat, squaring his shoulders and answered in a clear voice, "Yes, sir. He's my father. But let me assure you that we do not share the same beliefs."

Lupin could tell that the boy was telling the truth still, he couldn't help but feel wary of him. Purebloods value family above all else. Was this boy any different?

"Remus, we trust Theo. He's a dedicated member of the Resistance. He's taken a Blood Oath with us so we are assured of his loyalty," Neville said, trying to stem any impending conflict.

"Blood Oath? What do you mean?" Lupin asked.

Neville then told him about the Oath that every Resistance member took, how it was done by Hermione, and even about the consequences of betrayal. Lupin had to admit that he was impressed by the intricacy and ingenuity of the Oath. Not even members of the Order were asked to do such a thing….which, in hindsight, proved disastrous for them. Had they been inducted in the same manner, then Pettigrew would not have been able to divulge the location of the Potters. An Oath made with blood was almost as strong as an Unbreakable Vow, if not stronger, depending on the spells included to protect it. That a witch as young as Granger could perform such complicated spellwork made Lupin admire and fear her at the same time. Blood spells border on the Dark Arts after all.

"Hermione's Muggle-born, isn't she?" Lupin asked, remembering that tiny bit about the girl. He'd kept tabs on the goings-on at Hogwarts (he'd always wanted to teach there) and her name had come up quite often, usually accompanied by praises from McGonagall and even Severus.

"Yes, she is," said Neville, nodding.

"I take it she's still at Malfoy Manor, then? I heard that Voldemort's keeping the more promising witches and wizards locked up there – for his 'apprenticeship' program," Lupin nearly spat.

An uncomfortable silence fell on the group, eyes swiveling to one another.
"Why? What's wrong?" Lupin felt his hackles rise just a bit. And he didn't like it.

"Well...we're not really sure where she is," Ginny said.

"We have a theory, though," Luna said airily.

"And we're hoping that we're right," Theo said. Blaise and Neville nodded.

"Wait...I'm confused. There are just two places where she could be – Malfoy Manor or Hogwarts. Are you telling me that she's not in either two?" asked Lupin.

"Er...yeah...sort of..." Neville mumbled.

"Sort of? What do you mean 'sort of'?"

"Okay. I think we better tell him what we've come up with," Blaise suggested.

The others nodded in agreement. Leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, Blaise proceeded to tell Lupin everything (with Theo and Neville butting in every now and then with their own info) – from what happened on the day that the Muggle-borns left for the Registration up to the time that Theo discovered the 'Granger' in the Hospital Wing. They even showed him their crystal pendant, explaining how it worked (which earned a muffled 'shite' from Lupin as he examined Neville's crystal which he held in his fingers). He readily agreed that the fact that they could not take it off proved that there were more enchantments embedded in it than just the Protean charm. Lupin also admitted that their theory about Abigail Adams was quite possible, especially after he'd seen what kind of magic Granger was capable of doing.

"Well, at least you'd be able to prove if our theory is correct soon enough as Abigail Adams will be coming through this very portal within a few hours," Lupin said, as he stretched his arms to stifle a yawn. His body craved rest, but his mind was too pumped up to even consider sleep.

"Wait, you said Abigail will be coming through this portal? Why?" Neville asked, frowning. Lupin saw the same bewildered expression on the faces of the other students sitting before him.

"You didn't know? Didn't Severus tell you that he sent her to escort the Chosen One back to England?" he asked, feeling foolish all of a sudden. When Neville and his group arrived, he assumed that they were there because Snape sent them. Now, he wasn't sure.

"Uh...no. We thought Abigail had to tie up some loose ends at her old school," Neville said, his frown deepening. And then, as realization dawned, he slapped his forehead and groaned. "I think you really owe Ms. Adams a very big apology, Theo," he said, turning to the flustered Slytherin.

Theo gulped and said, "I know!"

"Shite! So this proves our theory! Abigail really is Granger!" Blaise blurted.

"That's why I never got anywhere when I asked the other professors if they knew where Abigail was! They really didn't know!" Luna said, shaking her head.

"Of course! Snape would never entrust such an important assignment to Abigail if she's truly who she says she is!" Ginny said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well...I guess that solves the mystery of the missing Head Girl, doesn't it?" Lupin said with a grin of his own, glad that the group was able to work that one out on their own. He could've just told them point blank that if Adams was sent to do such a top secret assignment, then their theory...
that Abigail Adams was Hermione Granger was spot on. Where's the fun in that, though? Besides, they needed the mental exercise, especially now that things were escalating.

However, there was still one piece of information that he thought he should share with these young warriors. It might help him make a fairer judgment on the person Dumbledore had asked him to evaluate.

"By the way, I was told that one other Hogwarts student would be coming back with Ms. Adam's party – Draco Malfoy," he said, studiously observing the Resistance members' faces. Of course, he knew who Draco Malfoy was, who wouldn't? There's only one Malfoy family left in Wizarding Britain so it's hard not to know their members. He actually just wanted to see how the other Hogwarts students would react to this tidbit.

It was a bit fascinating, in fact, witnessing their reactions. Nott and Zabini looked at each other, communicating wordlessly. Luna's face remained passive, but her eyes twinkled with some hidden knowledge. It was only Ginny and Neville who looked like they'd been slapped senseless.

"What the...Malfoy's with Adams? So...he knew about the…" Neville stammered, seemingly unable to string a coherent thought together.

"Did you know about this?" Ginny said, glaring at Blaise.

"Of course not!" Blaise retorted heatedly.

"But…we had our own theories, too," Theo said, casting a desperate glance at Blaise.

"What theories?" Lupin asked, getting really interested now.

"Yeah, what theories?" Neville piped in.

"Uh…shite! Should I tell them, Blaise?" Theo said, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Why not? Let's see what they make of it," answered Blaise, ignoring Ginny's dagger looks.

Theo nodded. "Okay…so we're not really sure how it all began, but for the past few weeks… Draco's been acting strange…"

Ginny snorted. "As if he could get any stranger…"

Blaise shook his head and chuckled, "Believe me, Luv. Even you would find his actions strange. Ow!" Blaise cried as he rubbed the arm that Ginny had just punched.

"Just get on with it, Theo," Neville said, paying no attention to the bickering lovebirds.

Getting a nod from Lupin, Theo launched on his and Blaise's (as he adamantly stressed) observations regarding Draco Malfoy's odd behavior. He told them everything; starting with the day he found Draco and Hermione getting cozy in the hallway, all the way up to the day that he left to 'accompany' Abigail to Ilvermorny. His audience was silent after his narrative, each one lost in his or her own thoughts regarding the strangeness of Draco Malfoy.

"I think the real question here is…can he be trusted?" Lupin said, breaking the silence.

"Yes. He's taken the Blood Oath, too," Luna said.

They all turned to her with mixed expressions - disbelief, outrage, comprehension. The last one was very evident in Neville's eyes.
"Merlin's red pants! Are you saying that Malfoy's crossed over to the Light side?" Ginny exclaimed, her hands covering her mouth.

"I believe so," Luna answered, smiling serenely. The others gaped in disbelief.

"I think Luna's right," Lupin said, leaning back. Seeing the questioning gazes of Theo, Blaise and Ginny, he continued, "Just think about it. We in the Order didn't even know that Harry was still alive. Only Snape and Dumbledore knew where he was. Then, out of the blue, Snape sends Granger and Malfoy to retrieve him. Does Snape strike you as one who's overly trusting?"

They all shook their heads. Lupin grinned, "I thought not. Snape's still one of Voldemort's most trusted allies in spite of his being a high-ranking Order member. You do not get to that level of trustworthiness by being careless. And I bet my last unpatched robe that he knows more about Draco and Granger than he's letting on. How else could he have delegated such a highly sensitive assignment to two Hogwarts students?" Seeing that he still held his audience's attention captive, Lupin plodded on, "And as you said, Granger's a highly exceptional witch. Would someone like her let herself be easily duped? I bet my best pair of socks that she made Draco take the Blood Oath before letting him tag along with her to America."

Lupin was relieved to see comprehension dawning on the Resistance members’ faces.

"But…if Draco's signed on with the Resistance…why didn't he tell us? He knew that we'd already joined up," Theo said, his face scrunched up in utter annoyance.

"Mate, when has Draco ever revealed his plans to us?" Blaise chuckled darkly.

"Why didn't Hermione tell me?" Neville muttered, shaking his head.

"Why didn't Snape tell me?" snorted Lupin. "Look, obviously, they all have their own reasons. Let's not take this too personally. This isn't about us, after all. Snape may not be such an outstanding person, but I know that he's dedicated to the Order and he doesn't take unnecessary risks. I'm sure everything would be explained to us sooner or later."

"Let's just be glad that Draco's on our side, mate," Blaise said, thumping Theo on the shoulder. Theo grimaced, still nursing a bruised ego. "At least we're assured that we wouldn't be exchanging hexes with him on the battlefield," Blaise finished, ruffling Theo's sandy locks.

"Yeah, I suppose so. We'd be surely dead if we did. Between the three of us, Draco's hands down the best dueler there is," Theo grudgingly said.

"I know!" laughed Blaise.

"I'd love to see Ron's face when he finds out," Ginny said with a dreamy look on her face. They all laughed. Ron's hatred of Malfoy, and generally all Slytherins, was legendary.

"Yup, that would be thoroughly entertaining. However, I think it would be better if we kept this to ourselves first. Until we know what Snape's planning, at least," admonished Lupin.

Everyone agreed although Ginny looked a bit disappointed. The talk then turned to other matters - Order plans, the Resistance's further involvement in the fight against Voldemort until they lapsed into talking about mundane things.

Lupin found himself drifting off, exhaustion slowly overtaking him. The Resistance members being typical teenagers eventually started wandering into the kitchen, leaving Lupin in peace.
(which he was silently thankful for). He stretched out on the couch again and closed his eyes. Still, sleep was slow in coming. His mind was still churning with all the information he’d been blasted with today and he had to consciously shut it down - werewolves normally took days to completely wind down. Gradually, his breathing slowed as both his body and mind started to relax and gave in to sleep. It would be hours before he would be startled into wakefulness by screams and scuffling.

A deflected hex exploded near Lupin's head dragging him from sleep, instinct instantly taking over. He deftly jumped behind the couch as he drew his wand. Behind him, he saw Fred and George with their wands out, eyes fierce and menacing. His sleep-fogged mind took a couple of seconds to comprehend the ridiculous scene before him.

Standing by the fireplace were Dumbledore and Gordon, looking stunned and annoyed at the same time. Gordon had his left arm stretched out as if protecting something or someone, his right hand holding his ebony wand pointed steadily at the twins.

"Fred…George…lower your wands," Lupin said, moving closer to the twins.

"What's going on here?" Blaise's deep voice rumbled as he ran into the room; Ginny, Neville, Theo and Luna following closely behind. They stopped in their tracks as they gaped at the volatile scene before them. Lupin noticed that Blaise and Theo had surreptitiously taken out their wands, too.

"What's that snake doing here?" snarled Fred.

It was only then that Lupin noticed the two figures standing behind the two older wizards - a blonde girl and a tall, young man with platinum blonde hair. The young wizard's identity, Lupin didn't even have to guess (he was the spitting image of his father); the girl, he assumed must be Hermione Granger still in her Abigail Adams disguise.

"That's so rich coming from a weasel," Draco hissed, looking murderous.

Fred and George growled as they aimed for Malfoy.


The twins looked like Dumbledore had just slapped them.

"Wh-what? Snape sent a snake to get the Chosen One?" choked out Fred.

"Has he gone mental?" George huffed.

"Will you two brutes just lower your wands? You're obviously the ones who'd gone mental! Didn't you even care to notice who he's with?" Ginny spat at her brothers, her own wand at the ready.

Fred and George glanced at each other, an unspoken message passing between the two. As one, they lowered their wands and mumbled an apology at Dumbledore.

"We obviously have some trust issues here," Lupin said.

"Not really, Remus. There's only one person here that we don't trust," Fred said, glaring at Malfoy. George looked like he wanted to laugh in spite of their situation.

"Would it help if I vouched for him?" Hermione/Abigail said as she stepped forward, wand loosely held in her hand.
"No offense meant, sweetheart, but why should we trust you? We don't even know you," Fred smirked. George nodded, smiling at the blonde girl as he mouthed the word 'Sorry'.

Lupin could sense the battle raging within the girl. She wanted to reveal herself, to make the twins trust Draco, yet she was a dedicated Resistance fighter and she understood the importance of maintaining her cover. Still, Lupin felt her resolve weakening, leaning towards revealing her secret to save the blonde Slytherin from further humiliation. She cares for him! Lupin thought.

Before could say anything more, however, Neville stepped forward and stood before the twins.

"I'm vouching for Malfoy. Hermione…," Neville glanced at Abigail, "Hermione told me before about Mal…uhm..Draco's desire to switch sides. He apparently went directly to Headmaster Snape to declare his loyalty."

Draco and the Hermione/Abigail girl both looked stunned by the Resistance leaders' words. Lupin sensed that Neville was making everything up.

The twins frowned, exchanging meaningful looks. George started to speak when bright green flames burst inside the fireplace. Every eye in the room turned as one to it, momentarily forgetting the earlier altercation. When the fire died down, a dark-haired, young man gingerly stepped out of the grate, brilliant emerald-green eyes behind round spectacles scanning his new surroundings.

"Harry Potter," Lupin breathed.

The young man turned to him and gave him a smile that looked only too familiar.

"Uh…hello…what did I miss?" he said.

Chapter End Notes

**A/N: Comments, reviews, anything? Anyway, thanks for reading!**
Hello, my lovelies! Sorry for the sporadic updates. I hope you're still out there. If you are, thanks a ton! Don't worry, I don't plan on abandoning this story so rest assured that you'll be seeing an Epilogue for this one. BTW, if anyone of you has TapChat, please check out my short Dramione there - "I'm Smarter Than You" - short, sweet and funny, a stark contrast to this plot-heavy epic. If you can't find it, look for my username: bbcherrytomato. Okay, enough self-promotion! Let's get down to the nitty-gritty! Hope you all enjoy it.

The tension in the room broke when Harry stepped out of the fireplace. Lupin rushed to him and gave him a bear hug while the others fell into a deathly silence as they gaped at the Prophesied savior of the Wizarding World. The twins, of course, were the first to break out of their trance.

"Bloody hell! It's really you, isn't it? The Chosen One!" Fred said, walking towards Harry.

"Merlin's red socks! You look exactly like your dad, Harry!" said George.

"Uh...thanks...I guess," mumbled Harry, glancing at Lupin.

"It's true. You're the spitting image of James. Except for your eyes...you've got your mother's eyes," he said with a sad smile.

Harry nodded, not really knowing how to respond. He didn't even know what his parents looked like. The Figgs never kept any pictures of the children's parents at the orphanage.

"I'm George, by the way - George Weasley," George said, shaking Harry's hand.

"And I'm Fred, obviously the sexier and more good-looking twin," Fred said, taking Harry's outstretched hand.

George playfully punched Fred's arm, "You wish!"

Harry laughed. He had a feeling that he was going to like these two.

"I suppose introductions are in order," Lupin said, gesturing for Neville and the others to come forward. They quickly obliged, eager eyes fixed on the last hope of the Wizarding World.

"This is Neville Longbottom, leader of the Resistance," Lupin said.

Harry reached for Neville's hand, "Leader of The Resistance? Impressive!"

Neville blushed. "I'm not the leader. I'm just the one who organized a group of Hogwarts students to help in the fight against the DL. It was actually Hermione's idea," he said, his eye flicking to the blonde girl talking animatedly with Gordon Fawley.
Harry did not miss the implication of that unconscious gesture. He knows! Do the others know as well? But how could Neville have known? Abby...Hermione said only Draco and Snape knew of her disguise. And me, of course, but only because I accidentally saw her as Hermione.

"And these are fellow Resistance members - Luna, Ginny, Blaise, and Theo."

Harry shook hands with each one, lingering slightly on Ginny. The redhead noticed and laughed.

"Yes, I'm Fred and George's sister. It's the hair, isn't it? Quite a giveaway. If you see another redhead around here, you can bet that he's also a Weasley," she chuckled.

Blaise moved closer to Ginny, a possessive hand resting casually on her shoulder. Harry got the message - she's his girl. It's not as if he was interested anyway. Unfortunately, the one that had caught his interest was also with someone else, he thought wryly.

"So, Harry, where are you going to stay? Will you be going to Hogwarts?" Fred asked.

"Uhm...actually...I don't know. It hasn't been discussed yet. But Prof. Dumbledore said that we'd be meeting with Snape later on," Harry replied.

The twins chuckled. "Don't worry, Harry, we all call him Snape, too," they said in unison.

"Fred...George..." Lupin said, wagging his finger at the twins. "Don't you start giving Harry some wrong ideas now. You both know you're to call the Headmaster Professor, not Snape."

"What's wrong with 'Snape'? That's his name, isn't it?" Fred said, smirking.

"I know! But you also know what I mean! Don't make me tell your mum," Lupin warned.

Both Fred and George turned a shade paler before mumbling something incoherent.

"What was that?" Lupin narrowed his eyes at the twins.

"Nothing!" they both muttered, their eyes swiveling to Draco.

"You two better behave. Your father wouldn't like hearing about what happened earlier, so don't do anything foolish," said Lupin. The twins looked at their feet in shame.

"He just caught us by surprise. Reflex, you know. We're just not used to seeing him up this close and personal," George said, nodding at the blonde Slytherin.

"And who's that girl?" Fred asked Harry.

"That's Her...(clears throat)...Abby, Abigail Adams," Harry replied, blushing. He couldn't believe he almost gave away Hermione's secret. Damn! I don't think I'm cut out for spy work!

The twins took his discomfort for something else, judging by the way they wiggled their brows at him. Harry blushed even more when they winked at him conspiratorially.

"Your secret's safe with us, Harry," Fred whispered.

"Oh! NO! No! T-there's no secret! It's...it's not what you think," he stammered.

"Well, she'd be better off with you than with a snake," George grumbled.

"Hey!" Theo and Blaise blurted.
"George," Lupin said, frowning.

"No offense meant, guys," George said, palms up.

"She's been sorted into Slytherin, just so you know," Theo muttered.

The twins' eyebrows shot up as they turned to Hermione, assessing her.

"Well, that's one snake I wouldn't mind mind slithering up beside me," Fred chuckled.

"Same here, bro," George said, high-fiving his twin.

"Careful, guys. She's already with Malfoy," Ginny said, smirking.

As if feeling their eyes on her, the blonde girl slowly turned in their direction with wide eyes. Harry waved, feeling foolish in spite of his joy at seeing Hermione smiling back at him. Good thing Draco was too busy talking to Dumbledore. He wouldn't have liked seeing Harry ogling his girlfriend. And even though Harry had as yet to form an educated opinion on Draco, he could tell that the bloke was formidable and quite dangerous.

"What do you mean she's with Malfoy?" quipped Fred, still eyeing the blonde girl with interest.

"Well, they've been inseparable at Hogwarts. And just look at them now. Look at the way she looks at him - like he's Merlin's gift to mankind," Ginny said.

"She's in love with him," Luna said airily. Everyone turned to her with incredulous looks.

"Luna, you've no proof of that. How can you say she's in love?" Neville quietly said, leaning down at his girlfriend. Luna just smiled at him knowingly.

"You'll see," she said, her big, blue eyes turning to the subject of their discussion.

"I'd rather not see, Luna. Just give me a few minutes with her and she'll forget that she even met that git," Fred said, bumping knuckles with a chuckling George.

Blaise and Theo stiffened visibly, their fists clenching at their sides.

"All right, that's enough talk about Ms. Adams. You two, come with me, we've got work to do," Lupin grabbed the twins by the shoulders and steered them away from the group.

Harry's eyes followed the twins with a frown, curious as to why they seemed to dislike Draco so much. "Why do I have the feeling that they don't like Draco?" he asked, turning to Ginny.

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the group.

It was Luna who broke it with her no-nonsense reply. "Because he's the son of Lucius Malfoy, the incumbent Minister of Magic and Voldemort's right-hand man," she said.

"WHAT?" Harry blurted. All eyes were immediately upon him, including Draco's. Harry raised his hand in silent apology before turning back to the Resistance members standing before him.

"Then why is he here?" he asked, keeping his voice down.

Blaise sighed audibly and leaned forward. "Look...Draco's not like his father. He's actually risking everything just by being here," he said.
"So...are you saying that he's going against his father's wishes?" Harry asked.

Theo and Blaise nodded. "Not just his father's but the Dark Lord's, too."

"But...what if he's just spying on us?" Harry regretted the words as soon as they'd left his lips. The children told him about how Draco saved them from the men in the orphanage. He wouldn't have done that if he was just spying, would he?

"No. Draco always hated his father's blind loyalty to the DL," Theo said.

"And he's changed a lot since he started working closely with her," Blaise said, nodding at Hermione.

"Love does change a man," Luna said, smiling. Neville winked and wrapped an arm around his girlfriend.

Their conversation was halted when they saw Draco and Hermione walking towards them.

"Harry, Prof. Dumbledore says that you're leaving now," Hermione said.

"Leaving? Just me? Aren't you coming, too?" Harry asked.

Hermione gave Draco a quick glance before answering. "Uhm...no. We can't. We're going back to Hogwarts with them," she said, nodding at the Resistance members.

"Why can't you?" Harry persisted.

"Because you're going to the Headquarters of the Order," Draco replied.

At Harry's bewildered look, Hermione said, "Prof. Dumbledore wants to keep Draco's involvement quiet for now - at least until he's spoken with Prof. Snape."

Harry nodded. After what the Resistance members told him, he understood why Draco needed to stay in the shadows. Reluctantly giving a final wave to his newfound comrades, Harry stepped away from the group and walked over to Dumbledore.

"So..." Blaise said, skewering Draco with one of his meaningful gazes.

"Fancy seeing you here, mate," said Theo.

"Well...I guess the cat's out of the bag now, eh?" Draco replied with a smirk.

"Are you with...(a bit of throat clearing)...the Resistance now?" Ginny asked.

Draco sensed that she changed her question at the last instance.

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that, Weaslette?" Draco raised a perfectly arched brow.

"NO! No! I'm really...uhm...glad that you are," she said, blushing.

Neville extended a hand and said, "Welcome to the Resistance, Mal, uhm, Draco."

"Thanks, Neville," Draco said, shaking Neville's hand.

Theo and Blaise jumped him and enclosed him in a bone-crushing bear hug.

"All right! That's enough, both of you! You're embarrassing me!" Draco pushed the two off,
laughing.

"We're all happy to have you with us, Draco," Luna said.

"Let's just keep this tight, okay? Only the people here today must know of my involvement. Snape and Dumbledore want me to stay anonymous for now," Draco said.

The others nodded in agreement.

"What made you take the leap, mate?" Theo asked after a minute of silence.

"Was it because of her?" Blaise said, giving Hermione a meaningful look.

"What? Why would she be the reason for me to join up?" Draco retorted.

"Come on, Malfoy! We all know who she really is," Ginny said.

Draco's brows rose to his forehead. "Really? And who is she, Weaslette?"

"Oh, nobody...just a bushy-haired Ravenclaw who's been missing for weeks now," Ginny replied, smirking at Draco. Blaise and Theo did the same while Luna looked on with her usual dreamy look.

"How did you figure it out?" Hermione asked.

"By accident," Neville said, chuckling.

"By accident?" Draco and Hermione asked in unison.

Neville then told them about what Theo saw at the Infirmary. He diplomatically left out the part where Theo and Blaise told them about Draco's apparent deep feelings for Hermione. He didn't think the blonde Slytherin would like hearing how his love life was being bandied about by his own friends.

"So...I was right in thinking that the Ministry would take an interest in her..." Draco quietly said, more to himself than to his fellow rebels.

"Apparently so, mate," Theo agreed solemnly.

"Who else knows?" Hermione asked.

"Just us," Neville said, sweeping his hand at Theo, Blaise, Ginny and Luna. "We didn't tell the others. We figured that if Snape knew of your disguise, then he must have a very good reason for keeping it secret - even from the Order and the Resistance."

Hermione and Draco sighed, their shoulders slumping visibly in relief.

"That's good because we're not even sure what Snape's planning for us. I have a pretty good idea, but it hasn't been confirmed yet," Draco said.

"You're going to spy for the Order," Luna said airily.

Silence fell on the group as each one digested what Luna had just said and became wrapped up in their own thoughts. Suddenly, they realized just how grave their situation was.

"I believe you got the gist of it, Luna," Draco said, his arm going around Hermione.
"Shite! That's...that's...MENTAL! And fucking dangerous!" Theo cried, pacing around in a circle like a wounded Hypogriff. "That's a job for the Order, not you! Have you forgotten that your father is the freaking Minister of Magic? What would your father do to you if he finds out? Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Draco chuckled as he grabbed his friend and pulled him to his side, a strong arm draped around Theo's shoulders.

"Calm down, mate! I'll just be doing what you'd been doing!"

Theo's head snapped at him, "Wh-what? I've not been spying!"

"Not intentionally, no! But you'd been passing information to the Resistance, right? You'd been telling them what your father's been telling you. I'll just be doing the same," Draco said, roughly messing up Theo's sandy locks.

Theo calmed down a bit, smiling sheepishly at Draco. "Well, if you put it that way...I guess it doesn't sound that dangerous," he said, chuckling.

The others seemed to eagerly agree with Draco - Neville clapped Theo on the shoulder, Ginny and Luna gave him reassuring pats, even Hermione smiled at him encouragingly. Blaise laughed and fist-bumped with Theo, yet his eyes held no joy. He knew Draco's words were only said to soothe Theo; they were not necessarily true, though.

And that's what scared him. Draco had an uncanny way of getting into the thick of things and with a war brewing in the horizon, his blonde friend would definitely be in the middle of it all. Especially with Granger in the picture. Now that she's with him again, Draco would never let her out of his sight - even if it meant going through the fires of hell to achieve that.

Unfortunately, hell seemed to be eagerly awaiting her.

"What are you planning to do now," Blaise asked.

"As Her..uhm...Abby said earlier, we're going back to Hogwarts with you lot. We need to tell Snape everything that happened in New York."

"Have you started training the others, Neville?" Hermione asked, turning to Neville.

"Yes! We've actually started with the training program that you left me."

"That's great! Perhaps we can go over it later - see what needs to be changed or added."

"Uhm...there's something I've been meaning to ask you, Hermione," Neville said.

"What is it, Neville?"

"Our necklaces...we can't take them off..."

"Ah! Yes! I forgot to tell you about the other spells I embedded in the crystals. As long as you're a member of the Resistance, the necklace stays on to protect you..." Hermione's eyes flicked to Draco, who nodded encouragingly, "and to keep track of you."

"Protect and track..." Ginny mumbled, brows furrowed.

"Yes. It will help you resist an Imperio and dull the effects of a Crucio. It will also shield you from most hexes and lessen the intensity of almost all dark spells. The only curse that it can't shield you
Theo, Blaise and Neville stared at her with mouths agape. Ginny blinked - twice. Luna just smiled. Draco looked smug. He really was proud of his witch.

"Sorry? You're sorry for not finding the counter-curse for an Avada? Are you nuts?" Ginny blurted, her bright blue eyes opened wide.

Hermione bit her lip, her eyes filled with shame. "I'm r-really sorry, Ginny. I tried!"

Ginny burst out laughing and pulled Hermione into a giggly hug. When she pulled back, she had a big, bright smile on her face. "Girl, no one, I repeat, NO ONE knows how to counter an Avada. And to put all those counter-spells in a crystal? You're the only one who's ever done that! And you're still sorry? Godric! You're the most brilliant and most clueless witch I'd ever come across!"

Hermione laughed with the others. Draco pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her waist, smiling lovingly down at the brightest witch of their age.

"Wait...you also said 'keep track of you'. What does that mean?" Blaise asked.

"It means that just in case you get lost or are taken somewhere unwillingly, we can find you just by saying - 'Find' plus the name of the missing person," Hermione replied.

"What? That's bloody brilliant! But how do we do that?" Ginny said, taking out her pendant.

"I'll show you. It's like scrying, only we won't need a map. Okay, let's try it. Ginny, think of someone who also has the pendant that you'd like to find and say 'Find' plus the person's name while holding onto your pendant."

"Okay," Ginny clutched her pendant and said, "Find Blaise Zabini." Ginny's crystal glowed and when she looked at it the words 'Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade' started scribbling along its length.

Theo and Neville whistled, Blaise muttered a curse, Ginny clapped her hands while Luna smiled serenely. Draco planted a kiss on Hermione's blonde tresses, grinning proudly.

"Whoa! What's it doing now?" Ginny exclaimed as her pendant started to wiggle and pulsate.

"It's pointing you to him. If you were far away, the pendant will slowly vibrate until you get close enough. It's now telling you that you're too close," Hermione said with a chuckle.

" Damn! Had we known that it can do that, we would've known immediately where the Muggle-borns were taken after the Registration!" Theo said.

"And...we would've known where you were the entire time that you were unaccounted for," Neville said, winking at Hermione.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to tell you everything about it. I thought I could do it when we came back from the Ministry. Turns out Draco's fears were not so unfounded," Hermione said, frowning.

"Yes...there are still seven Hogwarts Muggle-borns at Malfoy Manor," Theo said, shooting a tentative glance at Draco.

"We have to get them out of there. The DL's going to use them and their parents to infiltrate the Muggle world," Neville said, turning to Draco. Blaise and Theo fixed their gazes on their friend.
"I know. But we can't do this without proper planning. If Voldemort's personally involved, we can't just pop in there and take them away," Draco said.

"I'm sure Prof. Dumbledore and the Headmaster will come up with something. We might be working with the Order soon," Neville refrained from asking Draco if he was ready for that.

"You and Draco can do some spying before we do that," Ginny suggested to Hermione.

"Yes, you can find out how they're doing and how we can get them out," Neville said.

Blaise stayed silent, but his eyes told Draco that he's not too keen on the idea. Blaise knew how Draco felt about being around Lucius. Theo seemed to be thinking in the same line, judging by the deep frown creasing his forehead.

"Don't go to the Manor when Voldemort is there. He might be able to sense your secret," Luna whispered, staring at Hermione with wide eyes.

Draco's arms went around Hermione protectively.

"She won't be doing any spying at the Manor. I don't want her getting anywhere near...the Minister. If someone needs to go to the Manor, it will be me and me alone," he said adamantly.

"Your fa..er...the Minister will not know that I'm the missing Muggle-born," Hermione protested.

"You don't know Lucius. We can't risk having you around him," Draco insisted.

Hermione tried to reach into Draco's mind but his walls were up so she just sighed and said, "Well, nothing's decided yet. We'd have to wait for instructions from the Headmaster before we do anything. And now that Prof. Dumbledore's here, there could be changes in his plans."

"Yeah...besides, I think Draco's right. It might be too dangerous for you to go to Malfoy Manor. The Minister's been really interested in finding you. My father didn't come here of his own accord you know. He was ordered by the Minister to come here and check out the Headmaster's alibi," Theo said.

Draco's face turned a shade paler at that mildly shocking revelation. But when he glanced at Hermione, he realized that she somehow already knew about it.

"You knew, didn't you?" he said, unable to contain his irritation.

She turned guilty eyes at him and gave him a nervous smile. "I-I saw Theo's message...on the crystal...the day that his father came to Hogwarts to...verify Headmaster Snape's alibi..."

"And you didn't tell me..." Draco's icy tone caused Hermione to cringe a little.

"I'm sorry, okay? I didn't think it was important!" she replied defensively.

"Granger, everything my father does is important news to me! Especially when it pertains to you!" Draco growled as he stared down at the scowling witch before him.  

Theo reached for his friend's arm in an attempt to pacify the seething wizard.

"It's okay, mate. It appears that my father still has some credibility with the Minister and the DL. They honestly believed him when he vouched for Snape's excuse," he said, laughing nervously.

"Are you sure?" Draco snapped at Theo.
"Uhm...yeah! Probably because my father was so convinced by what he saw. He actually thought that creature in the infirmary was the missing Granger." Theo said, eyes flicking to Blaise. The dark-haired Slytherin nodded - a silent assurance that he would intervene if needed.

The quick exchange was not lost on Draco. Although Theo's words calmed him a bit, his fears for his Muggle-born witch resurfaced violently. He reached out for Hermione and wrapped his arms around the blonde witch.

"Please, don't do anything like that again. Don't hide anything from me."

She responded in kind, leaning her head against his chest, melting away whatever momentary anger he felt for her.

"I promise," she said.

Draco gave out a sigh and nuzzled Hermione/Abigail's blonde tresses. She was his life and he would never let her anywhere near his father or Voldemort if he could help it.

Unfortunately, things don't always go his way.

***********************************************************************************************************************************

So, this is Hogwarts, Harry thought as he walked behind Gordon and Dumbledore along the hallways of the school he'd only read about. Had he not been hidden away in America, this would've been his home. Had his parents not died, he would've been an ordinary student here, concerned only with exams, assignments and probably...girls! But as so happened...

Stop it! He reprimanded himself. He didn't have the luxury of 'what ifs' and 'would haves'. This was his life now and he must live it the best way that he could. If not for himself, then for the children awaiting him in America. If not for them...then, at least for the Figgs. They sacrificed themselves so that he could live. And he owed them a well-lived life.

That is if he even survived the war.

And there surely was going to be a war. He overheard Dumbledore talking to Gordon and Leo about their plans. They did not sound unwarlike to him.

The two men walking before him stopped in front of a gargoyle statue. Dumbledore leaned forward and whispered something. The gargoyle jumped to the side to reveal a moving staircase. At any other time, Harry would've been amazed by it, but after everything he'd witnessed - and done - it somehow seemed too 'ordinary'.

Upon reaching the top, Dumbledore was immediately wrapped in a bear hug by a man dressed completely in black. He was Dumbledore's height, but younger and with straight, longish black hair. Harry recognized him as the talking head he saw in the Figg's fireplace. He said his name was Snape. After a while, Snape disengaged from Dumbledore and hugged Gordon. They quietly exchanged words, then, they all turned to him.

"Harry, this is Prof. Snape," Dumbledore said.

Harry stepped forward and extended his hand to Snape, "Pleased to finally meet you in person, sir," he said with a smirk.
Snape took his hand, returning Harry's smirk. "Would've preferred to meet you under better circumstances, young Potter. Come! Let's all have a cup of tea while we talk."

They followed the Headmaster to a sitting area at the farthest corner of the room. Tea and biscuits were already spread out on the coffee table. Snape quickly filled four cups and distributed them to his guests. Next, the tray filled with delicious-smelling cookies was passed around. Harry took a few and placed them on his cup's matching saucer. It tasted divine.

"You have your mother's eyes," Snape said.

"So they say," Harry replied, reaching for another biscuit, purposely ignoring Snape's eyes.

The uncomfortable silence that ensued was broken by a burst of green flame from the fireplace. Gordon was immediately on his feet, running toward the source of the noise. The tall, lanky man who stepped out of the grate was immediately enclosed in the older wizard's arms. Harry didn't have to ask who the newcomer was. He looked every bit the younger version of Gordon.

It was a teary reunion between father and son and it somehow pulled at Harry's heartstrings. The closest he ever got to having parents were the Figgs...and they were both gone now. There wouldn't be any tearful reunion with them if he ever came out of this misadventure alive. Mentally slapping himself for once again wallowing in self-pity, Harry turned back to the quiet discussion going on between Snape and Dumbledore. He couldn't make out all the words, but he definitely heard Abigail's and Malfoy's name in there. Did Dumbledore know about her disguise?

"Harry, this is my son, Emmet," Gordon's voice pulled Harry back from his musings. He realized that Gordon and his son were now standing before him. He jumped to his feet and reached out to shake Emmet's outstretched hand.

"Harry Potter, such an honor to finally meet you," Emmet said, enthusiastically shaking Harry's hand, his bright eyes filled with amazement.

"Uhm..." Harry didn't know what to say, so he just smiled and nodded.

"You're embarrassing him, Emmet," Gordon chuckled. "You better get used to it though, Harry. You'll be meeting the members of the Order in a little while. I'm sure you'd be mobbed by that lot."

"Er...really?" Harry gulped.

Emmet laughed and clapped Harry on the back. "My dad's joking, Harry. They won't mob you. They're much more mature and better behaved than me."

"Glad to hear that," Harry sighed.

"Emmet! So nice to see once again, young man," Dumbledore was also on his feet, shaking hands with the younger Fawley.

"Same here, Minister! You really had us worried there, you know!"

"Sorry about that. Your father thought it best if we both stayed missing until I was strong enough to travel back here."

"I understand. I'm just glad that both of you are safely back home. Although, with the way things are going, I'm not really sure if England's the safest place for any of us," Emmet chuckled softly.

Harry felt the tension rising a notch as the men went back to sit down for tea. They were now
about to go down to business. And it somehow scared him. Not only because he knew that he would be at the center of all their plans, but because more lives could be lost if they went through with them. Yet, what choice did they have? It's not as if Voldemort would let them be if they stayed quiet. It was either him or them and he very much preferred that they come out victorious. He just didn't like being referred to as The Chosen One, or the savior of the Wizarding World, or the Last Hope. Damn! He didn't even know he was a wizard until just a few days prior!

"Are there things we need to be clarified before we introduce Harry to the Order?" Snape asked, eyes going to the other men before him.

"Harry, you have met Remus Lupin. He's one of your father's closest friends. We'll be going to the Headquarters of the Order, the house of your father's best friend, Sirius Black," Dumbledore said, leaning forward. "He's also your godfather."

"My godfather?" Harry felt his heart skip a beat. "That's almost like family, isn't it?"

"Yes. And he'll probably ask you to stay in his house," Dumbledore replied.

"But...you don't want me to..."

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged a swift look. Harry wondered what that was about.

"It's entirely up to you. We wouldn't want to come between you and your godfather," Dumbledore said eventually.

"Then...what is it that you're not telling me?"

"Black and I don't usually see...shall we say...eye to eye. He might not agree with my methods and he might try to influence your thinking," Snape said, looking unflinchingly at Harry.

"Would that be a bad thing?" Harry asked, turning to Dumbledore. He's the only one he really trusted in this group.

The old wizard seemed to hesitate. "Not entirely. You have to understand, Sirius is still blaming himself for your parents' deaths, so he might be just a little too protective of you. He might even try to stop you from getting involved in anything remotely dangerous. Losing two of his best friends while opposing Tom Riddle had changed Sirius."

"Changed? In what way?"

"He's just not that into fighting the forces of the Dark Lord anymore. And with you in the picture, he might opt for running rather than standing his ground," Snape said with a smirk.

"Are you implying that my godfather's a coward?" Harry snapped at Snape. He didn't know where that came from, but Snape's words somehow grated at him.

"I didn't say that. I meant that Sirius would rather throw you back into hiding rather than risk losing you like he lost your parents," Snape answered, returning Harry's heated glare.

Harry's cheeks burned with embarrassment. He really shouldn't butt heads with anyone this early. And Snape seemed to have Dumbledore's full trust and support. It wouldn't help to antagonize him, especially since he didn't know how powerful this wizard was.

"I'm sorry. That was uncalled for," he mumbled, avoiding Snape's gaze.
"Don't do that!" Snape barked.

Harry's head whipped back to him. "Do what?"

"Act weak. Don't ever back down. The Dark Lord always looks for weaknesses. Don't give him even a glimpse of fear behind your eyes. He will turn it to his advantage without you even knowing it."

At Harry's confused look, Dumbledore explained. "Severus, just like me, is a Legilimens - someone who can see into other people's minds. Voldemort goes beyond that. He can manipulate thoughts, intensify fear and turn them into something unbearable."

"And you expect me to fight someone like that?" Harry snorted.

"That's why you're going to be trained. You have an innate ability already. We just need to hone and sharpen them. Besides, it's not always just about skills, Harry. Good always triumphs over evil. And you have a lot of that in you," Dumbledore said.

"I don't know if that would be enough, Professor," Harry said.

"We will take advantage of your inherent abilities. You have much raw, untapped power waiting to be revealed and developed. I saw you during training, Harry. I know what you're capable of."

Much as Harry wanted to believe Dumbledore, he still could not shake the feeling of inadequacy. Voldemort was a powerful wizard - one of the most powerful in the world, highly trained and skilled in magic he could not even comprehend yet. How was he to walk onto the battlefield and face a wizard who could read and manipulate his mind?

"Don't worry, Harry. You will be trained by very skilled wizards. If your main concern is Voldemort reading your mind, Prof. Snape could help you with Occlumency. That's the ability to block a Legilimens from invading your thoughts," Dumbledore said.

Harry couldn't help but glance nervously at the dark-haired wizard. Somehow, he didn't like the idea. Yet, he didn't know how to decline without appearing rude or ungrateful. Thankfully, he was saved from voicing his concern.

"I think not. I would be very busy keeping abreast with the Dark Lord's plans. I might not be able to give Harry the proper training he deserves. Draco is a very skilled Occlumens. I'm sure he could be easily persuaded to tutor Harry here," Snape said, his eyes never leaving Harry's.

"Are you sure, Severus? Can he really take over for you? He's mighty young," Gordon said.

"He might be young, but Draco is a natural Occlumens. Nothing can top that," said Snape.

"I'm fine with Draco, Gordon. If Prof. Snape believes in him, then who am I to doubt him?"

Snape nodded in satisfaction and turned to Dumbledore with a knowing smile.

"Of course no one in the Order must know of Draco's involvement," Snape reminded.

"But what about the twins? They seemed a bit upset at seeing Draco earlier. Wouldn't they tell the others in the Order?" Gordon asked.

"I'm sure Remus had taken care of that," Dumbledore replied.

"Now, the question is where you would like to stay, Harry," Gordon said.
"I-I really don't know. Any suggestions? Where would you be staying, Professor?" Harry asked, looking up hopefully at Dumbledore.

"I'll be staying with Gordon. I believe Emmet had already put up additional wards in their home so we would be fairly safe there. If not for your training, I would've asked you to come with us."

"Why can't you train me, Professor?" Harry immediately regretted the question when he saw the pain and sadness that flitted in the old wizard's eyes.

"I wish I could, Harry. It would be my greatest honor to train you. But I'm afraid I would do you an injustice if I took on that responsibility. You need the best teachers if you were to catch up with what you had missed all these years. And after my...unfortunate incident with Tom's forces...well...let's just say that I'm no longer what I used to be. But don't worry, I'll be designing and supervising your training. I'm just an owl away, after all," Dumbledore said, smiling at Harry with a twinkle in his eye.

"An owl away?" asked Harry.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot that you're not yet familiar with the nitty gritty of wizarding life. We usually send messages by owl," chuckled Dumbledore.

"Really? That's amazing! I know owls are smart but I didn't know they could do that!" Harry exclaimed, glad that in spite of everything that's happened he could still find something so amusing.

"I think Harry's best bet would be the Shrieking Shack," Emmet suggested. "It's hidden, extremely well protected, virtually undetectable by the Ministry, and very near Hogwarts. It also has an untraceable Floo fireplace. I have a friend in the DMT, he's one of the guys monitoring the Floo Network and he helped me sneak in before I came here. I did a trace on the Shrieking Shack, but it didn't show up. So, that's good news."

"But what if it's connected to a place the Ministry's already tagged? Do you think it will be traced then?" Gordon asked, turning to his son.

"Hmm...I don't know. I'll try to see if I can persuade my friend to help me sneak back in tonight. He's a bit of a romantic so I told him that I'm searching for a girl's network," Emmet chuckled. "I'll just tell him that I got another tip. He's very supportive of my love life." That made them all laugh.

"Had Hogwarts not been infiltrated by the Dark Lord, you would've been very much welcome to stay, Harry. The Resistance members are all here, after all. But it's just too dangerous for you now. His people are popping up every now and then and without much warning, too. I would've been caught off guard by Nott's unannounced visit had Horace not informed me of it. Lucius seems to enjoy flaunting his role as the Dark Lord's right-hand man just a bit too much," Snape nearly spat.

"Why was Nott here?" asked Gordon.

Snape waved a lazy hand and said, "Oh, just Lucius' way of showing off."

Somehow, Harry found the answer a bit too glib for the serious-looking Headmaster. Emmet seemed to think so, too, based on the way he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It would've been unnoticeable had Harry not been looking his way. It made Harry wonder if Emmet knew more about that visit than he was letting on. Could it be that he was privy to things even his father and Dumbledore were not? Perhaps this young wizard was smarter than he appeared to be.

"Hogwarts is out of the question then," Dumbledore said.
"I think I'll go with Emmet's suggestion. The...what was it called? The Shrieking Shack? I'm okay with that...wherever that is," said Harry.

"That's where we were before we came here, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Oh! Great! I think that would be more than comfortable for me. And just an Apparition away from Hogwarts, too!" Harry laughed. He couldn't believe that he was making magic-related jokes now. A week ago, he didn't even know that he was not an aspiring magician but a full-blooded wizard!

The people around him seemed to appreciate it, though. Snape even sported a genuine smile.

"Now that that's settled, I suppose it's time to introduce Harry to the Order," Dumbledore said, leaning on his cane as he rose to his feet. The others stood as well.

"If you don't mind, Albus, I think I'll just stay here and have a word with Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Adams. There's still a lot that we need to discuss regarding their trip to America," Snape said as he walked them toward the moving staircase.

Harry's ears perked up at the mention of Abigail's name. He wanted to ask if she would also be tutoring him but bit back the question at the last minute. He didn't want the very perceptive Snape to pick up on his budding interest in the young witch. Still...he hoped they'd let her tutor him. That would certainly make studying Magic much more interesting.

**Knock it off, Harry! You've only known her for what - two days? And you're already acting like a fool! Concentrate on learning as much as you can about Magic so you can defeat the Dark Lord. Otherwise, you'd be putting everyone in the Wizarding World in danger. Including her!**

With that brutal mental slap to himself, Harry trudged behind Dumbledore down the stairs, barely missing the amused look and growing smirk on Snape's face.

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Angela Toffler never liked lying to her husband. She thought that it was too stressful and not even worth the effort. How could it be when her husband was the most understanding person she'd ever met? Besides, being a trial lawyer, she knew that lies never brought anyone any good. She could think of a few clients who were now suffering fates worse than death for their falsehoods. So, she made it a point to always stick to the truth and nothing but.

Yet, here she was, lying through her teeth to her unsuspecting husband.

"Everything's okay, honey. Carlson just wanted to go over the details of the Haywood case. I'll come straight home as soon as we're done. Yes, I know. I will. I love you, too, sweetheart. Drive carefully, okay?" She made a kissing sound before putting the phone back in its cradle.

Slumping back in her chair, Angela ran her fingers through her wavy hair in dismay. There was no meeting; the Haywood case had been closed and shut days ago. But she just could not tell Harold the truth. No matter how indulgent her husband was, he wouldn't let her do what she intended to do.

"You're doing the right thing, Angie," she said to no one in particular.

A head peaked through her door.

"Did you say something, dearie?" the familiar voice of her elderly assistant, Mrs. Potts, called out
to her. Angela silently cursed herself for forgetting that Mrs. Potts was still there. The woman always meant well, but she was just too perceptive for comfort sometimes.

"Just talking to myself again, Mrs. Potts," she said, smiling.

"You're working too hard, Angie. Go home to that handsome doctor of yours. I'm sure he'll be able to soothe away all your worries," Mrs. Potts said, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Angela burst out laughing. This was why she'd never be able to replace the wily, old hag. She had a crazy sense of humor that was a stark contrast to her school marm appearance. That - plus her sharp mind, quick wit, and impeccable organizational skills - made her an invaluable addition to Angela's office. Besides, Mrs. Potts was the only one who could keep up with her. She actually had to go through a battery of younger, but less sterling assistants, before she stumbled upon this gem of a woman.

"You go on ahead, Mrs. Potts. I'll just finish up some paperwork and I'll be gone, too."

"Would you like me to make you a cup of tea before I leave?"

"Oh, no! I'm fine. I won't stay long."

"Alright. Just make sure that you do that. I don't want to hear Alfred telling me tomorrow that you stayed until the cleaners were already making their rounds," Mrs. Potts waved a finger at her.

"I promise! Now, go away!" Angela chuckled.

Mrs. Potts gave her a nod and a wink before closing the door behind her.

Angela sighed in relief and slumped back in her chair.

_You really are doing the right thing, so quit stalling!_

She waited for a few minutes (just to make sure that Mrs. Potts was already gone) then she gathered up her things, locked her drawers, and headed out the door. She swept past Alfred, their night guard, with a wave and a warm 'Good night, Alfred' just to make sure that he would have something to report to Mrs. Potts in the morning. Slipping into the common toilet at the end of the hall, Angela quickly changed from her business suit into a pair of dark jeans, a jumper, and a hooded jacket. She then took the lift down to the basement and within minutes was driving away towards the parking garage a few blocks from her office building. From there she would take the bus that drove past that part of London where the Leaky Cauldron was located. She just hoped that her long-time contact in the Wizarding World would be there. He wasn't such a reliable bloke, but he was the easiest one to track down. Besides, she didn't know that many witches and wizards.

She had met him by accident, five years ago. Nick, a friend from college who was now a police officer called her for help regarding a strange case of robbery. Apparently, the robber, who was very drunk when they arrested him, stole a police car right in front of the officer and placed it inside a bag. He also turned one of the officer's German shepherds into a white, fluffy poodle. Another officer was frozen stiff while the third couldn't open his mouth to speak. The two officers returned to normal after a few minutes; the German shepherd, however, was still a poodle. Nick didn't know what to do - the other officers were adamant in putting him in jail (cops don't really like being made a fool of) - but what would they charge him with? They couldn't even charge him with drunk driving because he wasn't driving at all!

Angela knew right from the start that the man they arrested was a wizard. How could she not know when she, herself, was a witch? No one, except her husband, knew about it, of course. Not even her
son, James. Her family had sworn off magic long before she was born. It was only when she started doing strange things that her grandmother told her the true history of their family. Her gran made her promise to never expose herself to the Wizarding World again because it had brought nothing but pain to their family.

Yet, when James' letter from Hogwarts came, she just couldn't refuse to send him. She knew how difficult it was to hide one's magic and she didn't want her son to suffer the same way that she did. Harold didn't want James to grow up not knowing the truth behind his abilities either, so they decided to let him attend Hogwarts, thereby ending her family's self-exile from the Wizarding World.

It was only now that she was starting to regret that decision.

The short ride to the Leaky Cauldron was over before she knew it. Soon, she was walking through the doors of the smoky, dark pub, her eyes quickly scanning the few patrons sitting by the bar. Her contact never sat there. He would always be in one of the corner tables, almost completely hidden in the shadows. But she knew where to look and she breathed in relief upon seeing her contact bent over what appeared to be a bowl of soup.

Pulling her hood lower to cover as much of her face as possible, Angela walked toward her contact and took the chair directly in front of him. The man's head snapped up in alarm, a hand quickly sliding inside his jacket.

"Fletcher, it's me," Angela said, tilting her head to the sliver of light above them.

Mundungus Fletcher's mouth twitched into a cross between a pout and a grimace.

"Look, if t'is abou' them Daily Prop'ets, I can explain," he stammered as he raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

Angela rolled her eyes. "I'm not here about that, Fletcher. Although, I'd really like to start receiving them again very soon," she smirked when Fletcher gulped visibly. "But as I've said, that's not what I came here for."

Fletcher sighed, "O'right. But I'll still make shu' you get 'em nex' week. Don' wantcha thinkin' I'm a crook." He leaned back in his chair and smiled smugly. "So, wha' can I do fer ye now, Missie?"

Angela leaned forward on her elbows, eyes boring into Fletcher's.

"I want you to take me to the Order," she whispered.

She watched as Fletcher's eyes flared and his face turned as pale as sheet.

"I-I don 'no wha' yer talkin' abou'!" he protested, his eyes furtively swiveling around the room.

"Cut the crap, Fletcher! I know about them and I know that you know where and how to reach them. You owe me, you little thief. Or have you forgotten about our deal?"

When Angela helped Fletcher with his little 'incident' with the Muggle police, they made a deal. She would not turn him over to the Ministry of Magic (Fletcher was too thick to even question her knowledge of it) if he would act as her eyes and ears in the Wizarding World.

Fletcher gulped, his face turning a sickly green.

"Look, even'f I did, I could no' take you t'ree! Yer a Muggle!"
Angela smirked then placed both hands over Fletcher's bowl. When she released it, the soup had turned into solid ice. Fletcher almost fell off of his seat after seeing what she had done.

"Blimey! How'dya do tha'?

"Magic?"

The old outlaw gaped at her and blinked hard. "Y-yer a...a...a..."

"A witch. Yes," she answered, staring hard at her companion.

She waited until Fletcher was fully recovered from his shock.

"Now, are you going to take me to them or not?"

The one-time crook seemed to size her up before leaning forward on the table.

"What's your business with them?" he asked.

Angela was not a bit surprised at the sudden change in the man's speech. She knew that he had many talents. That gruff, seemingly uneducated exterior was just one of his many disguises.

"I need to rescue my son," she said.

"Your son? Why, where is he?"

"Malfy Manor. He's one of the...the Ministry's so-called 'Apprentices'"

The newly transformed Fletcher leaned back in his chair, a hand rubbing against his chin.

"That's dangerous stuff, Mrs. Toffler. I'm not sure even the Order will be able to help you with that. They've got more than enough on their platter right now."

"Just take me to them, Fletcher. If they refuse..."

"What will you do if they refuse to help you?" Fletcher asked, shrewd eyes studying her.

Angela sighed. The Order was really her only hope.

"I don't know. I'll think of something. I just can't let my son be a puppet of that...that..."

"Monster?" Fletcher finished for her.

She nodded, her bravado slowly slipping at the thought of her son being held against his will and probably made to do things she'd rather not imagine.

"Fletcher, please! If you do this for me, you'll be free of me for good. I won't bother you again."

She expected the man before her to laugh with glee, but she was surprised when he just sighed and ran his hands along his bald pate.

"I'm not as bad as you think me to be, Mrs. Toffler. I wouldn't think to exchange my freedom for your son's life," he said, smiling sadly. "Come on, I'll take you to them. Keep your hood down, though. I don't want these people to think that I just picked up a beautiful woman for a date. It would surely ruin my reputation."

Angela quietly laughed as she followed Fletcher out of the pub and into an alley.
"You'd have to take my hand so we can apparate to the Headquarters," Fletcher said.

Angela swallowed. She'd read about apparition, but she'd never tried it before.

"W-will it hurt? Is it safe?" she asked.

"Apparation? Nah! I mean, yes, yes! It's pretty safe, I guess. Just make sure that you hold on tight and don't let go until I tell you to," Fletcher said.

"Okay," she nodded, gripping Fletcher's arm as tightly as she could.

"Ready?" Fletcher asked, putting a hand over Angela's. "Close your eyes."

Before Angela could reply everything turned black, then she felt herself being pressed on all sides, an invisible band squeezing the breath out of her. Her eyes and ears hurt and she could almost feel her lunch going up her throat. Just when she thought she'd black out, it was over. She could breathe again and they were standing in front of a black door.

"Are you all right?" Fletcher asked, peering up at her.

"Y-yeah. J-just give me a minute," Angela panted, leaning against the wall. She swallowed the bile in her throat and took several deep breaths. "Okay...let's go," she finally said.

Fletcher gave her a nod then turned to the door and tapped it three times with his wand. The door opened and the moment they stepped in was instantly greeted by the screeching of a woman.

"Merlin's beard! Why can't they keep this hag covered all the time?" Fletcher muttered, pulling black curtains across the portrait.

The screaming stopped, but Angela could still hear a muffled voice from behind the curtain.

"What was that?" she asked as she followed Fletcher down a long hallway.

"That was Mrs. Black, the former mistress of this house."

When they reached an alcove at the end of the hall, Fletcher stopped and turned to her.

"Stay here. I'll go in there and see who's manning the fort. Oooh...I wish Dumbledore's here!"

She heard Fletcher say as he walked through an archway that probably led to the sitting area. After a few minutes, he was walking back to her, beaming.

"We're in luck! Come on, come on," he said, motioning for Angela to follow him.

Angela walked cautiously into what turned out to be a very cozy parlour. There were five people sitting around a mahogany coffee table, quietly sipping tea. Four were men - an old man with cropped hair, a bespectacled man with a friendly face, a young man who looked like the younger version of the bespectacled one and another young man with round specs and ruffled black hair. The lone woman sitting with them was a rather plump redhead with a pleasant smile on her face.

However, it was the man standing by the bar that had caught her eye. He had an aristocratic profile and his black hair flowed down to his shoulders in careless waves. His fingers were long and graceful as they poured an amber-colored liquid into a crystal goblet. When he turned around to face her and fixed her with sharp, dark gray eyes that looked all too familiar, Angela gasped as one question burned in her mind.
Why did that man look like he could be her great, great grandfather's twin?

The chill in the air was pleasant enough that night that he didn't even have to cast a warming spell on his clothes. The large house under his surveillance was in a quiet, private road with a large, iron gate barring the entrance. No one would ever pass this way except for the residents of the house. Still, he thought it prudent to place himself under a Disillusionment spell, just to be safe. What really irked him was the fact that he was in a Muggle neighborhood, skulking in the shadows like a common criminal. He'd thought that being one of the elite Purebloods in the Dark Lord's army he would be treated with more respect and due consideration. But, no! He was still delegated with the most pathetic and boring assignments ever.

Moron! You should be thankful that you're not lying in St. Mungo's with half your body burned to a crisp...or...or worse, buried six feet deep in the ground like Cedrick Avery!

Lorcan Wilkes leaned back against the tall, Birch tree behind him and sighed. Why must he follow his father so blindly? He didn't even share much of their beliefs anymore - especially about Blood Purity! He couldn't tell anyone since it would most likely put the girl in danger if he did, but he actually fancied a Muggle-born witch he'd met at Madam Malkin's a few months ago. They've been going out regularly and he was beginning to feel that Heidi was the girl for him. But now, with talks of war brewing, he didn't know what the future might bring or if they even have one.

The sharp crack of apparition sounding behind him made Lorcan's senses come to life. With wand in hand, he swiftly turned around to face the new arrival. Lorcan's shoulders slumped in relief upon seeing who it was - Rowan Travers, his so-called 'partner'. Late again, as per usual! Didn't the fool have any concept of time? He wondered how Rowan's father, Rockford, could put up with him. The senior Travers was well known for his strict discipline and vicious temper. He pointed his wand at himself and lifted the Disillusionment charm.

"Why are you late?" he said, leaning back against the tree.

Rowan squealed and jumped a foot away from him. When he realized who was it was, he squared his shoulders and smoothed his Muggle jacket down. At least the dimwit was dressed properly this time, Lorcan mused. The last time they went to a Muggle location, Rowan was dressed like a circus performer - complete with tights and glittering shoes.

"I was held up! Father had some last minute instructions," Rowan scowled.

More like he was checking if you looked decent, Lorcan wanted to say.

"And what were those last minute instructions?"

Rowan blushed, lending truth to Lorcan's previous thought.

"Well...just that...uhm...we should check back in as soon as we're done here," Rufus mumbled.

"That's standard procedure, Rowan."

"Well...then Father was just trying to remind us of it!"

"Sure," Lorcan said, smirking.

Rowan blushed even more but ignored the implied barb. "So...what's next?"
Lorcan nearly lost his temper at the look of excitement on his partner's face. They were going to perform an Unforgivable curse on two, unsuspecting Muggles! How could he be excited about that? If not for his love for his family, Lorcan wouldn't be here, yet this twisted excuse for a human being seemed to glow at the thought! He felt his stomach clench in disgust.

"Have you heard what happened in New York?" Rowan was saying.

"Idiot! Of course, I've heard of it! Who in the Dark Lord's army hasn't?"

"Yeah, what about it?" Lorcan said instead.

"They should've sent us! Salazar knows we're much better than those amateurs!"

Lorcan laughed. Rowan could be quite funny at times.

"Amateurs? They're Yaxley's team! They're always handed the most dangerous missions for a reason. And I doubt if it's because they're amateurs."

"Yaxley may be their leader, but they're not as good as him. Take Cedrick, for instance. I'd always bested him in duels during our Hogwarts days. He was just there because his father's in the Dark Lord's inner circle."

"Look, Travers. The guy's dead, okay? Stop badmouthing him!"

Lorcan wished he could apparate back home. He didn't know how long he'd be able to tolerate this piece of shit standing beside him.

"I wasn't badmouthing him! I was just stating a fact!"

"Okay, so here's a fact for you. If you went on that mission, you wouldn't be here blabbing your mouth at me. You'd be the one pushing up daisies!"

"Pushing up daisies? What does that even mean?" Rowan snorted.

Lorcan silently cursed himself for that slip. It was a Muggle phrase he'd picked up from one of Heidi's comedy movies. He loved watching those moving pictures on the big screen with her.

"Forget it. Let's just stop talking about that botched mission, okay? I don't want to jinx this one," Lorcan said, dismissing his companion by turning his eyes back to the house.

They stood in silence, one eager to just get it over with, the other to intimidate and cause havoc.

"Who are these people anyway? Why does the Dark Lord want to use them?"

"They're Media moguls. They own a television and radio network and a telecommunications company. The Dark Lord obviously thinks they're important," Lorcan replied.

"Media what? And what does 'tele...tele...whatever' mean?"

Lorcan rolled his eyes. Why did he have to be stuck with this stupid git?
"They use telephones to communicate with each other. That's what telecommunications mean, it's about telephones," Lorcan said. "Don't you know anything about Muggles?"

Rowan snorted. "Pfft! Why should I? They're just going to be our slaves anyway."

"If that's how you see them, I doubt you'd go far in the Dark Lord's new regime. Muggles are a central part of his plans or haven't you been listening to his speeches during our meetings?"

"Of course, I have! You're probably the one who wasn't listening at all! 'Muggles and Muggle-borns are beneath us', that's what the Dark Lord's been drumming into our heads. And what does that mean, eh?" Rowan smirked when Lorcan glared at him. "To be beneath someone is to be that someone's slave, mate!"

"Whatever," Lorcan replied, turning away from his 'partner'. There's no point in explaining himself to this dimwit.

"Hey! Look there!" Rowan whispered, pointing at the sleek, red car driving towards the Greene's house. It pulled up the driveway and stopped at the edge of a stone walkway.

"Muggles are so primitive! They need contraptions like that to get around, it's disgusting!"

"They may not be able to apparate like us, but they're not primitive," Lorcan snorted.

"They're stupid, that's what they are!"

Not as stupid as you are, Lorcan almost said.

"Let's wait until they're inside."

"What for? No one's going to see us around here," Rowan said, his eyes scanning the area.

"Even so! We have to be careful. We don't want to mess this up."

"Yeah! Yeah! I hear you!"

The couple who alighted from the car was now at the door. The woman was fumbling inside her bag, looking annoyed. The man whispered in her ear and pressed on something at the left side of the door then stepped back as if waiting for something.

"Is that them? What are they doing?"

"I don't know," Lorcan replied, feigning ignorance. He knew what they were doing, but he wasn't in the mood to explain it to Rowan. The door opened and the couple walked in.

"Let's go!" Rowan said before disapparating.

Lorcan cursed colorfully when he saw the fool waving back at him from the front of the door. Grunting, he disapparated and joined his partner.

"May I do the honors?" Rowan asked, his eyes bright with anticipation.

"Sure, go on ahead. I think you need to press that button," Lorcan pointed to a small button by the side of the door. He'd seen one of those in Heidi's house. She called it a doorbell.

"This one?" Rowan said, pressing the button. A loud, chiming sound was heard.
When nothing happened, Rowan pressed the button again. This time they heard a muffled voice from within say, "Will you please get that, honey? That must be Emily and Tim. Rosa's at the back with the kids."

A man replied in the affirmative and they heard footsteps approaching. The door was pulled open to reveal a tall, sandy-haired man with a ready smile. His smile faltered when he saw them.

"Oh! I thought you were..." he frowned. "Wait, how did you get past the guard?"

Before Lorcan could say anything, Rowan was already pointing his wand at the man.

"Stupefy!" Rowan shouted.

The man was thrown back a few feet before landing on the floor with a loud thud.

"Shit! Why did you have to do that? We were supposed to talk to them first!"

His words fell on deaf ears. Rowan was already walking past him and levitating the still form of the man into the sitting room.

"Honey? What was that?" The woman they saw earlier was running down the stairs. She stopped short when she saw Lorcan looking up at her. "W-who are you?"

"Mrs. Greene, we're from the Ministry of Magic. We're here to talk to you about the program that your family would be participating in," Lorcan said, smiling reassuringly at the woman.

"W-what program? W-where's my husband?" she asked, looking frightened now.

Lorcan was about to reply when another shout of 'Stupefy' reverberated in the room followed by a flash of red light that hit Mrs. Greene squarely in the chest. She fell down the stairs and landed face down on the floor.

"SHIT! What is wrong with you, man?" Lorcan growled whipping around to face Rowan.

"Did you see that? I've never cast such a powerful Stupefy before," Rowan laughed.

Ignoring Rowan's insane laughter, Lorcan rushed to Mrs. Greene's side and turned her over. Her eyes were flared open while her mouth seemed frozen in a scream. Blood was seeping down from where her forehead was bashed in. Lorcan didn't have to be a Healer to know that the woman was already dead. His blood turned cold as he fixed incredulous eyes at Rowan.

"She's dead!" he roared.

Rowan's laughter died and his face contorted into a look of utter terror.

"W-what? Are...are you sure? I-I...I just stupefied her! I didn't mean to kill her!"

"You stupefied her while she was walking down the stairs, you arse!"

"I wouldn't have stupefied her if you did it yourself!"

"We were supposed to Imperius them into doing what the Dark Lord had written in the parchments your father gave me. We could've done it without stupefying them!"

"Dios mio! What happened here?" a squat, dark-haired woman screamed from a door to their left, each hand holding on to a boy of about six or seven - twins. The twins ran towards their mother and...
hugged her still form. Lorcan rose to his feet and backed away from the horrifying scene.

"S-she...Mrs. Greene had an accident. She fell down the stairs," Lorcan said.

"Oh, por dios! I'm going to call an ambulance," she said as she started to walk back into the room where she came from. Midstep, she stopped and turned, "W-who...who are you and w-where's Mr. Greene?" she asked, eyes darting between him and Rowan.

Everything happened so fast after that. Her eyes flared, as if guessing the reason for Mr. Greene's absence then she shrieked and ran for the front door. A shout of "Bombarda!" blasted the door to smithereens, sending the woman flying back into Lorcan. He fell hard, his head slamming against the marble floor. Things started to blur so Lorcan shook his head to get his bearings. He heard a gurgling sound on top of him. Realizing that he was pinned beneath the woman, Lorcan quickly shoved her off of him and scrambled to his feet. He nearly gagged when he saw the bloody mess twitching on the floor. When he looked at the ravaged doorway, he saw two figures - a man and a woman - lying in another bloody heap. The man was coming to, groaning in pain. From the corner of his eye, Lorcan saw Rowan slowly walking towards the injured man, his face twisted in a crazed sneer.

*Shit! He's going to finish him off?*

"Rowan! Stop! Let's just get out of here!" he growled.

Suddenly, two small bodies rushed past him and jumped on Rowan's slight frame. They all fell on the floor, the twins straddling Rowan's back and pummeling him with their fists.

"You killed them! You killed them!" they kept on shouting as they continued to pound on Rowan's back.

Lorcan was frantically pulling one of the twins away from Rowan when his right shoulder exploded in pain. He fell back just in time to see Mr. Greene standing by the entrance to the sitting room with what Lorcan recognized from Heidi's moving pictures to be a shotgun held firmly in his hand and pointed menacingly at Rowan.

"Boys, get off of that monster and let daddy deal with him," Mr. Greene's voice was shaking, but it chilled Lorcan's spine. The twins jumped to their feet and ran to their father.

As Rowan started to turn, Lorcan saw his partner give him a fiendish grin, his eyes communicating his intention. Lorcan started to shake his head while his hand searched frantically for his wand. He turned his head to look for it and his fingers had barely touched the tip when another explosion rang in the air. When he looked back to where Rowan was, he saw his partner's face contorted in pain as his hands clasped at his crimson chest. He shuddered violently, blood spraying from his mouth with every expulsion of breath. Then, he was still.

Lorcan's stomach clenched and he tasted bile in his throat. All he wanted to do was to get out of that place, but he just couldn't leave Rowan here with these Muggles. Seeing that Mr. Greene was still stunned by what he had just done, Lorcan took advantage of that lull and without a second thought lunged for Rowan's still form. He gripped his former partner's arms and concentrated on getting home.

The next thing that greeted him was his mother's horrified face.

"Hello, mum," was all he said before he lost consciousness.
Malfoy Manor had never been a welcoming place for Angus. How could it be when he'd spent his first few weeks sleeping in its damp and gloomy dungeons? But more than that, he felt that the Manor itself had that underlying sense of foreboding and quiet tension permeating the air. Still, it had never felt as strange as it did these past couple of days.

After their 'Family Day', as they liked to call the day their parents visited them, the Hogwarts Muggle-borns had been given a bit of... freedom. They were no longer being shadowed by their guards (except when they had to go to their training sessions) and were even allowed to roam the Manor whenever the Minister was not around. They'd also started to appreciate their daily tea time with Mrs. Malfoy, who seemed to genuinely enjoy their company as well. The girls, in particular, loved listening to her talks about fashion trends and the Yule Balls which the Malfoys hosted every year at the Manor. He slipped away back to their room just when the girls were asking Mrs. Malfoy to show them the Ballroom and some of the popular classical dances.

Angus didn't know if the Minister's wife was just being a gracious hostess to them or if there was something more diabolical behind her hospitality - like lulling them into a false sense of security or making them lower their guards. Whatever Mrs. Malfoy's intention was, she seemed to have accomplished it with flying colors. Most of them, the girls especially, were now so comfortable with her that they'd started telling her things about themselves without even any prodding. Even his cousin, James, was silent about this new development.

And that's what Angus was worried about.

What if it was all an act? What if Mrs. Malfoy or Narcissa, as she'd asked them to call her, was just following the Minister's orders? She was, after all, his wife. And the Malfoys were notoriously known for being Pureblood snobs - aristocrats who touted Blood Purity and Pureblood Supremacy. Didn't she share her husband's beliefs? Was she really concerned about them?

"What are you doing up here? Aren't you interested in learning the waltz?"

He looked up to find James leaning against the door jamb looking down at him with a lopsided grin gracing his lips.
Angus laughed, "Goodness, no! I'm lucky Janice became too preoccupied with convincing Meryll and Dennis to dance she forgot to ask me to dance! What about you? Why did you come up here for?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wanted some peace and quiet. Maybe do a little…thinking," James replied, motioning his cousin to make room for him on the bed. As soon as he was settled, James leaned back against the pillows with arms behind his head.

"Ah, just thinking, eh? Does it involve a certain bushy-haired Ravenclaw?"

"W-what? I don't know what you're talking about."

Angus bumped his shoulder against James' and laughed.

"Stop hedging, cuz! I've known about your tiny crush ages ago!"

"Really now? Well then I've got nothing to tell you, if that's the case," James said, smirking.

"Aww, c'mon! Don't be like that! It's just the two of us, you can tell me."

"Why? So you can have something over my head when we get back to Hogwarts?" James laughed, playfully elbowing Angus.

"If we ever get back to Hogwarts," Angus muttered.

James' jovial mood dissipated in a flash. Angus almost felt sorry for what he said.

"You really don't believe we'd ever be sent back to Hogwarts, do you?"

He could've lied, just to avoid an argument with James, but he didn't.

"No. I don't believe we'd ever leave this place. Not alive, anyway."

James was instantly on his feet, scowling down at him with hands clenched at his sides.

"You really can be such an arse, do you know that? You can get in trouble for saying such things. We were chosen to be ambassadors to the Muggle World. We're supposed to feel honored not bitter about it, but your words hardly show that."

"Honored to be chosen? To do what - terrorize the Muggles into submission? Believe me, cousin, that's what it will all boil down to in the end. We will be forced to use our abilities against harmless, innocent non-Magical people! Have you forgotten that our parents are part of that Muggle world that the Ministry is bent on conquering?" Angus spat, sitting up to glare at his cousin.

"Conquering? Who said anything about conquering? Did you ever hear the Minister tell us that our mission is to conquer the world? Lord Voldemort wants us to slowly ease into Muggle society, make them see that we are not a threat to them so that they will accept us. That's all!" James said.

Angus couldn't believe what James was saying. And it saddened him because he suddenly realized that if war ever broke out they might soon find themselves fighting on different sides.

"No, James. They don't want US to be a part of that world. They want their kind - the Purebloods and Half-Bloods - to rule the world. We, those with tainted blood, the Muggle-borns, are just pawns! We are the foot soldiers who will do their bidding - infiltrate the Muggle world and bring its citizens to its knees! Once they're done, we will be discarded like trash! And you will be the
The rest of his words were knocked out of him by a hard fist connecting with his jaw. Stars exploded in Angus’ head, but they were quickly surpassed by the pain that stabbed at his heart. Never before had James lost his temper or raised a hand against him! Had he truly lost his cousin to the Dark Lord? Were they to be enemies now?

"Shut up, fool! You should learn to curb your tongue, cousin. It could really put you in harm's way. You just might find yourself back in the dungeons with that attitude," James snarled, rubbing the fist that had nearly flattened Angus.

"Is that a threat?" Angus snorted. He must not let James intimidate him. His cousin never respected weakness.

"No, it's a fact. You talk too much, Angus. Even about things you don't understand. You could get in trouble for that," James spat, moving to the other bed.

Angus had a ready retort, but the door slammed open to let in a breathless Dennis.

"You're wanted downstairs! Something's happened!" the young Gryffindor said.

"What happened?" Angus asked, brushing past James.

"I don't know! We were in the Ballroom with Mrs. Malfoy when Meryll was called into the Minister's study. Next thing we know, she was running back into the room straight into Mrs. Malfoy's arms, balling her eyes out! Then, the Minister came in and told me to gather all of you. Emma and Chris were in the gardens, so they already heard. I had to search for the two of you," Dennis said in a rush.

"Why was Meryll crying?" James asked, walking briskly towards Dennis.

"I DON'T KNOW! Just come with me, you two! The faster we get there, the faster we'll know what had just happened!" Dennis was running out the door before they could say more.

Angus felt James' eyes on him, but when he chanced a glance at his cousin James was already running after Dennis, a deep scowl marring his handsome face. With his stomach twisting in knots, Angus followed the two Gryffindors wordlessly all the way down to the grand ballroom. They found their fellow students seated on wooden chairs looking apprehensively up at the Minister. Only Meryll was seated on the chaise beside Mrs. Malfoy, her head buried in the older woman's arms.

"They're here, Minister," Dennis mumbled as he walked up to Lucius.

"Thank you, Dennis," Lucius said, nodding at Dennis.

Dennis glanced back nervously at Angus then he too, sat on an empty chair. Angus followed Dennis and took the seat next to him. James sat down beside him without a word. He obviously still hadn't gotten over their disagreement. Angus almost snorted. If there was anyone who should be upset, it should be him! His jaw still hurt from James' blow, after all!

"Now that you're all here, I'm afraid I have some sad news to deliver," Lucius said, his eyes roving around the faces before him. Satisfied that he had their full attention, he turned around and conjured a green, velvet chair and sat on it. He crossed his leg and leaned back in his chair. "We just received some rather tragic news about the parents of one of your schoolmates. Apparently, the house of Ms. Greene was broken into by unidentified Muggles last night. Mrs. Greene, together
with their housekeeper and a couple of friends were unfortunately killed during the incident."

A collective gasp rang in the room just as Meryll started crying again.

"Mr. Greene and her brothers," Lucius continued, "were able to escape the hooligans through the help of one of Lord Voldemort's soldiers. They were supposed to check on Mr. and Mrs. Greene when they chanced upon what appeared to be an attempted burglary. One of Lord Voldemort's soldiers died whilst defending Meryll's parents from their attackers. Thankfully, his partner was able to overpower the goons and apparate himself together with Meryll's parents and brothers to safety. We have them all under the Ministry's protection now, so there's no need to worry. They're badly shaken, of course, but otherwise in good health. Unfortunately, due to the trauma that they suffered, we had to…modify…their memories."

The students sat stunned, gaping incredulously at the Minister.

Lucius shook his head in disgust and jumped to his feet. "Had Lord Voldemort's soldiers arrived earlier, they would've prevented this…this…senseless crime! This is why he wants to take you all under his wing! Until he has completely subdued these lawless elements, no one can breathe safely! No one is safe - not even in their own homes!" He was pacing before them like a caged lion now, mesmerizing the Muggle-borns gawking anxiously up at him.

Except for Angus. Somehow, a part of him was still skeptical of the Minister's horrific tale. Numerous questions were popping inside his head, but he dared not voice them. Now was a good time to take his cousin's earlier advice - curb his tongue before he came into trouble. Observe - that's the only thing he could do now. Look. Listen. And file everything for later reference. Two questions kept burning in his brain, though. Why were the DL's soldiers checking up on the Greenes? And were his parents also being spied upon by the DL's forces? Angus silently cursed and wished he could talk to his own parents. Before he could dwell on the subject Lucius' voice recaptured his attention.

"Lord Voldemort agrees with me in saying that we cannot afford another tragedy like this befall any of our Muggle-born ambassadors' families. But we do not want to impose upon you, so I am going to ask you a question," Lucius stopped pacing and stood squarely in front of the Muggle-borns, his eyes full of sympathy and fierce determination.

"Know first that we have only your best interests in mind when we ask this. Do you want me to continue?"

Three heads nodded vigorously. He could not tell if James was also nodding since his back was turned to him. Angus, however, noticed that Chris, like himself, didn't nod in agreement. He prayed that Lucius did not see that. Lucius' next statement told him that his prayer had been heard and answered.

"Good. Good!" Lucius nodded solemnly, but his eyes were hard. "Now, in light of what happened to Meryll's family…are you all willing to place your own families under the protection of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort?"

A tense silence arose, punctuated only by Meryll's heart-rending sobs and Mrs. Malfoy's soothing whispers.

"Y-yes…" came the first tentative reply. It was James.

Angus turned stunned eyes to his cousin. James returned his stare. Angus knew that his cousin understood his silent plea. But instead of backing down, James' eyes became hooded as he turned
away from Angus and slowly rose to his feet. His voice was strong and full of determination when he spoke.

"Yes, Minister. I want my family placed under Lord Voldemort's and the Ministry's protection. And I will do everything I can to bring down anyone - Muggle or not - who dares to harm us or our families. That is my solemn oath on my honor!"

*Whoa! Did I just hear a veiled threat somewhere in that statement?*

Angus was still trying to sort out what James said when shouts of 'Yes' coming from the others pulled him from his thoughts. When he looked around he saw Chris reluctantly get up from his seat, giving him a curt nod. Chris was the School Prefect and not James, but the latter had become the de facto leader of their group ever since that mini mutiny in the dungeons.

Angus sighed and went along lest he be seen as a dissenter. His heart turned cold when he saw the triumphant gleam in Lucius' eyes. It gave him that nagging feeling that they were doing what the Minister wanted them to do all along.

"Very well! I shall inform Lord Voldemort of your decision and commitment. It saddens me that it had to come at such a price, but I'm also pleased that you're mature enough to make the right choice," Lucius said. "Go back to your rooms now. We will be taking Ms. Greene to her family. Abenathar will call you to dinner as soon as it's ready."

Lucius then led his wife and the now catatonic Meryll out of the room. The two guards at the door came in and escorted them back upstairs. The two remaining girls, Emma and Janice, came bursting into the boys' room as soon as the guards had left.

Emma was instantly in Chris' arms, shaking like a leaf. Angus knew that she had just been holding back her tears whilst in the presence of the Malfoys.

"It's okay, Emma. Everything's going to be okay," Chris was saying, his own voice cracking.

Janice sat beside Angus, fidgeting at the hem of her jumper. Her hands we're shaking, too. Angus took pity and put an arm around the sniffling girl. Ever since their impromptu snogging session, Janice had become more attached to him. He did like her, but he just thought that now was not the right time to embark on a romantic relationship. Too much was at stake. Good thing Janice seemed content with just being near him from time to time and never asked for anything more. As he tried to console the girl, a hand slammed down his shoulder.

"Come with me. We need to talk," James whispered in his ear.

Angus debated whether he should humor his cousin or just cut him off bluntly. The decision was taken from him, though, when Chris forcibly grabbed James by the arms and carted him off to the side. He could not hear what the two were saying, but he could tell that the situation was getting heated. And as if to confirm his assumption, the two started jostling each other with Chris landing the first solid blow. Angus leapt to his feet and made a beeline for the two grappling men. Angus leapt to his feet and made a beeline for the two grappling men. Emma tried to pull her boyfriend away from James, but Chris was too enraged to even notice her efforts. Wedging himself between the two men, Angus forcibly shoved them apart.

"Will you two just knock it off? We can't solve anything this way!" he roared.

"Maybe so, but at least I'd be able to beat the crap out of that traitor!" Chris snarled.

"You daft prick! I'm not a traitor! Stop talking nonsense! You don't know anything!" James snarled back, his face red with fury and frustration.
"Yeah? And what did you just do down there, huh? You practically swore to fight on the Dark Lord's side! Against Muggles!"

"I said I would bring down anyone who would harm our families - Muggle or NOT! AND THAT INCLUDES THE DARK LORD AND HIS MINIONS! Learn to read between the lines, you arse!"

Silence fell as everyone in the room processed what James had just said in their own way. Angus' felt like he was doused with cold water. So, he was right. There was a veiled threat in James' supposed declaration of support. Apparently, he was wrong in thinking ill of his cousin. Angus wanted to kick himself senseless.

"What are you trying to say, Toffler?" Chris asked.

James sighed and sat on the nearest bed. "I basically just told the Minister of Magic, in not so many words, that I would be their worst enemy if something happened to our parents whilst under their care. I'm sure he understood my meaning quite clearly. Whether he will take it to the DL or not...I do not know. All I know is that we need to warn our parents and we need to contact the Order. We can't stay here for long."

"Warn our parents? About what?" Emma asked, slipping her hand around her boyfriend's waist.

"I don't think Meryll's parents were killed by Muggles," replied James.

Janice gasped. Angus wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. He wasn't surprised by what James said. The idea had already crossed his mind. Hearing his cousin say it sent chills down his spine. Now, he understood why James did what he did. He wanted to make Lucius feel responsible for their parents. Still, it didn't explain why he hit him earlier.

"What made you say that?" Janice asked.

"Look, the Greenes live in a walled and guarded estate. No one would be able to enter it without going through a thorough inspection. Don't you think the guards would've noticed if someone uninvited entered the grounds? With guns?"

"Not unless they apparated into the grounds," Chris quietly said.

James nodded and smiled, glad that they were finally seeing it his way.

"And the Minister said it was an attempted burglary. No Muggle would be stupid enough to break into such a place just to rob it, don't you think?" ventured Emma.

Janice and Chris were nodding in agreement.

"You're confusing me, cuz. Earlier today, just before Dennis came to fetch us, you seemed willing to take your place in the DL's army. You even expressed your thoughts to me quite violently," Angus smirked, rubbing his bruised jaw.

"You can really be thick sometimes, cuz, did you know that? You were too vocal about your disapproval of the DL when we're deep in his right-hand man's lair. I had to stop you lest you gave yourself away," James said, smirking.

"Are you saying that they're spying on us?" asked Chris.

"I wouldn't put it past them."
"So why are we talking so freely now?" Angus asked.

"Haven't you heard of the silencing and privacy charms? And I thought you were a Mudblood," replied James, shaking his head in mock disbelief.

"Haha. Very funny," Angus said, punching his cousin's shoulder playfully.

"Did you just do wandless magic?" asked Emma, looking at James in awe.

James shrugged in reply. Angus gaped at his cousin. He didn't know that James could do more than just wandless summoning. He wondered what else his cousin wasn't telling him.

"Well, well. It seems that you're much more advanced than you let on, Toffler. Glad that you're still on our side," Chris chuckled.

"As long as you're not crossing over to the DL's, I will always be on your side," replied James, looking solemnly at Chris.

The Ravenclaw Prefect nodded, a quiet understanding passing between the two.

"So...everything you said to me..." Angus suddenly felt like a complete arse. He never should've doubted his cousin.

"...Was to see if anyone was listening in on us," James finished for him.

"And you're sure that no one was?"

James snorted. "Believe me, cuz, if anyone was listening in on our conversation, you'd be sleeping in the dungeons by now."

Angus gulped, his skin prickling in fear. "You should have been in Slytherin, you know. You're too sneaky for a Gryffindor."

James laughed. "Actually, the hat did tell me that I would do well in Slytherin. But then, since you'd already been sorted into Gryffindor, I asked if I could be placed there instead."

They all laughed at that. Even Dennis who was still beside himself with worry for Meryll cracked a smile. Angus felt like a thorn had just been pulled from his side. He didn't know what he would have done had his cousin truly turned against them.

"So what should we do now?" asked Emma.

Every eye turned to James, eagerly awaiting his answer. Angus did not envy his cousin's new role. He knew James preferred to keep a low profile. But he also knew that James never shirked any duty or responsibility thrust upon him, intentionally or otherwise. James took a deep breath and leaned forward, fingers raking his sandy hair as he seemed to contemplate his answer. A few moments passed before he looked up, his eyes gleaming with a hardness that Angus had never seen before.

"We pretend to go along with everything they want us to do. Not a word of dissent, hear? We must show Lucius that we trust him completely and that we're eager to work with the DL."

"Okay...that's doable...right?" Angus said, turning to the others. They all agreed.

"And then?" asked Chris.
"And then…we contact our friends at Hogwarts and tell them we need to talk to someone in person - ASAP!"

"How are we…" Chris began, but James waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Leave that to me. I'll send the message. They have to warn our parents and get us out of here before things get out of hand. Meanwhile, try to get as much information as you can about anything! Be very, very observant. And whenever you have the chance - practice doing wandless magic. Concentrate on the ones we might need later on like Alohomora or any offensive spells that you can think of. Defensive spells would be good, too," James said, looking and sounding very much like the leader they desperately needed. "Whatever happens in the next few days, don't panic and don't lose hope. We can do this together. Besides, we're not really alone in this," James said, his hand going to the invisible pendant resting inside his shirt. He locked eyes with Angus, the unspoken message clear as day.

Angus nodded and turned to Dennis. The younger Gryffindor caught on fast. He smiled and nodded at Angus, indicating his assent. James then took out his magically concealed pendant, clutched it tight and closed his eyes. When he opened his hand, the pendant was back to its original opaque state.

"What is that?" exclaimed Emma.

"We think it's about time that you three learned about the Resistance," Angus said.

 Snape sat back in his chair as he looked on stoically at the scene before him. Writhing on the cold, marble floor was the Dark Lord's latest toy - a Muggle girl of about sixteen or seventeen. She was clad in what appeared to be the remnants of an emerald green lingerie, now barely covering her due to the many slashes and tears on it. She had obviously displeased the Dark Lord in some way, so he was practicing his newest dark spell on her. It caused her skin to burn red as she convulsed and twitched with every red flash emanating from the Dark Lord's wand.

"Scream for me, my sweet. I designed this spell especially for you, so don't disappoint me," Voldemort crooned as he made another slashing motion. The girl screamed obediently as a new slash mark appeared on her exposed flesh. Surprisingly, there was no blood. A few seconds later, even the mark vanished completely, returning her skin back to its flawless state.

The Dark Lord leaned down and pulled her up by her long, blonde hair. She slowly climbed to her feet, her tear-streaked face flushed red but not bruised. Snape knew that the Dark Lord was a master of inflicting pain without leaving a mark. Voldemort does not like ruining his toys before he's done with them so he conjured spells that could cause pain without marring their beauty. And indeed, his toys were always beautiful - usually blonde and blue-eyed with bodies that were just blooming into full womanhood.

The Dark Lord secretly abhors ugliness. Which was probably why he preferred underprivileged witches and wizards instead of House Elves to serve in his household staff. He just couldn't bear to look at the wizened creatures. Snape had seen him flinch numerous times whilst being attended by Lucius' house elves. Quite petty, actually. But proof enough that in spite of his pretensions at being 'godlike', the Dark Lord was still very much human.

Another hair-raising scream from the girl pulled Snape back from his musings. She was now clawing at her neck, pulling at an unseen noose, eyes bulging from the effort. Voldemort swished his wand and the girl collapsed back onto the marble floor, panting. Snape averted his eyes when
he saw that the girl had resumed her thrashing with a flick of the Dark Lord's wand. Voldemort wouldn't have liked that, him not ogling her, but thankfully he was too busy to notice. The Headmaster didn't know how long he'd be able to stand witnessing this atrocious treatment of the girl. At the rate he's going, it would take every ounce of his Occlumency skills to hide his murderous thoughts from the Dark Lord. He never liked watching Voldemort's idea of 'entertainment', but today even more so. Not only because the girl was so young but also because this one eerily reminded him, much to his chagrin, of Abigail Adams. Thinking back now, he realized that the Dark Lord did seem to have a certain affinity for blue-eyed blondes.

*Shit! Why didn't I think of that when I gave her that disguise? She must never be seen by this perverted jerk or she might end up suffering the same fate that they did! But then again...these unfortunate creatures didn't have the same skills as 'Ms. Adams'...*

Snape nearly grinned as a sinister thought crossed his mind. Wouldn't it serve him right if he was killed by one of his 'toys'? Yet as soon as his analytical self took over, the idea was discarded mercilessly. He wouldn't risk Granger's life just to get a shot, a very iffy one too, at this monster. There will be time enough for that. Besides, it wasn't the girl's job to rid the world of this scum...it was someone else's.

That's if that damned 'prophecy' turns out to be true at all! Snape never told anyone, but he didn't really buy into that mumbo-jumbo about Harry being 'The Chosen One'. Not entirely, anyway. His logical brain never gave much credence to the art of fortunetelling (if it could even be considered an art!). But then...this monster before him did! And that's what truly mattered. In a way, Voldemort himself created 'The Chosen One' when he became obsessed with the prophecy about his yet-to-be-born nemesis. He gave it validity just by believing it! And the Order was smart enough to capitalize on that fear, hence the rumor mongering about The Chosen One.

"Severus, you seem a little distracted today. Isn't my pet entertaining enough?"

Snape wanted to kick himself for letting Voldemort catch him unawares.

"Forgive me, my Lord. She is indeed very entertaining. Just a little too...blonde...for my taste," he smirked, effecting a disdainful mien.

*Shit! I almost said too young! Wake up, Severus!*

Voldemort raised his dark brows at Snape, then as if comprehension dawned on him, bust out laughing.

"Oh, Severus! I forgot that you prefer redheads! Wait, don't tell me you're still pining for that Evans girl? You're my second in command, you can have any girl or woman you want," the Dark Lord said, twining his fingers around the girl's tresses.

She was now sitting on the floor at the Dark Lord's feet, her chin leaning on the dark wizard's knee, eager eyes staring up at the man who had, just minutes ago, been using her as a testing ground for his newly concocted spells. Like a stray dog, grateful for whatever scraps were thrown at her, Snape thought sadly. He swiftly erased the thought and focused on his reply.

"My Lord, surely you jest. Lucius wouldn't be too happy to hear that, though. Even if it's just a joke."

Voldemort laughed again, clearly pleased that Snape was not a delusional fool. The Dark Lord did not like wasting time with ambitious, self-important subordinates. He expected them all to know their place and accept it without question.
"Ah, yes. Good old Lucius would have a fit if he even thought he's getting demoted. It's what he deserves, believe me. After that idiotic handling of the Mudbloods, I'm starting to doubt his management skills. And that's why I'm giving you this most vital task and not to him. Lucius needs to prove his worth before I entrust him with anything more."

The sudden shift in Voldemort's tone was not lost on Snape. The Dark Lord was truly losing confidence in his right-hand man. Snape, on the other hand, was gaining his. Had he not been in the presence of one of the world's most accomplished Legilimens, he would've laughed at the irony of it all.

He truly should feel a bit remorseful seeing as he had a hand in his erstwhile school mate's foibles, especially his inability to secure all Muggle-borns from Hogwarts. However, he couldn't take all the blame for that one. If there was anyone who should be blamed for the Ministry's failure regarding that, it was the Minister's own son. His role in the matter was purely coincidental and after the fact. Although admittedly, had he known of Draco's plan to hide Granger beforehand, he would have aided him without a second thought. Still, Snape felt that he should at least pretend to be conscious of his own 'failure' lest he appeared to be gloating.

"I suppose I'm partly to blame for that, my Lord. I should've informed Lucius immediately about the Granger girl. I didn't know of her illness until it was time for the...Mudbloods...to leave for the Ministry since she kept to the Tower for the first few days. As you're probably aware, until the rashes appear Dragon pox has the same symptoms as an ordinary flu, so the silly girl thought nothing of it at first," Snape said.

"Yes, I'm well aware. I'm not really blaming you for that. The twit was foolish. I'm actually thinking that there were things regarding the Mudbloods that Lucius could've done better. Sometimes I wonder if he's a true Slytherin. He's not as devious as he ought to be! Did you know that he put the Muggle-borns in the dungeons? How was he going to make them trust him if he's already antagonistic from the start? But that's just the problem with Lucius, isn't it? He can't even go around this prejudice! If I hadn't told him to review his tactics, your Mudbloods would still be languishing in the damp, musty dungeons of Malfoy Manor as we speak," the Dark Lord spat the last words like he was truly disgusted. Knowing him, however, Snape wouldn't bet his life on the sincerity of that tirade.

"Don't get me wrong, Severus," the Dark Lord continued, "I'm not changing my mind about those Mudbloods, they're still going to be our slaves. But why create chaos if we can gain their loyalty willingly? I've been studying these Muggles for years. They may be beneath us, but they have their uses. Those Mudbloods are no different. Besides, they're easier to manipulate, if you just know which buttons to push. Just take my pet, for instance," the Dark Lord's fingers twisted around the poor girl's hair, lifting her head up. "She clings to me whilst in the heights of passion she'd never experienced before. She worships me because she knows I can bring her pleasure and pain beyond what she can even imagine. So she does everything that I tell her to do. Simple, isn't it?" the Dark Lord said, smirking as he stroked the girl's blonde head.

Snape didn't think he was expected to respond to that so he just kept quiet. He couldn't very well tell the Dark Lord what a bigot he was anyway.

"Tell me, Severus..."

Whatever the Dark Lord was about to ask him Snape never got to hear. Voldemort's attention was abruptly pulled away from him by Lucius' unexpected appearance.

"Lucius, what brings you here to my humble abode? Did I just summon you?"
The Minister of Magic visibly paled at the implied rebuke. They all knew how protective the Dark Lord was of his privacy. No one, not even those in his 'inner circle', comes into the Dark Lord's presence uninvited - especially in his own home. If they were to report something, they would send a message first, requesting for an audience, then the Dark Lord would summon them at his convenience. That Lucius, of all people, broke this non-negotiable rule meant only one thing - he was bearing bad news. And Snape didn't like it one bit.

"Forgive me, my Lord. But I couldn't chance having my message intercepted. This one is of the utmost importance and needing of your immediate attention," Lucius said, kneeling on one knee in front of the dark wizard.

"Is that so?" the Dark Lord replied, lifting a dark brow at Lucius. "Very well, I will indulge you...this time." Voldemort yanked the blonde girl's hair and pulled her up. "Await me in my chambers. Freshen up and discard those rags. I expect you to be ready when I return."

The girl curtsied before the wizard then scampered away without a backward glance, unaware of the malevolent grin adorning her master's face as he stared at her retreating form.

"Now, Lucius. What had you running to me with your tail tucked between your legs?" the Dark Lord sneered, leaning back in his throne-like chair set up majestically on a wooden dais.

Snape saw Lucius glance at him nervously, as if looking for an ally. The Hogwarts Headmaster pretended to not notice, choosing instead to keep his eyes on his impeccably clean fingernails.

"My Lord...there's been an...accident," Lucius slowly said, as if searching for the right words.

"An accident? Accidents happen everyday, Lucius. Why must this one concern me?"

A sigh escaped Lucius' lips. "It involves the Greenes…"

That perked up the Dark Lord's interest, Snape noted. Voldemort was now leaning forward, one hand propped up on his right knee.

"And…" Voldemort prodded.

"Five people were killed...including Mrs. Greene and one of our soldiers."

Snape felt bile rise up his throat. He knew that one of his Muggle-borns, Merryl Greene, was still being held for 'apprenticeship' training. Was Lucius referring to her mother? He turned to Lucius to confirm or dispel his fears when he found the Minister on his knees, grasping at what appeared to be invisible hands squeezing his throat. When he looked up, he saw Voldemort brandishing his wand at Lucius, his face twisted in a macabre sneer. An even greater fear seized Snape when he realized that Lucius could very well die in front of him right this very minute. He must intervene without looking like he was. Voldemort never liked sympathetic underlings.

"My Lord, if it's your desire to dispose of this useless excuse for a human being, then it will be my honor to do this service for you. There's no need to dirty your hands with scum like him. However, I do believe that even garbage has its uses," Snape said with a low chuckle.

Hopefully, the Dark Lord would be distracted long enough to come to his senses. He doubted if Voldemort really wanted to kill Lucius, the Minister still had the loyalty of the Purebloods, after all, something the Dark Lord had as yet to fully secure for himself. Monster that he was, Voldemort was never one to trifle with Magical Blood either, especially Purebloods. Still, he was known for getting carried away at times. And that's what Snape wanted to avoid right now - the senseless spilling of Magical blood (no matter how much he despised Lucius).
Slowly, the Dark Lord's maniacal rage seemed to simmer down, Snape's voice somehow - miraculously - cutting through the fog of the dark wizard's fury. With a flick of his wand, the Dark Lord released Lucius, leaving him gasping and sputtering on the floor.

"You're right, Severus. As always, you're the voice of reason," Voldemort said, returning to his 'throne' with an evil chortle. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you did it to save Lucius' life."

"Oh, I couldn't care less if he lived or died, my Lord. As long as he didn't neglect his duties to you," Snape replied with a lopsided grin. Lucius, who had just risen to his feet, glared at him.

"Tell me everything that happened, Lucius...while I'm still in the mood to listen," Voldemort said.

Lucius cleared his throat before speaking, purposely avoiding looking at Snape.

"Early this morning, Ashton Wilkes came to me seeking help. His son, Lorcan, came home last night, wounded. The boy was apparently...shot...with a Muggle weapon. The boy said it's one of those metal things that expels another piece of metal when-" Lucius stopped when he saw Voldemort wave his hand nonchalantly.

"I know what a gun is, Lucius. You forget that I spent my early years living with their kind," the Dark Lord said with a smirk.

"Of course, my Lord. Apologies," Lucius said, bowing before Voldemort. Snape almost gave in to his desire to roll his eyeballs at Lucius. "His partner, however, died after being shot in the chest."

"Never mind that. Tell me why the boy was shot and who shot him."

"That's...that's where it gets a little complicated, my Lord," Lucius said.

"Complicated? In what way?" Voldemort asked, quirking a brow at the Minister of Magic.

"I used Legilimency on the boy...and what I saw was...not very clear...and a bit disturbing."

"Why?"

"In his memories, I saw Mr. Greene holding a...gun. It was pointed at Lorcan's partner, Rockford Travers' boy, Rowan. Apparently, the boy was shot whilst on his back. But I cannot see Lorcan's memories before that. Everything's blurred...muddled, somehow. I doubt if he's an Occlumens, though. I never felt any walls going up to shut me out," Lucius explained.

"I never should've trusted such a delicate assignment to Travers! Damn that Rodolphus! He's the one who volunteered those two to me!" Voldemort bellowed.

Lucius' lips twitched, as if controlling a self-righteous smirk. Snape knew of the rivalry between the Lestranges and the Malfoys - all vying desperately for the top spot in the Dark Lord's army. Fools! Snape nearly spat. Didn't they know that they were all dispensable in his eyes?

"Those Muggles, the Greenes, were chosen because they have something that can make our entrance into the Muggle world that much easier - communications! The Greenes have TV and radio stations at their disposal! Can you imagine how easy it would be to get into Muggle minds through their televisions and radios? We could brainwash them overnight! I was supposed to start disseminating subliminal messages tonight! All those nitwits had to do was to Imperius the Greenes to do my bidding! And they couldn't even do such a simple task! Sometimes I wonder if I'm truly surrounded by idiots!"
Snape had to control the laughter threatening to escape his lips. The Dark Lord was pacing around the room, waving his arms about in frustration, sparks emanating from his wand every now and then. Voldemort looked like a spoiled brat having a tantrum.

"We can still use the father, my Lord. He just needed a bit of memory modification. I actually took the liberty of doing it. He now believes that he was attacked by Muggles and was only able to survive through our people's help and sacrifice. If anything, he's feeling more indebted to us now than before. He was actually one of those who appeared to be truly willing to help us bridge the gap between the Magical and Muggle worlds, even from the start," Lucius said.

The Dark Lord stopped pacing and stepped in front of Lucius, his eyes narrowing at the Minister.

"Is that so? Then, why didn't you just tell me? Had I known that the Greenes were sympathetic to our cause, I wouldn't have sent those two to Imperius them!"

"No one told me that you would be using them this early. I was still preparing my report about the Muggle parents of your apprentices. Had I been informed of this, I would've told you that there was no need to force them into doing what we want. The Greenes were more than eager to act on our behalf," Lucius said with just a little venom. Voldemort caught it, Snape was sure, but he chose to let it slide. His lack of trust in his people was the reason why this mission failed. And although Voldemort would never admit it, he still acknowledged that fault as his. He would adjust and make sure that it never happened again.

"Where's the boy?" Voldemort asked after a few moments of awkward silence.

"He's at home, recuperating, my Lord. His mother did the best she could to close up the wound, but she said that the muscles need to heal on their own."

"Is she a competent healer?"

"Yes, my Lord. She used to work at St. Mungo's."

"Good, good. Bring him to me tomorrow...or better yet, take Severus to the boy now. He will know if the boy is an Occlumens or not."

Lucius visibly flinched at the implication, but nodded just the same.

"So...I take it that the Travers boy did not survive his wounds?"

"Unfortunately not, my Lord," replied Lucius, sounding really regretful for once.

"Oh, on the contrary! I believe he was quite fortunate. Had he lived, he would've been faced with my wrath. He would eventually have wished for death...after a day or two under my...care."

Voldemort's low chuckle sent shivers down Snape's spine. Even Lucius turned a shade paler, if that was even possible.

"Nevertheless, let this be a lesson to all of you, arrogant pricks. Especially you, Lucius, since you look down on Muggles and Mudbloods like they're cockroaches under your feet. They may be inferior to us, but they're not as stupid as you think them to be. And they're definitely not primitive. True, they need their technology to function well, but that technology is quite...formidable, if not amazing. If they're as primitive as you Purebloods say they are, then why would I even waste my time planning and scheming, hmm? If they're that easy to conquer, why would I need to get into their minds first? Take off your blinders and see your enemy for what they truly are, Lucius. Because unless you do, you'll be the conquered instead of the conqueror."
Snape couldn't help but admire the way Tom Riddle's mind works. The man truly is a genius. And had he not been such a bigoted, cruel, and evil bastard, he would've made a great leader.

Unfortunately, he is the epitome of bigotry, cruelty and evil, so he shouldn't be allowed to lead even the house elves, much less mankind - magical or not.

"Now get out of my sight and try to do some damage control!" Voldemort waved his hand in dismissal and rose to his feet, drumming his wand against his leg. He looked around and frowned at the man standing by the door. "You! Shouldn't you be preparing my dinner by now? What are you doing standing there for?"

The man blanched and scampered out the door faster than a lightning bolt.

"Severus, go with Lucius and see to the boy. You have my leave to return here unannounced after you've scraped that fool's head dry. Meanwhile...I need some entertainment," the Dark Lord waved his hand in dismissal, his eyes twinkling with diabolical mischief. An evil grin slowly spread on his lips before he turned away from them and headed for the staircase. "Oh, Cecilia...are you done getting ready, my pet?" he hollered in a sing-song voice, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Shall we?" Snape said, turning to a haggard-looking Lucius.

The Minister of Magic straightened his dress robes and tilted his head up, his arrogance and confidence returning.

"Of course," he said, swiveling on his toes with a flourish, his cape swishing magnificently behind him. Without even a backward glance, Lucius stepped out of the room and walked towards the front door. There were no fireplaces connected to the Floo network in this house. The Dark Lord's paranoia extended to his followers, so even the wards protecting his property did not allow apparition by anyone other than himself. The two guards posted by the grand double doors bowed as they passed and firmly closed the door behind them. Once outside, Lucius took out a small vial from his trouser pocket and downed the contents in one quick swig. Noticing Snape's eyes on him, the Minister shrugged and said, "Anti-headache potion. Narcissa wouldn't let me leave without it."

They walked to the gates in silence. The four wizards stationed there gave them a short nod and opened the large, wrought iron gates to let them out.

"Where are we going?" Snape asked, keeping in time with the Minister's brisk steps.

"Have you ever been to the Wilkes'?" asked Lucius.

"No. I don't think I have."

"Well, then. Hold onto my arm so we can apparate there," Lucius said after they were about twenty meters away from the Dark Lord's estate.

Snape nodded without a word and laid his hand on Lucius' extended arm. He never liked side-along apparitions, so he closed his eyes and waited for the usual pull against his navel. It was over within seconds.

"We're here," Lucius said, stepping away from Snape to knock on a dark, wooden door.

It was a modest-sized house located, as Snape noted, somewhere in the more modern wizarding communities just outside London. The door was opened by a wizened, old elf wearing a clean, blue pillowcase as its toga.
"Lord Malfoy," the elf said, bowing so low that its crooked nose almost touched the marble floor.

Lucius walked past the elf without even acknowledging it. Snape followed the Minister up a flight of stairs and through a long hallway. When they reached the last door on the left, Lucius rapped on the door twice before twisting the doorknob. Snape's nostrils were assaulted by the powerful scent of various healing potions before he could even step into the room. Seated on an armchair was a slim woman with dark hair pinned loosely atop her head. She was holding on to the hand of a young man lying asleep beneath a thick, powder-blue comforter. The young man's eyes fluttered open when the woman, Mrs. Wilkes, Snape presumed, squeezed his hand. They flared wide when he saw Lucius and Snape standing at the foot of his bed.

"M-Minister...H-Headmaster?" the young man said as he tried to sit up. He groaned and collapsed back on the pillows, beads of sweat peppering his forehead.

"No need to get up, Lorcan. I'd forgotten that you were under Sna-(some throat clearing) Severus at Hogwarts. Lord Voldemort sent him to help you...remember...what really transpired during your mission," Lucius said. Only the Dark Lord's inner circle knew of Snape's Death Eater status.

Lorcan blinked twice, fear registering in his green eyes as he correctly guessed what the Hogwarts Headmaster was about to do to him.

"I will leave you with him now. Don't be afraid, he will not hurt you," Lucius smirked. He gave a short nod to Mrs. Wilkes and then left without even a parting word to Snape.

Arsehole! Snape muttered under his breath.

"Would you like to have your mother here with you?" Snape asked gently, carefully assessing the young man looking up at him with trepidation.

Lorcan glanced at his mother, an unspoken message passing between the two of them. Mrs. Wilkes released her son's hand and rose from her seat. She gave Snape a shy, tentative smile and walked out the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Snape took the seat vacated by the woman.

"Relax, Lorcan. And don't resist my probing. It would be easier that way. This normally doesn't hurt a bit, but if you resist me, you might experience a bit of discomfort." He paused to see if the young man understood what he just said. Lorcan gave him a curt nod, indicating that he did understand.

"Good. I will start now. Just relax," Snape took out his wand and pointed it at Lorcan's temple. The young Death Eater flinched and tried to move away from him. "Don't be afraid. This is just to make sure that I get everything that I need so I wouldn't have to probe your mind again. Have you seen a pensieve before?" Lorcan nodded. "Good. Then you know why I need to use my wand. I will look into your memories, but I will not extract everything, just the ones that you have of last night. As I said, don't resist me. Just let me do what I came to do so I can get out of here as soon as possible. You may close your eyes if it helps. I don't need to maintain eye contact with you to read your mind. I'm way better than that," Snape said, chuckling at the end in an attempt to put the young man at ease. It really was easier to sift through a calm mind.

Lorcan gave a nervous chuckle and leaned back into his pillows, his eyes closing shut. Snape could easily tell that Lorcan was not an Occlumens. His thoughts were just a bit chaotic due to the traumatizing events of last night, no doubt.

There! That's it, show me everything, Snape said to himself as he located the memories he was looking for. Now he understood why Lucius was confused. Lorcan was trying to alter his
memories! He wasn't an Occlumens so his attempt had turned his memories mushy and blurred, fading one minute and reappearing the next.

But that wasn't what truly caused Snape to almost break contact. It was the quiet thought that the young man was nursing. He didn't know if Lorcan was doing this on purpose or if he was even aware that Snape could reach that deep into his psyche. But there it was, hidden under the rubble of his jumbled thoughts, getting clearer by the minute. It was a thought that would've cost the young Death Eater his life had Lucius been as skilled as him.

Lorcan and his mother were thinking of defecting!

o-O-o

Draco Malfoy was not one to sulk. Yet here he was, sulking...and brooding...and getting pissed by the minute. And there's nobody but himself to blame for his present condition.

No, that's not entirely true. He could actually blame Snape. It was that annoying git who volunteered him into the unenviable position of teaching the great Harry Potter Occlumency.

And look at what good it did him!

He shouldn't really let what he saw in Potter's mind get to him, but it couldn't be helped. Why did he have to see what that arsehole thought of Hermione anyways?

He tossed the book he'd been trying to read for nearly four hours now against the wall. How could he even concentrate on a single word when his mind was being plagued by doubt and insecurity? He might as well burn the bloody thing and be done with it!

Fuck! This isn't right! Get a hold of yourself, Malfoy! Hermione's with you, not him!

Still, he couldn't shake the fear that was strangling his heart right now.

How close were they before? Did Harry ever...

No! Hermione said that he was more like a brother to her! She had a thing with Ron, not Harry! Harry was in love with the Weaslette!

Yeah, THAT Harry...but what about this one? This one never even glanced twice at the Weaslette! And you saw his thoughts, didn't you? You saw how he looked at her! You saw how-

Shut up! Shut up! Stop thinking like that! It wasn't actually Hermione he liked but Abby! He liked the blonde Slytherin, not the brunette Gryffindor!

Details! Hermione, Abby, they're still the same person, stupid!

You're the one who's stupid! Hermione's different from Abby!

Yeah? In what way? Looks don't really count. If 'Abby' falls for The Chosen One, you still lose your 'Hermione' because they're one and the same, dolt!

Shut up, you fucking...

Draco cursed colorfully as he realized that he was having an argument with himself. How crazy was that?

"Fuck! I'm going mental!" he muttered, shaking his head in frustration.
Grabbing the book back from the floor, Draco tried to refocus his mind on the task at hand. The events of the past month had distracted them for far too long from their real mission - to find a way to go back to their own timeline. That's the reason why he must concentrate on the book he was holding - he must find a way for them to go back!

Yeah! Before Potter gets his hands on 'Abby'!

Now don't start with that again, you...

Draco sighed and slapped his cheeks.

Wake up, Draco! Don't go there! Focus! Focus!

Returning to the settee, he opened the book and gingerly flipped through its tattered pages. It wasn't really a book but more like a documentation of obscure experiments, a journal of some sort and very old, too. He didn't even recognize the name of the writer - M. Gaunt. The surname sounded familiar, but he just couldn't place it no matter how hard he tried. Perhaps he should ask Hermione. She was more book crazy than him after all. She might've come across this name before.

He found this ancient tome in the Restricted Section the day before the Muggle-borns had left for the Registration, so he hadn't had the chance to show this to her yet. And after everything that happened since then, he'd totally forgotten about it. Aside from the experiments, it also talked about time travel, time-turners and how the Dark Arts could be used to affect time itself.

If Snape was right in saying that the time-turner that brought them here was imbued with Dark Magic, their best bet, according to this, would be to find the actual time-turner that was used. But that was like looking for a mate for the giant Squid - nearly impossible! Add to that the fact that they don't even have any idea who might have such a rare object and their task goes way beyond impossible! As Hermione had told him, the Time-turners from their own timeline had all been destroyed by the Ministry. Who would've had the means to secret away one that was also steeped in Dark Magic?

But perhaps, they were looking at this the wrong way or they were asking the wrong questions. Perhaps, the real question should be: who would've been desperate enough to want to go back in time and change things?

Of course! Why didn't we think of that before?

Someone who lost so much during the war!

Someone who had bet everything on a losing horse (He got that expresion from Hermione)!

But that someone must also have had access to dark artifacts unbeknownst to the Ministry. Otherwise, that time-turner would've ended up like its cousins - obliterated from the face of the earth!

He or she must also have just enough clout to privy as to when and where the Ministry would be conducting their raids. They must have an insider who's able to give them enough time to smuggle their dark objects out.

If he looked at the qualifications together - desperate, lost so much during the war, had bet everything on a loser, had access to dark objects, had enough clout within the Ministry - only one person easily came to mind.

"There you are! I'd been looking all over for you," Hermione's voice cut into his train of thought,
halting him from finishing it.

"What are you doing hiding out here?" she asked, snuggling beside him, her long, blonde hair draping on his arm.

Draco grimaced at the sight, painfully reminded of Potter's feelings for 'Abby'. He tried to move away but she wrapped her arms around his waist when he did.

"Uh, uh. You're not running away from me again. What's eating you, huh? You've been avoiding me since we came back from the Shrieking shack yesterday."

"I'm not avoiding you! I've just been...busy," he retorted.

She snorted and snuggled closer, her right hand tracing lazy circles on his chest.

"Busy, huh? Are you too busy for this?" Hermione pushed away from him and straddled his lap in one swift movement.

Draco groaned at his body's instant reaction. How could he ever resist this girl?

"Tell me, my Slytherin Prince, is his highness too busy for this, too?" Hermione whispered as she leaned forward and planted soft, feathery kisses along his jawline and neck. Her tongue darted out and licked his Adam's apple. Draco's pants were now too tight for comfort.

"N-no," he moaned, his hands going to her waist of their own accord.

He could feel her smiling against his skin. The wicked witch!

"Hmm...is he too busy for this?" She breathed as her hand slid down between them and stroked his hardened member through his pants.

"Fuck, Hermione," he growled, capturing her lips with his own. He did not wait for her to open for him, he plunged inside without preamble and plundered her sweet mouth mercilessly. Their tongues battled for dominance, but he wouldn't have any of that tonight. He wanted to engulf her just this once, so he sucked her tongue into his mouth and nibbled at her lips. His hands were now groping everywhere, her thighs, her back, her ass. He gripped her plump cheeks and squeezed hard, pulling her closer into his erection. Hermione moaned into his mouth and ground her hips against his crotch, eliciting a guttural moan from him as well.

When they both came up for air, Draco glanced up and saw her blue eyes all fired up with desire. Flashes of Potter's fantasies burst in his mind's eye, instantly killing the mood. Draco shivered like a man doused with cold water as Hermione looked at him in confusion, the heat in her eyes already gone, too.

"What's wrong, Draco? Did I do something wrong?" she asked with concern.

With a deep sigh, he gently pushed her off of him, carefully avoiding her eyes.

"No, you did nothing wrong," he said, raking his fingers through his tousled hair.

"Then...what just happened? One moment you're burning hot, the next you're as cold as ice," she said, irritation lacing her voice.

"I-I don't...I can't explain it. It has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me? I'm not stupid, Draco. We were snogging like there's no tomorrow and
then you froze like a Popsicle when you looked into my eyes! What was that all about, huh?" she spat. "If it's not about me, then what is it about? Tell me!"

Draco knew that she was really mad now. He had pushed her out his mind the moment he felt her sending feelers. He didn't like what just happened either, but what was he supposed to say - I froze because I saw Potter's fantasies about you when I looked into your eyes? And I was just wondering if you're fantasizing about him, too? The more that he put it into words, the more ludicrous it sounded. Still, he couldn't...

"What are you doing?" he asked upon seeing Hermione stomping wordlessly towards the door.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm leaving," she said without stopping.

"Leaving the room or leaving me?"

Fuck! That didn't come out right! What's wrong with you, Draco?

Hermione paused and slowly turned around to face him.

"WHAT? What did you just say?"

Draco was so mad at himself that he didn't even think about his next words.

"You heard me. I don't have to repeat myself."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? I'm not doing anything."

Hermione threw up her hands and turned back to the door.

"You're going to see him again, aren't you? Teach him more magic tricks?"

If looks could kill, Draco would be dead by now.

"Is this what it's all about? Are you jealous of Harry?"

Draco snorted. "Pfft! Why would I be jealous of that git? He can't even perform a proper Alohomora!"

Hermione stood there with arms across her chest, a deepening scowl darkening her face as her foot tapped impatiently on the floor.

"You are jealous of that git, Malfoy. Admit it!"

"Ha! You see? He's a git! You called him one yourself!"

"Fine. When you're done acting like a child, we'll talk," Hermione said, making her way towards the door for the third time that night.

"What? I'm not acting like a child! I was just thinking! A-and… I'm not going to talk to you even after I'm done...thinking!"

"Whatever, Malfoy."

"Right! Go ahead, run to your precious Potter like you always do! If I didn't know better I'd say you
have the hots for him, too! Like you always have!"

Draco didn't know if Hermione apparated or if she flew, but she was right there in front of him in the blink of an eye, glaring like a crazed banshee.

"How dare you," she said between clenched teeth. "How dare you insinuate that I had something going with Harry whilst I was dating his best friend! I'm not like your Slytherin dimbos, Malfoy!"

"For your information, not all of my dimbos were in Slytherin. Some of them were in Ravenclaw, just like you!"

"I wasn't a Ravenclaw back then, stupid! I was a Gryffindor!"

"So what? I had Hufflepuff and Gryffindor dimbos, too!"

"Ah! So you finally admit that you really had dimbos panting after you?"

"What if I did! It's not as if I had any choice in the matter, did I? I had to take whatever was offered to me because the one I wanted all along was too busy fawning over the fucking Chosen One that she didn't even notice that Draco fucking Malfoy was a living, breathing human being, too! All she ever saw was an arrogant prick who made her fucking idol's life miserable!"

Hermione looked like she was about to give him another tongue lashing when she paused midway, her words apparently caught in her throat.

Whatever it was she wanted to say, Draco never found out because she was suddenly wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down for a hot, wet kiss.

When she pulled away from him, her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"Oh, Draco! Is this what it's all about? Does Harry's presence bring back those awful feelings? Talk to me, please?" Hermione said, cupping his face in her hands.

"No, Hermione. I saw everything, okay? I saw it all! All his fantasies about you! He fancies you, dammit! He wants you for himself! And what am I next to the Savior of the fucking wizarding world? I was a Death Eater for crying out loud! And I probably will be, too, in this fucking alternate timeline! Next to him, I'm shit!"

Draco shoved Hermione away and walked back to the settee. He didn't even notice the tears that were streaming down both their faces.

"He wants me for himself? The 'Hermione' me or the 'Abby' me?"

"What does it matter Draco. You see, if this Harry is falling for 'Abby', then he's not really falling for me. Or have you forgotten that this," she said, gesturing to her whole self, "is just a disguise. This isn't who I really am, is it?" Hermione said as she slowly walked towards Draco. "Based on your earlier reaction, I would say that Harry's infatuation involved the blonde, blue-eyed Abby and not the brown-eyed, bushy haired Hermione. Am I correct?"

Draco nodded, unable to speak as Hermione's words started to sink in.

Hermione swept her wand over herself, beginning from her head down to her toes whilst murmuring the incantation Snape taught her. The blonde beauty gradually disappeared and in her
place stood the witch that Draco had fallen head over heels in love with.

"Draco, this is the real me. This isn't what Harry wants. And even if it is, he still wouldn't have this," Hermione said, kneeling in front of Draco, her hands reaching up to cup his cheeks. "Because this already belongs to you. How many times must I tell you that I love you, no matter who you were, are or will be. This girl that you see in front of you will always be yours and yours alone...for as long as you want her."

Draco's heart was near bursting with happiness as he pulled his amazing witch into his arms and showered her with kisses.

"Whatever did I do to deserve you?" he mumbled in between nibbles.

Hermione laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck as she straddled him once again, her lips locking onto his. All the love they felt for each other surged forth, their bodies practically screaming with desire. Hermione's hands moved frantically over his face, his neck, his hair, while Draco's roamed the nether regions of her back, stopping to squeeze and knead her plump derriere. He slipped his hands back to her thighs and caressed the creamy skin he found there. She was still wearing her uniform so it gave him easier access to her delicious parts. Soon, his fingers were crawling over to the edge of her knickers, tracing the lacy outline that led to her core. His heart pounded in his chest when he found her wet and ready for his assault. She mewled into his mouth when he easily located her distended bud and pressed on it. He smiled when her hips jolted as he slipped a finger inside her moist opening, careful to keep his thumb running circles around her throbbing bud. Hermione threw her head back, giving him access to her neck. He licked the soft skin there, grazing it gently every now and then with his teeth. His free hand went to the hem of her blouse and pulled it apart, buttons flying in all directions. Next he discarded her bra with a wordless spell, exposing her chest fully to his gaze. His lips descended on her left breast, tracing her hardened nipple with his tongue as his fingers continued to pound into her. He sucked and licked and nibbled until she started to buck into his hand. Within minutes her walls were tightening against his fingers. But instead of giving in to her impending release, Hermione jumped up and knelt before him, her frantic fingers fumbling with his belt and zipper. Impatience getting the better of her, Hermione waved her hand and vanished his pants. Draco chuckled when Hermione smirked up at him. His laughter died in his throat when she started to pull his boxers down, her intent clear. Panicked, Draco grabbed her wrists to stop her from going any further. She'd never done this to him before and he didn't want her to feel obligated to do It now.

"Hermione, you don't have to," he said, smiling down at her.

"I want to. I want to know you...to know your taste..."

Draco almost came right then and there. Just the thought of having himself buried inside this amazing witch's mouth almost pushed him over the edge. He wondered how long he would last in actuality. He nodded when he realized that she was waiting for his assent. Hermione gave her the most seductive smile he'd ever seen as she slowly released his stone hard member from its confinement. Her fingers stroked it lovingly, leaning forward to kiss its swollen head. At the first contact of her Lips, Draco nearly came undone. But it was her flicking tongue that almost made him jump from his seat.

Fuck, Draco! Don't embarrass yourself! Hold back!

He wanted to turn away, just to pace himself, but he couldn't tear his eye away from the extremely erotic sight before him. Hermione was no expert, she moved tentatively around his turgid shaft, but it still aroused him more than he'd ever been aroused his entire life. As if finally gaining the confidence she needed, Hermione moved her lips around the head and up and down his length,
nibbling and sucking as she went along. Then, in one fell swoop, she took him inside her mouth, her fingers moving up and down his length, caressing and squeezing at the same time as her tongue swirled and flicked around the top. Draco felt the telltale tightening in his crotch, a warning sign of things to come (Pun intended).

"Hermione," he gasped, his fingers pulling slightly at her brown curls.

His girlfriend lifted her eyes to him, the heat he saw there pushing him further to near completion.

"I'm...I'm not going to last long...you have to stop now," he said, ignoring the fact that every cell in his body was screaming for release.

The brunette nodded and rose to her feet without breaking eye contact. Draco's breath caught in his throat when he saw the girl of his dreams removing the rest of her clothing, not stopping until she was standing before him in her naked glory.

"Make love to me, Draco," she said solemnly.

"I-I w-was..." Draco silently cursed for his verbal ineptness.

Hermione shook her head, "Make real love to me. No more skirting the issue. I want to be yours completely - tonight."

A lump lodged in Draco's throat, finally understanding what she was asking him to do. The thought made his heart soar, but a part of his soul was still reluctant.

"Hermione, if you're doing this just to reassure me…"

In reply, Hermione waved her hand and vanished all his clothes, leaving him as completely naked, and vulnerable, as she was. Draco hardly had time to react when she straddled him again, her wet core coming in direct contact with his fully exposed, rock-hard member. He almost came when she moved her hips in slow circles, rubbing her wetness against him.

"Fuck, Hermione! You're killing me," he growled against her throat. Knowing that he wouldn't last much longer if she continued what she was doing, Draco pulled away and cupped her face in his palms as he looked deep into her brown eyes.

"Are you sure about this, luv? You don't have to, you know. I can wait…"

"Well, I can't! I'm done waiting. I want to claim you now, Draco. I want to be yours, in every way. I want to have what you gave those other girls."

Draco's heart ached at her words. "No, Hermione. You will have much, much more. I never gave them anything. Yes, we shared a few moments of physical release, but they never came away with anything from me. I am going to give you everything - my body, my heart...and my soul. I swear to you, Hermione Granger, that from this day forward, I am yours and yours alone."

There were tears in her eyes, but the smile she gave him was as brilliant as the stars that night. "And I am yours from this day forward, for as long as you'll have me, my dearest Draco Malfoy."

Draco pulled her face to him and planted a soft, chaste kiss on her lips.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it properly," he said, rising to his feet with Hermione cradled in his arms like a newly-wedded bride. He walked the short distance to his bed and gently placed her on it. He stepped back to admire his beautiful witch. She looked even lovelier with her chestnut
hair spread out on the pillow, her luminescent creamy skin in stark contrast with the emerald green silken sheets. But it was the expression on her face that made Draco's heart (and other intimate parts) swell with joy and pride. It wasn't just desire he saw in her brown orbs, but also acceptance, eagerness, excitement, and most importantly, love. No other girl had ever looked at him like she was looking at him now.

Hermione raised one hand in silent invitation, a sultry smile adorning her luscious pink lips. Draco wasted no time in joining her in bed, capturing her lips in a mind-blowing kiss. Hermione's fingers raked through his hair, pulling him closer. Moving away from her lips, Draco traced the column of her neck, down to her collarbone, his free hand roaming her silky skin, stopping momentarily to caress her perky breasts. His lips traveled further south, his tongue flicking at her flesh every few inches. Hermione bucked her hips when Draco started licking her navel. He reached up and rubbed her pebbled nipples, squeezing and pinching gently. With his tongue, Draco traced a new path down to her glorious mound. Hermione squirmed when his tongue touched her wet opening. Spreading her legs further, Draco positioned himself squarely between her legs. She'd never let him do this to her before, so he looked up to see her reaction.

What he saw was the most beautiful sight in the world - his girl biting on her lower lip, her face radiant with desire and anticipation. Draco licked his lips as he inserted one finger inside her slippery opening, pumping it slowly in and out. Hermione threw her head back against the pillows, fingers gripping the silken sheets. Lowering himself back to her mouthwatering girly bits, Draco savored the scent of desire emanating from her before placing his lips against her folds. Her hips left the mattress when Draco's tongue touched her sensitive nub. His hands slipped beneath her ass to hold her in place as he proceeded to lick her quivering bud. Draco could feel himself throbbing as he continued to plunder her girly's hidden treasure. He licked her wet folds, returning to her precious jewel to trace lazy circles around it every few seconds. Feeling that she was ready for more, Draco sucked her swollen nub as he pumped two fingers in and out of her dripping core. Hermione's moans were getting louder, her fingers now clutching his hair.

"Gods, Draco! I can't...I must...oh, holy shit!" Hermione screamed as her walls tightened around Draco's fingers, signalling an oncoming mammoth orgasm.

Draco ground his fingers faster into her as he sucked hard on her precious bud. Within moments, Hermione's legs clamped around his head as she came into his mouth. He savored everything, lapping up every single drop of her intoxicating juices. As soon as Hermione's trembling started to abate, Draco resumed his exploration of her body, licking his way up to her throat. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in for a deep, passionate kiss, tasting herself just a little.

"I want you now, Draco. I want you inside me," she whispered against his lips.

For the first time in his life, Draco felt nervous about making love.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! The next time you ask me that I'm going to flip us over and fuck you senseless!" she growled, but with a tiny laugh.

Draco chuckled and kissed Hermione like there was no tomorrow. He released her lips and trailed kisses on her cheeks, jaw and earlobes, all the while positioning himself at her slick entrance. Hermione instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist, giving him greater access to her wet opening. She stiffened a little when she felt the tip of his rock hard member pushing against her folds.

"Relax, sweetheart. It will hurt just a little bit, but it will feel better soon enough," he whispered
into her ear before sucking on her lobe. He nibbled on it as he slowly entered her. Inch by inch he slid inside her, all the while continuing with his plundering tongue. When he felt the obstruction press against the tip of his member, he paused and moved back to her mouth. He sucked and nibbled her lips, distracting her with his learned tongue. When he felt Hermione relaxing against him, he pushed hard, breaking the thin membrane in the process. Hermione's fingers raked down his back as she panted against his lips. Draco had to consciously resist the urge to move, giving her time to get accustomed to having him inside her.

"Are you okay?" he breathed.

"Yes...just a little sore. Make it better?" she replied, giving him a shy smile.

Draco nodded and started moving inside her.

"Fuck, Hermione! You're so tight!"

"Is that good?"

He chuckled and said, "Oh, yes, sweetheart! That is so good!"

Hermione pulled him down and plunged inside his mouth. Draco moved delicately, very mindful of the fact that this was her first time. He could feel the tension building inside his belly, making him want to move faster and deeper inside her. But he was afraid of hurting her so he tried his best to pace himself.

As if sensing his discomfort, Hermione breathed into his mouth, "Faster!"

Music to his ears! He started moving faster, plunging deeper and harder into her quivering sheath. Hermione's arms and legs were now wrapped tightly around him, her slick folds getting wetter by the minute.

"Oh, gods! Draco! I can't hold on...shit! I'm almost there!"

"Fuck! Hermione! I....I'm..."

He slipped his hand to where they were joined and pressed on her distended nub. Hermione spasmed around him, sending him almost to his peak.

"Shit! Draaacoo!" she screamed as her legs quivered and her warm core clamped around Draco's throbbing length, her walls spasming over and over.

"Hermione! Fuck me, I'm...oh, fuuccckk!" He screamed as he went over the edge pumping his life juices into his beloved's heated core.

They came down from their high in slow increments, breathing in and out against each other's mouths. Draco started to pull away from her, but Hermione clamped her legs around Draco again.

"Not yet, I want to savor this," she said.

"But am I not too heavy?" he said, propping himself on his elbows as he looked down lovingly at his amazing witch.

"Not really. And I love feeling your weight on me," she smirked.

Draco chuckled and pecked Hermione's pert, little nose.
"I love you," he said solemnly.

"I know. And I love you, too," she replied. "And now you're mine!" she said, quirking a brow at him.

"Oh, yes! I'm yours...forever and always."

"As I am yours, too. Forever and always."

And in that moment, Draco knew that he would do anything for his woman, even at the cost of his life. Even his soul. For he would never love anyone as much as he loved Hermione Granger, the Muggleborn witch that, against all odds, captured his snobbish, Pureblood heart. He leaned down and kissed her with all the love that was bursting inside him, thankful that she reciprocated in kind.

Later - much, much later and after two more repeats of the same- when they were fully sated and feeling just a bit exhausted, Hermione, whilst caressing the thin hairs on his abdomen, asked, "So, what were you really doing before I got here?"

"I was reading an old tome, well, actually it's more like a journal, that talks about time-turners. I'll show it to you later. I found it in the Restricted section the day before you left for the registration and then completely forgot about it."

"But it isn't what's really bothering you, is it?"

Draco marveled at how easy it was for both of them to sense each other's mood.

"No...not really," he sighed, absently stroking Hermione's arm.

"Then, what is?"

"I think I know who's responsible for this time shift."

Hermione pulled away just a bit to look up into his eyes. She gasped when she saw what was in Draco's mind.

"No!" she breathed, both hands going to her mouth.

"Yes. Him...my own 'beloved' father."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading! As always, I'm starving for comments, so please leave a word or two. Cheers!
Infiltration

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One of the perks of working for the powers that be was the inside information that can be gathered clandestinely. For as long as you kept the level of snooping within the boundaries of what can be considered as 'natural curiosity', that is. Because no matter how 'hush-hush' things were supposed to be kept, people still talked. Some, to brag about their status as an 'insider'; others, because they just couldn't keep their mouths shut. The best source of information, however, is the disgruntled or disenchanted underling. They're the ones who had stopped caring about their employer or master, so they no longer had qualms in giving away their sacred secrets.

And they do it for free, too.

Well...okay, not everyone does it for free. Although most of them do it for revenge, some spill their guts in exchange for something, oftentimes a way out of their organization or intolerable situation. But of course, information is classified according to different levels of usefulness - depending on who's 'selling', what's being 'sold', and who's 'buying'. The more sensitive and relevant the information is, the better the seller's chances for bargaining are.

Just like Lorcan Wilkes. What he was 'selling' was something the Order desperately needed. And although he was not a top-level cadre in the Dark Lord's army, he knew things that not even Lucius was privy to.

For example, neither Snape nor Lucius were aware of the 'assignment' that had been handed down to Lorcan and his partner, simply because that was how Voldemort operated. He would never let any one person see the whole picture - too afraid of getting his power usurped by an ambitious follower. Generally, it was a good idea, but it also made him vulnerable to information leakage. People, by nature, are a curious (and nosy!) lot, especially when kept in the dark about some of the goings on in their clique. They would speculate amongst themselves and speculation involved sharing and talking about things they normally shouldn't be talking about.

Which was just what Snape was counting on when he decided to help Lorcan and his mother defect to their side. He knew that he should've at least informed the Order members about what Lorcan was about to do, but he just could not pass up the chance of having another pair of eyes and ears inside the Dark Lord's organization. Lorcan was a foot soldier. He could go to places where Snape's presence would send tongues wagging and eyebrows arching skeptically. His appearance in Lorcan's circles would also trigger the Dark Lord's paranoid tendencies. That would not be good, not only for him, but for the Order as well.

Lorcan would be keeping an eye (and an ear) on troop movements, especially with regard to the security of the Muggle families of the Dark Lord's 'apprentices'. As soon as Lorcan finds out what Voldemort plans on doing with them after the tragedy at the Greenes', Lorcan and his mother (and possibly his girlfriend, too) would be smuggled out of England by the Order. The only glitch in that plan was that they would have to leave Lorcan's father behind.

But not if Snape could find a way to convince him to join his family. Ashton Wilkes was a loyal soldier, but an idealistic one. If Snape could make him see that the Dark Lord's overall plan for Wizardkind was not in accordance with his ideals, then Ashton could be persuaded to leave with his family. From what Snape had garnered, Ashton is a simple and devoted family man who had only been swayed by Tom Riddle's fiery rhetoric during their Hogwarts days. Now, Snape also
knew, based on what he'd seen in Lorcan's memories, that the boy's father has lately become more and more disillusioned with the Dark Lord. It would take just a little prodding for him to jump fence. When that time comes, he would again need the help of the Fawleys.

And as if on cue, the young Fawley heir materialized with a burst of bright, green flames in Snape's fireplace. Following behind him were Dumbledore, Gordon and Remus. They were obviously coming from the Shrieking Shack. As per Emmet's friend, they could not track travel from unregistered Fireplaces - incoming or outgoing. And since the one in the Shrieking Shack was virtually non-existent in the Ministry's logbook, they could use it to their heart's content, free from the fear of being tracked down and tagged by Voldemort's watchdogs.

Snape quickly rose from behind his desk and led them to the sitting area, dispensing with the usual effusive pleasantries. He was all business today and he wanted to make the most of their time since there was a lot to be discussed.

"Uncle Sev, you seem a bit out of sorts," Emmet joked as he sat beside his father.

Snape rolled his eyes, but said nothing, concentrating instead on his current task - pouring tea for his guests.

"Uncle?" Remus asked with a raised brow.

"Ah, yes. I'd almost forgotten about your connection to young Emmet. If one looked closely, the resemblance is quite obvious," chuckled Dumbledore whilst taking the cup being offered by the Headmaster.

"Albus, you very well know that we do not look anything alike," snorted Snape.

"I didn't say that you look alike in any way, just that there's a resemblance."

"Actually, that wouldn't have been bad. I sometimes wish I had Uncle Sev's deep, dark looks. It would've made me more mysterious and intimidating, eh?" laughed Emmet, earning him another eye roll from Snape.

"Oh, shut up! I know for a fact that you don't need my mysterious, dark looks to have girls hanging around your neck," smirked Snape. "But we're not here to talk about how good looking I am (Remus choked on his tea). I have some rather disturbing news."

The light and playful atmosphere instantly turned silent and serious, every eye fastened on the Hogwarts Headmaster, their cups of tea momentarily forgotten.

"What have you learned, Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

"As you're all aware by now, one of my Muggle-borns suffered a great loss," Snape said. The others nodded solemnly. They all knew about what happened to the Greenes; Snape had sent them an owl the very night that he learned about it. "I wanted to meet with you the very next day it happened, but I had been instructed by 'You-Know-Who' to tie up some loose ends."

"What loose ends?" quipped Remus, reaching again for his tea cup.

"He sent me to perform Legilimency on one of the boys that he had assigned to the Greenes. Apparently, Lucius' Legilimency skills were quite lacking. I couldn't risk telling you the details via owl for fear of being intercepted. The official press release is that the Greenes were attacked by Muggles in an attempted burglary."
"Which is a big, fat lie, of course," said Gordon.

"What else is new?" smirked Emmet.

"So what's the real story, Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

Snape took a deep breath before telling them everything that he had learned from Lorcan's memories. He'd viewed them many times in the pensieve, just to be sure that he didn't miss anything. He would still, however, show them to Dumbledore later on.

In fact, he was planning on showing a lot of things to the former Minister of Magic after they're done with this meeting.

His audience was silent after he finished with his tale, but he could tell that there were a million questions going through their brains right now. In the end, it was Remus who broke the silence.

"You said the reason why Lucius got confused with the boy's memories was because he was trying to alter them?" Snape nodded. "But, why would he do that? His memories would've shown that he was innocent. It was his partner who went bat crazy, not him. He would've escaped punishment."

"He wasn't really trying to tamper with that particular memory. He was trying to hide his other memories. But since the boy was not an Occlumens, everything became jumbled up. We should actually be thankful that Lucius is shit at Legilimency and 'You-Know-Who' feels too self important to deal with such a low level underling. Their loss, our gain, I should say," Snape said, sipping quietly at his tea.

"Our gain? In what way?" asked Gordon.

"The boy was trying to cover up memories of him and his mother talking about defecting. There were also memories of his father griping to his mother about how things were so different now...how 'You-Know-Who' was becoming less and less the man that he used to admire and nearly worshipped. Those were dangerous thoughts and the boy knew that, so he tried his best to block them. That's also why Lucius had a hard time sifting through all of that."

"Wait...are you saying that the Wilkes are defecting to our side?" asked Emmet.

"Not exactly..."

"What do you mean 'not exactly'?"

"Lorcan and his mother are, but his father...well, I would still have to talk to him," answered Snape, lifting his teacup back to his lips. His eyes, however, were pinned on Dumbledore, a silent message passing between the two.

"Are you saying that you approved the defection of the two without consulting us first?" Remus was now leaning forward with a fierce, almost wolf-like sneer on his face.

"What was I supposed to do? If I didn't make a quick decision, the boy and his mother would've gone into hiding by themselves. They would've been tracked down and killed within days. 'You-Know-Who' doesn't take kindly to traitors, Remus!"

"Still, you shouldn't have exposed yourself to them! They could still be caught. And then they'd be tortured for information. How long do you think they'd last under the care of the Lestranges or the Carrows, eh?"
Snape's prepared scathing retort died on his lips as he realized what Remus was saying. "Much as I appreciate your concern for me, Remus, I'm still offended that you would think me that careless," Snape held up his hand when Remus tried to speak. "Don't worry, I made sure that Lorcan would not remember anything we'd talked about."

"If that's the case, how is the boy's defection a gain for us, then?" queried Emmet.

It was Dumbledore who replied in Snape's behalf, a gentle smile gracing his lips. "My dear boy, Legilimency isn't just about reading another's memories or thoughts. It can also be used to modify, even create, new memories. And I must say that your 'Uncle Severus' (a bit of eye-rolling from Snape) is a very skilled, indeed a very talented Legilimens. I'm sure Lorcan would be able to do what Severus asked him to without him remembering who it was that gave him those instructions."

"So...you Imperiused him?" Emmet said with a barely noticeable cringe.

"For your information, Mr. Emmet Fawley, I've never had to resort to such a disgraceful act and I don't intend on starting now. I simply...wrote...a few suggestions inside his brain. Which brings me to the conditions of his, or rather, their defection."

"A few suggestions? And that's good enough?" Remus nearly spat.

"They're quite powerful suggestions, Remus. He won't be able to ignore them."

"And what do we get in return?" Gordon asked.

"He's going to give us names, dates and any other information he could gather before he finally jumps fence. He's going to give us Information we can't gather on our own. Not even me. We all know how paranoid 'You-Know-Who' can be. He doesn't share everything with his 'lieutenants', especially those who seem capable of taking over for him. And right now, he's moving through his foot soldiers. They're the ones seeing the most action in his camp. That's why we need the Wilkes boy."

"But what about his father? Isn't he just a low-ranking cadre?" interjected Emmet.

"Which makes my job of convincing him to join his family in defecting that much easier. He's not expected to be at his master's beck and call all the time," smirked Snape.

His audience was now nodding, finally seeing things his way.

"Who's going to be his contact?" Remus asked after a beat.

Snape glanced at Dumbledore, as if asking for support. "This is where it gets a bit tricky. I just realized that the boys I 'suggested' Lorcan to contact have a very protective mother."

"Merlin's arse! Are you talking about the Weasley boys?" gaped Remus.

"Well...technically, they're already of age, so they're no longer 'boys'...technically…"

"But they're still Molly's boys!" grunted Remus.

"Look, I must admit I didn't really have time to think it through. They're the first people who popped into my mind! They're closest to his age - just a year apart at Hogwarts. They also have a shop in Diagon Alley, no one would think too much of it if Lorcan went inside their shop one of
these days to buy his girlfriend a Pygmy Puff or a Purple Pussy Cat," Snape protested.

"Why, Uncle Sev! If I didn't know better, I'd say you're a fan of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes!" laughed Emmet, earning him an elbow in the ribs from his father.

"The Wilkes boy has a girlfriend?" asked Remus.

"Yes. A Muggle-born witch working at Madame Malkin's." Snape shifted uncomfortably at the knowing looks on Dumbledore's and Remus' faces. Only the two in this group knew how significant that fact was to him. Thankfully, neither of them remarked on it.

"But...wouldn't that put the twins in danger in case things get hairy? Molly wouldn't like that," Gordon asked.

"Don't worry about that, Gordon. Lorcan wouldn't be thinking about defecting just yet. All he'll feel is this burning compulsion to talk to his comrades about their assignments. I put up shields around his 'dangerous' memories in a way that even he won't be able to access them. Well, not until he enters the joke shop in three days' time, that is. It's a bit like hypnotism, only he's not sleeping. The shields will go down the moment either Fred or George utters the trigger word. Everything should be in place at our end by then. It will take him a few hours to remember everything - including our conversation. Then he'll know what to do next. We should be ready to smuggle them out of England the moment they return to the shop. That's where you come in, Gordon," Snape said, turning to the scion of the Fawley clan.

"What do I have to do?" Gordon was leaning on his knees, eyes keen on Snape.

"Get in touch with your contacts in America, ask them if they can provide protection for the Wilkes. Because after we get Lorcan's report, we'll be making some moves that might identify the boy as a turncoat."

After getting an affirmative nod from Gordon, Snape turned to Remus. "You'd have to help the twins. Keep them in line, don't let them get over zealous. Remind them to focus on their task and nothing more. They always listen to you."

Remus snorted, "Not always, my friend. Most of the time, but not always."

"That's more than enough. I know for a fact that they never listen to a word I say. Even when they were still in school," Snape griped.

"What about me? What's my assignment? I hope you didn't ask me here just to provide comic relief," snorted Emmet, raising a brow at his 'Uncle Sev'.

"What's wrong with being the comic relief? Merlin knows we need a bit of laughter now that we're dipping our feet into dangerous waters," smirked Snape.

Emmet groaned in frustration. Snape stayed silent for a few more moments, thoroughly enjoying the look on his nephew's face before taking pity on him.

"Oh, alright!," he finally said. "I believe my Muggle-borns at the Manor are asking for a meeting," Snape said as he gave Emmet a meaningful look, assuming correctly that the young wizard had read Toffler's message.

"Yes, I'm aware. Is that my assignment?"

"No. But first, is your house elf still able to go to them?"
"Your house elf...meaning one of ours?" Gordon said, turning to his son.

"Uh, yeah. Didn't I tell you that I'd been sending Twinkle to the Manor to help the Muggle-borns still being held there? You know, just to make sure that they don't starve to death or die of thirst," Emmet was blushing as he spoke, anticipating a dressing down from his father for sending out one of their staff without his knowledge. He breathed a sigh of relief when instead of a reprimand his father wrapped an arm around his shoulder and ruffled his hair.

"I'm impressed, son! I wouldn't have thought of it myself," Gordon said, beaming.

"It's no big deal, dad. Just a few meals here and there," Emmet mumbled, turning a deeper shade of red, embarrassed by his father's very public show of affection.

"Anything done to help out the oppressed is always a big deal, Emmet," said Dumbledore. "Not everyone would go out of their way for other people, especially if it could put them in danger."

Emmet nodded, acknowledging the old wizard's implied praise.

"What do I have to do, Uncle Sev," Emmet said, turning to Snape with a grin.

Snape purposely ignored the bait and plodded on with his instructions.

"Tell her to deliver this message to James - Trust Draco."

"What? You're sending Draco to talk to them? As I recall, they're not even on speaking terms with the bloke," Emmet protested.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Severus," Remus said, shaking his head.

"Why not? Draco's our best bet for this, I tell you. First of all, he's the Minister's son. He can go to the Manor without raising any suspicions. It's his home, after all. Secondly, everyone knows that Draco and Narcissa are close. Even his father wouldn't question his presence in the Manor. He'll just chalk it up to a son missing his mother. Thirdly, he's a member of the Resistance and his loyalty to the cause is without question. Lastly...I trust him, for reasons I can't divulge yet. I was hoping you could rely on my judgment on this," Snape said, glaring at Remus.

The last was delivered with so much emphasis that Remus practically bit back his retort. To go against Snape now was like telling everyone that he didn't trust the Hogwarts Headmaster, even after everything he'd done for the Order - and him, personally.

"But, Uncle Sev… I..." Emmet was stopped short by the hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see his father shaking his head, a small frown creasing his brows.

"Actually, I think Severus is right. Young Malfoy has proven himself trustworthy during that mission in America. He and...Ms. Adams...make quite a formidable pair," Dumbledore said, his eyes glinting. "Perhaps you could also send the girl with him. To keep him grounded."

"Hmm...yes, that's a good idea. He could introduce her as his 'girlfriend'," Snape said, a slight grin tugging the corners of his mouth. "I'm sure that wouldn't be too much of a stretch for him."

"Can't we just send James a message through their pendants?" asked Emmet.

Snape gave him an exasperated look and said, "That would've been read by all Resistance members. But since we're trying to keep Draco's involvement as silent as possible, sending a
message that way would defeat the purpose, don't you think?"

Emmet blanched at his oversight. How could he have forgotten about that?

"But what if they - the Muggle-borns at the Manor, send messages to the others here in Hogwarts
about that? Draco could still be exposed," said Remus.

"Hmm...good point, Remus. I suppose I should send a written message to Toffler with instructions
to keep silent about Draco's role in the Resistance. Don't worry, I'll make sure no one but Toffler
will be able to read the message," Snape said the last in reply to what he had correctly surmised
would be Remus' next objection.

"Are we settled on that, then?" All involved nodded. "Good," Snape said.

With that out of the way, they discussed other matters regarding the Order, including the plans on
the other Muggle-borns' families. They spent most of the afternoon going over every little detail
whilst munching on snacks and drinking tea.

After everything on Snape's table - tea, biscuits and wafers - were demolished, Remus rose to his
feet and said, "I suppose we should all head out and earn our keep."

Snape grunted, leading the way to his fireplace. He shook hands with Gordon, nodded curtly at
Remus and endured another hug from Emmet (That boy really was a hugger!). Father and son went
together, leaving Remus behind to escort Dumbledore. It was only then that he noticed the old
wizard hadn't moved from his place.

"Aren't you coming with me, Albus?" Remus asked.

"I have some things to discuss with Severus, if you don't mind," Dumbledore replied.

Snape sensed the hesitation in his former schoolmate, but the latter nodded after a beat and stepped
into the fireplace without another word. Snape then closed the fireplace, disconnected it from the
Floo network and walked back to the waiting former Minister of Magic, reclaiming the seat he had
left just a few minutes ago.

The old wizard looked at him from the top of his spectacles and said, "Now, show me everything
you've been dying to show me this whole afternoon, Severus."

The Hogwarts Headmaster sighed, glad that in spite of some limitations to his magical abilities,
Albus Dumbledore's mind was still as brilliant as ever. He flicked his wand and the ornate box he'd
shown to Draco and Hermione the day he found them sneaking back into Hogwarts flew into his
outstretched hands.

"I believe...this belongs to you, Albus. Or at least...to another version of you."

If Dumbledore was surprised by his words, the old wizard, as always, successfully hid it behind a
pair of amused and twinkling, blue eyes.

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Ron Weasley didn't like being kept out of the loop. Especially by members of his own family. So
he fumed and simmered as his eyes followed his youngest sibling running across the Great Hall
and exchanging furtive whispers (again!) with Luna and, of all people, Daphne Greengrass.
Alright, Daphne's a Resistance member and also a Pureblood like his sister, but, honestly, what did
she, the eternal graceful swan, have in common with the boisterous, tomboyish Ginny other than
those two things? Throw in Luna into the mix and things become even more dubious. In his eyes, at least.

"Ron, you aren't even touching your dinner," Lavander cooed beside him, curiously following his line of sight. She sighed and reached up to turn Ron's head in her direction. "Why, in Merlin's name, are you glaring at your sister like that, hmm?"

Shrugging out of her hold, Ron just grunted and shifted his attention to the lamb chops and buttered veggies on his plate.

"Something's up, Lav. I can feel it," he said after a few bites.

"What do you mean?"

"There's something going on that they're not telling us."

"Who's not telling us what, Ron? Them?" Lavander asked, turning back to the group that had by now moved to a corner away from the others.

"Don't look at them! Ginny's got a sixth sense, she can tell when someone's looking at her," Ron growled, staring back down at his plate.

"So what? You're her brother, you can look at her whenever you want," Lavander huffed.

"You're the one looking, Lav, not me. Ginny doesn't like being ogled by anyone, I tell you."

"I'm not ogling her! Only boys ogle us girls!" she pouted, stabbing at her veggies.

Ron sighed, sure that Lavander was about to launch into another one of her tantrums. She really hated being told off. Draping an arm around his girlfriend, he pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. If only he didn't love this girl to bits, he wouldn't put up with her too fluid mood swings. Unfortunately, his heart was smitten the moment she showed him just how talented she was in...private matters.

"Come on, Lav. Don't be like that. The night's still young, we can still have some fun later on, don't you think?" he whispered against her hair, reveling in the cinnamon scent of her dirty blonde curls.

The voluptuous beauty in his arms slightly turned to look up at him, a sensual smile gracing her strawberry-pink lips. "You promise?" she breathed.

"I promise," he breathed back and planted a chaste kiss on her freckled nose.

The witch giggled and slid her arms around his waist, pulling him into a tight hug.

"Oh, Won-won, you're the best! Do you think we can go to our secret place again?"

Ron knew of what she was talking about. They had found that secluded pond by accident whilst running after the blast-ended skrewts that the third years had accidentally set free during start of term. Since then he and Lavander had been sneaking out to skinny dip in its surprisingly perpetually warm waters.

Crisis averted! Ron sighed to himself when Lavander disentangled herself from his arms and continued eating her lamb chops and mashed potatoes, throwing meaningful glances at him in between bites. Now he could go back to his surreptitious observation of his sister and her posse.

Why was she always talking to that Greengrass girl? Luna, he understood. She was in Ginny's year,
after all, in spite of being in Ravenclaw House. But Greengrass was in his year and a Slytherin to boot! Whatever could she be discussing with two underclass girls that had nothing in common with her except their blood status. And, yeah, being in the Resistance.

Then, it hit him! That's it, wasn't it? They're talking about Resistance matters! That's what those three shared that was worth missing dinner over. Godric knows that Ginny and Luna cared nothing about that Blood Supremacy crap, so they wouldn't be chatting about that with the former Pureblood snob from Slytherin House.

But then, if that's really the case...why didn't he know about it? This wasn't the first time that he'd seen those three bumping heads during mealtimes, either. He'd seen them lurking around corners during lunch and breakfast, as well! For the past three days!

He must find out what they're whispering about. His gut told him that it wasn't about boys or girly things (Merlin help the person who'd even suggest such topics to his sister!) or even schoolwork. Ginny was naturally smart. Even without much effort, she still managed to get better grades than him. Yet she wasn't nerdy enough to discuss schoolwork especially during breaks!

Quidditch, yes! She could make one's ears bleed once she starts talking about Quidditch, but he highly doubted if either Luna or Greengrass shared the same inclination.

So, yes...it must be Resistance related.

But if it was, why was he out of the loop?

"Shite!" he grumbled, throwing down his fork in frustration with such force that it made Lavander squeal in surprise.

"What is wrong with you, Ron? You've been grumbling since we came down here for dinner," Lavander cried, glaring at him. "If you don't like sharing a meal with me that much, then I suppose you're better off eating alone!"

Before he could do or say anything in his defense, Lavander was throwing her linen napkin on the table and stomping away from him. Parvati, who was sitting right across from Lavander, also rose from her seat in a huff and stalked away. But only after skewering Ron with her infamous dagger looks.

"Bad move, mate," Dean said, shaking his head. Seamus grimaced as well. Thankfully, Neville was not there to give him a piece of his own mind, potentially aggravating the situation.

Wait! Neville's missing again? How many dinners has that bloke missed this week?

Something's definitely up, he was sure of it. He just didn't know how to get to the bottom of it without incurring the wrath of his prickly sibling. Ginny never liked him (or any of her other brothers for that matter) sticking his nose in her business. Just then, he saw Nott and Zabini walking towards Ginny's group. Ginny's face lit up, her hand extending toward the dark-skinned Slytherin in silent invitation. Ron didn't know which was inflaming him more now - the secret they were excluding him from or the fact that his sister appeared to be so enamored with a snake. Sure, he's Resistance now, but in Ron's opinion, he (and his lot) would always be Slytherin snakes - devious, slippery and so unworthy of his trust.

"Ginny's really into that Slytherin bloke, isn't she?"

Ron was thinking it, but he didn't appreciate hearing it from someone else.
"Shut your mouth, Finnigan, before I shut it for you," he growled.

"What? It's just an observation! It's not as if you didn't know," Seamus protested.

"I'm her brother, of course I know!" sneered Ron.

Seamus was about to reply to that when Dean clapped him on the shoulder as he rose from his seat, "Hey, look at the time! Come on, mate, we're going to be late for our study group! Hurry up, Heather must be fuming mad by now."

"What study group? I didn't sign up for any study group!" Seamus grumbled as he followed his best friend out of the Great Hall, leaving Ron stewing in his own ire.

He hardly noticed the departure of his two companions, however, as his eyes were still following his sister's every move - a plan forming in his mind. When the group appeared to be leaving the Hall, Ron jumped to his feet and walked briskly out the door. Positioning himself behind a thick column that gave him a good view of the Great Hall's doors, he waited for Ginny and her posse to show themselves. He only had a few minutes' wait until the five Resistance members were striding past him. They were so close to him that he caught snippets of their conversation.

"Is Neville already there, Luna?"

"Yes. He's cooking dinner tonight."

Laughter and hooting from the boys.

"Neville can cook?"

"Yeah! He cooks really well, too."

"You're so lucky, Luna. I wish more men knew how to cook."

"Hey! I know how to cook. All Italian men know how to whip up a mean spaghetti and meatballs. Just ask Theo here."

A gagging sound followed by grunts and some scuffling.

More laughter as the group continued down the hallway. Ron chanced a look from his hiding place just in time to see his quarry turn the corner.

Where are they going?

Ron crept out of his hiding place and made to follow the group when upon turning the corner he realized that they'd disappeared.

How could they have walked that fast? The hallway leading to the staircase was not very long and there were no classrooms there either. One wall displayed framed pictures of wizards, while the other was filled with tall windows.

"They went down to the entry hall," someone said.

Ron whipped around, but found no one even near the vicinity.

"Not a very smart one, is he?" another voice snickered. Two more voices joined it in laughing. "Not as smart as the sister, anyway." More snickers.
"We're up here, dimwit," a deep voice said.

Ron looked up to find five wizards sitting around a table, staring down at him with disdainful eyes. It was an old portrait of some of the very first Hogwarts alumni.

"Finally realized that portraits in this place can talk, eh?" snickered a blonde-haired wizard who looked eerily like Malfoy.

"Oh, shut up! I was busy looking for-"

"We know! That's why I told you that they went down the entry hall," a dark-haired wizard wearing Gryffindor robes said with an exaggerated eye-roll.

"Uh, right...okay...thanks, then! Bye!" Ron turned back the way he came and took off for the stairs before any of those other wizards could say anything else. He could hear the blonde-haired wizard calling out to him, but he ignored it and ran faster, taking the stairs two steps at a time. He barely heard him mention a Disillusionment charm.

His heart fell upon reaching the main entry hall. There still was no sign of his sister and her friends. How could they have disappeared that fast?

Wait! The pompous wizard said something about a Disillusionment charm. Could that be why they were nowhere in sight? But why would they put such a charm on themselves inside Hogwarts?

Ron scratched his head as he pondered that thought.

Unless they were going outside...in secret! The Shrieking Shack! They're going to the Shrieking Shack!

Convinced that he was right in his assumption, Ron cast a Disillusionment charm on himself and walked down the familiar path leading to the Whomping Willow, his brain continuing to mull over the strangeness of the situation.

But why would they be going to the Shack at this time of night?

The Resistance used the place for training and meetings. And as far as he knew they hadn't scheduled any training or meeting for tonight.

Odd that they hadn't done any training the whole week, actually, in spite of Neville constantly reminding them to keep on practicing their spellcasting. Was his sister and her friends preparing for a special assignment? If they were, why didn't they include him? He was one of the pioneers of the group, after all. It was him and Neville who recruited members, why was he now being excluded from their activities?

Incensed by that last thought, Ron stomped across the grassy path, cursing silently. He stopped short when he heard voices up ahead. He didn't want them to see him just yet. Determined to catch them red-handed, Ron crouched and hid behind a clump of thick, leafy foliage. This part of the Hogwarts grounds was not as well-tended as the others so as to discourage students from taking a stroll this far away from the castle.

Ron looked on as the Whomping Willow started flinging its branches at unseen intruders. Even from where he was, he could feel the whoosh of air as it flailed its gnarled appendages. Then, within seconds, its thrashing limbs grew limp.

Ginny and the others must be sliding down the entrance to its bowels by now.
He waited for a few more minutes before approaching the extremely hostile tree. When he saw it shudder, as if awaking from slumber, Ron crouched low and quickly scampered towards it. He couldn't remember which part of the root to 'tickle' in order for the tree to stop its homicidal rampage against intruders, so he just went straight for the small opening at the base of its trunk. His Quidditch training kicking in, Ron deftly evaded the vicious trunks aiming for him and slid down the smooth ramp that gained him entrance into the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard soft voices ahead of him. He checked if the Disillusionment charm was still holding before following those voices down the path. He slowed down when he saw that his quarry was now plainly visible. They'd apparently lifted the charm from themselves, secure in the belief that they were safe in this tunnel. Ron frowned as he realized that this careless attitude could put them in danger. What if it was someone else under a Disillusionment Charm who was following them - like one of the DL's spies? Ron let out a string of silent curses and resolved to discuss this with the group. They must not be complacent, even within Hogwarts' grounds. Especially now that there were rumors of war flying around.

As soon as Theo, who was the last to climb up the ladder, had disappeared through what he knew to be the trapdoor opening to the second level, Ron followed suit. He pushed the trapdoor with his head, but it was already locked. Fishing his wand from inside his pocket, he pointed it at the door and whispered, "Alohomora". He frowned when he heard the lock slide open. Were they really so trusting? Couldn't they even think of something more complex than that elementary spell to protect the entrance to their sacred sanctuary?

Nearly fuming now, Ron flipped open the flimsy trapdoor only to be greeted by at least three wands pointing at his face.

"Well, well, well. I guess we've found out who's been dogging our heels," Theo said, a malicious grin spreading on his face.

"Put that away, Nott. Or it won't be just your heels I'd be dogging," snarled Ron, pointing his wand at the Slytherin.

"Stuff if, Ronald. You're being such a dick," Ginny said, rolling her eyes, as she pocketed her wand. She and Blaise offered to help Ron up, but the redheaded wizard waved away their hands and climbed up the hole on his own.

Brushing the dust from his robes, Ron walked past the two and went straight to the kitchens. He figured Neville would be there as he remembered Luna saying that Neville would be cooking dinner. He was determined to have some words with Neville. His Weasley pride wouldn't let him put this matter to rest until he's blown off steam.

What greeted him when he reached his destination, however, was enough to put a damper to his building fury. Seated around the small kitchen table were Daphne, Neville, Luna and a young man with unruly, black hair wearing round spectacles. The latter looked up when Ron stomped into the kitchen, his emerald-green eyes smiling at the newcomer in greeting.

"Don't tell me, you're also Ginny's brother, aren't you?"

"Close your mouth, brother dear. It's so unsightly," Ginny said as she walked past him, tugging Blaise along behind her.

"A-are you for real?" Ron blurted before he could stop himself.

The dark-haired wizard chuckled, "Last time I checked, uhm, yeah. I'm flesh and blood. And bones,
too. Gotta have bones, yeah?"

Ron shook his head and said, "I mean...you're Harry Potter, aren't you? You're really him? You're not a...a..."

"...Figment of your imagination? No, I'm afraid I'm the real deal."

"Fuck me!"

The room shook with the laughter of everyone around him.

"Uh, I'm not really into boys...so, I'm afraid I'd have to decline," Harry replied solemnly, but his eyes were twinkling with mischief.

Ron frowned, not immediately getting the jibe. His face flamed when he finally realized that The Chosen One was apparently poking fun at him.

"Sorry about my brother, Harry. His mouth tends to run faster than his brain sometimes," Ginny said in between guffaws.

"Shut up, Ginevra," he muttered as he walked towards Harry with an extended hand. "I'm Ron, by the way, Ron Weasley. Obviously," he said the last with a bit of exaggerated eye-rolling as he pointed a finger to his hair.

Harry shook his hand and said, "And I'm Harry Potter. Glad to finally meet you, Ron 'Obviously a Weasley'."

"So, I guess you're the secret they've been keeping from me, huh?"

Harry blinked, not really comprehending, then his eyes went past Ron.

"No, Weasel. I'm the secret they've been keeping from you. Done a poor job of it too, if you ask me," a very familiar voice drawled from behind him.

Ron knew who it was before he even turned around to face his most hated childhood nemesis, but he was still jolted upon seeing the annoying smirk on his snobbish Pureblood face.

"Malfoy? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Well, I should think my presence here needs no explanation. But just to humor you, Weasel, since we'd be fighting on the same side now, I'm here because I'm helping Harry with his training. Satisfied?"

"WHAT? And whose brilliant idea was that?" Ron spat, turning to Neville. The veins on his neck were nearly bursting as he desperately tried to control his anger.

"Headmaster Snape's," Neville replied without hesitation.

Ron scoffed. "Figures. We never should've trusted that turncoat in the first place. Can't you see what's happening here? Snape's filling our ranks with his...his...snakes! I wouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves hanging from our necks together with the Muggle-borns in Malfoy Manor! For all we know, this lot could be spying for the DL!"

The air suddenly turned heated, silently humming with a volatile energy. Daphne was now on her feet, an uncharacteristic sneer marring her doll-like features. Blaise had a murderous look in his eyes, while Theo was clapping and unclapping his hands, as if itching to connect with Ron's
overlong nose. Even Ginny wore a disgusted look on her face. Neville looked disappointed while Harry stood by with a curious look on his face.

"You should be careful with your words, Weasley. I believe we, snakes, quite outnumber you today," sneered Draco.

It was only then that Ron noticed the blonde Ilvermorny girl standing beside him.

"What is she doing here? She's not even a real Hogwarts student! Are you all too dumbstruck by her looks! She's still a slithering snake underneath all that!"

Ron half-expected a colorful retort from Abigail, but the newest addition to Slytherin house just shook her head and looked up at the ceiling, like she was holding back tears.

"Stop it, Ron! You're embarrassing yourself," Ginny snarled.

"Embarrassing myself? Is that all you're worried about, Ginny?" Ron gave out a mirthless laugh.

"We've been infiltrated by these...these...people...and all you can think of is how I'm embarrassing myself? Did they Imperius you or something? Wait...that's it! You've all been Imperiused by Snape and his Slytherin gang! Fuck! I should've known something like this was going to happen! Wait 'til I tell mum and dad about this, Ginny!"

"You're really being an idiot, Weaselbee," Draco snorted.

Knowing that the pompous Slytherin Prince was laughing at his expense made Ron see red. Without even realizing what he was doing, Ron pointed his wand at Draco's face and screamed, "Stupefy!"

The spell was expertly and effortlessly blocked by his intended victim, though, inflaming Ron even more. Determined to wipe the annoying smirk off of Draco's arrogant face, Ron prepared to renew his attack when his wand went flying out of his hand and into the outstretched hand of someone behind him. When he turned around, ready to confront whoever it was who dared intervene for his nemesis, he was shocked to see that it was Harry who had disarmed him from behind.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but this just won't do. We're not enemies here," Harry said.

"You don't understand, Harry! You don't know these people!"

Harry shrugged. "I may not know them as well as you do. But I owe them," Harry said, nodding in the direction of Draco and Abigail. "They did more for me than you have. And they did it before they even met me. So, I can fairly say that I know them better than I know you, which goes without saying that - no offense meant, mate - I trust them more than I trust you."

Ron's heart slammed against his chest. Never before had he felt so Insulted and treated like the enemy. He looked at the faces before him, waiting for someone - anyone - to stand up for him, but they just stood silent.

"Are you just going to let this happen, Neville? We started this group! You're the leader here, you should have the last say in this! You can't just let them take over."

Neville cut Ron off with a hollow laugh. "This group was created to fight the growing threat of the DL's forces. I - we - just organized this group. The idea wasn't even mine to begin with, Ron. And you know that! We're here to fight the DL and not with each other."

"Have you gone mental? These," Ron said, sweeping his hand at the glaring Slytherins, "are people who made fun of us for years! Their parents supported - are still supporting (glares at Draco and
Theo) Voldemort! For all we know they could be reporting to him -"

"We signed the contract, you dumb fuck! You know the consequences for betrayal! Or have you forgotten that we made a blood oath just like you did, you stupid arse?" screamed Theo as he strained against Blaise's and Ginny's hold.

Ron swallowed the bile in his throat when he realized his mistake. How could he have forgotten about that bit of parchment that bound them together?

"Alright! I concede that point. You did sign the blood oath after all! But what about them? I didn't see their names on that piece of parchment! How can we be sure of-"

"You didn't, Ron. But I did," Neville quietly said.

An deathly silence fell on the group.

"What? You knew even then that Draco had switched sides?" croaked Theo.

"No...not until just recently, Theo. The day they came here with Harry, to be precise. I wanted to be sure that he was really serious about joining us. You see, when Hermione gave me the parchment for safekeeping...before she left for the registration...she said that there was one member who had signed on and took the blood oath even before we did, but she concealed the name for security reasons. However, she also taught me the spell that could break the concealment charm if the need to know who that was became imperative and she wasn't around to give her assurance. I've held back my curiosity because I suspected then that it would be someone very close to the DL's forces, possibly an insider. I didn't want to carry around such a dangerous bit of information inside my head now, did I? Then, when they came here with Harry, my suspicion was confirmed. But still, I had to see it for myself, so...I looked. And it was indeed Draco's name and signature that Hermione had concealed."

Ron fell silent as he digested what Neville had said.

"You said Malfoy's name was there," Neville nodded. "But you never said anything about her," Ron said, pointing to Abigail. "Are you telling me that she signed on the bloody parchment just recently? As far as I remember, Granger sealed it after we'd all signed. How then could her name still be admitted into that enchanted contract?"

Neville gave him a small smile, but his eyes were on the blonde Ilvermorny transferee.

"Oh, believe me, Ron. Her name's been there all this time."

The knowing smiles the other Resistance members threw at Abigail Adams brought a frown to Ron's brows. Somehow, it made him realize that he was still out of the loop - an even bigger loop at that, too!

And he didn't like it one bit.

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Sirius glanced at the woman staring with undisguised fascination at the mural of 'The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black'. She never seemed to get tired of tracing the lines that branched out here and there, enumerating the names of their ancestors and present relations. He also noticed how her fingers lingered on the blackened spots - particularly his and Andromeda's. Well, at least they were there at one point, while she and her own branch of the Black family was not even alluded to.
Not that there was anything to take pride in being a Black.

According to his thinking, anyway. Or maybe Andromeda's, too, he nearly chuckled.

That cousin of his was blasted off the family tree when she defied the number one rule in the Black manifesto - never associate with Muggles. The woman had not only dared associate with Muggles, she went as far as marrying one!

How he wished he was that brave, Sirius mused as he sipped at his brandy.

No...he wished he was as brave as his baby brother...

Fuck! Don't go down that path again, Sirius! Focus on the present! Focus on how you can help this woman become the powerful witch she ought to be!

Tamping down the desperation that was starting to resurface, Sirius walked over to Angela and stood behind her as she traced the blackened spot that should've contained his name.

"Why was your name erased from this?" she quietly asked.

Sirius chuckled without humor, "If my mother had her way, my name would never have been written up there in the first place. But it's a magical tree, you see. The moment I breathed my first gulp of air, my name was automatically etched on it - the newest wizard in the long line of Pureblood Blacks."

Angela nodded as she turned back to the wall, looking up at the other blackened spots. "What about those others, why were they removed from the tree? You said Andromeda married a Muggle - was that the case for the others as well?"

Sirius gave her a sad smile. "No. There are many offenses one can commit to earn a blasting spell. Look up there, that shouldn't have been removed since Cedrella married a Pureblood. Too bad she chose one from a clan that the Blacks hated - the Weasleys."

Angela's head swung to him, a frown creasing her perfectly-arched brows. "The Weasleys? As in Arthur and Molly Weasley?"

"Yes. I'm actually related to Arthur through that marriage."

"What about the others?"

"Well...let me see...Phineas was an advocate of Muggle rights, Marius was a squib, Uncle Alphard was blasted away after my mother found out that he gave me money when I ran away. That's why I was obliterated from the family tree, by the way."

"Really? Just for running away?"

"It wasn't that simple, actually. I ran away because I couldn't take my family's elitist views anymore. I rebelled against them, got sorted into Gryffindor - which in my father's opinion was an even bigger travesty than associating with Muggles! And then, I went to live with the Potters, who, according to my parents, were the biggest blood-traitors of all. Second only to the Weasleys, of course."

"Wow! I didn't know that you were such a rebel!" Angela laughed.

Sirius chuckled good-humouredly. "Don't let this cool exterior fool you, cousin. Wait...are we
cousins or are you my great-aunt or something?"

Angela's brows creased into a frown as she mulled over the question.

"I really don't know! But I'd rather be your cousin than your great-aunt! I don't want to sound that old! Heaven forbid!"

They both laughed at that.

"My grandmother didn't go into details," Angela continued, back to her serious tone, "she didn't really want to talk about that side of the family. All I know is that my great, great grandfather, Cepheus Black was disowned and disinherited when he married Lyra Lestrange, who had been equally disowned by her family because she was a Squib. Nana said that grandpa Cepheus died whilst defending Grandma Lyra, who was then pregnant with their second child. She and the children survived, but she changed her name to Anna Boyle and moved to the Muggle world. From then on, she made sure that none of her children or grandchildren interacted with the Wizarding world, even those who were not Squibs."

"Did everyone in your grandma's side know about the Wizarding world?"

"Yes, because our family's magic usually skipped generations, so it was imperative that everyone knew what to do when it manifested in their own children."

"But your son is also a wizard, right? So, it didn't skip this time."

"Yes, that's correct. I don't know how or why it happened. I was actually surprised when I found out about James' abilities. I thought that it would show in his children, not him," Angela sighed. "Had I not sworn to my Nana on her deathbed that I won't reveal my secret to anyone other than my husband and that I wouldn't tell James about our history until before he gets married, this wouldn't have happened. James wouldn't have been branded a Muggle-born. He wouldn't be suffering."

Angela gasped, unable to hold back the tears.

Sirius pulled the sobbing witch into his arms, crooning soothing words into her hair. Anger began to pool at the pit of his stomach. The 'Noble and Most Ancient House of Black' had suffered senseless tragedies due to this twisted belief in Blood Supremacy and it was time that he put a stop to it. He was now the Scion of his clan and he would do everything to ensure that what happened to Cepheus, Andromeda, Angela and James, would never happen again. He can't change the past, but he can surely change the future. And he would start by helping this long-lost cousin, who was slowly becoming like the sister he'd always wanted, achieve her full potential as a witch. She's a Black and she's entitled to that, at least.

"Do you think James will forgive me?" Angela whispered against his chest.

Sirius pulled away and looked down at Angela. "What is there to forgive?"

Angela shrugged. "Well, I kept a very big secret from him. If I hadn't, he wouldn't be in this predicament. I don't even want to think about what he'd been forced to endure...I-I won't be able to forgive myself if anything bad happens to him, Sirius..."

"Look, I know that you're a strong woman, Angela. And I'm sure that James is just as strong. He's got the noble and ancient blood of the Blacks coursing through his veins, after all," Sirius said, smiling down at his cousin. "And one of the reasons why the Blacks feel entitled to so much, even misguided arrogance, is because they're always good at everything they do. Just take me, for example. I may be a useless bum as of the moment, but still, I do it with style!"
Angela gave a small laugh as she playfully slapped his arm. "You're not a useless bum, Sirius! You're helping me hone my skills, turning me into a real witch in spite of all those training that I'd missed. And you're helping the Order, too, just by letting them use your own house as their headquarters, sharing all your resources in the process. I'd hardly call that being useless. You don't have to be always on the battlefield to be called a warrior, you know. There are even more significant battles being fought everyday away from the front."

Sirius felt a tiny trickle of pride flow through his veins. It's been so long since he'd been appreciated by anyone. Sure, the Order was grateful for the use of his house, but it was more like a taken for granted thing and they'd never expressed their gratitude for that small bit of contribution. Not that he was looking for expressions of gratitude, of course. It's just that...with Snape, Remus and practically everyone in the Order risking their necks outside, every single fucking day, for their cause whilst he stayed cooped up in this hellhole, drowning his fury in buckets of Ogden's Old..well, it sort of eroded his self-respect over the years. And it sometimes made him forget that he was still a wizard, a very skilled and capable wizard, who belonged to the Order of the Phoenix and that he was fighting for the good side.

"It sounds better than it is if you put it that way," he chuckled as he walked back to the bar. He'd intended to pour himself another drink when his conscience kicked him hard, reminding him of his earlier resolution. He really should stop wallowing in self-pity and start living for someone or something other than his bloated ego again. Steeling himself against the temptation, he grabbed the decanter and walked all the way to the kitchen sink to dump all of its contents down the drain. He could've done it by magic, but the physical act of doing the deed himself gave him a certain feeling of satisfaction and finality that a vanishing spell wouldn't have done.

When he turned away from the sink, he found his cousin looking at him with an amused grin on her face.

"Well, that must have signified something monumental," she said, crossing her arms on her chest as she casually leaned on the doorjamb.

Sirius laughed. "Somewhat...I decided to turn a new leaf. I'm going to start a new Black tradition - no drinking anything stronger than butterbeer unless it's to celebrate a birth, a marriage or a new year," he said, squaring his shoulders, the shadows in his eyes lifting, giving his face an almost ethereal glow that showed those handsome features that the Blacks were noted for.

Angela smiled and said, "Is that a promise?"

He nodded solemnly, placing a hand over where his heart was, "An oath."

Just then, the loud shrieking coming from Walburga's portrait rang in the air. Sirius was already running towards the foyer when he bumped into the stumbling and bloodied figure of Mundungus Fletcher. He would've hit the floor face first if not for the quick hands of Sirius that steadied him on his feet.

"What's wrong, man? Why are you all bloody?" Sirius barked.

"Gimme a glass o' wa'er f'erst, man!" Fletcher said, gasping for breath.

Angela came out with a glass of water and thrust it into Fletcher's hands. She glanced nervously up at Sirius as the man had his fill. Sirius' heart was slamming so hard against his chest he was surprised it hadn't left his anatomy. But of course, neither of the two in his company knew of it, having learned how to school his features to expertly hide his true feelings, thanks to the Slytherin in his Black bloodline.
"So tell us what happened to you, Dung," Sirius said as soon as Fletcher was done with his water. The other wizard was so agitated he didn't even notice Sirius' use of the demeaning contraction of his name.

"It's all goin' down to shite, Sirius, I'm tellin' ye!" Fletcher said as he swayed towards the kitchens, unmindful of his two companions who were staring at him with matching frowns.

Fletcher flopped down on the nearest chair and flung himself on the table with his head cradled in his outstretched arms. Sirius could tell that the bloke was breathing hard, so he gave him a few more minutes to gather his wits.

"The war's startin', Sirius. It's startin'...it's startin'..." Fletcher kept on mumbling over and over, his shoulders quivering as he was wracked with heart-rending sobs.

Cold fear slithered down Sirius' spine and he knew Angela was feeling the same, if he were to base his observation on the pallor of her face.

"Quit it, man, and tell us what happened," Sirius growled, grabbing Fletcher by the scruff of his jacket. Fletcher's face sported a few cuts and bruises, but they were quite minor. The front of his coat was matted with dirt and streaks of blood, the latter obviously not his own.

"What happened, Fletcher!" Angela nearly screamed at the sobbing wizard.

That seemed to get through the one-time thief. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his coat and turned to face the witch and wizard glaring down at him.

"I just foun' Amelia Bones...dead. She was tortured afore she was kilt! Dis...blood...no' mine! Is all 'er's! 'S'all 'er..." Fletcher broke down again, slumping back against his chair, his face contorted in pain, horror and grief.

Sirius cursed colorfully and slammed both fists on the table. Angela took the chair beside Fletcher, looking paler than ever.

Another loud shrieking sliced through the air followed by cursing and the heavy footfalls of, as Sirius correctly surmised, Mad-Eye Moody.

"Where's that no good piece of shit?" the former Auror bellowed, his wooden staff pounding the floor with every step.

Fletcher jumped to his feet and ran for cover. He was just about to slide under the table when the bright flash of a wordless spell hit him and sent him sprawling on the floor, stiff as a board.

"Whoa! Hold up! What are you doing, Moody?" bellowed Sirius, stepping in front of the fuming wizard with both hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"That little piece of good for nothing shit left his post! He was assigned to watch over the house of Amelia, but he left and went where Merlin knows where! Had he not gone gallivanting around, he would've been able to warn us of the arrival of those scum!" roared Moody, his magical eye whizzing maniacally around its socket, making Sirius dizzy.

Sirius pulled his eyes away from Moody and turned to the petrified Mundungus Fletcher. "You mean, he was supposed to be guarding Amelia? Why?" Sirius asked.

"There've been rumors that Riddle's army would be rounding up suspected 'dissenters' soon. And since Amelia's been very vocal about her dislike of the new Minister, we've been taking turns
guarding her house. It was that nitwit's turn last night and he botched it!"

"Did he really leave his post? Dung may be a right git, but he wouldn't risk another's life intentionally. We should talk to him and find out what really happened," Sirius said, moving closer to Fletcher. He waved his wand and uttered, "Finite."

Immediately, the older wizard started groaning and crawling back to his feet. He nearly jumped when he saw Mad-Eye looking malevolently at him. Sirius strategically placed himself between the former Auror and Fletcher, afraid that the former would petrify the latter again.

"Fletcher, sit down. We're just going to talk," Sirius said, attempting to pacify the agitated wizard. Fletcher stretched his neck to chance a peek at Moody.

"I tol' 'im, I never lef' me post! I was there the 'ole nigh'! I didn' see no one, but her niece go inter de 'ouse!" Fletcher croaked, trembling.

"Argh! You and your lies! I was an Auror! There were still traces of magic coming not only from one but at least three dark wizards inside that house! And now you say that only the niece went inside! Are you really that blind!" growled Moody, looking as mad as a hatter.

Fletcher flinched, but he did not back down. "I'm tellin' d' truth! After Amelia came 'ome and entered the 'ouse, I sat on me arse without movin'. Then, after an 'our or so, Amelia's niece came and knocked on the door! I saw Amelia open it and let the gal in!"

"Did you see the girl leave?" asked Angela, her lawyer instincts kicking in.

"No! I though' she spent the nigh' der. When them kilt all d' lights, I thought they'd all turn'd in. T'was only when I 'eard sometin' crashin' tha' I thought sometin' wasnae righ'. But then, everythin' wen' quiet again, so I din't think to check," Fletcher said, wringing his hands.

"You heard a crash. What did it sound like? Like something breaking...a glass or plate? Or did the crash sound like someone hitting something?" continued Angela.

Fletcher seemed to ponder the question. Then he sighed and looked at the witch with a slightly panicked look in his eyes. "Like a body hittin' d'wall..."

"And you didn't think to check?" asked Sirius, now getting mad himself.

"I tol' ye! It became quiet again! I though' maybe someone jus' slipped on the floor."

Before they could continue grilling Fletcher, the shrill voice of Walburga echoed in the hallway again. Within minutes, Arthur and Molly were striding into the kitchen, both wearing worried expressions on their faces.

"Bill just told us that Gringotts had just been completely taken over by 'You-Know-Who's' people. Even those with old, private vaults were being accompanied not only by the Goblins but by at least one of his Death Eaters when they go down there," Arthur said.

"Shite! Good thing I'd already moved some of my resources somewhere else!" Sirius said. No one knew (except for Dumbledore and Gordon, that is, since it was Gordon who suggested it to him) that Sirius had withdrawn a huge portion of his inheritance from his Gringott's vaults and transferred them (after converting them to Muggle currency, of course) to the Muggle-run Lloyds Bank in London. It was done to ensure that the Order would not totally run out of provision in case something like this happened. Thank Merlin for Gordon's businessman's intuition!
"What's wrong?" Molly asked, her eyes darting between Fletcher and Moody. Molly's always been good at detecting tension.

"Have you heard about what happened to Amelia?" Sirius asked. Husband and wife shook their heads. "Better have a seat you two," Sirius said, leaning against the edge of the table. After both Molly and Arthur were seated, he told them everything that Mad-Eye and Fletcher had told them. Molly broke into tears and sobbed into her husband's shoulder. Arthur looked grim, but his eyes held a fierceness that wasn't usually there.

"Fletcher, you said that you saw Amelia's niece enter the house, correct?" Arthur asked the still trembling Mundungus.

Fletcher nodded vigorously. "Yeh, I saw 'er with me own two eyes. T'was 'er!"

"When you came to check on Amelia this morning, did you see the girl there? Was there any sign that she was even there?"

"No. I check'd upstairs...there was no sign o' 'er," Fletcher said.

"But you said you never saw her leave," said Sirius. "Did you really look for her?"

"T'wasn' a big 'ouse! I woulda seen 'er if she was there!" insisted Fletcher.

"We never should've let that piece of garbage guard Amelia," grumbled Moody.

"There's one way to be certain," Molly said. When all eyes turned to her, she explained, "Amelia's niece, Susan, is in the same year as Ron at Hogwarts. As far as I know, she's continued on to Seventh Year. We could check with Severus if she was given a pass to leave Hogwarts. I highly doubt it, but let's ask Severus just to be sure."

"Are you connected to the Headmaster's office?" Arthur asked Sirius.

"Yes, but Floo call only. My fireplace is not big enough for transport," Sirius said.

"Do you think it's safe to call on Severus from here?" asked Molly, frowning.

"I suppose so. I know I'm going to regret this, but I have to admit that Snape is quite good at protecting his turf. I'm sure he'd already placed countless repelling and disguising charms on his Floo," said Sirius.

"Thank Godric for that. I'll call him now," Arthur said, walking out of the room.

"Uhm...do you mind if I ask Fletcher a few more questions?" Angela said, turning to the others around her.

"Sure, dear," said Molly, patting Angela's hand. Moody only grunted.

"Of course, cuz. Perhaps you can make sense to all his gibberish," Sirius chuckled.

Angela gave Sirius a playful slap on the arm before going over to Fletcher to resume her interrupted interrogation of her former contact.

As Molly, Moody and Sirius discussed amongst themselves the events that were slowly unfolding before them, Walburga let out another screech, signaling the arrival of another Order member. This time it was Dedalus Diggle.
"Diggle! What brings you here?" was Moody's gruff greeting.

"Bad news, I'm afraid. Bad news, indeed," the wizard said, slumping onto the nearest chair. He took off his purple top hat and wiped his brow on the sleeve of his purple coat.

"Oh, no! Not again!" Molly blurted.

"Not again? What do you mean, 'not again'?" Diggle asked.

"Amelia Bones was found dead this morning," Sirius said.

Diggle blanched at the news, then shook his head in sorrow. "Then, we'd be mourning two fallen witches today, I'm afraid. Hestia and I received word that Adelaide Abbott was killed last night in her own home. One of our sources at the Auror office said that she had been tortured before she was killed. Our source also said that according to an eyewitness, Adelaide's daughter came home last night. The witness, whose daughter had been Hannah's playmate since they were still in diapers, saw Hannah enter the house just a little before midnight."

"What? That's also what Fletcher said happened at Amelia's!" said Sirius.

"See! I tol' ye! 'Tis the same! I di'nt saw no one but the girl!" interjected Fletcher.

"Shut up, fool! This does not justify you leaving your post!" roared Moody.

"How many times do I have to tell ye - I never left me post!" retorted Fletcher.

The growing argument was halted when Arthur burst into the room, looking paler than usual. "I'm sorry it took a bit longer. Severus had to check with the Hufflepuff Prefect if Susan was in their dormitory the whole night."

"And was she?" Molly asked.

"She was. She's never asked for a pass nor did she leave Hogwarts yesterday or on any other day before that. Susan had been forbidden by her aunt to even go to Hogsmeade due to the current dangerous situation so she didn't even have a pass for that. Susan hadn't left Hogwarts since start of term," said Arthur.

"And I suppose that if we asked Severus about Hannah's whereabouts for the past few days, we'd receive the same answer," Sirius said.

"Wait...what? Why should we ask about Hannah's whereabouts?" asked Arthur, just now noticing the new addition to their gathering. "Dedalus? What are you doing here?"

An uncomfortable silence stretched for a few moments until Moody growled his reply.

"Adelaide Abbott had also been found dead and apparently, her daughter Hannah came home to visit her mum before she died."

"WHAT?" Arthur blurted, turning incredulous eyes first at Mad-Eye then at Diggle.

"I'm afraid it's true," Diggle said, shaking his head.

"What does this mean, then?" Molly asked.

"It means that someone's been posing as their relatives in order to kill off the known enemies of 'You-Know-Who'," said Moody.
"But...why?" croaked Molly.

"To throw us off," replied Sirius.

"Or maybe, to gain entrance to places they knew would be heavily warded and protected," suggested Diggle.

"I think it's more than that," Angela said. All eyes swiveled to the newly-discovered witch. "I'd seen this kind of tactic used in some of my cases. There are two things we can take away from what just happened. First, they're sending us a message - they can get to us whenever and wherever they want. Second, they're sowing mistrust amongst our members and allies. By using the likenesses of the girls, they're making us suspect even the people closest to us."

"Fuck! Riddle is really a fucking psycho!" roared Sirius, thumping his fist on the table.

"What does that mean?" Diggle asked.

"It means that 'You-Know-Who' is trying to destroy us from the inside," was Angela's quiet reply.

Draco threw himself on the bed with a heavy sigh, his arm shielding his eyes from the glare of the lone crystal lamp on the side table.

"Well, that went swimmingly, don't you think?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Hermione sighed and laid down beside her boyfriend, her head resting on his shoulder whilst her arm went around his waist.

"Don't let him bother you. Harry's on your side," she said.

Her boyfriend snorted. "Even in this timeline, that Weasel's still a prejudiced arse."

"Ron's not really that bad. He's just not that...open-minded."

"He's a moron."

Hermione slapped Draco's hand. "He's not. He's just not very good at letting go of his biases. You used to be like that, you know."

Draco sat up like a shot, his brows knotted as he stared down at Hermione. "I can't believe you said that! Are you comparing me to that idiot ex-boyfriend of yours? I take offense in that, Granger."

If it hadn't been for the slight twitching at the corners of Draco's mouth, Hermione would've taken his words seriously. "Oh, I would never even dream of comparing the two of you. It would be pointless. Even if he had more redeeming qualities than you, they would mean nothing because I've only got eyes for you now."

An aristocratic brow quirked at her, followed by an arm pulling her roughly against a firm chest. "Really? Just your eyes? What about the rest of you? What about these lips?"

Draco leaned down and brushed her lips with his.

"Are these all for me, too?" whispered Draco, his tongue darting out to dip into her mouth.

"Yes...all for you," she moaned against Draco's plundering tongue.
"What about these, are they only for me, too?" Draco's hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs tracing circles around the puckering buds.

Hermione giggled as she pulled his hands away from her sensitive chest area, "Yes, they are. But you better not start anything now. We'll be late for our meeting with the Headmaster."

Draco grunted and wrapped his arms around her, his lips going back to ravaging Hermione's. She responded in kind, linking her fingers behind his neck. They were, however, interrupted by a staccato of loud beeps emanating from Hermione's wand. Reluctantly, Draco pulled away from her and collapsed back on the bed with a grunt.

"I'm really starting to hate that wand of yours," he said, pouting dramatically.

Hermione laughed, "You really can be cute sometimes."

"Sometimes? Oh, you wound me, my lady. You wound me!" Draco said, his hands clasping his chest. She slapped his arms in jest and gave another hearty laugh.

"Come on, let's find out why the Headmaster wants to see us. Who knows, he might have figured out a way to send us back to our own time without that blasted Time- Turner," Hermione said, slipping out of the bed.

"I highly doubt that," Draco said, following Hermione's lead.

"One can hope, my dear Draco, one can hope."

The Slytherin wizard smirked. He grabbed her again and pulled her back into his arms, bending down to capture his girlfriend's lips once more, "Indeed. And I'm always hoping, my Luv. Hoping that you would never deprive me of your affections ever again."

Hermione's heart melted at the way his eyes seemed to expose his soul to her. His insecurities and fears, his feeling that he was not good enough for her, were still there, just beneath the surface of his stoic and arrogant front. And it truly was just a front, Hermione now knew. Deep inside, underneath that icy and seemingly indifferent facade, Draco was just a boy who was caught in a web of grown-up power games, forced to grow up before his time.

Just like Harry was.

Knowing now what Draco had to endure before and during the war, Hermione finally realized how tragic it was that all the sympathy went out to The Boy Who Lived when Draco had also suffered just as much as he did. Yes, Draco did not lose his parents like Harry did, but then a different kind of suffering was thrust upon him, one that was more difficult to deal with, if one were to be truly honest. For wasn't it harder to go against your own father, to eventually hate your own flesh and blood, and then be always tormented with the threat that your family's survival depended entirely on how good you were at following the orders of a demented, power-hungry master of Dark Magic? War never really has any victors, after all, only victims.

And Draco was a victim, just like Harry was. Just like she was. Just like everyone else who experienced the war was. Maybe even more so, in fact, because while those who fought for the Light received unending compassion from the public, those who were even mildly associated with the...other side...received, and are still receiving, nothing but ridicule and condemnation. Draco had switched sides during the war, yet he was still being viewed with contempt and suspicion. Could anyone blame him now for thinking that he deserved anything less?

"Oh, sweetie! You don't need to hope for that because you already have my affection (kiss), my
"love (kiss), my heart (kiss)-"

"And your body?" Draco breathed, reveling in her kisses.

"Including that," Hermione breathed back and pulled Draco down for a deep and passionate kiss, her fingers entangling with his soft, blonde hair. She felt his strong arms wrapping around her, pulling her into him, revealing the state of his arousal. Her body started to respond to that enticement when the loud buzzing of her wand broke through the pleasant haze of their embrace. Again.

"I'm going to snap that wand of yours one of these days," Draco muttered against her lips, refusing to break their kiss.

Hermione chuckled and pinched his side, eliciting an exaggerated yelp from her more than slightly irked boyfriend.

"You will do no such thing, my Slytherin Prince," she said, pushing away from him. She walked to the table and retrieved her wand, putting it out of harm's way.

"I rather like you calling me that," smirked Draco.

"Of course you do, you pompous arse," Hermione chuckled.

"Pompous arse, huh? Let me show you what a pompous arse I truly am," Draco growled, reaching for her. Hermione giggled and ran for the door, carefully evading Draco's long arms.

"You'd have to catch me first," she threw him a raspberry and flung the door open, leaving the Slytherin Seeker gaping at her as she ran down the hall.

It took just a few heartbeats for Draco to catch up with her. She stopped running when he did and took his hand in hers. He looked down at their entwined fingers and gave her that rare smile of his that always made her heart go a-flutter.

"I'll never get tired of this," Draco said, lifting up their clasped hands.

"Neither will I," she replied.

He bent down and gave her lips a feather-soft kiss. "Now, let's go see Snape. I want to get this over with as fast as we can. I still have plans for you, Luv," he said, wiggling his brows at her.

Hermione felt her cheeks flame at the implication. She had a pretty good idea what those plans were and it made her throat dry just thinking about it.

"Aww...you're blushing! That is so cute," Draco chuckled as he tweaked her nose.

"Shut up, ferret," she grumbled, but not without humor.

Draco smirked before whispering. "Bookworm."

"Better a bookworm than a ferret."

"Oh, yeah? At least a ferret's a cute animal."

"It's not! It's stinky and...and...did you know that ferrets are related to weasels?"

"What? Salazar's pants! I couldn't be related to the git, could I?"
"And the name 'ferret' is derived from the Latin word, 'furittus' meaning 'little thief'."

"Shit! That's it! You better stop calling me 'ferret', Granger!"

"Or what?" Hermione said, smirking up at him.

"Or I'm going to be a real 'little thief' and nick your things!"

"Really? Like what do I own that you would even consider worth stealing?"

"Hmmm...I don't know...maybe your knickers?"

"Hah! You wouldn't!" Hermione gasped.

"Maybe I would!" Draco smirked, raising a perfectly arched brow at her. "Maybe I should start now, what do you think?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Hermione said, thumping Draco's arm.

"Ow! You're such a violent witch, did you know that? Besides, I don't understand why you would object to me nicking them now...I'd be taking them off later anyway."

The last seven words were mumbled under his breath, but she heard them clear as day.

"What did you say?"

"Uhm...what? I said 'I don't understand why you would object to me nicking them now. Maybe I just want a souvenir from my girlfriend.'"

"No, after that."

"After that? I didn't say anything after that," Draco said with feigned innocence. "Oh, look! We're already here! I'm afraid we'd have to continue this conversation later in private, eh Luv?"

Hermione rolled her eyes when Draco gave her a mischievous wink.

Let's see how well your plans for this evening will go, ferret.

Granger, you're thinking too loudly again.

And you're being your usual nosy self again, listening to me think.

I think you meant for me to hear that.

Really? What made you say that?

Just a hunch. And I'm good at hunches.

Hermione chuckled to herself. She really liked linking minds with Draco. It made her feel like she was a part of something special, something unique and completely theirs and theirs alone.

"Ah! Finally! I thought you weren't going to make it," Snape's voice greeted them the moment they stepped into his chambers.

"Sorry, Headmaster. We just came from the Shack," Hermione said.

"How was it?" Snape asked.
Draco's annoyed look and Hermione's sigh settled the question for him.

"That bad, eh?" Snape said as he gestured toward the sitting area. It was only then that they noticed the other wizard looking up at them with undisguised interest.

"Good evening, Professor," Hermione said, "Good to see you again."

"Professor," Draco said, nodding at the older wizard whilst taking a seat beside Hermione.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy, Miss...Granger," Dumbledore said, his blue eyes twinkling.

Hermione's eyes flicked to Draco, her own surprise reflected in his gray ones.

"You can see through my disguise?" Hermione said, fear creeping into her voice.

The old wizard smiled. "No, you need not worry about your skill, Ms. Granger. Severus told me about it. He also told me where...or probably I should say when...you came from."

"Oh," was the only thing that escaped Hermione's lips, an overwhelming feeling of relief instantly cascading over her. She and Draco had actually hoped that Snape would tell the legendary wizard about their predicament. Perhaps now they'd have a better chance of finding a way back without using the Time-Turner that sent them to this alternate timeline.

"Do you think you can help us get back to our original timeline?" Draco asked, glancing briefly at Hermione, mirroring her own hopeful thoughts.

"Based on what Severus told me, it appears that he was right in assuming that Dark Magic was used to alter time. If that's the case, then I'm afraid it will be too risky to think of other ways to send you back. We'd have to look at the Time-Turner that was used, see what other spells were involved in the process before we can even attempt to send you back," Dumbledore said.

Hermione's shoulders slumped at having that tiny hope brutally crushed.

"So, you also think that it was a Time-Turner that brought us here?" Draco asked.

"I can't think of anything else that's powerful enough to do this," Dumbledore said.

"Professor, there's something that's been bothering me from the time that we came here. You see, from where...when...we came, I'd had the opportunity to use a Time-Turner and the one thing that you...or rather the you from that timeline...kept drumming in my head was the need to be careful in encountering my 'other' self. You...or the other you...said that it could produce catastrophic results."

Dumbledore gave a small smile. "Yes, that sounds like something I would say because it's true. You could accidentally kill yourself or the 'other', or you could lose your sanity. Time is a very dangerous and enigmatic commodity. We can't really predict its movements. That's why it should be treated with the utmost care. Just imagine how you would feel if you suddenly bumped into your 'other' self in the corridors of Hogwarts. You'd either think that someone's posing as you or that you're truly going mad. Either way, it could end horribly."

"Exactly! Which is why I've been wondering why neither of us even glimpsed our other selves in this timeline. When I used a Time-Turner before, I saw myself...or the other me. I knew where I would be at the time, of course, so I was able to evade the other me quite easily. But here...well, we've not even seen any sign of the ones who were here before we came. Also, the Time-Turner I used before could not go back in time as far as this one did. It could only take one as far back as
five hours, but here...it appears that things were changed by at least a decade!"

"We, however, did not go back that far. It's like we were the same people from where we came from, but everyone else...were just a bit different," Draco said.

"What do you mean by 'everyone else were just a bit different'?” Snape asked.

Draco gave Hermione a quick look before answering.

"For example, Lucius...was not the Minister of Magic from where we came from. He was actually already a fugitive by the time that we were transported here. There were also a lot of dead people walking around-"

"You never mentioned anything about dead people before," Snape said, cutting him off.

Draco stiffened, his eyes going back to Hermione. She understood what he was asking so she gave him a short nod.

Should we tell them about what happened to them in our timeline? Draco asked.

I don't think that would be a good idea. Not yet, anyway.

What should we say then?

Nothing specific, just give them a general idea.

Alright. But I don't think we can keep this from them much longer. Draco said before retreating from her mind.

When Draco turned back to answer, Dumbledore had that enigmatic grin on his face again - the one that seemed to say he knew what was really going on, he just didn't want to admit it.

"No, we didn't. I can't go into details, but suffice it to say that there are a few people who already died in our timeline that are still very much alive in this one."

Snape seemed to blanch at that. Hermione could only guess what he was thinking. Dumbledore, however, had that knowing look in his eyes that told Hermione he knew more than he was letting on. Even wearing Muggle clothes and without his signature beard, he was still every inch the Dumbledore that she knew - wise, powerful, mysterious.

"What do you think, Severus?” the old wizard said, turning to the Headmaster.

"Well, my guess is that it's because of the Dark Magic involved,” answered Snape.

"Yes, that could be it. Severus also told me that you were in the Room of Requirement when the time shift apparently happened, is that correct?” Hermione and Draco nodded in unison. "As I'm sure you're both aware, that place has its own protective spells - all very ancient and quite inscrutable. It could be that the magic of the Time- turner, combined with the ones in the Room of Requirement made it possible for you to slip into this timeline and take your other selves' places without you knowing it. It's like your other selves never existed at all,” explained Dumbledore.

"But if they didn't then how can we explain me being a Ravenclaw here when I was a Gryffindor before. And the other me here had a different set of friends, too." Hermione said.

"Those are just...minor details. Embellishments, if I may say so. You're still as intelligent as you were before and still a Muggle-born. Even Draco still has the same set of parents, the same social
status. And I believe he's still in Slytherin, too. So, your core personalities and circumstances were still very much the same. Perhaps the differences in your 'other selves' here were anchored to the changes that the time shift had made," the old wizard said, peering over his spectacles.

Realization slowly dawned on Hermione.

"Of course! I was best friends with Harry before and since his situation in this timeline was changed...that's it! When the Time-Turner changed Harry's life here, it also changed mine. We - Ron, Harry and me - were a team only because of Harry, because we all went to Hogwarts together," she said.

"Very good, Miss Granger," Snape said, smiling one of his rare genuine smiles.

"She's the brightest witch of our age," Draco said, pride seeping into his voice.

"Indeed she is. I've never seen a witch as young as her who could pull off holding on to a complicated Disguising spell as this one," Dumbledore said.

"Which brings us now to the reason why I wanted to see the both of you here," Snape said, leaning forward.

Hermione felt Draco shift uncomfortably in his seat. She reached out for his hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. He cast a swift glance at her and squeezed back.

"I don't know if you've heard about what happened to the Greenes," Snape said, quirking a brow. He sighed when they both shook their heads. Then, he proceeded to tell them about the incident at the Greene residence and how the Ministry was trying to pass it off as a Muggle attack.

If Draco was as horrified as she was, he hid it well behind his hooded eyes. His tight grip on her fingers, however, showed proof of his growing anger and apprehension.

"What have we got to do with this then?" Draco asked rather curtly.

"James Toffler, who now appears to be the standing leader of the group of Muggle-borns at Malfoy Manor, is asking for a meeting with an Order member."

"We're not members of the Order," said Draco, glancing meaningfully at Hermione. She couldn't believe that this was playing into their own plans. Draco had been dying to get into Malfoy Manor to search for the Time-Turner ever since he'd come to the conclusion that it was his father who had the means, the opportunity and the desperate need to reverse time.

"I'm aware of that. But you can go in and out of Malfoy Manor without raising any suspicions. It is still your home, after all," Snape said with a smirk.

"But James and I are not even on speaking terms. Why would he talk to me now?"

"I will send him a message. He will know that you're our emissary."

"What about my...father? Wouldn't he be suspicious of my sudden appearance at the Manor? From what I gathered from my conversations with Blaise and Theo, there's not much difference between our relationship before and now. He and I still weren't close."

"But you're close to your mother. And if Lucius asked, you could tell him that you wanted to introduce your new girlfriend to her," Snape said, quirking his eyebrow at Hermione.
Draco's grip on her fingers tightened, his face turning livid.

"No way! I'm not letting her step even a toe inside that blasted place!" Draco spat.

Hermione sensed the fury in those words. She knew that he was thinking of the horrifying memories that the Manor could trigger in her - the snatching, the torture, the death of Dobby, yet it was the guilt that was fueling his anger.

"It's okay, Draco. I can handle it. You need not worry about me. Unless...you're ashamed of introducing me to your mother," she said, raising an eyebrow at him in a playful manner, hoping to lighten the mood.

The blonde Slytherin scowled at her, ignoring her attempt at humor.

"It's not that and you know it, Hermione," he said, his lips drawn in a stubborn line.

"I can take care of myself, you know," she snapped.

"You don't know my father! If he ever gets wind of your true identity-"

"He won't!" she said, placing a hand on his cold cheek. She realized that he was truly afraid for her, but she couldn't let him do this on his own. She had to be there in case he needed her. Merlin knows how even the best-laid plans could go awry in the blink of an eye.

"If you're afraid that Lucius would use Legilimency on her to uncover her secrets, you can rest assured that Ms. Granger would be able to thwart his feeble efforts with eyes closed. Figuratively speaking, of course. No offense meant, young man, but your father's Legilimency skills are shit," Snape drawled, the corners of his lips quirking, obviously suppressing a grin.

Dumbledore, however, was smiling like the benevolent mentor that he was.

"Yes, your father is not a natural Legilimens like you, Draco. He trained on it, but he just doesn't have the gift. So, you have nothing to fear on that end," the old wizard said.

In spite of those assurances, Draco remained unconvinced, based on the crease on his brows. Hermione tried reaching his mind, but was greeted by a blank wall. He was hiding from her again. Determined to settle the matter now, she tugged on his hand until he was forced to look at her. She wasted no time in asserting her presence, pushing back the walls he'd erected.

*Draco, please, let me in.*

He did not react, but she was granted entrance. She almost pulled back when she saw the chaos inside his brain - fear and anger swirling against each other.

*I can do this, Draco. I just want to be there for you. Besides, with me there, we can search for the Time-Turner that much faster.*

The maelstrom in his mind went down a notch, responding to the soothing caress of her voice. He seemed to mull over her words, slowly giving in to her plea.

*I don't want to risk you being discovered,* he finally said.

*I won't be. I'll practice my Occlumency, I promise.*

"Perhaps we should test Ms. Granger's ability to block out a skilled Legilimens," Snape suggested, as if reading their minds. "If she can keep Albus out, then she's safe."
Would that help reassure you?

There was hesitation in his voice when he replied. *I guess.*

Hermione withdrew from Draco's mind and turned to the older wizard.

"Ready when you are, Professor" she said, looking straight into Dumbledore's brilliant blue eyes, bracing herself for his assault.

The former Minister of Magic gave a short nod and Hermione sensed the probing tendrils of the old wizard's thoughts. It was very mild, hardly perceptible if one wasn't paying full attention. It was so subtle in fact, that had she not been told of what he was doing, she wouldn't have noticed it at all. Thankfully, she'd already made a habit of keeping her walls up whenever she was in the company of others. Soon enough, he was gone.

Then, both Snape and the old wizard were smiling at her warmly.

"She's ready," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling from behind his spectacles.

"Good! Let's get back to work then, shall we?" Snape said.

It was nearly midnight when they finally left the Headmaster's quarters. By then, they were too tired to return to the Slytherin dungeons, so they just went back to the Room of Requirement. The moment they collapsed on the bed, Draco's arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her against his bare chest. He was snoring softly into her hair within minutes.

Hermione, however, laid staring at the dark for much longer. After everything they'd learned and discussed tonight, only one thought kept playing over and over inside her head - they must find the Time-Turner as soon as possible!

She couldn't risk going through another war, not when the stakes are too high.

Not when she has so much more to lose than before.

Because, somehow, deep in her soul, she has a bad feeling about their getting involved in this new war against Voldemort. Somehow, she wasn't so sure that they would win again.

Chapter End Notes

So...how did it go? Disappointed? Frustrated? Annoyed? Please leave me a comment so I'll know if you're getting bored with the story. Til next time, guys! (hopefully within the decade lol)
Breakfast at the Wilkes' home was never a family affair. Especially after he left for Hogwarts. In fact, even when he was home during holidays, breakfast was still a non-event in their household. So, having it with both parents two days in a row was quite a feat.

Although Lorcan's parents each came from a long line of Purebloods, they were not affluent, hence they had to take on regular jobs. Izzy, their very wizened and old house elf who refused to leave his father even after being freed, helped with the running of the household enabling his mother to work as a Medi-witch at St. Mungo's up until a few months ago, when she was diagnosed with a heart condition that left her exhausted after just a few hours' duty. Even with magic, there were still limitations and the human body was one of the few that they had as yet to fully understand and conquer. His father, who had always been a quiet, dedicated Potioneer, spent more hours than he could count down in their house's basement, brewing and researching new potions for the betterment of Wizardkind, or so he used to say. Lately, however, he didn't seem too enthusiastic with the assignments he'd been receiving from his superiors. Apparently, being a low-level member of the Dark Lord's army wasn't as thrilling to him now as it once was.

"I've been thinking...It's been so long since we'd gone on holiday together," his father's voice broke the silence.

Lorcan's head snapped up, his attention fully engaged all of a sudden. His mother, he noticed, kept on slicing her sausages with a serene smile.

"Maybe we could go somewhere nice. We've got enough money saved up," his father continued. "What do you say, son? Might be good for your health."

"Father...I don't really need to go anywhere to get well. I'm already quite recovered, actually," he replied, still unable to believe what he was hearing.

His parents had always been practical, frugal folks. They didn't go on 'holidays'. The closest that they ever came to having some sort of vacation was their trip to Bath to visit his grandfather the year before he started Hogwarts. And that was only because the head of the Wilkes clan was already on his deathbed and had been asking for him. The old man didn't really have a loving relationship with his own son, but he loved his only grandson tremendously. Which was probably why he bequeathed the little that was left of the Wilkes fortune to Lorcan.

"Nonsense. Your body may be healed, but your mind still needs to relax after...after what happened. Besides, your mother could do with a change of scenery, too," his father argued.

He didn't know what his father was up to, but he was sure that this sudden attack of wanderlust was not due to his or his mother's health issues. Not entirely, anyway. Ashton Wilkes rarely went against routines and for him to willingly break his…
"You could even bring along that girl of yours if you like. What's her name again...Heidi, was it?"

Now that really caught him by surprise. His father wasn't very happy when he learned that Lorcan was seeing a Muggle-born witch. He may not be rich, but he was still a proud Pureblood and he did not like seeing his only son, the last of their line, sullying it with the blood of a Muggle-born. Lorcan felt his hackles rising. Was his father testing him? Was he laying a trap for his Heidi?

"Look, Father, I appreciate your concern, but I really don't need a vacation. You and mother can go if you want. I can manage on my-"

BAM!

Lorcan and his mother jumped at the sound. His father had slammed both palms on the table, something the soft-spoken and mild-mannered older Wilkes had never done before.

"We hardly ever do anything together and we're going to start now. If you want Heidi to be a part of this family, better take her along or else say goodbye to her properly. Let it not be said that the Wilkeses don't have any honor left," Ashton said, his booming voice reverberating against the walls of their modest-sized kitchen.

It took a minute for everything his father had said to sink in, but when they did, one thing held his thoughts captive - 'say goodbye to her properly'. Just what did his father mean by that?

"I thought we were just going on a vacation, yet you make it sound like we're not coming back," Lorcan said, watching his father's livid face. A tinge of pink brushed the older man's cheeks before they turned even paler than his normal complexion. Something wasn't right. "What's going on, Father?"

Ashton Wilkes slumped back in his chair and ran a shaking hand through his salt and pepper hair. He threw a quick glance at his wife who smiled benignly at him, her hand reaching out to his.

"W-We might not come back, son. After what happened to you...I-I...I just don't think your mother and I can take any more of that…" his father broke off, choking on unshed tears.

A tiny shiver went down Lorcan's spine. He and his mother had planned on running, with or without his father. Shame and guilt riddled him now for even considering leaving his old man behind. Ashton Wilkes may not be a very demonstrative man, but it's always been clear that everything he did was for the sake of his family; no matter how misguided those actions might be at times.

"A-are you saying that we're going to...run away and go into hiding?" Lorcan asked, almost kicking himself for his inability to sound less incredulous. He knew how hard this was for his father. Admitting to one's mistakes and lapses in judgment wasn't a walk in the park, after all, especially for a man like Ashton Wilkes. Had his great, great grandfather not squandered the family fortune on loose living, Ashton would've been the sole heir to a vast fortune - near to rivaling the riches of the Malfoys even - and a politically and socially influential family. Lorcan wondered if that would've been better or worse. Would his family have fared better if they were rolling in riches and political clout?

"I've made some arrangements...for all of us. Your mother told me that Heidi lost both parents last year. If you're serious about her...well, you might be the only one she's got now. It would be poor form to leave her behind, don't you think?" his father's wavering voice broke into his thoughts.

"B-but...what about your job? W-what about mine?" he had to ask. His father sighed.
"If you're as fed up with yours as much as I am with mine...then I'd say...screw them!"

His mother gasped before breaking out into quiet laughter, slapping his father's arm in a rare expression of careless good-humour. "Oh, Ashton! Watch your language!" she giggled.

His father waved his hand nonchalantly. "Bugger it, Demeter. I'm sure he's used to even stronger language than that. Kids nowadays...they're more irreverent than we were in our youth," his father countered, turning to him with an unfamiliar smirk. He looked ten years younger in spite of his salt and pepper, close-cropped hair. His parent's light banter was so heartwarming he almost forgot the horrors that they'd all been subjected to.

"If you say so, Father," he replied with a light chuckle. Still...he couldn't shake off that nagging feeling at the back of his head. Like there was something that he needed to do.

"Good! I'm glad we're now all on the same page," his father said, squeezing his shoulder.

"What's the plan, anyway? When are we leaving?" he asked, spooning some scrambled eggs into his mouth. Strange how his appetite seemed to have returned in a flash.

"We need to tie up some loose ends. It's a good thing I'd not been assigned anything urgent these past few days. I'm going to turn in the last batch of the potions I'd been working on. I still don't understand why they need this much Polyjuice potion and Veritaserum."

"Maybe they're going to use it to infiltrate the Muggle-borns' families," he replied without thinking. He was so engrossed with his food he didn't notice his father's flinching or his mother's tiny squeak of horror.

"Muggle-borns' families? What do you mean?" his father asked, all the light humor in his face gone and replaced by an intensity that he'd never seen before.

"Oh! Shite! Oops! Sorry, Mum! I wasn't supposed to tell you that...or anyone for that matter. But since we're leaving anyway, I suppose there's no harm in telling you now. We've been assigned to 'watch over' the families of the Muggle-borns being held at Malfoy Manor. My assignment was the Greenes. As you're aware, mine didn't end up so well-"

"It wasn't your fault, son," his mother interrupted rather forcefully (another first for her!). His father was nodding as well, the intensity in his eyes still there.

"Well...yes...I still feel responsible, though. I should've known that Rowan wasn't that stable. I should've been more watchful. Anyway...there's nothing I can do about it now, is there? So...well...that's that. But going back to what I was saying...apparently, our Master intends to use their families to do things for him. I still haven't worked out what those 'things' are, but I was planning on doing some digging. If there's something I can do to help the other families...or at least, prevent a repeat of what happened to the Greenes," he sighed, the burden of what happened before weighing down on him like a physical load. "I have a moral obligation to do something, you understand? I can't sit by and keep on doing nothing. I hope you get what I'm trying to say. I'm not very good at talking about these things," He sighed as he continued poking his scrambled eggs. He must make them see that he's no longer just a puppet of the Dark Lord or his immediate superior, Rodolphus Lestrange. He was his own man now and he's done doing their bidding. It was the one thing he could think of to bring back even a smidgen of honor to the Wilkes name. He owed his grandfather that much, at least.

"We do, son. I will try to do some...digging...of my own. Just be careful. Don't let anyone get wind of what you're doing. And go see your girl. Invite her to our little family 'vacation'," his father
admonished. He knew that this was his father's way of making amends for all those years of being physically present but emotionally out of reach.

"Wait, what would happen to Izzy? We can't just leave him here, can we?" asked Lorcan. He'd grown very attached to the old elf, having been under his care for almost half of his life.

"He's coming with us, of course. I doubt we'd be able to be rid of him even if we tie him to the lamppost. He'd most probably bring it with him whilst tailing us wherever we go," chuckled his father. "Besides, he'd be able to protect your mother much better than the both of us."

Lorcan nodded and went back to his half-eaten breakfast. Everything seemed to be already planned. He wondered what kind of digging his father would be doing. As for him, he knew exactly where he would do his own. Downing the last dregs of his black coffee (something he picked up from Heidi), he bid his parents goodbye (after wishing his father an awkward good luck) and ran out the front door, eager to put his plan into action. This was going to be a long day, of that he was sure, but for the first time since he'd joined the ranks of the Dark Lord's Death Eater cadets, there was a spring in his step and a clarity of purpose that propelled him forward.

He may not be the one who will bring the Dark Lord down, but he'd be damned if he didn't do his best to help in the process.

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Harry watched as Daphne showed him how to work another spell used to heal minor injuries. She explained that these spells were more like the ones that he called 'First Aid'. She then emphasized that knowledge of these things could sometimes make the difference between life and death on the battlefield. This was the reason why, as per Neville, they'd decided to include Daphne in the list of people who were privy to his arrival in the British wizarding community. They wanted to keep the list really short, especially after news of what happened to two of their fellow Resistance members' relatives - attacked and killed under suspicious circumstances - had reached them. But since he was on an even shorter timetable, even Dumbledore had agreed to bring in whoever was needed to fast track his training.

And since Daphne was the best at Healing Magic, which was now being offered in the Hogwarts curriculum, she was roped in to spend at least an hour every day teaching him its basics. The other Resistance members who already knew about his return to Wizarding Britain were also welcome to practice with them. Usually, only Neville and Luna were present. Today, however, being a Saturday, Theo, Ginny and Blaise had tagged along. They were on the second floor of the Shrieking Shack, seated on plump cushions in a semi-circle, listening to Daphne discuss healing spells.

"Alright, so let's review the basics. The Anapneo spell is used to clear the throat of a choking person. Of course, you have to determine first if the choking is due to an object obstructing the windpipe and not poisoning. If it's due to an object, this spell will dislodge it and help the victim breathe again. But if it's poisoning, this spell won't be any help at all. You'd need an antidote for the poison that was used. Unfortunately, we can't practice on an actual choking person...not unless you'd like to volunteer yourself, Zabini," Daphne said, turning a baleful eye at the inattentive Slytherin.

Ginny dug an elbow into Blaise's ribs to catch her boyfriend's attention. Blaise immediately dropped the spellbook he was reading and mumbled an apology. Daphne raised an elegant brow at her fellow Slytherin but said nothing.

"So...I just point my wand at the person's throat and say the incantation?" asked Harry.
"Yes, Harry. But you also have to concentrate on the spell...you have to mean it. Actually, that's the secret behind spellcasting. It's not enough that you know the spell, you have to put your mind and heart into it, too, but more so with healing spells," explained Daphne.

"Wouldn't that take a little from you, if that's the case?" Harry said, glancing at the others, feeling a bit foolish for asking something they probably already know.

"All spells take something from the caster. That's why using magic can be quite exhausting. The wand is just a conduit of the power that comes from within us," answered Blaise.

"And that's also why not everyone can cast every known spell in the universe," said Ginny.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, "I thought that as long as you have a wand and you know the spell, you can do it...or cast it."

"Nope. Not how it works, mate," Theo said. "There are spells that need a certain...level...or strength...of magic to perform. Take for example the 'Unforgivable' curses, you've heard about them, yea?" Harry nodded. "Not everyone can do them. It takes a bit of...meanness, for lack of a better word, for one to be able to pull it off. If you're too goody-two-shoes, I doubt you'd even be able to kill a fly with an Avada," Theo ended with a chuckle.

"But that's only because the Unforgivables need Dark Magic to begin with, right?"

"Not necessarily, Harry. You don't need to be a practitioner of Dark Magic to do it. And I have to disagree with Theo. If you really, really want to cast an Unforgivable and your magic is strong enough, you can easily cause damage even if you're as kind-hearted as Madame Pomfrey," said Neville. "I guess...you can say that it depends on the situation and the necessity of it."

"If that's the case...then why are they called 'Unforgivable'?" persisted Harry. He really wanted to understand the mechanics behind spellcasting since he'd be doing a lot of that very soon.

"Because they violate very basic human rights. Just think - Imperio causes a person to become a puppet of the caster - forced to do things against his will. While Crucio...Crucio inflicts excruciating pain...pain that can even drive the victims to insanity," Neville said heatedly, almost spitting out the last words. Harry felt that there was a story behind that.

"And the Avada - the Killing curse...well, that one's quite self-explanatory, isn't it?" said Theo with a humorless chuckle.

How could Harry forget that one when he had seen an actual demonstration of it? He didn't want to dwell on that now, but he needed to ask one more thing.

"Do you think I can do it? Cast an Unforgivable, I mean," he asked, his voice barely above a whisper yet it carried across the room like a heavy fog. A deep, dark silence descended upon the group. It wasn't every day that one contemplated on performing an Unforgivable curse, after all; even if that one was hailed to be the prophesied savior of the Wizarding World.

"I believe you can, Harry. I hope you won't be forced to...but when it comes down to it...you'd be able to. Your magic is powerful enough," Daphne quietly said, her brilliant sapphire eyes staring intently at him as she held the hand gripping his wand.

His heart swelled at Daphne's words. He'd never received as much encouragement and confidence from anyone before. He must admit that he was starting to admire the Slytherin witch. The past week he'd spent in her company, albeit for just an hour or two per day, had not only been educational but enjoyable as well. She was smart and witty, with a quiet strength that belied her
years. She was also possessed of an indefatigable patience that made Dumbledore look like a
cranky, ill-tempered warden. Fine, that was stretching the truth a bit too far, but still, she never
once complained about his unending questions - even when they were far from what she was
supposed to be teaching him. She's pretty hot, too. If things were different...if he wasn't saddled
with the fate of the wizarding world...he probably would've already asked her out. But as they were
practically gearing up for war, he couldn't really think about such things now, could he? Perhaps
after...after he'd done what he came here to do...and came out victorious.

Harry was still trying to analyze his feelings for Daphne when the loud clanging of pots and pans
coming from downstairs sent him and Neville scrambling to their feet and rushing out to
investigate.

"Stay here," Neville admonished the others before disappearing down the stairs with Harry. The
twins had placed alarms around the fireplace to signal an incoming Floo message or an unexpected
visitor trying to come through. The deafening cacophony was indicative of the latter. Harry was
first on the scene and he sighed in relief when he saw that it was just Leo. The American wizard
was standing inside the fireplace like a mannequin on display, temporarily frozen in place by a
specially-designed spell placed there by Fred Weasley. Harry almost laughed when he saw the
comical way by which Leo appeared to be stuck to an invisible glass panel, hands splayed out, his
left cheek squished against an unseen barrier. But, of course, he didn't. The bewildered and almost
panicked expression in the American wizard's eyes tempered his ill-placed humor.

"Leo!" Neville gasped behind him. He'd already met Leo during one of the Resistance's meetings
with Snape and had taken an instant liking to the friendly Auror of the MACUSA. Neville
chuckled quietly and rushed past Harry. With a crisscrossing wave of his wand, he silently
vanished the imperceptible wall barring their visitor from coming through. The sudden breaking of
the spell caused Leo to stumble right into Neville's waiting arms with a loud grunt.

"Well! That was quite an experience! Whoever thought of that really has a weird sense of humor," Leo said with a smirk.

"Fred did that," Neville said as if that explained everything.

Leo rolled his eyes; he already knew of the twins' penchant for pranks. Straightening to his full
height, the American Auror quickly brushed off the ash and dust from his robes and tapped
Neville's shoulder in silent gratitude. Seeing Harry grinning at him, Leo beamed and walked over
with an outstretched hand.

"Harry! So good to see you again. How's the training going?" Leo said, shaking the younger
wizard's hand enthusiastically.

"Same here, Leo. It's hectic out here. Why didn't you send a message first? We would've unblocked
the Floo if we knew you were coming," Harry said.

All humor seemed to evaporate from Leo's face. Harry's face fell as well. This wasn't to be a simple
social visit.

"I was pressed for time, Harry. I tried calling Prof. Snape but he wasn't answering his Floo," Leo
explained.

"Let's go to the kitchen and have some tea. Or coffee, as you both prefer, I'm sure," Neville said,
leading the other two wizards to the now fully refurbished and redecorated kitchens.

Harry and Leo had just settled around the kitchen table when Ginny, Blaise, Luna, Theo and
Daphne burst through the swinging doors. It was a new addition by George, something he said he saw in a Muggle Western movie. Neville was at the counter tinkering with the coffeemaker and teapot.

"So who tried to come through unannounced?" Theo asked, looking around the cheery and brightly-lit room.

"It's just Leo," Harry said. At the quizzical look his fellow Resistance members gave him, Harry slapped a hand to his forehead and laughed. He'd forgotten that some of these Hogwarts students hadn't met the American Auror yet. They weren't there during that lone meeting with Snape where Leo was present. "I'm sorry, it slipped my mind. This is my friend, Leo Graves. He's an Auror for the MACUSA, the American equivalent of the British Ministry of Magic, as I'm sure you're all aware."

One by one the Resistance members introduced themselves to Leo. Theo and Blaise shook his hand whilst Ginny and Luna waved at him with shy grins on their faces. The girls apparently hadn't met a foreign wizard before.

"So, what brings you here in such a rush, Leo," Neville said, returning with two pots - one filled with coffee, the other with tea - and several mismatched cups and saucers floating before him.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news to deliver. The children are all fine, Harry," he said the last after seeing the worried look on Harry's face. "But we might have to move them soon. I need to speak with Albus and Gordon as soon as possible."

"If the Headmaster hasn't returned yet, I suppose we can send an owl to Minister Dumbledore from Hogwarts," Neville said.

"Really? Oh, that would be great," Leo said, relieved that his efforts wouldn't be going to waste.

Luna then pulled out a sheet of parchment and a self-inking quill from her tiny sling bag and handed them to Leo. "Here. I always carry those around for emergencies."

"Great, thanks! You're such a Girl Scout," Leo said, reaching for the writing implements.

"A what?" Ginny and Luna chorused.

Leo looked up from the parchment with a surprised look on his face. Then, as if realizing what he just said shook his head and waved a hand in dismissal.

"Never mind, it's just a term we often use to refer to a girl who seems to be always prepared for anything. I'll tell you all about Girl Scouts some other time."

After a few minutes, Leo tore off the part with his note and returned the remaining parchment and quill to Luna. He rolled up the torn part and gave it to Neville.

"How long will it take to reach Albus?"

"Depends on how far he is from Hogwarts, but it wouldn't be too long. Hogwarts owls are quite fast and efficient. Did you ask for a reply?" said Neville.

"Yes. I need to know if they can make it here tonight, otherwise, I'd just come back whenever they're available. Thanks, Neville," Leo replied.

"Well, I think we'd best be heading off. It's getting late, anyway. People might be looking for us by
now,” Neville said, inclining his head to the other Hogwarts students.

After they said their goodbyes, first to Leo and then to Harry, they all trooped back upstairs and left through the trapdoor. Once Harry was alone with Leo, he wasted no time in uncovering the American wizard's purpose in coming to Hogsmeade.

"What's happening out there, Leo?"

The older wizard sighed and slumped against his chair. "There'd been several attacks on No-Majes that were definitely committed by Magicals. Whoever's behind them were trying to send the MACUSA a message."

"What do you mean? Couldn't they have been just victims of random criminals? New York has its own share of the lot, after all."

"I wish it was that simple, Harry, but we're quite sure that they were not the usual run-of-the-mill outlaw doing them. Magic always leaves a trace, however minute. Aurors are trained to detect them. That's why we have an undercover Auror in the NYPD. He's in the Crime Scene Investigation unit, so no one would think twice if he's nosing around every crime scene."

"Was he there at the...uhm...the Orphanage?" asked Harry, slightly grimacing at the painful twist in his heart. He's still trying to deal with that tragedy.

"Yes, but he had already left when we came snooping around the next day. It was only after a couple of days that I was able to reach him. He'd been trying to identify the magical traces he found there. As he suspected, they were not in our list of known Magical perpetrators."

"Well, we already know who attacked the Orphanage."

"Yes, but I couldn't tell him that yet. The new attacks seemed to bear the same signature, though, so I might have to divulge more to him sooner or later."

"But that's not really what concerns you is it?"

Leo paused and looked at Harry with his piercing, brown eyes. "How's your training coming along, Harry?"

"Very well, actually, considering," Harry replied with a quiet chuckle, "Why do you ask?"

"We might need every hand on deck sooner than we thought."

"Why? What happened?"

"One of our Int'l. Magical Cooperation Dept. Aides disappeared a few days ago. His body was found just this morning, tortured horribly. He was one of those who was very vocal about his disagreement to the new changes being implemented in his office. Another one from the Law Enforcement Legal Dept. was also reported missing, he was also a known dissenter."

Harry felt chills running down his spine. Based on what he'd learned about Riddle's rise to power in the UK, this was also how it all started - with the disappearance of members of the opposition.

"What about the Auror Department?"

"No one's disappeared yet, but maybe that's only because we're very well trained to protect ourselves. We can spot a tail a mile away. Herbert already has one so he'd been avoiding coming to
my sister's place these past few days."

"What about you?"

Leo smiled and shook his head. "I'm new to the department and very junior so I'm still practically being ignored. Which is just the way I want it, mind you. Lanie, however, told us that she felt some dark presence lurking around their neighborhood just a few days back. You know she can sense magic from other people, right? Well, that's already evolved. Just like her mom, she can now differentiate between Light and Dark magic."

"Wow, she's really turning into an amazing witch, isn't she?" Harry said.

"That she is. With a big crush on you, too. She's always asking about you. Turning quite annoying, in fact, if you ask me," Leo chuckled.

Harry blushed. "I'll call her one of these days. She gave me a 'magic mirror', did you know? I just kinda forgot about it."

"Did she now? Had I known about that, I would've used it when I couldn't reach Severus."

"Well...I probably wouldn't have been able to answer seeing as it's somewhere inside my overcrowded duffle-bag," laughed Harry.

"Ah, there is that. Oh, well. I'm already here anyways so, water under the bridge."

"Is that why you said the children might have to be moved?"

"Partly, yes. My sister won't be able to defend them if someone comes breaking down the door when Archie's not around. And Lanie...well, she's just a child herself. It's a good thing we haven't finalized our choices for the families who would adopt them. It's easier to protect them when they're still all in one place."

"I suppose you're going to ask Gordon if he could let you use his townhouse, then? I heard it's warded quite spectacularly and with an Unplottable spell, as well."

Leo nodded and leaned forward. "Plus, he's got two House Elves in his employ. As far as I know, Elf magic is quite powerful especially when used to protect others."

"Really? I haven't explored that branch of Magic yet, so I don't really know. It's probably why Pureblood families always have House Elves in their households," Harry replied, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge about the magical world he still needed to acquire.

And with that came the familiar sense of foreboding - that realization that he wasn't at all what these people needed. For how could he save a world that he barely knew or even understood? Chosen One or not, the world wouldn't be saved by just one man, no matter what that goddamn prophecy said. But they could all work together as ONE to achieve a single goal - the downfall of evil, no matter what name it liked to call itself.

And it begins now.

"Uhm, Leo...since you're already here and we've got nothing better to do until we get a reply from Prof. Dumbledore. Can I ask a small favor from you?"

"Sure, Harry. You know I'm always at your service," Leo said with a wink.
"Can you teach me all...well, not really all since we don't have all the time in the world, but at least the basics. Can you teach me the spells that Aurors use in their line of work? Spells, tricks...whatever...just anything that you think I should learn posthaste."

Leo's boyish face broke into a wide grin. "Oh, Harry. I thought you'd never ask."

The flurry of activity at the Manor told James that something special was about to happen today. For one thing, the elves were unusually cheerful. Some were even sporting rare smiles on their faces. None of them ever did when the Minister was in residence. Today, however, even 'Grouchy', the Head elf (James had dubbed him that because he was always a bit cross with them) was literally bouncing on his tiny feet as he went about the Manor ordering the other elves around. Then, their scheduled 'training' with one of the DL's Death Eaters was canceled; which was actually a very much welcome respite especially for James. They'd been pushing him harder than the others, demanding more and more from him that he wondered if he'd ever come out of this ordeal with his sanity intact.

Yesterday was exceptionally horrific. He'd discovered who the new residents of their previous 'quarters' were - Death Eaters who'd fallen from the DL's favor. And they were now James' 'training partners'. He'd rather not think about what they made him do yesterday, yet the images of the broken men pleading for mercy at his feet flashed inside his mind's eye in grisly detail. Sure, they didn't deserve his mercy; for all he knew they might've done worse things than what he was being forced to do to them. Still, he wasn't built that way, was he?

"Hey, cuz! Did you hear what the house elves have been going on about since morning?" Angus' hurried whisper broke into his dismal thoughts, bringing him back to the present.

"No, because I'm not in the habit of eavesdropping on Grouchy's minions," he snorted.

"Ha. Ha. I don't eavesdrop, you dolt. They just tend to chatter incessantly, and rather loudly, while changing the sheets in our room. And I just happen to overhear them. They probably didn't know that I was in the bathroom."

"Alright, I'll bite. What did you overhear, cousin?"

Angus ignored his jibe and glanced about, making sure that they were alone in this part of the gardens. Satisfied that they were indeed by their lonesome, Angus scooted closer to James and leaned in. "They said that the Minister's son will be coming for a visit today," Angus whispered.

That made James sit up straighter. He'd confided to Angus that Draco was the one the Order had assigned as their contact. He had actually gone against the Headmaster's instructions and told Angus about the message he received from Twinkle not only because he trusted his cousin with his life, but also as a precaution. His training was taking too much of a toll on him - physically, mentally and emotionally - that he thought it prudent to plan ahead and put some safeguards around his fellow Muggle-borns...just in case he was incapacitated and unable to do what he had promised them. Angus doesn't know about the latter, of course. James never told him about the extra training he'd been getting from the Death Eaters. And he didn't plan on doing so anytime soon. He didn't want to worry his cousin unnecessarily. Angus already had too much on his plate - what with Janice having a mini breakdown almost every day and Dennis fretting about Meryll up until she returned two days ago.

"Well...that's good news, isn't it? We'd finally be able to put our plan into action."
"Yes, but that's not the only thing that's good about this new development. It seems that we can also put aside whatever reservations we have about the bloke," Angus said with a grin. They had discussed ad nauseam the pros and cons of putting their trust in the 'Slytherin Prince'.

"Really? And why is that?"

"Because they're all excited to have him back at the Manor, that's why!"

James shook his head, frowning. "I don't get it. What does that have anything to do with trusting him? He's their young master, of course, they'd be happy to have him visiting."

Angus rolled his eyes and sighed in apparent exasperation. "Have you ever seen them getting all excited to welcome Lucius back whenever he goes away? He's their master, too, so they should exhibit the same feelings for him, shouldn't they? Yet they never do, right? Why, you might ask? Well, because they don't like him! But they sure as hell like Draco!"

"And on that ground, we should trust him completely, no questions asked," James replied drily.

"Look...you said we should observe everything around us. I just so happen to be fascinated with house elves. Neither of us had ever seen one until we got to Hogwarts. And you know me, I like learning about new things. The ones at Hogwart's, we never really saw much of them. They always kept to themselves in the dungeons. It was only here that I got to see them up close. And they're like people in many ways. They have emotions, prejudices, ideas, and convictions just like us. And I'm pretty sure that they also know all about loyalty, love, and hatred. They feel pain, joy-"

"So, are you saying that they love Draco?" interrupted James.

"I'm not saying that...but maybe they do, now that I think of it. I've been observing them ever since we came here. Especially after we met Twinkle. Their form of magic is amazing yet they remain subservient to wizardkind! How strange is that? But that's beside the point. My point is that I'd seen how the Malfoy House elves interact with their masters. They fear Lucius, but they have no love for him. Some of them might even hate him. Narcissa they love for sure, but they also somehow pity her. I really don't know why, but I see it in the way they look at her sometimes."

"My! You sound like you've really been studying them!" chuckled James.

"Well, why not? It's not as if I'm doing anything spectacular around here. We're surrounded by House Elves day in and day out. Might as well learn as much as we can about them, right?"

"You've got a point there, cuz. So...let's get back to trusting Draco. How can we rely on the judgment of house elves regarding that? They'd known him since he was a child, naturally they'd feel some form of affection for him."

"Not if he was horrible to them at one point or another. I've learned that House elves have very long memories. And they never forget, especially the wrongs done against them. That's probably why they're not that happy with Lucius. He must've done some terrible things to them back then."

"Okay. So maybe Draco wasn't as terrible to them as his father. But that doesn't mean he's trustworthy. It could be just their way of showing loyalty to Narcissa's son," said James, getting a little irritated at his cousin. Angus could be such a softy at times.

"You should've heard them talking earlier. They were really happy to see him again. One of them even said that it was too bad that he wasn't allowed to go with his young master to Hogwarts. He wanted to be Draco's personal valet! Now that's loyalty. And it only means that Draco's treating them exceptionally well. And to me, a man's character is easily gleaned by the way he treats those
who are beneath him. And to a Pureblood wizard, house elves are in the dregs," Angus explained.

James was about to retort to that when they heard Janice calling out Angus' name. His cousin squeezed James' shoulder and rose to his feet. "Just think about what I said, cuz, won't you?" he said before hollering back to Janice and leaving James behind on the bench.

James leaned forward on his knees and pondered over his cousin's take on Draco. Was he right? Is Draco worthy of their trust? The Headmaster trusted him, obviously, otherwise, he wouldn't let him be their contact. But what about those unsavory things he'd heard about the 'Slytherin Prince' at Hogwarts? How much of that was true, how much was hearsay? The Draco he knew wasn't worth telling the time of day to. But then again...he didn't really know Draco personally. Everything he 'knew' about the man was based on what others were saying about him. Yes, Draco was arrogant, but that was probably due to his upbringing, his family's elite status in the wizarding community. He grew up in a family of known Pureblood Supremacists, yet there were rumors about Draco's falling out with his father because of this. Could those rumors be true? He'd never heard Draco being friendly with the Muggle-borns, yet he'd never been anything less than civil to them.

Except towards Hermione.

Draco treated her differently than all the rest of the Muggle-borns. The Slytherin Prince seemed to take pleasure in baiting the Ravenclaw witch at every turn. He would always have a snide remark or a nasty comment for her. At first, it seemed that it was because of their scholastic rivalry, she had always bested the Slytherin in all their subjects - except Potions. But as Draco's attacks became too personal - calling her hair a squirrel's nest, making fun of her two front teeth, asking what horrors she's hiding underneath her robes - even he had to admit that there was more to it than just the race to the top spot. James suspected that it was also Draco who started Hermione's epithet of 'Princess Mudblood'. Yet, his passionate hatred for her appeared to go beyond bloodlines.

And that's why James specifically didn't like Draco and was reluctant in accepting him as their contact - his obnoxious treatment of Hermione. He was always singling her out of all the Muggle-borns at Hogwarts, always tailing her and taunting her like a young schoolboy screaming for attention. Draco never went out of his way for anyone, not even his posse, but for Hermione, he always did just so he could annoy her. It came to a point where the whole school was aware that if Hermione Granger was in the vicinity, Draco Malfoy wouldn't be too far behind. Always!

Then, something clicked in James' brain and a string of colorful profanities burst from the Gryffindor's lips. How could he have been so blind? How could he have missed it? Slytherin Prince - Princess Mudblood; The Prince and his Princess! That's why he coined that term for Hermione! Draco didn't hate Hermione! He had a crush on her! He was just too proud to admit it! Or perhaps even the cocky Slytherin wasn't that adept when it came to girls. Maybe Draco refused to acknowledge his true feelings for Hermione because it was such an absurd and appalling notion. He was a Pureblood, the embodiment of that social caste, in fact, and he was obsessing over a Muggle-born witch! How was he going to process that, after all?

James cursed again. He just found another reason to never, ever like Draco Malfoy.

Not only was he the personification of everything James abhorred - he's also competition!

James slapped a hand to his forehead and cursed again. He couldn't believe that he was arguing with himself. Is this how insanity begins? Those Cruciatus curses he'd been receiving must have scrambled his gray matter really well for him to be able to carry on a conversation - an argument - with himself. He was still banging his knuckles against his head when a slight movement to his left
caught his eye. Shifting to defensive mode, James quickly jumped to his feet and grabbed at the retreating figure's jumper. When he turned the figure around he was met by the frightened eyes of Meryll Greene.

"Meryll?" he croaked, ashamed at his rough treatment of the girl. He stepped back and swiftly relinquished his hold on her.


"What are you doing behind the bushes?"

"I-I w-was...hiding...from...from Dennis! Yes! I was hiding from Dennis!"

"Hiding from Dennis? Why? Are you two playing a game or something?"

"Uhm...yes! Y-yes...we're playing hide and seek," Meryll laughed nervously.

"Oh, I see. Alright, then, you can go back to your hiding place if you like. I'll be heading back to the Manor for some tea," James said, smiling down at the blushing girl.

"Uhm...yeah, right. Thanks, James."

"No problem. Have fun, you two," he said as he turned away to walk back to the Manor.

He was about to go into the kitchen when he heard laughter accompanied by the jaunty tinkling of the piano coming from the ballroom. He recognized Angus’ voice so he forewent his trip to the kitchens and proceeded to the ballroom instead. When he poked his head inside the room he saw that all his schoolmates were there having tea with Mrs. Malfoy.

Even Meryll.

She was seated beside Mrs. Malfoy on the settee near the piano where Angus was now playing a Christmas carol, quietly sipping from a dainty teacup.

A small chill crept down James' spine. How did she get here so fast?

"Hello, James. Come join us," Narcissa said, gesturing to the couch where Dennis was seated.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," he said as he walked to the indicated seat. The young Gryffindor smiled and passed him a filled teacup.

"I thought you were playing hide and seek with Meryll?" he whispered to Dennis.

Dennis head snapped up, a frown creasing his brows. "Hide and seek? Don't you think we're too old for such games?" Dennis chuckled.

"Well...that's what she said when I saw her in the gardens," replied James.

Dennis' frown deepened. "When did you see her there?"

"Just before I came here. I saw her hiding in the bushes behind me and when I asked her what she was doing she said that you two were playing hide and seek."

The young Gryffindor shook his head and looked at James like he had grown an extra ear.

"Meryll and I were the first ones to come here and she's stayed put all throughout. How could she
be in two places at the same time?"

*How indeed? Shite! Am I really losing my mind?*

Still...something wasn't adding up.

"Have you told her about the Resistance?" he asked Dennis, fear coursing through him.

"Not yet. She's not really talking much since she came back. Probably still mourning her mum. I-I thought we should give her a little more time...to recover, you know?"

He almost sighed in relief. "Good. good. Tell the others not to talk about the Resistance in front of her, just to be sure," James said, turning to Meryll, a horrible thought forming in his mind.

"What do you mean by that? Don't tell me you don't trust Meryll," Dennis whispered furiously before following James' line of sight.

Meryll was staring at them with a blank yet eerie expression in her eyes. Somehow, it made James uncomfortable. His discomfort was heightened when he felt Dennis fidget in his seat, as if feeling what he was feeling.

"Just do as I say for now, Dennis. I know what I saw in the gardens and I'm telling you, it was Meryll...or at least someone who looked exactly like her. And until we get to the bottom of this, we should be cautious about what we say to her. Or even to each other..."

Were his eyes and mind playing tricks on him? Or was someone else?

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Hermione glanced about and marveled at how Draco's real room looked exactly the same as the one the Room of Requirement had conjured in Hogwarts. Even the etchings on the four-poster bed were the same. How could the Room of Requirement have known about such tiny details?

"I have a very fertile imagination, that's how," Draco said, as if reading her mind.

"Oh, believe me, I know how fertile your imagination is," chuckled Hermione.

Draco grabbed Hermione by the waist and pulled her against his chest, planting numerous quick kisses on her face and neck. "Are you sure about that? You haven't seen half of what I've been imagining doing to you, my sweet witch," Draco growled as he continued his assault.

Hermione giggled and tried to push away from her boyfriend, but his viselike grip held her in place. She gave up her struggle before long, wallowing instead in the sweet attention that the blonde Slytherin was giving her. Soon enough, Draco's playful teasing turned into eager passion, easily igniting the fire that never seemed to completely go out between them.

"D-Draco...we really should see your mother f-first..." Hermione stammered as Draco trailed kisses down the column of her neck, his fingers slipping expertly under her shirt.

"She can wait," Draco breathed as he continued to lick and nibble at Hermione's collarbone.

"B-but w-what if she comes knocking...or if she hears us," she protested, stifling a moan that was threatening to escape her throat due to Draco's fondling of her breast. She could now feel heat pooling low on her stomach, spreading to the nether regions of her anatomy.

"My room is very well protected by silencing and privacy charms, so you don't have to worry about
that, Luv,” Draco murmured against her cleavage.

Somehow he had managed to open her blouse without her noticing and he was now pushing her bra out of the way, lifting her right breast to his viewing pleasure. Hermione groaned when she felt his lips latching onto her hardened nub, his tongue swirling around it, sucking it into his delicious mouth. She grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled him closer to her tingling breast. Draco chuckled softly and gently sucked on the skin of her breast, his tongue licking the mark that he'd just left there. Then, he rose on his elbows and kissed the tip of her nose.

"But you're right, sweetness. We need to see Mother first. Business before pleasure as they say,” he said with another soft chuckle.

Hermione's eyes flew open when his words eventually penetrated the thick fog of her arousal. She slapped his arm and growled, "You tease! You're going to pay for that, you know!"

Draco laughed and waved his wand, returning her clothes to their previous pristine state.

"I just wanted to relax you a little. You were so tense before we came here...even after what I did to you this morning," Draco teased, his silvery-gray eyes twinkling with mischief.

Her cheeks burned at the memory of what they did before they went down to breakfast in the Great Hall. She was looking so out of sorts that Draco took her to the Room of Requirement to relax for a bit. And Draco knew of the perfect way to 'release tension'.

_Gods! This man's going to drive me crazy!

_Oh, that's always my intention, sweetheart, to drive you insane with pleasure!

She playfully slapped Draco's arm and pushed her grinning boyfriend out of the way.

"Will you please stop reading my mind!" she groused, pretending annoyance.

Draco laughed and pulled her down to his lap, his arms going around her waist while his lips nibbled on her nape.

"Then stop thinking so loudly, my short-tempered Ravendor witch," he chuckled.

"Ravendor?"

"Well...you're a _Ravenclaw_ now but you were a _Gryffindor_ before, so it goes without saying that you should have a house all your own - _Ravendor_!" Draco explained with a grin.


"Only because Snape put her there for convenience. The sorting hat had nothing to do with that. Besides, I don't think you're manipulative enough to be in Slytherin," Draco teased as he continued to nuzzle her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

"Oh, really? Not manipulative enough, eh? Hmm...we'll see about that," Hermione said before grinding her bum into Draco's crotch. She smirked when Draco groaned and tightened his hold around her waist, purposely halting her seductive motion.

"You wicked witch! If I didn't know better I'd say you're really asking for it."

Hermione twisted around and raised a brow at the panting blonde behind her. "And what if I am?" she licked her lips and pouted at him. Draco growled and jumped to his feet, cradling Hermione in
his arms. Within seconds, she found herself on her back, sprawled on the fragrant, silken sheets.

"Then, you'll have what your heart desires, minx," Draco whispered against her lips.

Hermione snaked her arms up and raked her fingers through Draco's fine, blonde locks, giggling as he started trailing kisses down the column of her neck. His fingers were now making their way down her flat belly, caressing her already inflamed skin. His free hand slid under her skirt, fingers deftly slipping inside her lacy knickers. A moan escaped her throat when she felt him rub her throbbing bud. His lips went back to hers, his learned tongue feverishly plunging inside. Hermione bucked her hips when Draco slipped a finger inside her whilst continuing the tantalizing movement of his thumb. Her own hands were now frantically fumbling with his belt, desperate to free his throbbing member from its confinement. When at last she succeeded, she wasted no time in reaching inside to wrap her fingers around his silken hardness.

What started as languid snogging quickly turned into frenzied groping and tearing of clothes. Within seconds they were skin to skin, exchanging hurried kisses while their fingers worked their magic on each other. Hermione wrapped her legs around Draco's waist, pulling him closer to her, reveling in the feel of the delicious aroused member that was presently pushing hard against her slick folds. Draco groaned and in one swift movement shoved inside her, causing Hermione to gasp in pure pleasure. There was an urgency to their movements, a frenetic rhythm to their seductive dance that matched the beating of their hearts. Draco slammed into her repeatedly, fast and hard, bringing them closer to fulfillment whilst Hermione ferociously clung to him, her body meeting his every thrust with equal fervor. Their passion swiftly rose and crested, until they finally reached that exquisite peak where they both cried out in ecstasy.

As they slowly came down from their wanton highs, both sweating and gasping for breath, Draco lifted himself off of his girlfriend and fell back on the bed with a soft chuckle.

"I take my word back. You're manipulative enough to be in Slytherin," he breathed.

Hermione laughed and wrapped an arm around Draco's waist.

"And you're so eager to be manipulated, my Slytherin Prince," she said, smirking.

"If that's your idea of manipulation, then you won't hear me protesting," Draco laughed.

She laughed again and rested her head on Draco's shoulder, feeling blissfully serene and utterly relaxed. Draco's even breathing told her that he had fallen asleep with his left arm wrapped protectively around her shoulder. Her eyes were also about to close when a loud pop nearly made her jump out of her skin. Instinctively, she reached for her wand, only to realize with dismay that it was in the overnight bag that Draco had placed on the settee when they arrived.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. It's only Fifi. What is it, Fifi?" Draco mumbled sleepily.

Hermione's cheeks flamed when she saw the smiling house elf standing at the foot of the bed. Thankfully, Draco had managed to cover them both with the thick comforter right after their passionate interlude. Still, she slid further down underneath it until only the top of her bushy head was visible.

"Aww...see what you did, Fifi? You embarrassed my girlfriend!" snickered Draco.

Hermione pinched his side. Draco laughed harder as he tried to pull the comforter down, but Hermione was holding onto it like her life depended on it.

"F-Fifi is s-sorry, young Master. Fifi didn't know you was in bed," the elf stammered.
Hermione's heart broke at the unmistakable sorrow in the elf's voice, so she scooted up a little and chanced a peek at the elf. It was a girl and she was wearing a blue pillowcase with the Malfoy crest in the center, looking utterly miserable with her big, green eyes staring at the floor in abject shame, her gnarled fingers twisting the hem of her toga unconsciously. She was about to console the elf and assure her that she wasn't at fault when Draco spoke.

"It's okay, Fifi. Just don't tell anyone about what you saw, okay? It's our little secret," Draco said.

Hermione noted how he spoke so softly and cajolingly at the elf. The elf nodded vigorously, her bat-like ears flapping loudly. The big smile she had on before was now plastered on her face again, making her look younger and happier.

"I promise, Master Draco. Fifi is very good secret-keeper," she beamed.

"That's my girl," Draco said, smiling brightly at the elf. "So, what brings you here?"

"The Mistress is wanting to know what is taking so long. She said Fifi should see if anything is wrong with young Master," Fifi replied.

"Just tell her that we'd be down in a few minutes," Draco said.

The elf nodded and disappeared with another loud pop.

"Your mother already knows that we're here?" Hermione whispered furiously.

"Uh...yes. I'm sure she was apprised of my arrival the moment we apparated into the Manor," Draco answered with a sheepish grin.

"What? And you let us linger here like we have all the time in the world?" snapped Hermione.

"I did tell you that we should go see her first, did I not? But you 'manipulated' me into 'lingering here like we have all the time in the world'. Ouch!" Draco groaned when Hermione kicked his shin. "Salazar's sake, woman! No need to be violent!"

Hermione snorted and turned her back on Draco, grumbling under her breath.

"Aww...sweetheart, don't be like that! I'm sure she's just worried that I'd lock myself up in here again like I always do when I come home," Draco said, nuzzling Hermione's neck as he pulled her to him. What he said somehow calmed Hermione down. Was Draco that miserable at home?

"Do you really just lock yourself in your room when you're home?" she whispered.

"Yes...mostly. I only come out when I'm assured that my father already left the house."

"Is that here or before...where we came from," asked Hermione.

"That's what I used to do, before, especially after that maniac took up residence in our home. I guess it's the same here. I gathered from Theo, this timeline's Theo, that my father and I aren't even on speaking terms now. Something must've happened here after our Christmas holidays during sixth year. According to Theo, that's when I told him that I didn't want to have anything to do with my father anymore. Unfortunately, short of asking Theo, I have no freaking idea what transpired between my father and me during that time," Draco explained, the last delivered with a humorless laugh. "I'd have to play it by ear, I suppose."

A shiver of fear coursed through Hermione's veins at Draco's revelation. She didn't know that
Draco’s relationship with his father was this bad. How were they to face him now?

"Don't you worry about him, sweetheart. I can handle him. I'll just do what I normally do when he's around," Draco said, planting a soft kiss on Hermione's nape.

"And what is that?"

"Pretend he's not there," Draco shrugged.

Hermione turned around to face Draco, a frown knitting her brows together.

"But...I thought you're going to introduce me to them. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

"The plan is for me to introduce you to my mother. It would seem strange if I suddenly started talking to my father now, don't you think? It might make him suspicious," Draco held a finger to her lips when she started to protest. "Don't worry, I'll still look for the Time-Turner. I'll find a way to do that and talk to Toffler at the same time. As you said, 'hitting two stones with one bird.'"

She laughed at that. "It's hitting two birds with one stone, dolt!"

Draco waved a careless hand at her. "Whatever. I don't understand this Muggle affinity for, what do you call them, 'idioms'? They're confusing!"

"Get used to them. I still have tons to teach you," she grinned wickedly.

"Oh, for Salazar's sakes! Have mercy on the poor Pureblood!" Draco said, rolling his eyes at her.

"Hah! Pureblood, yes! But poor? Hell will freeze over first!"

"Is that another idiom?" he quipped.

"Maybe," she winked. Draco snorted and tweaked her nose.

"Get dressed, witch. Before I get myself manipulated by your wicked charms again," Draco said before jumping to his feet in search of his clothes. Hermione followed suit, then she waved her wand and transformed herself into Abigail Adams.

As soon as they were both properly dressed again, Draco silently removed the charms protecting his room with a couple of wand waves. He then reached for Hermione's hand and pulled her to his side. When he looked down at her, Hermione saw concern flicker in his stormy gray eyes.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, Luv?"

She nodded and smiled, "As ready as can be."

Draco nodded and leaned down to plant a soft, chaste kiss on her forehead.

"Don't worry, my mother will love you. And those she loves, she protects fiercely."

"Thanks. At least I'm sure she'd love this disguise," Hermione said, unable to completely remove the bitterness in her tone. Draco caught on fast and instantly wrapped his arms around her.

"My mother's not like my father. She's more like me and I know she'll love you as Hermione Granger just as much as she'd love you as Abigail Adams," he whispered into her hair.

Hermione's spirits lifted somehow. She could deal with Lucius' disdain because she knew that
Draco didn't really care much for his opinion, but if his mother disapproved of her, Draco would be hurt and she didn't want that to happen. As if preparing for confrontation with an unseen foe, Hermione squared her shoulders and pulled away from Draco.

"I'm ready now, really. Don't worry so much about me. I'm sure I've faced much worse than an introduction to my boyfriend's parents," she said, lifting a hand to Draco's ice-cold cheeks, evidence of the Slytherin's own trepidation regarding this meeting.

Draco smiled down at her and nodded, then he turned the familiar brass knob and swung the door open. He was first to step out, glancing up and down the long corridor that greeted their exit. Hermione gulped down her growing fear and whispered encouraging words to herself beneath her breath. The moment she stepped into the surprisingly brightly-lit hallway, the door behind her clicked and closed with a finality that chilled her. She was back inside the house that had plagued her with countless nightmares - inside the belly of the beast, so to speak. But...then...not really. Even during that brief, but terrifying incarceration, Draco's presence gave her hope. And now, he was here, walking beside her and holding her hand. That alone should give her strength.

There's nothing to be afraid of, Hermione. You survived this place once and you'll do it again tonight, she stubbornly told herself. She chanced a glance at Draco to see if he was able to discern that thought, but he seemed to be dealing with his own demons at the moment. His eyes looked ahead with a fierce determination that Hermione had not seen on him for a long time. It was like he was girding himself for battle. Considering that they would be coming face to face with Voldemort's right-hand man, they might as well be.

Hermione had lost count of how many corners they had turned and the number of staircases they had traversed until they were passing through the elegant French doors that led to the most beautiful garden she had ever seen. To say that the Manor was a big place was definitely an understatement. She wouldn't even be able to return to Draco's room on her own even if she wanted to. No wonder Draco grew up to be such a snob. His childhood home was practically a castle!

Draco walked her down a cobblestone path that led to a beautiful octagonal gazebo sitting in the middle of a rose garden that was in full bloom even in winter. When she looked up, she saw the tell-tale sign of an enchanted canopy covering the entire garden, shielding it from the bitter cold. Their gardener must be an amazing wizard or witch to be able to conjure such a powerful spell. The gazebo itself was such a marvel, not only because of its size but also due to its design. It was raised from the ground by at least two feet, judging by the number of steps at its base. The low fence enclosing it was made of latticed, white wood and the roof was of glass, tinted in a muted green, summer shade. The sheer, white curtains that were tied around the middle to the intricately carved columns were gently swaying in the breeze, giving the gazebo an almost ethereal look.

What really held Hermione's attention, however, was not the fairy-tale like scenery, but the couple sitting inside gazebo. Even seated and quietly sipping tea, they painted an imposing picture, exuding wealth, privilege and power. Hermione's fingers tightened around Draco's, which the young man acknowledged by squeezing back. A cold shiver went down her spine when she saw Lucius look up from his cup to watch their approach. Narcissa, noticing her husband's sudden change in interest followed his line of sight. Her face instantly broke into a wide smile upon seeing her son. The Malfoy matriarch put her cup and saucer on the lace-covered table and daintily rose to her feet, her arms outstretched in heartfelt welcome as she stepped down from the gazebo.

"Draco, my son. It's so good to see you again," she said, her blue eyes twinkling in delight.

"Mother," Draco said, walking up to his mother with Hermione in tow. He briefly let go of her hand to give his mother a brief hug, but his mother was having none of it. She reached up, pulled
his taller son's face to her and kissed both cheeks soundly.

Hermione nearly laughed when she saw the embarrassed look on her boyfriend's face as he protested his mother's public show of affection. Narcissa only laughed and gave her a playful wink.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my son! I forgot that I should stop treating you like a six-year-old especially in front of a lovely, young lady such as the one that you have here," Narcissa chuckled.

Draco cleared his throat and pulled Hermione to his side, an arm draping protectively around her shoulders. "Mother, this is Abigail Adams, my girlfriend," he said, smirking down at her.

Narcissa's hands reached out for Hermione's, pulling her into a hug.

"Welcome, my dear, to our humble home. I'm so glad that my Draco has finally found someone who will keep him in line," Narcissa said, laughing softly.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh as she gently pulled away from Narcissa.

"It's a tough job, but someone has to do it," she replied, smirking up at Draco.

The young man rolled his eyes and grunted, "Go ahead, gang up on me."

The two women laughed together. Hermione couldn't believe that she would feel at ease with Narcissa so quickly. The Malfoy matriarch was not as she remembered her. Or perhaps, this timeline's Narcissa was not as uptight as the one that she met before. However, since the circumstances of their previous encounters weren't as ideal as she would've liked, she couldn't really judge that Narcissa based solely on what she had gleaned from those brief meetings. Still, she hoped the Narcissa in their real timeline would be more like the one in front of her now.

"Cissy, what's taking so long? Why don't you make our guests comfortable?" Lucius aristocratic voice broke into their light chatter.

Draco's brows knitted into a deep frown, "Why isn't he at work?" he whispered to his mother.

"It's a Saturday, son. When you're at Hogwarts, your father makes it a point to stay home during weekends. He only makes an exception when Lord Voldemort summons him," Narcissa replied.

Hermione felt Draco's fingers dig into her shoulders, yet when she looked up, his face was a perfect mask of indifference again.

"So, shall we?" Narcissa said, gesturing to the gazebo. Draco gave a curt nod and followed his mother, his hand sliding down to the small of Hermione's back.

Hermione was surprised when Lucius rose to his feet as they mounted the steps. She could be wrong, but she also thought she saw delight and then apprehension flicker in the older Malfoy's eyes before they were quickly hidden behind a stoic mien. He cast a brief glance at his son and gave him a short, curt nod. It was returned by Draco in the very same manner.

"Lucius, this is Ms. Abigail Adams," Narcissa said, smiling at Hermione.

Lucius stepped forward and took Hermione's hand to plant a soft kiss on her knuckles. Hermione almost flinched at the contact.

"Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Miss Adams. I've heard quite a few interesting things about you," Lucius said as he slowly released her hand.
Now that made her flinch. Her face must've registered her shock because Lucius waved a careless hand in the air in a gesture of dismissal.

"Oh, don't worry about that, my dear Ms. Adams. I didn't launch a Ministry-wide investigation about you. It's Severus' fault. When I needled him about this girl that my son had been rumored to be seeing, he indulged me, albeit quite grudgingly, with a few stories about you. Severus is always very protective of his students, so I understand his reluctance," Lucius said with a smirk that was so like Draco's it made Hermione blatantly aware of the two men's relationship.

"Forgive him, Ms. Adams. My husband can be very nosy at times. He couldn't wait for Draco to introduce you to us himself," Narcissa said, placing a soft hand on Hermione's arm. "He had to Floo-call Severus several times the moment Draco owled me that he would be bringing you with him this weekend. He actually had to hound poor Severus just to make him talk."

"It's okay, Mrs. Malfoy, I understand. And please call me Abigail," she said.

"Alright. But you must call me Narcissa and not Mrs. Malfoy. I insist," Narcissa said the last when Hermione started to protest.

Hermione, a.k.a. Abigail Adams, nodded and smiled shyly at the older woman. Narcissa then led them to the dainty, lace-covered table laden with an expensive-looking tea set and platters of various cakes, cookies and scrumptious finger sandwiches. Draco deftly maneuvered her to sit beside his mother instead of his father. He was holding literally to his promise of keeping her as far away from his father as possible. The older Malfoy's earlier gesture must've caught him by surprise, too, so he wasn't taking any chances now.

As soon as they were seated, Narcissa busied herself with serving them tea and passing the trays of food around. The woman surprised Hermione again with what she was doing. She had actually expected the older witch to clap her hands and summon their house elves to wait on them. Apparently, Narcissa wasn't so different from Molly when it came to attending to her family's needs.

"This is so good, Mother. I didn't realize how much I've missed your cakes," Draco said in between bites.

"You baked these yourself, Narcissa?" Hermione blurted before she could stop herself.

It was Lucius who gave a short laugh and replied, "My wife loves to tinker in the kitchen. She always cooks for us. It is only when we are entertaining...other guests...that she lets our house elves take over her precious kitchen."

There was a brief flash of annoyance in Narcissa's eyes when Lucius mentioned their 'other guests'. Hermione could only guess at who those 'guests' are.

"That's because I only cook for the ones I love," Narcissa quietly said as she took a sip from her cup. The sudden change in her demeanor told Hermione that there was more to what she was saying.

An awkward silence fell upon them before Lucius broke it with a bit of throat clearing.

"So, Ms. Adams, how are you finding Hogwarts so far? Is it at par with the standards of Ilvermorny or are you getting disappointed with Severus' idea of education?"

It was a loaded question, of course, so Hermione decided to play it safe. This was Lucius Malfoy, after all, no matter how congenial he appeared to be in this timeline.
"I think it's too early to tell. Perhaps you could ask me the same question after I finish this year."

Lucius gave her a lopsided grin, his left brow quirking up in mild astonishment.

"Ah, I see you're not one to pass judgment so easily, eh? Smart girl," he said.

"Of course she is! Our Draco wouldn't have noticed her if she wasn't," Narcissa said. "Draco admires intelligence in a girl. It's his weakness, I believe," she winked at Draco.

"Mother! Now she'll be suspicious of all the smart girls in Hogwarts," Draco jokingly whined. "Especially since she doesn't believe me when I tell her that she's the smartest witch at Hogwarts."

"Really? So someone's finally topped that Granger girl then? She's the one you've been complaining about since first year, right? He never admitted it, but I'm quite sure that he had a childhood crush on her," Narcissa teased.

Hermione would've laughed at the pained look on Draco's face, if not for the cutting remark that Lucius made after Narcissa's playful banter.

"Nonsense! A Malfoy would never stoop so low as to even consider looking at that Muggle-born witch let alone harbor any form of admiration for her," the Malfoy scion scoffed.

The temperature in the gazebo plummeted in an instant. Narcissa's face paled as her eyes swiveled to her husband with a disdainful look while Draco visibly stiffened in his seat, his eyes sending daggers to the older Malfoy who was nonchalantly sipping his tea. Hermione felt like there were steel bands around her chest, constricting the air flowing to her lungs. As if oblivious to the sudden shift in his companions' moods, though, Lucius continued on.

"And now that we're on the subject of that...girl. There's something I'd like you to do for me, Draco," Lucius said, turning at last to his fuming son. His brow quirked when he saw the vile look on his son's face, yet it didn't deter him from plodding on. "As I'm sure you're aware, Lord Voldemort is interested in training young wizards and witches from Hogwarts as his...ambassadors...to the Muggle world. He wants the best of the lot, of course. And since this Granger girl, according even to you, had always been at the top of her classes," Lucius paused to look at his son, but Draco had already averted his gaze and was staring out at the rose garden with undisguised boredom.

"Draco, are you even listening to me?" Lucius's tone had turned stern, making Narcissa wince. Draco turned his eyes to his father, but remained silent, the bored look on his face still in place. This seemed to irritate Lucius, judging by the way he slammed his teacup down its saucer. "See here, boy. I'm just trying my best to do my job and all I ask from you is a little help every once in awhile. Is that too much to ask my own flesh and blood?" Lucius practically snapped at his son.

The young Slytherin snorted. "And what is it that you want me to do now, father?" Draco said, his voice dripping with venom as he emphasized the word 'father'. Strangely, in spite of the dangerous gleam in his eyes, Lucius let his son's impertinence slide.

"Nothing too difficult for you to accomplish. I just want you to bring that girl here...personally. I'm sure she's fully recovered from her illness by now," his father replied with a smirk.

"What? Why do I have to do that? Why don't you just ask Snape to bring her here?" Draco spat.

Narcissa, clearly sensing the growing tension between the two, tried to intervene. "Lucius, dear. There's no need to involve our son. I don't think Severus would refuse you if you ask him to bring the girl here. He's our friend and Draco's godfather, after all."
"He's your friend, not mine! And the only reason he's our son's godfather is because Lord Voldemort insisted on it!" Lucius said through gritted teeth. His face had now dropped its earlier aristocratic stoicism. He was very nearly livid with rage.

"Are you saying that you don't trust Severus?" Narcissa gasped.

Lucius seemed to remember that they were not alone as his eyes quickly flashed to Hermione, his face losing much of its turbulent expression. He cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair.

"I didn't say anything of the sort. I'm just worried that Severus is over protective of that girl. The Dark Lord had been asking about her, having heard about her sterling reputation from Goyle's son, the blabbering fool," Lucius nearly spat the last. "I just don't want Severus to get into trouble. Besides, it would make Draco look good in Lord Voldemort's eyes if he brought the girl here himself."

" Hah! As if I care what that maniac thinks about me," scoffed Draco.

Lucius was instantly on his feet, grabbing Draco by his Slytherin-colored tie. Narcissa gave out a small cry causing Hermione to jump to the older woman's side to console her.

"Listen, you arrogant fool!" Lucius growled. "Don't make this any worse than it already is. You are putting all of us in danger with talk like that. Did you think he wouldn't know about your juvenile 'rebellion' against me? Even now, he's wondering why you haven't taken an active role in his campaign. Do you want us all to die because of your stupid ideals?"

Father and son glared at each other, but it was Lucius who was first to regain his composure. Slowly, he let go of Draco's tie and sat back in his chair, a glimmer of desperation and fear flickering behind his stormy gray eyes that looked exactly like his son's.

Draco gave his mother an apologetic glance before turning back to his father, the anger in his eyes dissipating a little. After what seemed like an eternity, he spoke with a hollow voice.

"I'll think about it, Father. But you'd have to excuse us now. I believe I promised Abigail a tour of our library. We'll see you later at dinner," he said as he stood from his chair and grabbed Hermione's hand. He leaned down and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "Thank you for the lovely cakes, Mother. I'm sure you'll outdo yourself with dinner."

Narcissa's agitated mood seemed to evaporate at her son's words. She smiled and tapped Draco's cheeks with motherly affection.

"Oh, I'm sorry, son, but I won't be preparing dinner. We'll be having it with your schoolmates tonight so Millie and the others will be cooking. You know I can't do more than a dish or two. But I did whip up some delicious muffins for dessert," Narcissa said, winking at her son. There still was, however, an air of sadness in her eyes.

"That's fine. I can do with Millie's cooking for one night," Draco replied with a smirk.

"Thank you, Narcissa, for a lovely afternoon. The cakes were marvellous," Hermione said, smiling at the older witch's blushing face. She then turned to Lucius to thank him as well, but the older Malfoy didn't seem to notice them, lost in his own thoughts, a troubled frown marring his forehead.

"Don't worry about him, he's just getting a little pressured at work," Narcissa whispered. "Go, enjoy your tour of the Manor. I hope you like our library."

Before she could reply, Draco was pulling her away from her mother and down the steps of the
gazebo. His long, urgent strides told her that he was also a little antsy. When they were finally out of his parents' earshot, Draco sighed and said, "We need to get back to Hogwarts first thing tomorrow morning. We can't stay here much longer than that."

"But what about James and the Time-Turner?"

"I'll find a way to talk to him tonight and search my father's study as soon as they turn in for the night. That is if I don't find it in the library first."

"Your mother will be disappointed. I believe she prepared some activities for tomorrow. Why are you in such a hurry to get back to Hogwarts, anyway?" Hermione asked, puzzled by Draco's abrupt sense of urgency. She didn't like being around Lucius either, but she also knew that Draco had been looking forward to spending some time with his mother.

"You don't know my father like I do. He takes pride in being able to keep his emotions in check. He doesn't lose his temper in front of people, not even family. He doesn't scare easily either and even when he is, he doesn't show it. Especially not to me. And for him to even give the impression of fear is saying a lot. His earlier display was so out of character for him."

"Your mother did say that he's getting pressured at work. Maybe that's just it," she said.

Draco shook his head and turned to her, a grim look overshadowing his handsome face. "No, that's not it. He's good at handling pressure. He was scared shitless. And for Lucius Malfoy to even get to that point means only one thing - everything's about to go bat-shit crazy."

Somehow, Hermione didn't like the sound of that.
If anyone is still following this story, I'm so sorry for the long delay. I've been dealing with some personal issues that took precedence over my writing. I'll try not to do that again. Hope you all like this new chapter.

According to Wizarding history, Malfoy Manor was built during the 1600's by Draco's ancestor, Armand Malfoy. Being part of the invading Norman army, he was awarded parcels of land in Wiltshire by William, the Conqueror, upon his arrival in Britain. Throughout the following centuries, the Malfoys added more prime pieces of land to their property in spite of the, more often than not, violent contestations of their previous owners. As such, the Manor became not only his ancestor's home but also his well-guarded stronghold. Hence, rumor has it that the number of secret passageways that allowed for swift escapes would put even Buckingham Palace to shame. Rumors, however, often have more than a grain of truth in them. And Draco could attest to that since one such clandestinely situated passage was where he was currently standing on - a narrow, dark, and musty hallway just outside his father's study. It was one of the first ones that he had discovered during his early years, often whilst trying to evade his annoying tutors. There, he found a small hole in the wall - just enough for an elf or a small boy to crawl through - that led directly into the Master study. This breach in the otherwise pristine brick wall of his father's study was completely hidden from view behind the lifesize portrait of Armand Malfoy. Draco accidentally discovered its existence when he noticed light seeping through the hole during one of his forays in this hidden hallway. As his magic developed, he gradually enlarged the hole to accommodate his growing figure. Later on, when he found spying on his father not only beneficial but also highly enjoyable, he also put complicated concealing and locking spells on this secret 'doorway' to prevent anyone from discovering it. He had earlier feared that this secret entrance wouldn't exist in this timeline, but when he saw the markings he had made as a young child along the corridor walls, he sighed in relief. Malfoy Manor in this timeline was thankfully identical to the one he grew up in.

Draco had left Hermione in the company of his mother and the other Hogwarts Muggle-borns right after dinner. His father had excused himself just before dessert was served so Draco felt that it was safe to leave Hermione on her own whilst he visited the study. His mother had monopolized her the whole evening, anyway, so he was sure that his presence would not be terribly missed. The thought made Draco smile. He had not anticipated the way his mother had taken to 'Abigail'. Seeing the two most important people in his life getting along so well warmed his heart. He just hoped that his mother would not be too put off when Abigail's true identity was revealed. It would hurt to distance himself from her mother if she refused to accept Hermione, but he would do it without question. Hermione meant the world to him.

After making sure that the room was empty, Draco wasted no time in removing the locking and concealing spells he had placed on the door and carefully pushed against the canvass backing of the portrait. It swung forward quite easily and noiselessly, which suited Draco's purposes to perfection. The search for the Time-turner was foremost in his mind, but he had also planned on getting a glimpse into his father's actual work at the Ministry. It would give him and Hermione a better handle on the man if he knew more about Lucius' role in the Dark Lord's regime. With his wand acting as his only light source, Draco padded towards his father's desk and sifted through the
neatly stacked pieces of parchment on top. They were mostly about their various business interests - stuff that he already knew. What he wanted to find are documents dealing with Lucius' current job as the Minister of Magic, things that might give him an idea on how the Order was faring against the Dark Lord. But then he realized that his father would not leave such delicate correspondence just lying about so he started looking into the locked drawers flanking the antique walnut desk. Luckily, his father had used the same spells he used on his other desk. More business notes and scrolls, but nothing Ministry related whatsoever. He was about to give up on his sleuthing when underneath a stack of bills and financial analyses, his hand chanced upon a roughened and crumpled piece of parchment, one that was so out of place in his father's overly organized desk. He lifted it up to his wand to get a better look, but aside from the large ink blots, the paper seemed to be blank. Knowing his father, Draco was sure that whatever the parchment contained, it was well hidden by concealing charms. He would also bet his favorite broomstick that it was important. His father, cleanliness freak that he was, would never deign to keep a soiled piece of parchment inside his precious desk. Lucius would've just thrown it away. Convinced that it merited further inspection, Draco folded the paper and slipped it inside his trouser pocket. With Hermione's help, he was confident that whatever secrets it held would be easily revealed. Besides, he must keep on looking for the real reason why he was here - the time-turner he was sure Lucius used to change history.

Stepping away from his father's desk, Draco swung his wand towards the shelves covering the entire left wall of the study. There were hundreds of ancient tomes bound in dark leather lining the shelves, but he knew that not all of them contained actual pages. Several of them were hollowed out to serve as secret hiding places. The problem was, the books in these shelves were not arranged in the way he remembered. He didn't even recognize half of them. Finding the hollowed out volumes would be impossible now. A few silent curses escaped his lips as the enormity of his task dawned on him. If he wanted to find the time-turner, he would have to go through all these books! And he just didn't have the time to do that! Not unless he employed the help of Hermione, but that would mean extending their stay at the Manor one more day. However, he was positive that the time-turner would be in one of those books. His father would not let such a valuable object away from his immediate reach. He would keep it close and somewhere only he could get to. And his study was Lucius' 'sanctum sanctorum', the one place in Malfoy Manor where only he could enter. Well, to the best of his knowledge, anyway, Draco thought. He had no doubt that his father was still blissfully unaware of the existence of his 'secret door'. Had Lucius known about it, that hole in the wall would've been sealed shut a long time ago.

Deciding that delaying their return to Hogwarts would probably not be that bad when weighed against the possibility of leaving this wretched timeline once and for all, Draco exited his father's study and concealed the hole behind Armand Malfoy's portrait again. He wanted to get back to Hermione and see how she's faring. He might even get a chance to pull Toffler aside and have that much needed conversation with the bloke. He'd never been on speaking terms with Toffler so he must tread carefully lest he make the others suspicious. Snape was adamant in his instruction - only Toffler must know of his role as go-between. He had no intention of going against the Headmaster's wishes yet he felt that they should not put too much trust in one person. Perhaps they could add one more confidante, just in case things go sideways. He made a mental note to discuss this with Toffler.

Draco was so focused on planning his next move that he almost missed the voices coming from behind the wall. Actually, if one of them didn't sound too familiar, he would not have caught the sound at all. Judging from where he now stood, he surmised that he was outside the drawing room. Stepping up to the wall, Draco pressed his ear against it and listened. It sounded like a heated argument was in progress between his father and whoever was in the room with him. He could barely make out the words, but he knew that his father was furious. The very walls vibrated with
Lucius's anger.

Draco was starting to get frustrated at his inability to hear more when he remembered a spell Theo had taught him before, something his friend often used to eavesdrop on his own father whenever Death Eaters held meetings at Nott Manor. Pointing his wand at the wall, Draco whispered the incantation and positioned his ear back against the wall. The spell worked as expected and it was like he was inside the room with his father.

"We are not progressing as we should! I can't keep on working my arse off while you and your minions lounge about doing nothing!" Lucius snarled.

"We've been following your instructions to the letter, Lucius. And you know that. Can I help it if we encounter obstacles along the way?" his father's visitor said. Draco was sure that he'd heard that voice before, yet he couldn't connect a name or even a face to it.

"Your son had been traipsing around the manor as that Greene girl for days and yet you tell me that you haven't learned anything?" Draco pictured his father pacing before his visitor.

"The assignment you gave him isn't a walk in the park, Lucius. He can't get close enough to Toffler. He appears to be much more cautious than we thought him to be. Add to that the fact that he needs to avoid running into the person he's impersonating-"

"Stop making excuses for your son. He should've incapacitated the Greene girl and hid her somewhere. And I told you Toffler's smart, didn't I? He notices things and his magic is much more advanced than the others. Why didn't you tell your son to go after the Creevey boy like I suggested?"

"Marcus did, but even Creevey was not sharing anything worthwhile. The boy kept talking about his feelings it practically creeped Marcus out."

Marcus? Did he mean Marcus Flint? No wonder his voice sounded familiar.

Lucius snorted in derision. "Your son should be flattered."

Draco imagined Garvin Flint's face flaming in shame. He almost laughed at the image. Marcus wasn't a looker and he'd always had difficulty getting dates.

"He's not that desperate, Lucius."

"Just tell your son to try harder. I need to find out how to get to that Granger girl. The Dark Lord is getting impatient."

Draco's hackles rose at the mention of Hermione.

"What does he want with that Mudblood anyway? Doesn't he have enough slaves under his thumb already?"

"Careful, Flint. You don't want me reporting to him that you're questioning his motives."

Draco had expected the man to start groveling in front of his father, but was sorely dismayed when he instead heard laughter.

"I wouldn't want that either, my friend. Don't worry, I'll tell Marcus to work harder. We won't get sidetracked from our ultimate goal, I promise."
So! Father's up to something and Flint is helping him. But with what?

"He really must put more effort into his assignment because aside from the Granger girl's whereabouts, I also need new information about the Order, specifically where they're hiding the prophesied Chosen One."

Draco's blood ran cold. How could his father have known about the Order hiding Potter? Did he have his own spy in the Order?

"I thought Snape was the one handling that?"

Lucius grunted. "I have a feeling that slithery snake isn't telling us everything."

"Hmm. That's a dangerous conjecture on your part, Lucius. Remember, Snape still has the full confidence of the Dark Lord."

Lucius made a scoffing sound. "Not for very long. And not if I can help it. The moment I get my hands on that Granger girl, I'll make her talk. I'm sure she knows something."

Oh, this is not good.

"What do you mean, Lucius?"

His father gave out an ice-cold chuckle. "I just found out from a reliable source that there's a so-called secret rebel group fomenting right inside Hogwarts. And if Greg Jr. is to be believed about the magical skills of that Granger girl, especially since she's a Mudblood, then I'm pretty sure that she's involved in it one way or another. If she is, then it's only natural that Snape would also be in the thick of it."

"Are you saying that Snape's conniving with the Mudblood?"

"Why else would Snape be protecting her? Did you think for a second that I believed his flimsy excuse for her inability to make an appearance during the Muggle-born Registration?"

"But according to Nott, he saw the girl at the Infirmary. He even swore to it."

Lucius snorted. "Nott is an old fool and he's too lazy to investigate. He probably saw some girl disguised as the Mudblood."


"Actually, using polyjuice to spy on the Order and the Muggle-borns was the Dark Lord's idea, although, he didn't tell me that, of course. I just found out about it when I intercepted a list of potions that Wilkes, our resident Potioneer, was instructed to brew. Included in that list was a very large order for basic Polyjuice potion. Naturally, I acquired a few bottles and used them to serve our own cause. And I believe it's paying off."

"But we're still nowhere near to finding the Potter boy."

"No matter. As soon as the Mudblood's here, I'll make her spill Snape's secrets. Including where that blasted Potter spawn is being housed by the Order."

He heard the clinking of glasses and the quiet laughter of the two men.

"By the way, I heard that Draco's visiting today. Have you two reconciled?" Flint asked after a few beats.
Lucius heaved a sigh and said, "He's barely speaking to me. Obviously, he's still stewing over my role in the passage of the new Ministry laws."

So, I, or rather the me in this universe, knew about the new laws. And it sparked a new battle between Lucius and me. Interesting.

"How did he know about the laws?"

"He came across an early draft in the library. I don't know how it got there, but he found it nonetheless. And his fury regarding the matter proved that my suspicions were right - Draco was truly veering away from our family's ideals and starting to sympathize with the Mudbloods! He said that some of them were even better than Purebloods. Can you imagine that? My own son going against the centuries-old Malfoy doctrine!"

Draco flinched at the vehemence in his father's voice. Lucius held on to Malfoy traditions and ways with a ferocity that almost defied reason. And that's why they always clashed.

"I see what you mean. I can't imagine what I'd do if Marcus didn't share my own beliefs. His mother would be devastated as well."

Lucius snorted. "Narcissa would've applauded Draco if she knew. She's getting soft in her old age - touting nonsense such as equality and rights for all, including house elves, mind you! She's a veritable bleeding heart these past few years."

A loud intake of breath was heard. Draco imagined Flint shaking his head at the absurdity of his mother's newfound empathy for creatures deemed beneath them.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lucius. Are you sure Narcissa's not under some kind of spell?"

Lucius sighed. "I wish. But Cissa's always been...conflicted...regarding Pureblood traditions and practices. She's not like Bellatrix."

"Then you should be thankful for that, at least," Flint chuckled.

"I suppose you're right. Anyway, I think you better get on with your other assignment, Flint. We can't have the Dark Lord casting a suspicious eye on you."

Flint snorted and gave out a tight laugh. "He doesn't even know my name!"

"That may be so, but he's still keen on results. And your team has been behind in producing satisfactory contributions of late."

"Oh, alright! I can tell that you're itching to get back to your 'party'. I hope you're not developing a soft spot for the Mudbloods," Flint laughed.

Lucius' laugh was as deadly as snake venom. "No. I'm just curious about the girl that my son brought home with him. There's something about her that intrigues me."

"Should I send people to sniff around?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm sure I'd be able to figure her out on my own."

Fuck! That's it! We're getting out of here ASAP! I must get Hermione as far away from Lucius as possible. I'd just have to find another way to look for the Time-turner.

As he rushed down the hidden corridor, Draco wrestled with his new dilemma. He couldn't let this
trip to Malfoy Manor go to waste, yet if he must make a choice between keeping Hermione safe and finding the time-turner, he'd go for the first in a heartbeat. Still, he must find the Time-turner without endangering Hermione. Several options rolled inside his brain, but only one seemed to have the most potential for success. When he finally exited the secret hallway, his mind was already made up. He must speak to Toffler, now more than ever.

Not only to warn him about the impostor in their midst, but also to enlist his aid in finding an ancient relic that could very well be, not only his and Hermione's, but possibly the entire wizarding world's salvation.

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"What are we doing here, Blaise?" Ginny whispered as she followed the tall Slytherin into an empty classroom on the sixth floor. "I don't want to get caught by Filch!"

"Shhh! It's okay. Filch is busy," Blaise replied as he pulled Ginny inside and closed the door behind them. He then waved his wand and placed locking and silencing spells on it.

"Then why are you shushing me?"

"Because we might not be the only ones on this floor."

"What? Are you saying that we're tailing someone?"

Blaise chuckled and pulled Ginny to him, his arms going around the red haired witch's waist before she could wriggle away. "You ask too many questions sometimes," he said.

"Are you complaining?" Ginny asked, frowning.

"Not really. I just wish you'd appreciate being in an empty classroom with your boyfriend more often," Blaise said, leaning forward to plant a soft kiss on Ginny's lips.

"We don't often go inside empty classrooms, Blaise," Ginny chuckled.

"Exactly!" Blaise said and captured Ginny's lips with his own.

Ginny responded in kind, her arms wrapping around Blaise's waist. After a few minutes of mind-blowing snogging, Ginny pulled back and playfully slapped her boyfriend's arm.

"I will never go inside an empty classroom with you again, ever!"

Blaise chuckled and tweaked her nose. "Really? Should we put a wager on that?"

Ginny quirked a delicately arched brow as she sized up the smirking Slytherin before her. "Are you sure you're up to it? Okay, tell me what you have in mind."

Blaise shook his head and laughed. "You're too competitive for your own good, did you know that? But, alright. I'm game if you are."

"Stop stalling. Just tell me-" Ginny was stopped mid-sentence by Blaise's finger on her lips. She started to protest when she heard what had apparently captured Blaise's attention - the sound of running feet in the hallway.

So, Blaise was right. They're not the only ones on this floor. She wondered how her boyfriend knew about that. A sliver of jealousy streaked through Ginny's heart thinking that Blaise was used to bringing girls inside empty classrooms on deserted floors. She was of a mind to question him
about it but before she could even open her mouth Blaise was already pulling her towards the door. He motioned for her to keep silent as he removed the locking spells he did before and peeked outside. After a few beats, Blaise shut the door and turned to her.

"Cast a disillusionment charm on yourself and follow me," Blaise whispered.

"Just me? Aren't you going to cast one on yourself?"

"I think it would be to our advantage if I'm the one to confront them. Just keep your wand ready, okay? You might have to rescue me if my instincts are right," he said, peeking through the slit in the door again.

Somehow, Ginny didn't like the sound of that. But she held her questions at bay, sure that they would be wasting time if she gave in to her curiosity now. Besides, she trusted Blaise and if he asked her to be ready, then she definitely should. Blaise was never one to take unnecessary risks. He's known as the cool Slytherin, not because of his impeccable fashion sense, but more because he was not one to rush into things foolishly. Waving her wand over herself, she muttered the incantation she now knew by heart. Cold air washed over her as the spell took effect.

"Ginny?" Blaise asked, turning his head towards where he thought she was.

"Right behind you, Blaise," she replied with a soft chuckle.

"Just keep quiet and let me do the talking."

"Okay. Are you sure it's safe for you to walk out there without a disillusionment charm?"

Blaise hesitated, then replied quietly, "I'm quite safe. But keep your eyes peeled just the same, okay? We can't be too careful these days."

Blaise slowly pulled the door open and squeezed Ginny's hand, "Ready?"

She squeezed back in response. They both took a deep breath before finally exiting the classroom with Blaise taking the lead. The hallway was dark, but there was a sliver of light coming from a door left ajar at the far end. Blaise was a few feet ahead of her, walking like he was strolling in the park while Ginny struggled with jelly legs. She wondered if it was because of the charm she cast upon herself or just sheer terror. But then she'd used the charm before and never had this feeling, so she concluded that it was goosebumps caused by deathly fear. They'd heard about what happened to Hanna's mother and Susan's aunt, after all. And as Blaise had said, they couldn't be too careful these days. Especially when you're a member of a secret group whose mission is the downfall of the evil, dark wizard who controlled your world.

When they reached the room at the end of the hall, Blaise glanced back at her and smiled. It was meant to reassure her, but she saw the fear that briefly flashed in the handsome Slytherin's eyes. Thankfully, Blaise couldn't see the mortification that she knew was now plastered on her face. It would've been enough to stop her boyfriend from pursuing this investigation. And they just could not afford to not check on anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Still, she prayed that the people inside the room were just like them, a couple of lovebirds out on a tryst in the most secluded area of the castle.

Or was that really what she and Blaise were doing here? Were they out on a 'tryst' or could Blaise have known something she didn't? Did he bring her here to snog or to do some sleuthing? Or maybe both?

Ginny's thoughts were cut short when Blaise pushed the door open and walked inside the room like
he owned it. She quickly followed him and was stopped short by what she saw. Inside the room were Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones holding onto an unconscious Pansy Parkinson between them. They were trying to drag her across the floor, but Pansy apparently was too heavy for them.

"Hey, what's wrong with Pansy?"

His sudden appearance startled the two girls, but not so much that they forgot to point their wands at him.

"Get out of my way, Zabini," snarled Hannah.

"What is the meaning of this, girls?" Blaise quietly said, self preservation goading him to point his own wand at the group.

"Drop your wand, Zabini...or whoever you are. You know you can't take the both us," Hannah said, her eyes ablaze with determination.

"Are you sure about that? Wait...what do you mean 'whoever you are'? Hannah, it's me, Blaise. Don't you recognize me? Or...wait...are you really Hannah?"

Hannah's eyes swiveled to Susan, an unspoken message passing between the two. Blaise took advantage of the lull and made to approach the girls, unfortunately Hannah quickly recognized his intent. Her wand was honing back at his face in a snap.

"Take one step, Zabini, and I'll turn you into the slimy worm that you are," Hannah snarled at Blaise, her face contorting in anger.

Ginny had to cover her mouth to keep from screaming. What was wrong with Hannah? Why was she acting like a lunatic? And Susan! Why was she helping Hannah?

"Okay, okay. Just keep it together, Abbott. We don't want any accidents here, do we?" Blaise said as he slowly raised both hands in surrender.

Ginny caught the slight gesture he made for her, though, so she moved closer to Blaise, her own wand never leaving the trio before her.

"Move out of the way so we can take this snake to Prof. McGonagall," Hannah said, shaking her head in obvious frustration.

"Prof. McGonagall? Why not take her to Headmaster Snape?" Blaise asked.

"Because we don't know if he wasn't behind what this bitch did to us!" Hannah screamed at Blaise, tears now streaming down her face.

"Why? What did she do to you? I know that Pansy can be a right bitch, but I don't think she's ever done anything to upset you this much," Blaise said.

"We're not telling you anything. Just move out of the way or I'll make you move!"

"Hannah, calm down. Don't do anything you'll regret later," Susan said, glancing at Blaise. "What if it really is Zabini?"

"Of course it's me, Susan. Blaise Zabini! Who else would I be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe some minion of the DL pretending to be you," Hannah sneered at Blaise, her wand pointing directly at his face.
"Well, how do I know you're not pretending to be Hannah?" Blaise retorted.

It was the wrong thing to say, Ginny knew the moment Hannah's eyes blazed in fury. Thankfully, Blaise also realized the same so he was able to block Hannah's spell with ease.

"Hannah! Stop it!" Susan screamed. That seemed to knock some sense into Hannah.

"Look, this has gone long enough! Let me prove to you that I really am Zabini, okay? We don't have to do this the hard way, Hannah. You know that there's one way to prove both our identities, right? Afterall, you two also have what I have hidden inside my shirt, don't you? Let's all lower our wands and take them out at the same time, okay?"

Hannah hesitated, but lowered her wand the same time that Blaise did, her hand moving towards the front of her shirt. Susan, Ginny noted, followed suit. Still, she kept her wand trained on the two girls.

"Okay. At the count of three, we all take out what we have inside our shirts, agreed?"

Both girls nodded.

"Great. Let's do this. One...two...three!" Blaise said, pulling his pendant from underneath the collar of his shirt. He sighed in relief when the two girls displayed their own pendants.

Hannah fell to her knees and wailed - loud, heart-rending sobs that wracked her thin frame. Susan, now left bearing the full weight of an unconscious Pansy, nearly toppled over if not for the quick reflexes and helping hands of Blaise.

"I think you can show yourself now, Ginny," Blaise threw over his shoulder as he helped Susan lower Pansy to the floor.

"Way ahead of you, Blaise," Ginny said as she gently rubbed Hannah's back. She had removed the Disillusionment charm the moment Hannah crumbled to her knees.

"Merlin! You were there the whole time?" Susan cried.

"Yup. That's why Blaise was so brave confronting the two of you by his lonesome."

"Well...we can never be too careful nowadays, can we?" Blaise replied with a wink.

Susan blushed and quickly averted her eyes.

Ginny chuckled inside. Her boyfriend could be a real charmer when he wanted to be.

"So, what were you two doing with Pansy, anyway?" Ginny asked.

Hannah wasn't done crying her eyes out so it was Susan who explained.

"Hannah and I came to talking right after...after...we came back from the...funerals. We tried to review...go over the events...to the days before...the attacks. One thing we had in common was finding Pansy snooping around us. Hannah said that she saw her coming out of the Prefect's bathroom the one time that she went there. I, on the other hand, saw her lurking around our dormitory a couple of nights. Once, I tried to ask her what she wanted, but she just stared at me and walked past like she didn't even hear me."

"I also saw her at the Owlery, a few nights before...before it all happened," Hannah sniffed. She wiped her eyes with the handkerchief Ginny loaned her and sighed. "I didn't think much of it at the
time, so I didn't tell anyone. But when they told me that people saw me at our house the night that...the night that mum died...I felt that it was somehow connected to Pansy's odd behavior. I mean...we all know about Polyjuice, right? Obviously, that's what they used to impersonate Susan and me. And maybe that's what Pansy was doing...getting stuff from us...to use for the Polyjuice...Susan and I never left the castle, so...it had to be someone inside Hogwarts...someone who could go around freely..."

"We decided to investigate Pansy. We followed her around for a couple of days and we realized that it wasn't just us she was snooping around, she was doing it to a lot of people, too. We even saw her hanging around the Gryffindor Quidditch team during practice," Susan said.

"And Ravenclaw, too," Hannah said, nodding.

"Why didn't you tell us? We could've helped," Ginny said.

"Yes, you should've told the team, or Neville, at the least," Blaise said, nodding at Ginny.

Hannah and Susan exchanged glances.

"Actually...we didn't know who to trust anymore," Susan sighed.

"And we wanted to be absolutely sure that Pansy was up to no good. We couldn't just go around accusing a Slytherin without proof especially since some of our members are quite sensitive about that," Hannah said, smirking. "We didn't want a repeat of our first meeting."

Blaise chuckled, "I'd have to say you have a point there, Ms. Abbott."

Ginny rose to her feet and walked around the room. Aside from a couple of boxes, a table, and a few chairs, the room was practically bare.

"What was Pansy doing here?"

"This is where she's stashing her 'collection'. Here, take a look," Susan said as she jumped up and walked towards the boxes. She placed one on top of the table and lifted the lid, after which she handed a small bottle to Ginny.

"Merlin!" Ginny blurted as she stared at the lone strand of red hair inside the bottle labeled 'Ronald Weasley'.

"How did you find out about this?" Blaise said as he rummaged inside the box and took out a few bottles. Ginny read the labels over his shoulder and shuddered - Seamus Finnigan, Luna Lovegood, Dean Thomas.

"Yesterday, when I followed Pansy here. After she left, I went inside and saw these. Still, I couldn't just accuse her. I told Hannah about it, though, so we trailed Pansy the whole day today. When she came back here, we followed and saw her labeling another bottle," Susan said while handing Blaise a bottle she took out of her pocket.

Ginny nearly choked when she read the label - Blaise Zabini.

"Now you know why we couldn't trust you earlier," Hannah said.

"This is so fucked up!" Blaise growled before throwing the bottle against the wall where it shattered into a million pieces.
Ginny flinched not only from the sound, but also from the fact that she'd never seen Blaise this mad. Gone was his trademark cool.

"She wasn't just collecting from the other Houses, she was also collecting from her own. I also found bottles with Daphne's and Astoria's names on them. There's also one for Theo, but it was still empty," Susan said.

"Why were you taking her to McGonagall and not to the Headmaster?" Ginny asked.

"Well...we just thought that she was more trustworthy than the Headmaster. He's a known supporter of the DL, after all. Who knows if he's the one instructing Pansy to do what she was doing?" Hannah replied bitterly.

"Believe me, he's not the one behind this. And I'm not saying that out of mere loyalty to my fellow Slytherins, former or otherwise," Blaise retorted, his own bitterness seeping into his voice.

Hannah, thankfully, did not reply to that. If she did, they would've ended up haranguing each other all night since Blaise would not let up once he's on the warpath. Sensing the tension rising between the two again, Ginny walked up to where Pansy was lying and sat beside her. Something was nagging at her, yet she couldn't put her finger on it.

"What did you hit her with?" she asked, turning to Susan.

"Stupefy," Susan replied.

"Did you hit her from behind?"

"No, we confronted her. She was facing us when we stupefied her."

"And she didn't deflect the spell? She didn't try to defend herself?" Blaise asked.

"Uh, no...come to think of it. She just stood there, staring at us," Hannah said.

"So, why did you have to stun her?" asked Ginny. She was beginning to form an opinion about Pansy's condition, but she couldn't be sure.

"She was holding her wand..." said Susan.

Hannah nodded. "And she didn't want to come with us to McGonagall."

Blaise snorted, "Of course, she wouldn't. You said you confronted her. What did you say to her? Did she say anything to you?"

"Well...we said that we know her secret and we're taking her to McGonagall."

"And? Did she say anything?" prodded Ginny. She was beginning to form an opinion about Pansy's condition, but she couldn't be sure.

"She just...smiled..." Susan glanced nervously at Hannah.

"It was...eerie," Hannah said, shuddering.

Silence ensued, each one trying to process the previous events in their own way. It was Blaise who broke it and finally took command of the situation.

"Well, we can't stay here all night and mull over what Pansy's really been up to. And seeing as you both still have qualms about approaching the Headmaster, I suggest that we take Pansy to Prof.
McGonagall now. I'm sure she'll know what to do with her," Blaise said as he lifted Pansy from the floor and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Damn, Pansy! I never thought you weighed this much! The moment you're awake I'll force you to go on a diet. Geez! You're heavier than my Aunt Fiona and she's much well-rounded than you," Blaise grumbled as he shifted the unconscious Pansy on his shoulder.

"I think we should take these boxes with us, too," Ginny said, "They might be able to help us figure out what Pansy's been doing all along."

The two girls nodded and took both boxes with them. Despite the long trek to McGonagall's quarters, the motley group arrived there within just a few minutes, thanks to Blaise's knowledge of hidden shortcuts. Ginny was impressed. She actually thought that her twin brothers had a monopoly on the secrets of Hogwarts. Apparently, her new boyfriend had a few tricks of his own up his sleeve.

"Ginny, I think it's best if you do the talking first. McGonagall has a soft spot for Weasleys," Blaise said, winking.

Ginny rolled her eyes, but stepped up to McGonagall's door just the same. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath before knocking on the professor's door. The door was flung open after the third knock to reveal their Transfigurations professor blinking up at them in her tartan robe and flannel slippers.

"Miss Weasley! What in Godric's name are you doing here at this hour?"

"Professor, we're so sorry to disturb you. But this is a matter of utmost urgency," Ginny said as she gestured for the others to come forward. McGonagall gasped when she saw Blaise with the still knocked-out Pansy draped over his shoulder.

"Who is that, Mr. Zabini? If she's injured, you should bring her to the Infirmary and not here," McGonagall sputtered as she clasped her robe closer to her chest.

"We thought you'd be able to help us better, Professor," Blaise replied rather breathlessly.

"Why didn't you just levitate her?"

"I didn't want to waste my magic on her," grumbled Blaise as he again shifted Pansy on his shoulder. He breezed past Ginny when McGonagall motioned for them to come in.

"Put her there, Mr. Zabini," the professor said, pointing to a maroon sofa.

Blaise dropped Pansy on it none too gently. Pansy did not even stir.

"Wow! It seems like your spells are still in full effect, girls," Blaise remarked as he turned to sit beside Ginny on a nearby armchair, smirking at Susan and Hannah. Both girls' cheeks turned a bright pink when they saw McGonagall eyeing them curiously.

"What spell?" the professor inquired.

"Uhm...we stupefied her," Hannah mumbled. Susan pretended to not hear and busied herself with placing her box on top of Hannah's.

"My goodness! Why in Godric's name did you do that?" McGonagall gasped.

Hannah took a deep breath before launching into the bizarre tale of Pansy's activities for the past
week. Susan also contributed her own observations. As they neared the end, Blaise and Ginny in turn gave their own version of the night's events. McGonagall pursed her lips and walked towards her small desk. She came back bearing an open, tartan can filled with delicious smelling cookies.

"Have some biscuits," she said, handing the cookies to Ginny, who in turn handed it to her companions after getting a couple for herself.

"What are in those boxes?" Prof. McGonagall asked, pointing to the boxes Hannah and Susan brought in.


At Prof. McGonagall's bewildered look, Ginny took off the lid from the top box and took out a couple of labeled bottles. "She's been collecting, Professor," she said as she handed the bottles to McGonagall. The old Transfigurations professor blanched when she understood the implication of what she was holding.

Ginny was about to share her theory regarding Pansy's odd behavior when she noticed the said girl convulsing on the sofa. "Hey! Look! What's happening to her?"

The others all turned to look at the now wriggling Pansy. Hannah squealed when Pansy's face started to contort and roll in waves, like there was a live animal struggling to break through her skin. McGonagall slowly rose to her feet and pointed her wand at Pansy.

"She's changing back. The polyjuice is wearing off," the professor said.

Hannah and Susan jumped to their feet and stepped away from the sofa. Both Blaise and Ginny took out their wands at the same time and trained them on Pansy. Only...it wasn't Pansy anymore. In her place was a young man whose face seemed vaguely familiar.

"I knew that wasn't Pansy! She wouldn't have stayed silent after being confronted by Susan nor would she just smile when cornered; she would've given you girls hell," Ginny said with a hardly restrained chuckle.

"But then...who is that?" blurted Susan.

"Wait...I think it's...is it..."

"Lucian Bole, Mr. Zabini," finished McGonagall.

"Pansy's new boyfriend!" Blaise breathed, shaking his head.

"Well, now that we know that isn't Pansy...and if he's the one going around as her...the question now is...where is the real Pansy?" Hannah asked.

The silence that followed was grim.

Hermione watched in fascination as Narcissa gently spoke to a teary-eyed Dobby. She herself almost cried when she saw the elf that had once saved her life. Unfortunately, this Dobby didn't even blink upon seeing her. It somehow hurt her; she had grown fond of the Dobby from their timeline. He was, afterall, the only one who really appreciated her efforts in improving the working and living conditions of house elves. Dobby was also the only one who loved her knitting. After a few minutes, the house elf, shoulders slumped in misery, walked away and went back to the
kitchens, where Narcissa had temporarily assigned him.

"Dobby is still a bit saddened by my refusal to let him go with Draco to Hogwarts. He's been pleading to be Draco's personal valet ever since he left for school. I have to keep on reminding him that Headmaster Snape doesn't allow students to bring their own servants and that one of the reasons why I let Draco go to boarding school was to develop his independence and sense of responsibility," Narcissa whispered to Hermione with a soft chuckle after Dobby had left.

"He must be very fond of Draco," Hermione replied.

"Oh, yes, he is! He came to us at the same time that Draco was born, so he became very attached to my son. He used to be Draco's only playmate while growing up."

"He probably misses Draco."

Narcissa smiled, "Yes, I'm sure he does. But Draco has sadly outgrown him. He's become less dependent on the elves for his personal things, as well, so Dobby naturally feels...well...less needed. And for a house elf, that's tragic."

Hermione marvelled at how much Narcissa seemed to understand and empathize with the house elves. No wonder Draco was not as thoroughly a snob as his father - he inherited much of his mother's big heart and compassionate nature. Would she be as accepting of her if she found out about Abigail's true identity?

"Would you excuse me for a minute, Abigail? I need to leave some last minute instructions with the kitchen staff," Narcissa said.

"Of course, don't worry about me. I'll just entertain myself with these delicious Trifles," Hermione laughed. Narcissa beamed and patted her hand before rising from her seat.

"I'll ask the girls to come over and keep you company," Narcissa said as she sashayed away from the table.

Hermione was about to tell her that it wasn't necessary but Narcissa was already gone when she looked up from her Trifle. She did want to talk to the other Muggleborns without Narcissa listening in, however, since she couldn't tell them who she really was, she didn't know how she would go about it. Especially since, as Abigail, she was practically a stranger to them. They think she's a Pureblood, too, so they wouldn't be that eager to make her acquaintance, considering the reason why they're being kept here. Even Dennis, one of the friendliest people she's ever met, had kept his distance. It was only Meryll who kept on glancing at her, although surreptitiously. Hermione wondered what that was about.

Fortunately, she didn't have long to wonder.

"Miss Adams, is it okay if I sit here with you for a while?" a soft voice to her left said.

Hermione quickly hid her surprise when she saw who had sat beside her.

"Of course! Would you like some Trifle or lemon posset, Meryll?"

"No, I'm fine. I just wanted to get away from them," Meryll said, nodding at Janice and Dennis. "I can't...they're acting weird around me."

"What do you mean?" Hermione had to restrain herself from looking at the two people they were discussing.
"Well...after I came back from my...mum's funeral…"

"Oh, Merlin! I'm so sorry. I forgot...I mean, I didn't know," Hermione almost kicked herself for that mental slip. As Abigail, she, of course didn't know about Mrs. Greene's death. Thankfully, Meryll didn't seem to notice.

"It's okay. I mean...it's not okay that my mum died...but it's okay that you didn't know. Mrs. Malfoy said that you're from Ilvermorny, right? So...you obviously didn't know...you couldn't...Ilvermorny is very far away, after all. Do you think Ilvermorny is better than Hogwarts? How many Houses are there? Which House were you sorted into? And...are there Muggle-borns in Ilvermorny?" Meryll was practically panting by the time she finished.

Hermione smiled and reached out for Meryll's hand. "Relax, Meryll. Just tell me what's really bothering you." In truth, she didn't know much about Ilvermorny, so she decided to deftly change the subject before her ignorance was revealed. Besides, she'd rather know how the other Muggle-borns were faring at Malfoy Manor than discuss the differences between Ilvermorny and Hogwarts.

Meryll averted her eyes and looked down at her clasped hands. "They act differently around me...like they're uncomfortable or something..."

"Maybe they're just trying to see how you're holding up. What you're going through isn't easy and your friends probably don't know how to help you."

"You really think so?" Meryll said, looking up at Hermione with hopeful eyes.

"Yes, I think they're just being considerate. They know you're still mourning your mum. They probably just don't want to appear callous if they try to have fun around you. They're sympathizing with you, Meryll, that's all," Hermione said, squeezing Meryll's hand.

"I guess you're right. Thanks, Ms. Adams. I don't know why, but I felt like I could talk to you the moment I saw you. Maybe because you remind me of someone," Meryll said, her face brightened by a genuine smile that Hermione hadn't seen in a long time.

"I do? Who?"

"Our Head Girl, Hermione Granger."

Hermione almost choked on her Trifle. "Really? How? Do I look like her?"

"Oh, no! You don't look anything like her, but...I don't know...you just remind me of her. Maybe it's the way you talk...or smile...or maybe it's the voice...I'm not really sure why, but you do. You remind me of Hermione. But it's probably just me. Hermione's a very nice Head Girl. She doesn't talk down on us, but always as an equal. She's Muggle-born, too, you know."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that. Perhaps Meryll was referring to the 'Hermione' in their own timeline and not her per se because she couldn't remember ever being in the younger girl's company longer than it took to say hi and hello. Especially in their original timeline where, unlike here, they belonged to different houses.

"Do you want her to be here with you?"

Meryll gave her a sad smile and shook her head. "No. I'm glad she didn't make it to the Registration. She would've hated being stuck here...and tested like a lab rat..."
"What do you mean 'tested like a lab rat'? Is that why you and your other schoolmates are here? You're being experimented on?" Hermione gasped, unable to hide her horror.

Meryll bit her lip and vigorously shook her head, apparently realizing that she wasn't supposed to talk about that, especially not with the girlfriend of the Minister's son.

"No! No! I-it's n-not like that," Meryll cast a nervous glance before continuing, "We're just being...uhm...assessed. Yes, that's it! The Ministry is just evaluating our...abilities...for our role as ambassadors."

"Ambassadors?"

"Yes. The Minister said that we're going to represent the Wizarding world to the Muggles. He even asked our parents to help him..." Meryll frowned, as if remembering something. "If I wasn't a witch, my mum would still be alive..." she mumbled quietly. Then, her head snapped back to Hermione, her previous melancholia seeming to evaporate into thin air. "I know why those Muggles came into our house. They found out that I was a witch! It was just like when I was in Muggle school! They made fun of me because I was...weird! They said I was weird! The Minister was right...we need to show the world that we are no different than them!" Meryll's eyes flared as she sneered at Hermione, "No...no...No! The Minister's wrong. We are different...we are better! We are better than them all and we need to make them see that! Wizardkind is superior to Muggles! And soon, we will rise above them! We will make them kneel before us!"

The change in Meryll's attitude was so sudden, it truly scared Hermione. How could a docile, albeit troubled, girl turn into this vicious creature at the snap of a finger? Something wasn't right here. Something was very wrong.

"Meryll...I don't think that's what the Minister meant..."

"You didn't hear him speak to us about our new role as ambassadors. He understood...he knew how dangerous the Muggles are to us..."

"Meryll...your parents are Muggles..."

"No, they're not! Mistress Alecto told us that our parents are Squibs because Muggles can't possibly produce wizards and witches! Our parents have Magical blood, too. It's only their abilities that are dormant. But Magic cannot be suppressed! And that's why their inherent magic manifested in their children. In us!" Meryll said, her eyes taking on a crazed look.

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing, or seeing. Meryll appeared to be thoroughly convinced that Alecto was right. But how could that be? Was this what Lucius and his cohorts were doing to the Muggle-borns - brainwashing them? Or was this just Meryll's personal interpretation, her own way of processing her mother's untimely death?

"Meryll...that's not true. Non-magical people can still have..."

The younger girl jumped to her feet before Hermione could finish. Then, she leaned a hand on the table and gave Hermione a contemptuous smile. "I was mistaken. You're nothing like Hermione. She would've believed me. Oh, and just to let you know," she leaned in closer and whispered, "Draco's been secretly dating Hermione before the new laws were passed. I wouldn't be too comfy in my current position, if I were you. He's just using you to divert his father's attention. You're not even his type, you know," Meryll finished with a mocking laugh before finally leaving Hermione to her own thoughts. Which became troubled when she dissected what Meryll had just said.
Was that true? Were we also together in this timeline - secretly? But then, how could she have known? Well...Meryll did say that 'Hermione' talked to her like an equal...and they shared the same dorm, so it's possible that 'Hermione' and her had decent conversations. Still, could they have talked about boys and relationships, too? Could the other Hermione have told Meryll about her secret boyfriend before everything went crazy? Or had Meryll just seen us - them - together and made her own conclusions? What other secrets was that girl hiding?

A cold chill crawled down Hermione's body. She tried to reach out to Draco to warn him, but his mind was closed to her. Probably because they were in the Manor where he always kept all his mental walls up. All she could do now was send a message through their linked rings. But that wouldn't be the same since the ring could only alert Draco of her need to see him and not to the reason why. She had designed their rings to blink once when either of their needs were not too urgent and could therefore wait until either of them was free and to blink three times when they needed to meet ASAP. The alerts would repeat every five minutes or until the recipient taps a reply. If the situation was between life and death, the rings would get warm and the inset stones would pulsate like a beating heart. Deciding that it wasn't a life or death situation yet, Hermione tapped the sapphire stone on her ring three times in order to make the emerald stone on Draco's ring to blink the same number of times. Hopefully, he would notice it immediately.

Meanwhile, she must find out what else Meryll knows before the young Ravenclaw puts Draco and the other Muggle-borns in danger. But more importantly, she must find out if Meryll told anyone about them. Lucius wouldn't be too happy if he found out about his Pureblood heir's involvement with the Princess of Mudbloods. Especially now that he was the right-hand man of the biggest Muggle-hater and darkest wizard of all time!

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Snape never liked leaving Hogwarts to answer to Voldemort's summons. No, scratch that. He never liked answering to his supposedly dark master's summons. Period. He'd rather spend the entire evening milking Longbottom's horrid Mimbulus Mimbletonia than spend one minute in the evil wizard's company. Yet, he could not ignore him either, especially now that the Order was actively plotting the said Dark wizard's downfall. He must maintain his esteemed position in Voldemort's army, whether he liked it or not. At least for a little while longer. The rebellion still needed every inside information he could gather from these meetings. He hated attending them, not only because he found the attendees' constant ass-kissing thoroughly annoying, but also because they were getting too tedious for his taste. Tonight, however, he was completely taken off guard upon seeing the Muggle father of one of his students comfortably ensconced in the company of Alecto Carrow and Voldemort himself.

Mr. Greene, whom he had expected to still be in mourning, appeared to be completely recovered and somehow...content. He had assumed that the Communications magnate was under the Imperius curse since he acted like he hadn't just come out of a horrific family tragedy. Yet, when Snape briefly glimpsed into the man's mind, he saw no trace of the dreaded spell. Mr. Greene was in complete control of his faculties. It did not take long for the mystery regarding Mr. Greene's attitude to be revealed.

"I'm so glad that Mistress Carrow…"

"Alecto, just call me Alecto, Rupert," she said with a girlish giggle.

Snape almost gagged.

"Oh, forgive me, Mistress...I mean, Alecto. I shall remember to call you that," Mr. Greene replied, cheeks blushing pink. Alecto batted her lashes at the man.
Snape actually gagged this time. "You were saying?" Snape said, interrupting the sickening scene before him.

Mr. Greene cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. "Yes, Headmaster Snape. I was expressing my gratitude for Miss-uhm, Alecto's help. She made things clearer for us."

"What do you mean?"

"Damn! Did I forget to tell you about Alecto's assignment?" Voldemort asked, his dark eyes twinkling with malevolence. Snape knew that he was left out of the loop on purpose.

"I'm afraid you did, my lord."

"Well, then, perhaps I should let Alecto explain it all to you."

"Thank you, my lord," Alecto said with a nod of acknowledgement. "You see, Severus, our esteemed leader asked me to research about Muggle-born bloodlines and find out why they had magical skills in spite of being born to non-magical parents. We discovered that Rupert and the others had wizards and witches in their lineage. Most of them, however, had lost their magical abilities due to constant intermarriage with Muggles. That is why after much exhaustive work, my team came to the conclusion that the parents are not non-magical at all, but squibs! That's the reason why they produced magically-gifted offsprings. Their dormant magic manifested in their children," Alecto finished with a triumphant grin. Rupert was beaming, his chest puffed up with pride.

Snape didn't know if he should laugh or cry. Dumbledore had already arrived at the same conclusion decades ago. Well, at least the Dumbledore from that other world, or timeline. He'd seen it from one of the many memories inside the phials that the former Hogwarts Headmaster had left safely hidden in his office.

"Really?" he said instead, carefully shielding his mind in case Voldemort decided to do a little prodding.

"Yes! Isn't that wonderful? It means that they, the Muggle-borns and their parents, truly belong in our world!" Alecto pronounced as she grinned at Rupert. He returned it promptly and in equal brilliance. Snape wanted to hurl. He preferred the surly, mildly deranged Alecto Carrow to this oddly cheerful caricature of her.

Voldemort, on the other hand, looked smug. "And that is why Mr. Greene, or Rupert, is now more determined to help us. He's given us full control of his many enterprises. We can now use them for whatever purposes we may deem necessary."

So, that's why the conniving snake looked like he just swallowed a whole elephant!

"That is good news, isn't it?" Snape drawled, swallowing the bile that had risen from his gut. He very well knew that Voldemort looked on squibs in the same manner that he did house elves.

"Of course, Severus. Now we can start our campaign. Wizardkind will come out of hiding and reveal how the Muggle world will benefit from our patronage. Under our tutelage, we can make their lives more...meaningful, can't we?"

The diabolic sneer on Voldemort's face sent the opposite message to Snape. Crafty, manipulative snake!

"Those Muggles who attacked my family will pay for what they had done. They're the ones who
do not deserve to live in the world that Lord Voldemort envisions for us all," Rupert Greene said with a snarl.

Lucius' memory modification appears to be working beautifully, Snape thought grudgingly. The poor fool doesn't even have any idea what really transpired that fatal night.

"And we shall make them all pay, won't we, my lord?" Alecto breathed as she turned to Voldemort, her eyes taking on the crazed look that Snape was more familiar with.

"Naturally, Alecto. But now I believe it's time that you take Rupert home. His twins must be wondering where their father had disappeared to...again," Voldemort quietly said.

Alecto's face fell a little at the apparent dismissal and implied reprimand. Being the good soldier that she was, though, she quickly hid her disappointment behind a bright, yet fake smile.

"I believe you're right as usual, my lord. I shall personally see to it that Rupert tucks in his twins tonight," she said as she rose from her seat and bowed before her lord. Rupert quickly followed, bowing judiciously to Voldemort before shuffling after Alecto.

The moment the two were out of hearing range, Snape turned to Voldemort and said, "Well...that was rather...unexpected."

Voldemort scoffed and threw his hands in the air. "Women! You really can't read them properly, can you? Did you know that I'd tried to pair Alecto with Antonin before? She acted like I'd suggested that she Avada herself. I thought she just didn't think Antonin was good enough for her, so I suggested a union with Rowle, her reaction was even worse. It was like I Avadaed her arse myself! But look at her now, blushing like an innocent lass. Good thing I have need of her new plaything, otherwise I'd lock him in the dungeons together with the other Mudbloods."

"Mudblood? I thought he's got wizard blood in him. Was Alecto making all that up?" Snape said. Of course he knew that Alecto wasn't that stupid. No Death Eater would be that dense and careless. The Dark Lord was not someone who can be fooled easily.

"Did you think her foolish enough to lie about something as colossal as this?" Voldemort laughed before annoyance flickered in his eyes. "But that doesn't change a thing! Mudbloods will always be Mudbloods, filthy and beneath us, even when born from Squibs. Actually, especially since they're born from Squibs! They're the offspring of the dregs of wizarkind. Even House elves have more magic than all of them combined! The only reason why I'm tolerating their kind is because they're still of some use to me."

Voldemort rose to his feet and started pacing in front of Snape. It didn't bode well so Snape braced himself for whatever storm was brewing. Voldemort was always a restless soul, but even more so when there's something bothering him. It didn't take long for the first thunders to arrive. Voldemort ceased his pacing and stood squarely in front of Snape. The sharp gaze that the Dark Lord gave him could've sent a lesser man quaking on the floor. Fortunately, the Hogwarts Headmaster was made of sterner stuff.

"Did you know that the Toffler boy can trace his roots back to one of the branches of the Blacks? It could explain why he outperforms his schoolmates here in every test now, could it? The Blacks are one of the sacred twenty-eight, after all. One of the Purest of the Pure."

It never ceases to amaze the Hogwarts Headmaster how Voldemort, born Tom Riddle, a half-blood just like him, gave so much importance to blood purity. Even after being presented with overwhelming evidence that one's magical abilities didn't depend on the purity of blood.
"I wasn't aware, my lord," Snape gasped. He already knew about that - including Angela Toffler's newly revealed status as a witch, but he couldn't let Voldemort know that.

Voldemort gave him a condescending look and returned to his seat.

"You couldn't have known. Alecto had just recently started using the Spell and Potion combination that I personally concocted for the purpose of tracing bloodlines," a look of aggravation flashed in the Dark Lord's face. "I must say that I'm somewhat disappointed by the results. My original purpose was to expose the Mudbloods as freaks of nature, their so-called 'magic' borne of abnormalities in their blood - just unusual abilities and not true magic. Alas, my well-meaning experiment had just inadvertently given them legitimacy instead, a real magical legacy and heritage," Voldemort spat the last words like they were poison in his mouth.

It took tremendous effort for Snape to refrain from laughing. Serves you right, he thought. However, his ill-placed humor was quickly dispelled by the Dark Lord's next remark.

"How's Miss Granger, by the way?"

Snape's breathing stopped for a millisecond that he had to compose himself before answering. "She's almost fully-recovered, my lord."

The dangerous twinkle in Voldemort's eyes combined with his devilish grin warned Snape that he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"Fantastic! I really must meet her in person at the earliest possible time. Especially now that I was just informed of our...connection."

Cold shivers crawled down Snape's spine. Shit! Why do I have the feeling that this isn't going to be just about Miss Granger's health issues?

"Oh, did I forget to tell you that my experiment can also be used on the Muggle parents and not just on the Mudbloods? I did, didn't I?" Voldemort sneered. "Well, then, I'm happy to report that it's very successful because I just found my long-lost aunt and by extension, my long-lost cousin!"

Voldemort clapped his hands and a door swung open. Snape almost forgot his cover when his blood boiled at the sight. Two of Voldemort's household staff were holding between them the glassy-eyed and obviously hexed parents of Hermione Granger. He'd met the mild-mannered couple during one of the Granger family's trips to Diagon alley so he couldn't be mistaken.

"Meet my aunt, Jane Granger nee Flemish. Alecto was very good at tracing her lineage. It took a few tries, but she came to a most revealing conclusion in the end. It appears that Mrs. Granger's great, great, great grandmother was a Squib, daughter of an obscure Gaunt, but a Gaunt nonetheless. She was left to die in a Muggle village as soon as her condition was discovered, and was later adopted by a Muggle couple desperate for a child. She, of course, took the name of her adoptive Muggle parents and then married a common Muggle. None who came from her bloodline exhibited any magical abilities. Until aunt Jane here gave birth to my dear cousin, Hermione. Nevermind the father, he's worthless," Voldemort said with a careless wave of his hand, his face alight with malicious triumph.

"My lord...I'm...I-I...I'm amazed..." Snape felt like his chest would burst. He wanted to smite the arrogant smirk off the Dark Lord's face, yet he couldn't. He mustn't. Not if he wanted to save the Grangers and their daughter, as well.

"It is amazing, isn't it? Who would've thought that I have a cousin? And a powerful witch, too!"
According to Alecto's initial investigation, anyway. But if she's right, imagine what that would mean for us!

Snape feigned ignorance once more. "What, my lord?"

Voldemort gave him a frustrated eye-roll. "Honestly, Severus, sometimes I wonder if I'm overestimating your intelligence." The Dark Lord sighed and leaned on his elbows. "Hermione is of my blood. She's my cousin, but a very distant one. If we were Purebloods, our parents would have arranged our marriage before we were even born-"

More like your grandson and her, you creepy, old man! Well, to be fair, you don't look like a day older than...maybe thirty-five or thereabouts despite the fact that you're nearly...what...70? Wizards do age differently than Muggles because we tend to live longer than them...but still! Snape shuddered at the unwanted images that invaded his mind's eye.

"-Now I understand why they adhere to such practices," Voldemort was saying, unaware of Snape's uncharitable thoughts. "The combination of two powerful people of the same blood would surely bring forth an heir with unrivaled magical abilities. Hermione's blood combined with mine would result in an offspring who would be unstoppable! We would rule the world!"

Snape found it hard to breathe. This was starting to creep him out big time. Being a highly accomplished Occlumens helped; none of the horror that he was feeling registered in his always placid features. However, the Dark Lord took his silence for disbelief.

Voldemort laughed and leaned back in his chair. "Are you questioning my ability to father a child, Severus? I assure you, my lack of offspring is by my own choice and not due to any...deficiency. I'd never met any woman worthy of bearing my seed before, but now that I've been told that a woman with my own blood running in her veins exists, I believe it's time that I procreated, don't you think?"

Too many words tumbled inside Snape's brain in reply; every one of them sure to earn him an Avada Kedavra from the man before him. Eventually, he decided that silence was the more prudent response. Voldemort rose to his feet, signaling the end of their meeting. Before Snape could rise to his feet, the Dark Lord turned to him and said, "Bring the Granger girl to me before the week ends, Severus. You don't want me going to Hogwarts and dragging her out myself, do you? That would really upset me. Do you want to upset me, Severus?"

"No, my lord," Snape said, rising from his seat and bowing to the Dark Lord.

Voldemort chuckled and briskly walked out of the room bellowing the name of his current Muggle toy. Snape sunk back into his chair, his legs refusing to hold him up any longer.

FUCK! He screamed inside his head. He only jumped to his feet when he realized that he had no time to waste. He must tell the Order about this new development tonight.

Ready or not, we must set things in motion, he thought.

Time to implement Plan B...
The day started out pretty ordinary. The new products were now on the shelves so even the shop's regular customers spent most of their time perusing them. Only two or three had come up the counter to pay for their purchases, the rest were still ogling the modified Pygmy Puffs (they can now sing) and the meaner exploding quills (they give off the smell of rotting eggs). There was also a group of girls debating which love potion was more effective for their intended victims. Everyone in the shop was in varying stages of excitement. But none more so than the proprietors of the famous joke shop in Diagon Alley, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Because today could be the day that they'd actually do real jobs for the Order. Today could be the day that things were set in motion.

"Do you still remember what he looks like?" George asked, turning to Fred who was trying to look busy rearranging (for the nth time) the items displayed on the counter.

"I have a vague recollection. He used to be in the Slytherin Quidditch team, remember? He was a beater, if I recall correctly."

"Ah! Yes! I remember him now. Tall, lanky fellow who was quite decent for a Slytherin beater, wasn't he?"

His twin laughed. "Too bad he graduated before we became Gryffindor Beaters. His honorable side would have fled in a heartbeat."

"Yeah, he would've had a hard time keeping his decency with us on the opposing team," George snorted.

"Remus says that his dad's not a bad fellow, either. Unfortunately, he got involved with the wrong crowd," Fred said as he sat on the stool beside his brother, giving up the pretense of working.

"Well, that's why they're jumping ship, aren't they? Honourable folk won't be able to stay long in the DL's service."

"Shhh! Keep your voice down...oh, yeah...right. I forgot about that," Fred chuckled when George raised a brow at him.

Fred should've known that he would never risk talking about sensitive matters without putting up an imperturbable bubble around them.

"So...when do you think he'll show up? It's been almost a week since Snape left a few 'suggestions' in his memories. He said it will only take three days, but it's been twice as long as that. Could it be that the bloke was able to ignore Snape's subtle prodding?"

"Nah, Wilkes is probably just too preoccupied with his own thoughts so Snape's hidden messages were kept at bay. He's not under the Imperius, after all, so he's still got his own wits about him. But
I'm sure he'll turn up soon. No one can ignore that annoying git for too long, even if he's just in one's brain,” George laughed.

"I guess so. But what do you think is really happening at Grimmauld Place? Dad seemed pretty worked up last night when he came back from their meeting."

George's brows knitted into a frown. "I've no idea. I just wish they'd tell us more. We're not kids! And I hate it when they treat us like we're not even in the Order."

"My guess is that it has something to do with Granger. I'm quite surprised that Snape was able to keep her holed up at Hogwarts without raising the ire of the DL or even Lucius. We all know that those two are most likely itching to get their hands on that girl. Especially now that—"

Fred was cut short when George jumped down from the stool, his eyes fixed on the door of the shop. Naturally, Fred followed his brother's line of sight and almost sighed in relief at what, or rather who appeared standing at the door.

Lorcan Wilkes.

Finally, the former Slytherin beater makes his long-awaited appearance, George thought. Fred would've run towards Lorcan if not for the restraining hand on his arm.

"Remember what Snape told us, we're to let him approach us," George whispered.

"Oh, shite! I forgot about that! What's the trigger phrase again?"

"Singing, purple, Pygmy Puffs."

"How appropriate," Fred mumbled.

George's eyes snapped to his brother. Obviously, they were thinking the same thing. Was it just coincidence or did Snape know that they would be launching the modified Pygmy Puffs this week? He suppressed a shudder as a horrifying thought occurred to him. Could Snape be reading their minds?

Before he could dwell on the matter, the subject of their vigil started walking towards the counter, shaking his head with a bewildered look.

"Uhm...You know, I've been meaning to come here to buy my girlfriend a present for the better part of this week...but now that I'm here...I can't seem to decide what to get her. Uh...c-can you suggest anything?"

"You're in luck, mate. We've just introduced a new product to the market. It's quite a hit already so I'm sure your girlfriend will be overjoyed to have one," George said, quietly elbowing Fred who was leaning down the counter, staring at Lorcan with wide eyes. "Can't you be just a little less obvious?" he quickly whispered to his brother. Fred ignored him, as per usual.

"How about a singing, purple, Pygmy Puff?" Fred said in a breathless rush. George rolled his eyes. His twin truly doesn't have a patient bone in his body.

"Uh...what did you say?" Lorcan asked.

"I said, how about. A. Singing. Purple. Pygmy. Puff."

It was fascinating to watch, actually - the way Lorcan's eyes glazed over, losing focus and staring
at something only he could see. George knew that Fred was as entranced with what they were witnessing as he was. After a few seconds, Lorcan blinked - once, twice - swaying on his feet like he was about to collapse, so George reached over and grasped both of Lorcan's arms. The former Slytherin shuddered, then as if coming out of a trance, his eyes flared, refocusing on the young men before him. George let go of him only when he was sure that Lorcan was back to reality.

"You're George and Fred Weasley, right?" The twins nodded. Lorcan sighed, a relieved grin gracing his lips. "Great! I have so much to tell you."

"Let's go out back," George said, motioning Lorcan to follow him. He glanced at Fred, silently passing a message that was immediately understood. Fred stepped away from the counter and turned to the few remaining customers.

"I'm so sorry, folks, but you'd have to come back tomorrow. We'll be closing early today," Fred said, clapping his hands.

George led Lorcan to their apartment upstairs, confident that Fred would be able to usher all the customers out without incident. When they reached the top, Lorcan dutifully sat on the couch that George asked him to sit on whilst he grabbed some snacks from the kitchen. George was just putting down a tray laden with biscuits and tea when Fred sauntered in.

"Those girls are giving me a massive headache. We really should stop selling love potions. Who knows if their intended victim in the future will be either one of us!"

George laughed. "That would really be something, wouldn't it? I doubt if those things have any effect on us anymore, however. We've practically tested them on ourselves so we're already immune."

"You're right. Still, we have to be careful."

"Agreed, brother."

Fred sat beside George on the purple couch opposite Lorcan who was silently staring at his clasped hands, his brows knitted in apparent confusion.

"So, Lorcan, what brings you to our humble establishment?"

Lorcan looked up, his eyes betraying some fear. "Headmaster Snape came to see me...after what happened at the Greenes'...uhm...did you know about them?" A sigh escaped his lips when both George and Fred nodded.

"We understand if you don't want to talk about it," Fred said.

"Uh...thanks. It's not a very proud moment for me. And I just found out that it's only the tip of the iceberg. There's much more that we should be concerned about." Lorcan paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "The parents are being held as hostages to ensure the cooperation of their children. They're also going to be used to do Lord...uhm...the Dark Lord's bidding. Our assignment was to Imperius the Greenes. They were supposed to insert subliminal messages into their programs. Other teams were assigned to the other parents. I was not able to find out what their actual missions were - my former colleagues were not too generous with details, but I did learn that it all had to do with the current jobs of the parents."

George glanced at Fred and found his twin shaking his head in disgust. Snape had already told the Order what the parents of the remaining Hogwarts students at Malfoy Manor did in the Muggle world. They were all in areas that exerted much influence - defense, finance, food production, legal
services, health services, and even communications.

Voldemort's got his bases covered, George said to himself.

"It's not just a one time deal, too. They will continue to receive... 'instructions'... from the Dark Lord. After they're done with their 'missions', their children will be sent to the Muggle world... not as ambassadors, as Minister Malfoy wants them all to believe, but as... enforcers and executioners. Several older Muggle-borns, those who caught the Ministry's eye during the assessment, are being rounded up as we speak. They, too, will be given 'assignments'. If they fail, their families will be executed."

"Oh, sweet Merlin!" Fred said, slumping back into the couch.

"That's not all..."

"Godric's socks, there's more?" George blurted.

"The Dark Lord has people using Polyjuice Potion to infiltrate the Order and Hogwarts--"

"We know," Fred said.

"You do? Thank Merlin! My father and I feared that they'd succeeded--"

"Actually, they did. We already lost two valuable people," George said, "Fortunately, we found out before more damage was done."

"I'm so sorry... I wish I could've helped sooner..."

"It's nobody's fault but that maniac's," Fred said, giving Lorcan a sad smile.

"I also found out that Bellatrix had taken two teams to America. They're looking for the people who helped the Chosen One escape. The DL knows that he's alive, but he doesn't know where he is yet."

"Shit! We need to warn Leo," George whispered to Fred, who nodded in agreement.

"We need to smuggle the parents of the Muggle-borns out, too. I don't think they'll survive if we leave them at the Dark Lord's mercy. And I... I don't want a repeat of what happened to the Greenes... If we can get their children out of Malfoy Manor, so much the better. But we have to move fast. The Dark Lord's planning something big for the Malfoy Yule Ball--"

"But that's next week, right? Lucius always has a Yule Ball a week before Christmas. That doesn't leave us enough time to plan anything--"

"Not unless we have some inside information, we don't," cut-in Lorcan as he unfolded two blank pieces of parchment on the table. "As it turns out, my father and I were able to put together a rough approximation of the Dark Lord's schedule. The first one is mine, the second, my father's. I'm sorry I didn't have time to consolidate the two," Lorcan said, tapping the parchments twice. Within seconds, words appeared on the blank pages.

Both twins leaned forward to marvel at what Lorcan had laid out on the table.

"You call this a 'rough approximation'?" said George, turning to the former Slytherin beater in awe. The lists practically outlined troop movements for the next two weeks, even mentioning names of people and their assignments.
"Well, the Dark Lord is known for reversing his orders at the last minute, so this could change without warning," shrugged Lorcan.

"Even so! This is better than flying blind," Fred said.

"We have to take this to the Order now, before-" George nearly choked when he read one entry in the schedule. It was for today. "Lorcan, were you able to read your father's entries?"

"Uh, actually, no. He gave his list to me just before I left the house this morning-"

George jumped to his feet and ran to a small desk. When he came back he was holding two pieces of parchment. He then took Lorcan's pages and placed each on top of his blank parchments, the printed side facing down.

"What are you doing?" Lorcan asked.

"He's duplicating the pages," Fred said.

"Couldn't he just use the Gemino spell?"

"Gemino is too unpredictable and hard to control. The spell we developed works best for making copies of parchments and embeds them with concealing charms. Only the intended recipient can read the copies. In this instance, only the names he whispered to the parchments will be able to see its contents," explained Fred.

"That's brilliant," exclaimed Lorcan.

"Right. Now, let's go. We've only got a few minutes left," George said, handing over to Lorcan his lists while he pocketed the copies he made.

"A few minutes left? To do what?" asked Fred, slowly rising to his feet.

"To escape. Death Eaters will be coming here to 'invite' us for questioning. It's on your father's schedule, Lorcan," George said, summoning two duffle bags from his bedroom. He slung one onto his shoulder and threw the other to Fred.

"Shit!" was all Fred was able to say before George grasped his and Lorcan's hands and apparated them to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, Hogsmeade.

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Neville watched with satisfaction as Harry demolished another statue with a Reducto charm. The Chosen One may not have been trained in the traditional way, but his magic was more than sufficient to keep him at par with a sixth-year Hogwarts student. His improvement was quite impressive. The only important thing he needed to master now was how to apparate. Although Neville did not think Harry would have any problems with apparition (he did well with side-along), Dumbledore had advised against letting him do it by himself. It had become a source of frustration for Harry, but he did not make any fuss about it since he understood the possible dangers. However, since their next missions might demand quick mobility, Neville had asked Blaise to teach Harry how to fly a broomstick. And today should've been the Chosen One's first flying lesson.

If only the events of the other night hadn't transpired, Neville sighed, I wouldn't be in need of a flying instructor.
Professor McGonagall wanted to keep secret what Hannah, Susan, Blaise, and Ginny had discovered. At least for the time being (only he and Theo, being Pansy's close friend, were told). She, therefore, had no other choice but to allow Theo, Blaise, and Ginny, of course, to find the missing Pansy Parkinson. Pansy's boyfriend, Lucian, turned out to have been, not only imperiused but obliviated as well, preventing him from giving any valuable information regarding Pansy's whereabouts. All he could remember were having tea at Madame Puddifoot's and Pansy going to the toilet. According to Lucian, he followed Pansy to the ladies' room when she didn't come back after a few minutes. He couldn't recall anything after that. They would not have believed his tale if only he hadn't taken three vials of Veritaserum. Professor Slughorn's potion did its job to perfection that they were now all aware that Lucian Bole hadn't truly outgrown his childhood fear of ghosts, making him freeze in the presence of the Hogwarts specters, most especially The Bloody Baron.

"He's doing quite well, isn't he?" Daphne said, taking a seat beside Neville. They were in the small, heavily-warded garden that the Weasley twins had incorporated in the rehabilitation of the Shrieking Shack. Neville thought it safer for Harry to practice outside since there'd be less to repair in case Harry underestimated his abilities.

"Yes, he is. Thankfully," Neville chuckled.

"I know what you mean. He's our only hope…"

"Absolutely. Just don't say that to his face."

Daphne chuckled, "Yeah, it would surely ruin his day."

Neville glanced at Daphne with a knowing smile. The blonde Slytherin blushed and averted her gaze when she noticed.

So, something's going on between the two, Neville thought with a grin.

"Look! Ron and Lavender," said Daphne, diverting Neville's attention flawlessly.

Following her gaze, Neville saw that Luna, Dean, and Seamus were lagging behind the approaching couple. Luna skipped up to him and pecked his cheek just as Neville was slapping a hand to his forehead. Harry could still have his flying lessons, after all! How could he have been so stupid! Ron and Dean were both on the Quidditch team and known excellent flyers. He didn't need to wait for Blaise with these two around.

"Ron! Dean! I'm so glad you dropped by," Neville said, jumping to his feet.

"Well, Ginny told us to come see you. Something about flying lessons, I think," Ron replied, smirking.

"Yes! Oh, thank Merlin for your sister's quick thinking."

"Well, that's not something I'm always thankful for," Ron murmured under his breath. Lavender giggled and pinched his arm.

"Why do you need flying lessons?" Dean asked.

"Oh, not me. Him," Neville said, turning his eye towards Harry.

After learning about the Blood Oath that each Resistance member had undertaken, Dumbledore had given the go-ahead to let the others in on the existence of the Chosen One. Neville had already introduced Harry to the rest of the Resistance three days ago, yet Dean, Seamus, and Lavender still
gawked at Harry, like it was the first time they'd laid eyes on him.

"Y-you want m-me to teach The Chosen One how to f-fly?" stuttered Dean.

"Please, stop calling him that," Daphne sighed.

"Yeah, he doesn't like that name," Luna said, nodding.

"O-oh..okay. What...what should I call him?"

Daphne rolled her eyes at Dean. "By his real name, for crying out loud."

"Uh, y-yeah. R-right."

"Mate, if you're too dumbstruck by Harry, maybe I should teach him all by myself," Ron chuckled, playfully punching Dean's shoulder.

"No! No! I'm okay. I'm honored to teach him," cried Dean.

"It's settled then," Neville said as he waved at Harry who was just cleaning up the shattered statues with his wand.

Harry nodded and jogged towards them, smiling. "Hey! Why are you guys here? Are we having another meeting?"

"No, Harry. They're here for you," said Neville.

"For me? Why?"

"Well, since we can't risk letting you apparate on your own, I thought you should be introduced to another wonderful aspect of magic - flying," Neville said, waving his wand in the air. Immediately, a broom zoomed into his waiting hand.

Harry's eyes were as big as saucers as he stared at the broomstick that Neville was handing to him. "You can't be serious!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, I am very serious, Harry," Neville laughed.

"You mean there really are magical broomsticks?"

"Perhaps we should show Harry how it's done first," Ron said whilst waving his wand. A sleek, ebony-handled broomstick flew into his outstretched hand. Dean followed suit, another gleaming broomstick responding quickly to his summons.

"Good thing Fred and George forgot these here," Ron said with a smirk.

"They left them on purpose. George said they're for emergencies, just in case flying is the only resort for a quick escape," Neville said.

"At least that Weasley has a good head on his shoulders," Seamus chuckled.

"What's that supposed to mean, Finnigan?" Ron glared at Seamus.

"Nothing! Good Godric, you are a sensitive one, aren't you?"

Ron rolled his eyes at Seamus as he straddled his broomstick. "One of these days, Finnigan, you're
going to get what you're looking for," turning to Harry, Ron said, "Watch, okay?" After which he kicked off from the ground and hovered in the air, just above head level. Harry jumped back in surprise.

"Whoa! How did you do that?" Harry said.

Dean had started explaining the intricacies of flying when Ginny came running out of the shack, breathless and pale. She went straight to Neville and pulled him aside, out of hearing distance.

"You need to come with me back to Hogwarts!"

"W-why? What happened, Ginny?"

Ginny gave the others who were watching the impromptu flying lesson of the Chosen One a cursory glance and grabbed Neville's hand, practically dragging him back into the house.

"No time to explain. Just hurry, will you?"

"Shouldn't we bring the others with us?"

"No. Just you," Ginny said, never letting go of Neville's arm until they were going down the ladder that led to the secret passageway underneath the Whomping Willow's roots. Neville followed Ginny wordlessly, not bothering asking any questions that he knew would be left unanswered anyway.

When they reached Hogwarts, Ginny ran straight for the Gargoyle statue and whispered the password. Although Neville wondered why he was being summoned by the Headmaster, he wasn't really apprehensive. The situation drastically changed the moment he stepped off the moving staircase, his heart jumping to his throat when he saw who, aside from the Hogwarts Headmaster, Blaise, Theo, and Lupin, was also waiting for him at the Headmaster's sitting area.

"Gran? What are you doing here?"

His grandmother huffed, "I wouldn't be here if this twit didn't try to trick me into thinking that she's you!"

It was only then that he noticed the sleeping girl on the Headmaster's couch - Pansy Parkinson!

"H-how did you know that she wasn't me?"

Augusta Longbottom tossed her head, her own version of an eye-roll. "You're my grandson! I know you like the back of my own hand."

Neville would have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious. His grandmother could be a pain sometimes, but she loved him fiercely. She also knew that he would never leave Hogwarts without asking for her permission first.

"Theo and Blaise found a couple of vials in Pansy's footlocker. They were both labeled with your name," Ginny said. "We told Professor McGonagall about it and she sent us straight to the Headmaster."

"We were too late, unfortunately," said Blaise, glaring at Pansy's sleeping form, looking peaceful in spite of the commotion she had unknowingly caused.

"Thankfully, your grandmother found her snooping around the house before she could make her
“Move,” Lupin said. "Augusta sent an owl to Grimmauld Place immediately after she had subdued the fake Neville. There two vials of polyjuice potion in Pansy's pockets."

"Was she...was she there to..." Neville swallowed the bile in his throat. He could not even bear to think what he would do if he lost his gran.

"I don't think she was there to hurt anyone. She wasn't even carrying a wand," Lupin said. "Maybe she was just gathering information."

"Perhaps. But I believe she was there to get something from your grandmother, Neville. Something that could be used to impersonate her," Snape said.

"For the polyjuice in her pocket! Yes, that's it! But why would she impersonate my gran?"

"Well, your grandmother is a known supporter of Minister Dumbledore and the Order," Lupin was saying.

"To get to you," said Snape, cutting Lupin off. "Whoever Parkinson's doing this for knows about the Resistance."

"Resistance? What's this Resistance you're talking about, Severus?" snapped Augusta, her sharp eyes flashing to the Hogwarts Headmaster.

"Augusta, I think it's time that you learned about the Resistance," Snape said. "Because your grandson is the one who started it."

"What? Are you in trouble with the law? Explain yourself, Neville!"

Neville sighed and sat beside his grandmother. "Gran, if the current Ministry of Magic is what you're referring to as 'the law', then I guess...yes, I am...because I'm part of a group of Hogwarts students who are doing everything they can to help the Order put a stop to the DL, I mean, Voldemort from taking over the world."

A few seconds passed before tears started flowing down his grandmother's cheeks. She flung her arms around him and pulled him into a crushing hug. "I knew you'd make your parents proud!" she said in between sobs.

Neville's heart swelled at those words. Ever since he was a small child, he'd been hearing of his parents' heroic acts and he felt that he was a bit of a disappointment to his gran. He only pulled away from his grandmother's embrace when he noticed Pansy stirring awake.

"She's waking up," Theo said.

Wands were drawn and pointed at Pansy. When she had finally completely woken up, she sat up like a shot, glassy eyes staring at nothing.

"She's still under the Imperius curse!" said Theo.

"Why hasn't it worn off?" asked Blaise.

" Whoever had cast it on her obviously knew what they were doing," replied Lupin. "Or it was cast very recently so it hasn't run its course yet."

"Is there no way to break it?" asked Augusta. "We need answers!"

"Short of turning her into a mindless imbecile, I'm afraid there's really no guaranteed safe way to
lift the curse. Although," Lupin paused and glanced at Snape. "If it's just information we're after, Severus can do something about that."

The Hogwarts Headmaster clearly understood what Lupin was implying, and judging by the way he scowled at the latter, he wasn't too happy about it.

"Or we can wait for the curse to wear off. Lucian didn't react well to Veritaserum. We can't risk doing that to Pansy," Ginny said. She rolled her eyes at the incredulous look the others were giving her. "Look, there's no love lost between the two of us, but I don't want her to suffer like Lucian did. Pansy's a strong-willed person, she would've resisted the Imperius curse if she could. The fact that she didn't is proof that the one who put her under it has powerful magic. We don't know what would happen to her if we make her take Veritaserum."

Neville stifled a shudder when images of a screaming Lucian came to mind. Apparently, the curse included an adverse reaction to truth serums. Thankfully, Madame Pomfrey was able to assure them that there would be no lasting damage to Lucian's brain. And just to make sure that Lucian does not go around gathering 'personal items' around Hogwarts whilst the curse was still in force, Madame Pomfrey had put him on a prolonged dreamless sleep.

"Augusta's right. We need to find out what Pansy knows - who took her, why she was sent to Augusta, why she had Polyjuice in her pocket. There's too much at stake now. We can't afford to pass up this chance of getting more information about Voldemort's plans. We're running out of time," Lupin said with unmasked exasperation.

Neville caught the swift look exchanged between Lupin and the Headmaster. There's something they're not telling us, he thought.

"So what do we do now?" Blaise asked, peering down at the catatonic Pansy.

"I'll extract her memory," Snape said, moving closer to the girl.

"But what if she was also obliviated like Lucian?" asked Theo.

Snape smirked at the younger Slytherin and sat on the ottoman facing Pansy. "I have a feeling that Ms. Parkinson's cunning enough to protect her true memories. Unlike in Lucian's case, where he was put under the curse and obliviated in a hurry, I think Ms. Parkinson had enough time to make her own plans. We'll know everything she knows before the night is through."

"Severus-"

"I know, Remus. I'll see if she knows anything about that as well."

"Is there anything we can do to help, Headmaster?" Neville asked, no longer able to contain himself. He did not form the Resistance just to watch from the sidelines, after all. And they truly could not afford to let Snape buckle under the strain - it could cost him his life. And the rest of them, too.
Snape's eyes swiveled first to Lupin, then to Augusta. The gesture was not lost on Neville. The Headmaster was seeking his grandmother's permission despite the fact that he was, by all intents and purposes, the official founder of the Resistance, a group whose sole purpose was to help bring down the Dark Lord in the first place. Augusta gave an almost imperceptible nod, making Neville release the breath he wasn't even aware he was holding in.

"Actually, there is something you lot can do," Snape said.

All four Resistance members leaned forward, eager to take their places in the fight against the evilest wizard in history.

The cacophony inside Grimmauld Place would have raised the ire of the entire neighborhood if not for the powerful silencing and privacy charms enveloping it. Good thing, too, that Tonks had permanently nailed the black curtain covering his mother's portrait to its wooden frame. Otherwise, the old hag would've contributed her own annoying shriek to the babel. Sirius ran his fingers through his dark mane in frustration as he slumped back in his chair. Why couldn't his comrades discuss things in a calm and civilized manner? Why must there always be shouting matches between people who shared the same goal?

Of course, it could be because they were all tense and raring to go, impatient to strike back at the enemy that was slowly gaining ground on them.

But it could also be because there was fear.

Fear of losing more of their people.

Fear of losing their loved ones.

Fear of losing their own lives.

Voldemort's reign of terror was achieving its goal if that was the case. They couldn't let fear control them. They couldn't let their fear dictate their actions.

Because if they did, then Voldemort had already won.

"We're not ready, I'm telling you," Arthur was saying, his face as red as his hair.

"When are we going to be ready? When we're all dead?" snarled Moody.

"We'll all be dead if we go as planned!" screamed Molly. Arthur pulled his wife to him, cradling her to his chest.

She has much to be afraid of, Sirius thought. Practically her entire family is involved in this fight. She could lose everything and everyone she held dear. They couldn't do that to her.

"Molly, we won't let your children come if that's what you want. The plan doesn't involve a lot of people, anyway," Kingsley Shacklebolt said.

Molly turned to him with fire in her eyes. Sirius silently thanked Merlin that he didn't give voice to his own thoughts.

"Do you think it's only my family I'm thinking of? Do you really think I'm that shallow?" she spat. The color drained from Shacklebolt's face. "That's not what I mean. All I'm saying is that we
understand if you don't want your children involved-

"It's not just my children I'm worried about, Kingsley. It's a plan made in haste. Anyone of you could die! The girl could die!"

"She won't, Molly. We will all be there to protect her," Kingsley said.

"And if Voldemort is that eager to have his dirty claws on her, he would not let his Death Eaters harm a hair on her head," Moody growled.

"Which puts every one of you in danger! If Voldemort tells his Death Eaters to protect her at all cost, then you won't be able to grab her from Snape! They'll kill you all on sight!" Molly said, her voice breaking into sobs.

Moody threw his arms in the air and hobbled out of the room, grumbling about women and their hysterical rantings as he went along.

"Molly, you have to put some trust in us," Kingsley said. "We're not novices when it comes to combat magic. We all fought Death Eaters before and came out on top. If we plan this right, everything will be okay."

Molly was about to cut Kingsley off when Arthur wrapped his arms around her, whispering as he slowly led her to an empty chair. "We're not totally against the plan, Kingsley. We just feel that we're not as prepared as we should be to embark on such an operation. So many things could go wrong," he said, sitting beside his wife.

Sirius was never one to plan his every move, but he understood what the Weasleys were trying to point out. They only had three days left to fine tune Snape's daring plan. Still, in spite of his natural dislike for the man, Sirius saw the genius behind the operation his former nemesis was proposing. It would enable the Order to retain a valuable spy in Voldemort's army whilst preventing him from storming Hogwarts. Yes, it had a high level of risk, but don't brilliant plans always do?

"It's risky, but I think we can pull it off," he said at last.

"You're not going, Sirius," Kingsley said.

Sirius gave out a laugh that sounded more like a bark. "Who's going to stop me, eh? I don't care if Dumbledore forbids it. I'm tired of being cooped up in this...this...glamorized version of Azkaban. Yes, you've all kept me from being thrown in jail, and I'm forever grateful for that, but this isn't any better! Actually, this is worse! I'm being kept a prisoner in my own home. And treated like an invalid! Have you all forgotten that I've battled more Death Eaters than you three combined? Don't tell me what I can and cannot do! Because I'd rather die fighting than of old age in this gilded cage you've turned my house into!" He raised his hand when Kingsley made to speak. "My godson is training to fight. He'd only started using magic yet he's going out there to face witches and wizards who were trained in the Dark Arts since they had started wielding wands. I, too, had undergone the same, so I know what dangers he would be facing. Yet, you have no qualms about that, do you? You'd let a young man who for eighteen years didn't even know that magic was real, who didn't even know who Voldemort was...you'd let him fight-"

"That's not true," Kingsley cut in, shaking his head.

"Really? Then, why are you teaching him combat magic, huh? Why is he being taught defensive and offensive spells?"

"He's the Chosen One-"
Sirius slammed his palms on the table and growled back at Kingsley, "And that's enough reason to send him to his death? He's just a BOY!"

"We know that, Sirius. That's why he was kept from all this for so long! Albus wanted him to live a normal life," Arthur said.

"So what's he doing back here then?"

"It was his decision to come back-"

"An eighteen-year-old is allowed to decide for himself, but I am not?" Sirius sneered at Arthur, his patience wearing thin at the unfairness of his situation. "Am I still under suspicion? Is that it? Do you still need convincing that I did not betray Ja-," his voice broke at the reminder of his best friend. "Are you still wondering if I really killed those Muggles? Is that the reason why I'm still not allowed to participate in the Order's missions?"

His so-called comrades' deafening silence was even more painful to Sirius than had they hexed him senseless. It somehow confirmed the gnawing suspicion in his mind - they still didn't trust him. Not completely, anyway. At the back of their minds, they harbored that tiny seed of doubt. Afterall, only Albus was able to 'see' what really happened that day when he delved into Sirius' memories. Snape could've vouched for him, too, but he didn't trust the git to not overstep his boundaries.

"It's not that we don't trust you, Sirius," Kingsley said. Sirius snorted.

"You're reckless and headstrong. You're driven by your desire for revenge. You don't care who you put in danger, as long as you get your way," Moody said as he walked back into the room. "You're a lone wolf, Black, not a team player."

"Fuck you, Alastor! As if you're any better than me! You-"

"Sirius?"

The soft, familiar voice pulled Sirius from the dangerous path he was barreling down into with wayward speed. He sighed and slowly turned to the owner of the voice.

"Angela..." he stopped short when he saw the unmistakable terror in her eyes. In two, swift strides, he was standing in front of his long-lost cousin, coaxing her to sit on one of the chairs. "What's wrong?"

A deep sigh escaped Angela's pale lips. "Lilyana, she's the one I told you about, another one of your distant cousins, remember? The one who isn't a witch like me?" Sirius nodded. Angela continued, "She called me this morning. She said that Bruce had been acting strange these past few days. But last night, he didn't come home. That's not like him, she said. Bruce would always inform her of any off-base assignments-"

"He's the Navy officer, right?" Sirius asked.

"Correct! Well, when she called the base, she was told that Bruce wasn't there. In fact, he didn't come to work yesterday. Called in sick, his assistant said."

The others were listening in earnest, their faces grave as an unsettling thought came to mind. Sirius was about to reassure Angela that everything would be fine when his cousin gripped his hand and said in a trembling voice, "That's not all. After the meeting at Malfoy Manor, us parents agreed to keep in touch. We gave each other our numbers so we can get ahold of one another when needed. Two nights ago, Tracey, Chris' mum called me. She said that one of the guards that Minister
Malfoy assigned to them...I did tell you about that, right? That the Minister assigned us 'bodyguards'? At Sirius' nod, Angela plunged on. "She said that she found him waving his wand at her husband whilst his back was turned. After that, her husband started acting...strange...staring at nothing for long periods of time, not very responsive to her questions...little things that only a wife would notice."

"Where does her husband work?" Kingsley asked.

"He's a senior accountant at Barclay's. Another thing, Tracey said that she's having memory lapses - pockets of time that she couldn't account for."

Fuck! Sirius silently cursed. The parents are being Imperiused. He turned to others and based on their grim expressions, they were also thinking the same.

"What about you? Had your guards tried anything of the sort?"

Angela gave him a small smile. "Thanks to the wand that Fletcher helped me get, and the spells you taught me, they're the ones who are always Confunded. I also gave Harold a charmed pendant, same as the one I'm wearing," she pulled out a silver chain from inside her blouse where a simple Opal pendant was hanging. "I told Harold it's a couple necklace. Fletcher said that Opals have protective and shielding powers. He also asked the jeweller to embed a few spell-repelling charms on them. We're basically quite safe. I'm afraid I can't say the same for the others."

"We need to get the parents to safety," Arthur said.

"But what about the kids? They must be removed from Malfoy Manor, too!" Molly said, her brows knotted in concern.

"We can't act without knowing anything about the movement of Voldemort's troops. It's too dangerous. We don't even have the manpower for simultaneous operations," Kingsley said.

The discussion was interrupted by the loud thumping of running feet in the foyer which accompanied the boisterous Weasley twins' entrance.

"We got it! We got it!" Fred and George chorused as they entered the dining room. "Our secret weapon!" they laughed, hoisting what appeared to be a roll of parchment in the air.

"Fred! George! What are you two doing here?" Molly cried.

The two paused for effect then, as if presenting the royal crown to the Queen herself, they marched towards the table and reverently placed what Fred was holding on the table. Fred unrolled the parchment and separated what turned out to be two blank sheets.

"What's this about, boys? We don't have time for your party tricks," scolded Arthur. "We're discussing something important here."

The twins looked at each other, their faces breaking into mischievous grins.

"Could they be as important as these?" George said, tapping the sheets twice with his wand. The pages immediately filled with dark handwriting.

"What are those?" Kingsley asked, leaning toward the table.

"Remember the assignment Snape gave us? The bloke finally came through!"
George high-fived his twin and turned a solemn face toward his audience.

"Those, my dear Kingsley, are what will turn the tide of this war. And so, I present to you, without further ado, the detailed schedule of Voldemort's army for the next two weeks," George said, giving a flamboyant bow to emphasize his point.

"YES!" Moody bellowed, thumping his cane on the floor.

"Well, I'll be damned," breathed Kingsley.

"You mean, Snape's spy finally came to your shop? I thought that was just a figment of his imagination," said Sirius, muttering the last to himself.

"Where's the boy?" asked Molly. "You didn't just let him leave, did you?"

"Relax, mum. Snape told us to keep him safe. He's very well protected inside our shop in Hogsmeade," replied Fred.

"He came to Hogsmeade? But I thought he was going to your shop in Diagon Alley? What aren't you telling us, boys?" said Arthur, turning a gimlet eye on his twins.

The twins glanced at each other, both running fingers through their red locks.

"Uhm..we didn't want to alarm you, mum," replied George.

"But since you'd find out anyway...if you read the schedules..." Fred swallowed hard, then said in a rush, "We had to leave Diagon Alley before the Death Eaters could take us in for questioning."

"WHAT?" Molly's voice reverberated around the small enclosure, rattling the ancient chandelier hanging above the table. Arthur quickly wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and whispered soothingly in her ear. Molly seemed to calm down for a bit, but her eyes still held the horror she felt within.

"All's well and good, mum! We're safe now, aren't we?" cajoled Fred.

"You could've been taken! We wouldn't have known where to find you!"

"But we weren't, were we? The schedule came in time to warn us," said Fred.

Before Molly could say more, Arthur wrapped an arm around her and whispered in her ear. She didn't seem to fully agree to what her husband had said, but said nothing. "We're relieved that you got out in time," Arthur said. "It was a close call, though. Your mother and I must insist that you stay with us from now on. Or at least, until this...this war...is over."

"Dad!" the twins cried in unison.

"Don't tell us you'd also forbid us from helping out in the Order! We can take care of ourselves, you know. We're adults now!" Fred protested.

"We'll stay at the Shack. We can help with Harry's training," said George.

Apparently, Fred was right in his assumption. The next couple of minutes was spent in a loud argument between the older and younger Weasleys. Sirius tuned them out and focused his attention on the parchments the twins brought in. His amazement grew exponentially as he read through the entries.
"This really could turn the tide of this war," he breathed. As his eyes scanned the two parchments, he became more convinced that everything they'd been planning could benefit from these two pieces of parchment.

"Everything's here...people...time...dates...places," he muttered, not noticing that the Weasleys were done screaming at each other.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, grabbing the parchments and turning to the others. He walked up to the twins and said, "How accurate are the entries here?"

"Well, not a hundred percent. Lorcan did say that the DL sometimes changes his mind about the assignments," George replied. Fred nodded.

"When you left your shop in Diagon Alley, were Voldemort's people already there? Was that why you left in a hurry? Or was it because you read the schedule?"

The twins looked at each other, then Fred spoke. "We didn't stick around to find out if the schedule was right. But we can check if people came to the shop."

"How? You can't go back there!" Molly cried.

"Mum, we don't have to go back there to find out. Jordan's staying at his sister's shop right across the street. We can ask him to look around. Don't worry, he'll be safe. He's a reporter. He knows how to snoop around without anyone noticing."

"May we use your Floo, Sirius?" George asked.

"Yes, of course. Use the one in the sitting room. This one's disconnected."

The twins nodded and jogged out of the room.

"Why do you want to know if the schedule's accurate?" Kingsley asked.

"Because if it is, then we need to go to America. Bellatrix was able to track down the people who helped Harry escape. Voldemort will be sending reinforcements."

He'd waited for a voice of protest when he included himself (again) in the impending Order mission, but it never came. He had gone back to the parchments before him when two loud thumps made him raise his eyes to glance at its source.

"When?" Moody barked.

"Tonight," Sirius replied.

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"Will you please sit? You're wearing the carpet down," Hermione sighed.

Draco huffed, but acquiesced just the same, flopping beside her with a grunt.

"I don't understand how you can sit there calmly after everything Snape had told us. Aren't you a bit concerned about that harebrained plan of his?"

"It's not as 'harebrained' as you make it out to be-"

"It's totally mental!"
Hermione shook her head and wrapped her arms around Draco's waist, leaning her head on his chest. "You're scared, aren't you?"

"I'm not scared. I'm terrified! It could go a hundred ways wrong!"

"But it's the best way-"

"For him, maybe. But not for you...not for us," Draco said bitterly.

"Look," Hermione pushed away from him and looked him in the eye, "I will be well protected every step of the way. Snape will be there...the entire Order will be there-"

"But not me!"

"You know why you can't come with us," Hermione said as she returned to her previous position. "This is the best plan that we've come up with. It'll be okay."

"I still think that there's something else besides this..."

"I know, sweetie. But this is not just about me...or us. This is about the fight against him...against Voldemort. We beat him once, we can do it again."

"It's not the same, Hermione. Things are different now."

"I know," she said, her heart clenching. It truly was very different now. She had more to lose this time. The outcome of this war with Voldemort could also turn out very differently. But they could not let their fear overpower them, could they?

"Do you think James will find the time-turner?" she asked, deciding to redirect Draco's thoughts from their current topic.

"I don't know. I'm not sure he'd even look for it," Draco said, shaking his head.

They had left Malfoy Manor right after Draco had talked to James. He told her that he had asked James to look for the time-turner since they had to return to Hogwarts right away. Hermione still remembers the disappointed look on Narcissa's face when they said their hurried goodbyes to her. She had tried to reach into Draco's mind to ask him what had made him decide to leave, but he had blocked her completely. When they came back to the Room of Requirement, so she wasn't able to grill him about it, either due to his sullen disposition. The next few days after became extremely hectic, preventing them from discussing their visit at Malfoy Manor. This was the first time that they were left to their own devices.

"If we hadn't left, I could've helped you look for it-"

"How many times do I have to tell you that we couldn't stay. It wasn't safe-"

"Why wasn't it safe?" Hermione said, sitting up. "Why can't you just tell me what really happened? I'm not a child, Draco. I deserve to know what you're protecting me from."

Draco ran a hand through his hair and jumped to his feet, resuming his pacing.

"I know that! But sometimes...you can be so stubborn!"

"Really? That's rich coming from you," Hermione scoffed.

"Fine! We're cut from the same cloth! Happy?"
Hermione had to stifle a laugh as she looked up at the blushing face of her boyfriend. She knew how hard it was for Draco to admit to his own faults, but he's trying. Still, he needs to trust her to make the right decisions for herself. Or sometimes, even for the both of them.

"No. Not until you tell me what made you leave that night in such a hurry."

She could see the battle raging within Draco. Eventually, he threw up his hands and flopped back on the settee beside her.

"Alright, you win," Draco said. Taking a deep breath, he took her hand and kissed it. Then, he told her everything that he had heard - his father's scheming with Flint, their secret plans, including the reason why the Draco in this world was not speaking to his father. He hesitated when he came to the part where his father told Flint about his interest in 'Abigail'.

"Do you think he saw through my disguise?" Hermione asked.

Draco shook his head. "I don't think so. My father's not very good at Legilimency, so you're safe in that area. But he's devious enough to employ other methods in unraveling your secrets. I didn't want to risk it."

"You said your father's plans weren't progressing as he'd anticipated. Could that be why he was, as you say, scared shitless?"

"Hmm...maybe," Draco frowned, "Voldemort's not as easy to manipulate as my fa-, as Lucius, thought him to be. That's what caused his downfall before. He thought that as a Malfoy, with all his money and political clout, he would be able to influence Voldemort's decisions. By the time he realized his mistake, it was too late."

Hermione wrapped an arm around Draco's waist, leaning her head against his chest. She knew that Draco loved both of his parents, despite his constant declaration of hatred for his father. This couldn't be easy for him.

"I'm still worried about Meryll. I think she saw the other Hermione and Draco together. What if she tells your father about it?" She tried to talk to Meryll again, but the younger Ravenclaw had reverted to her shy persona. Hermione didn't know what to make of it. "She was also acting weird. One minute, she's friendly, the next she's mean and aggressive. She even told me that I'm not your type."

"What?" Draco laughed.

"She's referring to 'Abigail', of course."

"Then she's right. Abigail's not my type," Draco said, lifting her chin to plant a soft kiss on her forehead. "I'd never trade this forehead for hers...nor these eyes...nor this nose...nor these lips," Draco said as his mouth moved to those body parts he was enumerating, lingering on the last, his arms enclosing her in a tight embrace. "I'll never trade you for anyone else, Hermione. You're mine, forever and ever...and even beyond that if possible."

Had it not been Draco saying those things, she would've cringed and ran for the nearest hill. But she knew how difficult it was for him to open himself up to such vulnerability, so his declaration warmed her heart and quickened her pulse instead.

"I would never trade you, either. Not for anyone or anything else," she said, returning her boyfriend's fierce embrace. She wished they could stay like this forever, safe in each other's arms, not caring about what happened to the world around them.
Unfortunately, they both cared too much. Neither she nor Draco would be at peace if they knew that they'd sacrificed the safety of others for their own selfish desires. She snuggled closer to her boyfriend, her senses slowly giving in to the soft tendrils of sleep, when Draco sat up straight and extricated himself from her hold.

"Shit! I can't believe I forgot about it!" he was saying as he rummaged inside his messenger bag. After finding what he was looking for, he went back to the settee and pulled the small coffee table before it towards them.

"I'm not sure if I already told you about this," he said, his hands spreading a crumpled piece of parchment on the table. "I found it at the bottom of my father's drawer. At first, I thought that it was junk, but then he was a stickler for neatness. He would never keep a used, crumpled piece of paper in his locked drawer. So I thought that-"

"This was important," Hermione said, finishing Draco's sentence.

"Yes, but I can't figure out how. As you can see, it's blank. I've tried using the Revelio charm - in all of its variations - but to no avail."

Hermione ran her fingers down the parchment, feeling a faint static of magic connecting with the pads of her fingers. She could tell that it held secrets meant for only a select few.

"Ostendere secreta auferat velamen veritatem" (Remove the veil, reveal your secrets, and show the truth), she chanted, her fingers tracing invisible circles on the parchment. She felt a slight shift in the magic protecting it, making her heart beat faster.

"What was that?" asked Draco, his eyes showing confusion and a smidgen of worry.

Of course he didn't know about that spell. It wasn't, nor would ever be, taught in Hogwarts. She debated between telling her boyfriend the truth or a small, white lie. Draco could be overprotective sometimes, and he would not like her dabbling in something that bordered in the Dark Arts. However, if she was right in her assumption, and if they really needed to uncover the secrets of this piece of parchment, she wouldn't be able to hide it from him anyway. In the end, she settled for the truth.

"It's something I picked up while researching for the Resistance's Oath," she said, purposely avoiding Draco's eyes.

"The Blood Oath?"

"Yes. I had to do a lot of research for that...this is just something I came across."

He remained silent for several heartbeats, as if weighing her words. Hermione could almost feel the gears in his head turning, his deep breathing betraying the direction they're going. "Are you sure it's safe to use?" he eventually asked.

"It's a minor spell, used only for objects. But-"

"Involves a blood sacrifice," Draco finished for her.

She couldn't help but chuckle at the seriousness in his tone. "Yes, it requires blood, but just a tiny bit. We don't have to slaughter anyone and soak the paper in their blood."

"Good. Because I'm not very fond of large amounts of blood," he muttered.
“Would wonders never cease? Who would have thought that the great Draco Malfoy, former Death Eater, is squeamish of a little blood?” Hermione giggled.

Draco rolled his eyes at her and slumped back in the settee, "I said large amounts of blood, Granger, not a little blood. Were you even listening?"

This time, Hermione was no longer able to contain the laughter bubbling inside her. "Okay! Okay! I apologize!" she said, pecking Draco's cheek. Her boyfriend continued to grumble as she rained kisses on his face. He grunted in mock dismay and pulled Hermione to him for a deep and passionate kiss. When she pulled back to catch her breath, she saw the longing in his eyes. Her insides fluttered in response, but she knew that if she gave in to their desires, they wouldn't be able to stop. And they just couldn't afford to be distracted now.

Resting her forehead against Draco's, she rubbed her nose against his and smiled.

"Later, sweetie. I promise," she breathed.

Draco sighed, but gave her a lopsided smile, "I'll hold you to that."

Hermione laughed and pulled her boyfriend back to the table.

"The spell can only be completed with a drop of blood," she said, pointing her wand at her forefinger. A tiny cut appeared on it, bright red blood rising to the surface. She pressed her bloodied digit on the parchment and watched as it was absorbed by the pulp. Her shoulders slumped when nothing happened. Then, a thought struck her.

Of course! Why didn't I think of that?

Turning to Draco, she saw that he had cut his own finger.

"I found this in my father's possession. If he's the one who put the spell on it, then I think my blood would be the acceptable substitute for his. We share the same, after all," Draco said, pressing his forefinger on the spot where Hermione had pressed hers.

He had barely lifted his finger from it when words written in a neat, slanting cursive, started appearing on the surface of the once blank parchment.

"Is that your father's handwriting?"

Draco shook his head, his eyes scanning the paper.

"No...I don't recognize it at all. Look! At the bottom of the page…"

Hermione turned her eyes to where Draco was pointing. She gasped when she recognized the initials - RAB.

"I think...this is from a diary…” Draco said.

"I know. It's a page from the diary of Regulus Arcturus Black. Sirius' brother."

"My mother's cousin?” Hermione nodded.

The hairs on her nape stood on end as they read the contents of the page:

March 3, 1979
I've finally learned why Voldemort needed to borrow Kreacher. If not for elf-magic, Kreacher
would have died there. He had no intention of returning my house elf to me. What an evil git! I can't believe what Kreacher told me! But I'm sure that he's telling the truth. He cannot go against my order. I must find out the significance of that locket!

March 8, 1979
Horcrux! The locket is V's horcrux! This is worse than I thought. He wants to be immortal! He's the personification of evil! I wonder if it's the only one he made...

April 7, 1979
I overheard B talking to V this morning about a cup. She said that it's safe. What's so important about that cup? Could it be another horcrux? I must dig deeper...

May 20, 1979
He's getting suspicious of me, I know it. I should stop poking around. But I must know how many horcruxes he's made so far! It's important that I find out more about his horcruxes. This could be the only way to destroy him!

May 23, 1979
What I've learned so far (objects of significance to V - horcruxes?):
Locket, cup, diary, ring, diadem (overheard an interesting conversation about it between V and B (another horcrux?)
Could there be more?

Hermione turned the parchment, there was only one entry left.

May 25, 1979
This is it! Kreacher and I are going to get the locket! We'll go there tomorrow and I'll replace it with the one that I made. I'll order Kreacher to destroy the real one for me, if I don't make it out. Kreacher escaped only because his elf-magic was more powerful than that place. I don't think that will also apply to me.
But, then, what about the others? I should tell Sirius about them! No. I mustn't. It will put his life in danger. I must tell Kreacher to keep what we're going to do a secret to ensure the safety of the family. It's better this way - that I do this myself. If I don't come back, at least there's one less horcrux. I hope someone finds the others and destroys them all! I was wrong in believing that Voldemort will make the world a better place. I should've listened to Sirius! He's the brave one! But there's nothing I can do about that now, is there? If Kreacher and I find a way to leave that place together, I will defect to the other side and help them bring Voldemort down! If not, then, I just hope that my death will be enough to make up for that mistake.

"Horcruxes? I've heard of them, but I never thought that it was possible to make them," Draco said, shaking his head.

"It can be done...using Dark Magic," Hermione said before proceeding to explain the intricacies involved in creating horcruxes. Draco shuddered at the end of her tale.

"Voldemort had seven...but Regulus thinks that there's only five - the locket, the diary, the ring, the cup and the diadem. Could it be that Regulus just didn't know about the other two?" Hermione said, more to herself than to Draco.

"He had seven? Fuck!", Draco said in horror. "Wait, Regulus did say that he couldn't let him create more. Perhaps he was able to stop Voldemort at number five."

It was only then that Hermione realized that Draco knew nothing about Voldemort's horcruxes. Yes, she'd mentioned to him that she, together with Harry and Ron, had been on a mission during
their seventh year, but she didn't elaborate on that. Harry didn't really want to make it public knowledge after the war, therefore, everything about it was kept amongst the three of them - the Golden Trio. Even Ginny didn't know much about the horcruxes. All she knew was that Voldemort created them in an attempt to become immortal.

"I don't think so. Regulus died when he took the locket from the island. Kreacher, the Blacks' house elf, took the real horcrux and it stayed in his possession until it was stolen by Mundungus and then later confiscated by Umbridge. We had to break into the Ministry to 'retrieve' it from her," she explained. "It was destroyed using the sword of Gryffindor."

"So...in our world, what were the other two horcruxes?"

"Nagini…and…"

"And what?"

"Harry."

Draco's jaw practically dropped in shock. He quickly recovered from it, though. "How's that possible?"

"When Voldemort tried to kill Harry, the spell rebounded and a tiny bit of Voldemort's soul latched onto Harry, accidentally creating another horcrux. That's why his scar always hurt when Voldemort was angry. They shared a sort of connection because of that. Harry used to tell us that he could catch glimpses of Voldemort's thoughts or what he's doing."

"But how was it...that tiny piece of Voldemort's soul...destroyed?"

"Remember that incident in the Forbidden Forest, where your mother helped Harry?" Draco nodded. "Voldemort cast the killing curse on Harry again, but it didn't kill him. Voldemort inadvertently destroyed his own horcrux."

Draco absorbed that last piece of information in quiet reflection, then his eyes twinkled as if with hidden knowledge. "I now understand what my father and Flint are doing. They're looking for Voldemort's horcruxes! I don't know how he came about this page from Regulus' diary, it could be from this world or from the other, but he's using it, I have no doubt about it."

"Are you saying that Lucius is on our side?"

That seemed to give Draco pause, a bit of hope flaring in his silver-gray eyes. Then, just as quickly, it disappeared, to be replaced by a hard glint.

Hermione somehow knew what he was going to say before he even opened his lips.

"No, Lucius isn't that noble. He's going to destroy Voldemort and take his place."
Recap

Chapter Summary

A quick recap of Chapter 1- 33

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I know, I'm the most terrible person on earth. It's been what - almost a year since my last update? I'm really sorry about that. Life just, well, became too overwhelming. Not sure if anyone's still reading this or looking forward to reading more chapters, but as I said, I have no intention of abandoning this story, so we're plodding on. For those loyal few out there, this is for you, just so you don't have to re-read everything from the start to get a grip on what will be happening in future chapters.
Thank you for staying with me. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1- Chapter 33 RECAP

Ch. 1 A Brand New Day
Six months after the Second Wizarding War, the Golden Trio return to Hogwarts to continue their studies. Hermione feels the difference between now and when she first came here. She plans to bury her broken heart in schoolwork after her brief relationship with Ron did not end well. In Prof. Slughorn's Advance Potions Class, the Slytherins are partnered with the Gryffindors for a year-long project. As fate would have it, Hermione Granger gets partnered with Draco Malfoy.

Ch. 2 Some Things Never Change
Hermione wonders how she's going to work with her counterpart Head Prefect, Draco Malfoy. During lunch in the Great Hall, Draco tries to lighten Hermione's mood when he finds her pining after Ron, discovering in the process that she calls him 'Draco' instead of 'Malfoy' in her mind. Hermione, irritated at her Potions partner, stomps out of the Great Hall in anger leaving Draco to conclude that some things don't really change.

Ch. 3 The Golden Trio
Hermione and Ron have a long overdue talk about their failed relationship. After Ron apologizes, Hermione realizes that her feelings for him weren't that deep, either. She forgives him and they renew their friendship. When Harry comments on what happened between her and Malfoy in the Great Hall, Hermione silently curses Draco for forcing her to explain herself to her two best friends about things she can't understand.

Ch. 4 Harry's Secret
Harry finally tells his two friends how he owed his life to the Malfoys. He reveals that after Voldemort threw the killing curse at him in the Forbidden Forest, Narcissa lied to the Dark Lord by saying that Harry was already dead. When he was carried back to Hogwarts by Hagrid, Harry
was wandless. It was only after Draco tossed his own wand to Harry that he was able to defend himself and defeat Voldemort.

Ch. 5 The Truce
- As Draco tries to deal with his hidden feelings for Hermione, Blaise Zabini teases him about the incident in the Great Hall. Suspecting that Draco was in denial, Blaise implies that he should prepare to welcome her into the fold since Theo himself was planning on asking the Muggle-born witch out.
- Hermione is plagued with guilt after hearing Harry's story. To make up for her awful treatment of Draco, she proposes a truce between them which Draco readily accepts.

Ch. 6 Amortentia
The returning students brew Amortentia in Prof. Slughorn's Advanced Potions class. Hermione's potion smelled different to her than the one she brewed during sixth year while Draco's smelled the same. Prof. Slughorn concludes that it's because what attracted Hermione before has changed. Draco, on the other hand, appears to be still attracted to the same things that attracted him in sixth year.

Ch. 7 Saving Narcissa
Two months later, news reaches Draco that her mother had been arrested for alleged war crimes. Harry volunteers to testify on behalf of Mrs. Malfoy. When Draco becomes suspicious, Harry takes him to Prof. McGonagall where he divulges what Mrs. Malfoy had done for him in the Forbidden Forest.

Ch. 8 The Room of Requirement
Days before Narcissa Malfoy's trial, Draco distances himself from Hermione and Harry. When he practically disappears, Hermione searches for him. She finds him in the Room of Requirement that he has transformed into his room in the Manor. She confronts him about the sudden change in his attitude, but instead of explaining himself Draco lets go of his feelings and kisses Hermione. He says that he is afraid Hermione will never see him as anything more than a former Death Eater and will not want to have anything to do with him. Hermione tells him that she understands why he had to do the things he did during the war and admits that she also feels something for Draco. Remembering that Harry is waiting for them, Hermione and Draco start to leave the room when an unknown force throws them back rendering them unconscious.

Ch. 9 Topsy Turvy
After Hermione and Draco regain consciousness in the Room of Requirement they cautiously walk out of it to find Harry. They run into Theo Nott, who seems surprised to see them together. After being told that all the students are gathered in the Great Hall, the two follow Theo. Things turn weird after that because aside from seeing Snape alive and well, they find out that new Minister for Magic is Draco's father, Lucius Malfoy.

Ch. 10 The Muggle-born Registration Act
Lucius announces The Muggle-born Registration Act which requires all Muggle-borns to register at the Ministry in London. To show the Ministry's support for the Hogwarts Muggle-borns, Lucius says, the Hogwarts Express will be sent to Hogsmeade on Sunday morning to take them all to London. When he reveals the new Marriage Laws, the students turn violent. Hermione and Draco slip out of the Great Hall during the commotion and returns to the Room of Requirement to discuss what they had seen. They quickly realize that something is not right. Draco suggests that they in order to return to their Houses and talk to their dorm mates to find out more.

Ch. 11 Of Myths and Altered Truths
Hermione goes to the Gryffindor dorms and finds that Lavender
Brown is not only alive but a close friend of hers. Ron, on the other hand, barely acknowledges her. When she asks about Harry, Ron and Neville think that she's joking. As they await the other Muggle-borns that have not been rounded up together with the ones in the dungeons, Hermione learns about the Resistance and their plans to help the Order of the Phoenix spread rumors that Harry Potter is not just a myth. She also learns that Neville and Ron have been recruiting for the Resistance during their summer break. The missing Muggle-borns return to the Common Room and inform them of Headmaster Snape's instructions - to watch over the younger students and be prepared for anything. After the meeting is adjourned, Neville volunteers to walk Hermione to her dorm. That's when she learns that she's in Ravenclaw, not Gryffindor.

Ch.12 Trouble in the Snake Pit
In the Slytherin dungeons, Draco is confronted by Theo Nott about his fraternizing with Hermione, the most famous Muggle-born in Hogwarts. Theo warns him that there are spies in Hogwarts and with the new laws, he must be careful, especially since his father is now the Minister for Magic. He also tells Draco about the 'movement' and how they must make a choice before war breaks out in the near future.

Ch. 13 The Lull Before the Storm
Hermione and Draco meet back in the Room of Requirement where they exchange information on what they have learned so far. Hermione tells Draco about the time-turner she used during third year to get to her classes and how that might be how their timeline was altered. Draco agrees but adds that Dark Magic is also possibly involved. Since neither feels comfortable staying in their respective dorms, the two agree to stay the night in the Room of Requirement instead.

Ch.14 There's Something You Should Know
Draco goes over his convoluted history with Hermione in his mind and how he's always been fascinated with her despite trying to convince himself that he hated her. He remembers how he tried to warn her about the Basilisk and from Death Eaters on the night of the World Cup, how he thought of rescuing her from his aunt, and how he came back to Hogwarts before the final battle to look for her. After reviewing everything he's done concerning Hermione through their years together in Hogwarts, Draco finally admits to himself that he has indeed fallen for the Muggle-born witch.

Ch.15 An Unlikely Alliance
Hermione and Neville conduct the first meeting of the Resistance. Hermione gets a blast from the past upon finding the same faces looking up at her - members of Dumbledore's Army. A few new additions include three Gryffindors (non-canon characters) - James Toffler, Angus McDermot, and Heather Piccard, and three Slytherins (canon) - Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, and Sebastian Daley. Things turn volatile when Cho Chang's cousin, Jasmine (non-canon), brings Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini to the meeting. After things settle down, Daphne and Theo say a few words, revealing the difficulties they've also been experiencing. When Ernie McMillan raises his concern regarding the possibility of a member turning traitor, Hermione wonders who is really willing to put everything on the line.

Ch.16 Granger Danger
Draco learns from Theo that the Muggle-borns' magical abilities will be tested during the Registration, making him conclude that Hermione must not go to register. He decides to stop her from going to London, only to find out that she has already left for Hogsmeade.

Ch.17 Crossing the Line
- Hermione supervises the boarding of the trains and talks to her fellow Resistance members to remind them to stay alert. She also teaches them how to conceal their necklaces with a spell that
Draco hides in one of the carriages going to Hogsmeade and looks for Hermione in the station. Upon finding her, Draco implores Hermione not to go because she will be in grave danger. Hermione insists that there's nothing to worry about forcing Draco to take drastic action.

**Ch.18 Fallout**

The Muggle-borns reach the station in London, but when they disembark from the trains, Hermione is nowhere to be found. While awaiting further instructions, they get to discuss the possibility that the required Registration is just a front for something more sinister. This makes James Toffler worried for the witch he's admired from a distance and hopes that her disappearance is not related to the Registration.

Hermione wakes up in what she thinks is the Room of Requirement. When she catches a glimpse of Narcissa Malfoy in the gardens, she realizes that she's in Draco's real room in the Manor. Draco confesses to stupefying her because she wasn't listening to his warnings and he was afraid for her. She forgives him but makes him promise to never turn his wand against her again.

James tells Professors Sinistra, Flitwick, and Sprout that Hermione is missing. They promise to look into it when they return to Hogwarts.

Hermione and Draco leave the Manor and apparate near Honeyduke's where Hermione shows Draco the secret passage in the cellar that leads to Hogwarts. They reach the Room of Requirement without a hitch until they hear Snape's voice behind them.

**Ch.19 Revelations**

Snape confronts Hermione and Draco in his office. He tells Hermione that she owes her life to Draco since he saved her from the Ministry Registration, which is just a front for rooting out highly-skilled Muggle-borns. He also tells them that he knows they're not from this timeline and asks them where they were when the time-turner took effect. Later, he shows them the memory vials of Albus Dumbledore he found in a secured location.

The Muggle-borns arrive at Malfoy Manor where Lucius snidely welcomes them and gives them their food ration. They are then taken to their new quarters - the dungeons of Malfoy Manor. A house elf comes to collect their wands, but James' is duplicated by the elf and given to him in secret.

**Ch.20 Conspiracies and Convoluted Plans**

Blaise Zabini, wanting to escape the annoying ass kissing in the Slytherin dungeons, strolls to the Quidditch pitch where he finds Ginny Weasley alone and practicing complicated moves. When she falls from her broomstick Blaise runs to her and upon seeing that she is unresponsive carries her to the Infirmary. A misunderstanding ensues between the two when Ginny finds him leaning over her as if about to kiss her, but Blaise smoothly explains himself away. Madame Pomfrey returns, irritated that Blaise did not call her when Ginny awoke and sends him back to the Slytherin dorms. However, to show her gratitude for bringing Ginny to the Infirmary, the old Medi-witch tells Blaise that he can visit her the next day. Taking a last glance at the redhead before leaving, Ginny rewards him with a small smile, something Blaise had always wanted to see directed at him. He returns to the Slytherin dungeons to find Theo Nott getting worked up over Draco's apparent disappearance.

Draco, who is in truth spending time with Hermione in the Room of Requirement, helps her practice Occlumency and gets a glimpse of the unusual, natural power of her mind.

Snape talks to Emmet Fawley (non-canon) and is assured that Emmet's house-elf, Twinkle, is helping and watching over the Hogwarts Muggle-borns in Malfoy Manor. He later asks Emmet to make travel arrangements for two people he will be sending to a New York orphanage.

James and the other Muggle-borns find themselves treated to a sumptuous breakfast by the elf that smuggled him a wand. They surmise that she belongs to Emmet, the young Ministry official who accompanied them to the Manor. They give him the code name, "Elf Master".
- Theo sees Draco roaming the hallways of Hogwarts with a petite and pretty blonde in his arms and concludes that Draco’s a real player. Surprisingly, this annoys him.

**Ch. 21 Body of Lies**
- The Hogwarts Muggle-borns are taken to the Ministry to register. Hermione is still not there. James sends a message to the Resistance in Hogwarts - WHERE’S HERMIONE?
- The Resistance members receive James’ message and are thrown into panic. Neville decides to call a meeting to discuss what they can do to help find the girl he considers his sister and best friend.
- The blonde girl Theo saw earlier with Draco is introduced to the Hogwarts students by the Headmaster as Abigail Adams, a transferee from Ilvermorny. Theo expresses his dislike for the girl who Snape says has been sorted into Slytherin House. He and Draco exchange words where the latter warns Theo not to judge Abigail too quickly because he might get the surprise of his life.
- Snape tells Hermione and Draco that he’s sending them on a delicate mission for the Order in America. They are to escort The Chosen One back to England.

**Ch. 22 The Chosen One**
- James Toffler recalls his 'evaluation' and wonders why the Ministry is unusually interested in his background. He later learns about the long-kept secret by the Order when Twinkle, the house elf that had been bringing them food, returns after three days' absence.
- Ginny confronts Blaise about an article in the Prophet implying that they are a couple. Blaise denies any knowledge of it and Ginny feels his sincerity. When Ginny hears Ron coming for Blaise, she runs away from him, dragging Blaise with her. This is when they accidentally discover a hidden tunnel in Hogwarts that leads to the infamous Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade.
- Draco loses his cool when Snape tells him that because the Fawley fireplace is now being monitored by the Ministry, the only way for them to travel to America is by plane - a Muggle contraption that he loathes.
- Henry James, an eighteen-year-old boy living under the supervision of Mr. and Mrs. Figg in an orphanage in America, inadvertently overhears a conversation the couple are having with a talking head in the fireplace and discovers that his real name is Harry Potter.

**Ch. 23 Wheels in Motion**
- The Figgs try to explain everything about his identity to Henry/Harry. When Mr. Figg tells Harry that he must return to England to fulfill a prophecy, he runs away.
- Lucius becomes suspicious when he doesn't find any report about the evaluation of Hermione Granger. When he is told that Snape had sent a letter explaining the girl's absence, Lucius decides to investigate the matter himself.
- The Weasley twins refurbish the Shrieking Shack while the other Resistance members practice their skills in dueling.
- Hermione and Draco arrive in the New York orphanage only to discover the Henry/Harry is missing.

**Ch. 24 Exposed**
- The Muggle-borns in Malfoy Manor get into an altercation with their guards and only the timely arrival of Mrs. Crowe and Emmet saves them from harm.
- Theo takes his father to the Infirmary to investigate Snape's alibi on the non-appearance at the Registration by his top student, Hermione Granger. Nott, Sr. seems satisfied by what he sees, but Theo wonders where the true Hermione is since the one claiming to be her is obviously not.
- When Draco and Hermione decide to return to England without Harry, the Figgs tell them that the enchantments protecting the Orphanage are tied to Henry and might be coming down soon. Draco acts quickly and contacts Snape to get the address of the Fawleys in New York. Unfortunately, the Orphanage is broken into before they could leave. Mr. Figg decides to stay in an attempt to stall
the invaders. Upon learning that her husband is staying, Mrs. Figg implores Draco to leave without them and take care of the children. Draco hesitantly complies and flees the night with Hermione and the children.

- Henry, after meeting a young witch and her Squib mother, is reminded of his responsibilities, not only to the Figgs but also to the whole Wizarding world, decides to go home. He finds the Figgs being tortured by masked men. When they are killed before his eyes, Henry's Magic explodes, scorching everything around him.

Ch. 25 The Winds of War
- The only two survivors of the tragedy in the New York Orphanage arrive at Malfoy Manor badly burned, almost beyond recognition. When questioned about what happened and who did this to them, Yaxley says that it was Harry Potter, The Chosen One.
- Theo tells Neville, Luna, Blaise, and Ginny about his thoughts on the fake Granger in the Infirmary. They come to the conclusion that the real Hermione is still in Hogwarts, disguised as someone else - the new girl from Ilvermorny.
- Mundungus reports to the Order that he overheard two Death Eaters recruiting for Tom Riddle's forces and preparing for war. Fred and George arrive in the middle of the night to share what they heard - Voldemort is blaming the Order for starting the war. Snape arrives to inform the Order that Harry Potter is coming back to England, earning him a hard punch from Sirius, who until now thought his godson had died the night Riddle killed his friends, James and Lily.
- Draco and Hermione meet their host, Gordon Fawley. He shows them a Death Eater mask and Draco quickly identifies it to be Yaxley's. As they discuss the implications of the attack on St. Milburga's, Henry arrives and declares that he is now Harry Potter.

Ch. 26 Building Bridges
- A step-back to when Harry wakes up in the Prescott residence and is reunited with his mentor, Albus Dumbledore.
- The Hogwarts Muggle-borns in Malfoy Manor are visited by their parents. Lucius subtly interrogates the parents while Narcissa plays the perfect hostess. Although most his other classmates are thrilled by this, James sees it for what it truly is - Lucius is telling them that their parents are also hostages. He concludes that the only way to free them all is for Voldemort to die.
- Snape reveals everything about the orphanage and Harry Potter to the Order. Emmet arrives to inform them of the need to connect a fireplace to the one in their townhouse in New York in order to bring Harry to England. They decide to use the one in the Shrieking Shack since it is not under surveillance by the Ministry.
- Draco and Hermione spend some time with the Harry from this timeline and they see the similarities and differences between the two. Harry shrewdly negotiates his terms regarding the children from the orphanage with Dumbledore, which earns Draco's respect. Gordon receives instructions on how to connect his fireplace with the one in the Shrieking Shack.

Ch. 27 Coming Home
- Harry gets his first real wand from Ishmael Guggenheim's Central Curios.
- The Muggle-borns in Malfoy Manor play Truth or Dare to kill time where a few secrets are revealed.
- Draco and Hermione engage in some amorous activities (lemons!) in the shower. Hermione accidentally reveals her true identity to Harry when she forgets to return to her Abigail Adams disguise.
- Lupin reminisces about his time in the Shrieking Shack after helping the Weasley twins do the spellwork needed to connect the fireplace here to the one in New York and gets to meet some of the members of the Resistance. Harry Potter arrives in the Shrieking Shack, shocking Lupin by how he looks so much like his father, James.
Ch. 28 Aggravations
- While talking to Neville, Harry gets the impression that the leader of the Resistance knows who Abigail Adams truly is. He also learns that the reason why the Weasley twins are not so fond of Draco is that he is Lucius' son, the Minister of Magic who is also Voldemort's right-hand man. After Harry leaves for Hogwarts with Dumbledore and Gordon to meet with the Headmaster, Draco and Hermione talk to Neville, Theo, Blaise, Ginny, and Luna and are told that they already know about 'Abigail's secret and how they discovered the truth. Hermione explains the charms embedded in their crystal pendants when Neville asks her why they could not take them off. Draco's fears for Hermione's safety resurface when Theo tells them about the real reason for the Muggle-born Registration.
- Harry meets the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Prof. Snape and Gordon's son, Emmet. They talk about Harry's upcoming introduction to the other members of the Order and where he would be staying. Snape confirms that Hogwarts is not safe from Voldemort's spies, so Emmet suggests the Shrieking Shack as the best choice since it is protected by an unplottable spell.
- Angela Toffler, James' mother, meets with her contact in the wizarding world, Mundungus Fletcher and reveals to him that she's a witch and not a Muggle. She wants to help her son and begs Mundungus to take her to the Order. Mundungus agrees and she meets the Order members, including a man who looks like his great, great grandfather's twin.
- Lorcan Wilkes and Rowan Travers (both non-canon) go to the Greene residence to Imperius Merryl's parents into doing the Dark Lord's bidding, but things get out of hand when Rowan Stupefies the couple. Rowan, who accidentally kills Mrs. Greene, is shot and killed by Mr. Greene after seeing what happened to his wife. Lorcan, who also gets shot, barely escapes, taking his fallen partner with him in apparating to his own house.

Ch. 29 Mind Games
- Angus gets into an argument with his cousin, James, when the latter appears to think that they should feel privileged for being chosen to take part in Lord Voldemort's plans. The fight only ends when they are called to a meeting with the Minister. Lucius informs them of Mrs. Greene's death, blaming it on a botched break-in by unknown Muggles. He also tells them that only the intervention of the Dark Lord's soldiers saved Merryl's father and two brothers. He asks if they will agree to put their families under Lord Voldemort's protection and James quickly agrees. When the Muggle-borns return to their quarters, another fight ensues, this time between James and Chris, who calls the former a traitor. James retaliates by saying that Chris should learn to read between the lines because when he agreed to put his family under the Dark Lord's protection he also left a veiled threat - that he will kill anyone who harms them. He also tells Angus that the reason why he said those things earlier when they were alone in their room was to see if anyone was spying on them. When everything is settled, Angus shows the others, with the exception of Merryl who went home to see her father and brothers, his crystal pendant and about the secret society in Hogwarts called the Resistance.
- Snape witnesses Voldemort torturing his new plaything, a young, blonde, and blue-eyed Muggle girl, and curses himself for giving the same disguise to Ms. Granger. He Although he thinks it would serve Voldemort right if he is killed by his own 'toy', should he get his hands on Granger, Snape quickly dismisses the idea. Killing Tom Riddle is someone else's job, not Ms. Granger's. Lucius arrives to inform the Dark Lord about the failed mission on the Greenes, which sends their leader into a frightful rage. After torturing Lucius for bringing him the bad news and failing to properly read the younger boy's mind, Voldemort orders Snape to retrieve the memories of the Lorcan Wilkes. Lucius immediately takes Snape to Lorcan and leaves him there to do the job he failed to do. Snape discovers why Lucius was unable to find read the boy's mind. It turns out that Lorcan's been trying to alter his memories to hide a secret - he and his mother are planning to defect.
- Draco is tortured by what he saw in Harry's memories while teaching him Occlumency - fantasies involving Abigail Adams. In an attempt to banish his awful feelings, Draco focuses instead on
researching about the Time-turner. He is also getting curious about who might be desperate enough to use it. His thoughts are interrupted at the arrival of Hermione. His insecurities resurface when Hermione kisses him and is again reminded of Harry's own fantasies about the blonde girl. They argue heatedly up to the point where Hermione starts to walk out. But when Draco finally lets go of his feelings, Hermione tells him that Harry wants Abigail, not the real her. She assures him that he's got nothing to fear because she's already his. They end up making love for the first time. (Lemons!). Much later, Hermione asks him if he found out anything about the time-turner. Draco admits that there's only one person he can think of who is beyond desperate and has the means to use a time-turner - Lucius Malfoy, his father.

Ch. 30 Infiltration
- Snape informs Dumbledore, Lupin, and Emmet about Lorcan Wilkes and how he inserted some 'suggestions' in the boy's memories to gather information. They make plans on how to extract Lorcan, his parents, including his girlfriend, and bring them to safety. Dumbledore, feeling that Snape wants to tell him something in private, stays behind after Emmet and Lupin leave. Snape then shows the former Minister for Magic the memory vials of the other Dumbledore.
- Ron, observing that his sister, Ginny, is strangely always talking to Luna, and Greengrass during breaks, concludes that she is keeping something from him. Noticing that Neville is also more often unaccounted for, he wonders if the secret that they're keeping from him is related to the Resistance. When Ginny and Luna meet up with Blaise and Theo after dinner and leaves the Great Hall together, he decides to follow them. He gets mad when he realizes that they're going to the Shrieking Shack. Upon reaching the place, he looks to confront Neville about the lax security but is instead introduced to Harry Potter, the legend in the flesh. But what really shocks him is finding out that the secret the Resistance is keeping from him is not Harry, but Draco Malfoy, who is now a part of the Resistance together with the Ilvermorny transferee, Abigail Adams.
- Sirius, upon finding out that Angela Toffler is a long-lost cousin, endeavors to train her and reveals to her the not so sublime history of the Black family. Mundungus arrives, wounded and pursued by an angry Alastor Moody. The former Auror blames Mundungus for Amelia Bones' death, claiming that the former thief left his post outside Amelia's house. Mundungus denies it and swears that the only person he saw enter Amelia's house was her niece, Susan. Molly and Arthur turn up bearing news about Voldemort's take-over of Gringotts. Upon hearing of what happened to Amelia, Arthur suggests that they ask Snape if Susan had indeed left Hogwarts to come home to her aunt. While Arthur tries to Floo call Snape, Dedalus Diggle, another Order member, comes by to inform them that Adelaide Abbot was found dead in her own house early in the morning. According to a reliable witness, the only person seen going into the house the night prior was Adelaide's daughter, Hannah. Arthur returns from his Floo call and briefs them on his conversation with Snape - Susan never left Hogwarts and didn't even have a Hogsmeade pass. Arthur presumes that if they ask Snape about Hannah, the same will be said about her. Angela, a renowned trial lawyer, recognizes Voldemort's tactic and deduces that Voldemort is sending the Order a message - no place is safe, he can get to them whenever he pleases. And by using the likenesses of people they know and trust, is sowing suspicion amongst them, essentially destroying them from within.
- Draco and Hermione meet up with Snape and Dumbledore. They learn that Dumbledore knows about Hermione's disguise and that they do not belong in this timeline. Dumbledore confirms that the time-turner used to create this new timeline must be imbued with Dark Magic since it was able to drastically alter time. The former Minister also affirms that the magic enveloping the Room of Requirement had protected them from its effects, allowing Draco and Hermione to retain their memories and assimilate this timeline's version of themselves completely. Draco balks when Snape suggests that he Hermione should accompany him to the Manor when he meets up with James to keep the pretense of introducing his girlfriend to his mother. James has been asking for a contact person and Draco is the perfect candidate for the job since he has the capability to come and go to the Manor without raising any suspicions. Hermione, wanting to assure Draco that she is capable of taking care of herself, allows Dumbledore to perform Legilimency on her. Dumbledore happily
announces that Hermione passed the test with flying colors.

Ch. 31 Of Elves and Men

- Lorcan Wilkes receives a pleasant surprise while having an unusual breakfast with both parents. His father, Ashton, after suggesting that they take a much-needed vacation, admits that he is no longer happy working for the Dark Lord. In fact, he is planning on leaving his service permanently, even if it means going into hiding. Ashton says that he's already made arrangements for them, including Heidi, Lorcan's Muggle-born girlfriend, proving that he's no longer a fanatical believer in Pureblood supremacy, which greatly pleases Lorcan. However, Lorcan still wants to help bring down the Dark Lord. His father agrees and they make plans to gather as much information as they can get their hands on and use them in whatever way possible.

- Harry, together with Neville, Luna, Blaise, Ginny, and Theo, are training on basic healing spells under Daphne Greengrass, whose company Harry is starting to like. Since Harry is new to spellcasting, the others explain to him the intricacies involved, including the correlation between the strength of a spell and the intent behind it. Their discussion is interrupted when the loud clanging of pots and pans downstairs warn them that someone is trying to come through the Floo. They rush downstairs to find Leo Graves, Mathilda's brother who is also an Auror for the MACUSA, stuck in the fireplace. Neville quickly vanishes the invisible the Weasley twins placed there as a precaution to let Leo through. Over a cup of coffee, Leo divulges the reason for his coming. He assures Harry that the children are all fine, but they might have to move them somewhere safer, and due to this, he must speak with Albus and Gordon. Neville suggests that they send an owl to Dumbledore from Hogwarts. Leo writes down his message and gives it to Neville, who promises to send it out immediately. Neville takes the others with him back to Hogwarts, leaving Harry alone with Leo. Harry takes this opportunity to ask Leo about what's happening in America. Leo tells him about the attacks on No-Majes committed by unknown Magicals. Two MACUSA employees, both very vocal about the recent changes in their departments, also disappeared. He also says a few days back, Amerlaine felt some dark Magical signatures lurking around their neighborhood. To which Harry expresses awe. Leo concurs that her niece is turning into an amazing witch. Harry, feeling that he is sorely unprepared in this fight against evil, asks Leo if there are spells or tricks Aurors use that he should learn posthaste. The American Auror smiles and quickly agrees to teach Harry.

- James receives encouraging news from his cousin about Draco Malfoy. Angus, who has always been fascinated with house elves and thus spends most of his spare time studying them, assures James that Draco can be trusted. He bases this on the house elves' excitement in preparing for the arrival of the Malfoy heir. James, of course, scoffs at this reasoning, but Angus insists that the elves do not act that way towards Lucius. The fact that even the grumpiest of the Manor house elves is practically bouncing on his feet with enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing his young master again shows that Draco must have been treating them really well. Angus believes that a man's character is easily gleaned by the way he treats those who are beneath him. If Draco is considerate to his house elves, who in Pureblood aristocratic society, are considered the dregs, then he is a right fellow in Angus' book. Their discussion is interrupted when Janice starts calling for Angus. Left in that corner of the garden, James ponders on what Angus told him about Draco, which also leads him to why he didn't trust the Slytherin Prince in the first place - his foul and almost unreasonable treatment of Hermione. But then, as he tries to untangle the dynamics between Draco and Hermione, he arrives at an absurd and unwanted conclusion - that Draco, in truth, has a crush on Hermione. As James tries to come to terms with this new reason to never ever like Draco Malfoy, he finds Merryl Greened hiding behind the bushes. When he confronts the girl, she says she's playing 'hide-and-seek' with Dennis. James leaves Merryl to her game and walks back to the Manor. When he gets there, he finds that Merryl is already there, sitting serenely beside Mrs. Malfoy. James finds this strange and wonders if his eyes and mind are playing tricks on him.

- Draco and Hermione apparate to Malfoy Manor to meet with Narcissa. However, due to Draco's amorous bent, they spend most of the afternoon in his enormous bed instead (tiny lemons).
Hermione feels embarrassed when she finds a house elf standing at the foot of the bed, looking at them. Draco assures her that it's only Fifi, his mother's personal elf. Fifi tells them that his mother has been waiting for them in the garden for afternoon tea. When they reach the gazebo, Draco introduces Hermione, in her Abigail Adams disguise, to Narcissa and the two hit it off instantly. Unfortunately, Lucius is also there. He acts gallantly toward Hermione but gets into a heated argument with Draco regarding his refusal to join him in serving the Dark Lord almost immediately. This forces the two to cut their planned afternoon tea with Narcissa short. As they walk back to the Manor, Draco tells Hermione that they will be returning to Hogwarts as soon as possible. When Hermione asks why Draco says that his father's earlier outburst was so out-of-character and only means one thing - Lucius is scared shitless because everything's about to go bat-shit crazy.

Ch.32 Some Dangerous Discoveries
- Draco slips away from his mother and Hermione after dinner to look for the time-turner in his father's study. He instead finds a mysterious piece of paper in his father's desk. Realizing that he will need Hermione's help in finding the artifact, which he feels is hidden inside one of the hundreds of books in the study, he decides to extend their stay in the Manor to look for it later. Passing by the drawing room, he overhears his father talking to Marcus Flint's father and discovers that the two are colluding about something. He also learns that Voldemort is using polyjuice potion to spy on the Order. Marcus himself is impersonating Merryl Greene to spy on the Muggle-borns in the Manor. Draco must warn Toffler about this. When Lucius confides that intends to figure out what he finds curious about his son's new girlfriend, Draco decides two things - he must get Hermione as far away from his father as possible and he must talk to Toffler.

- While indulging in some amorous activities in an empty classroom on the seventh floor, Blaise and Ginny hear the sound of running feet. Blaise chooses to investigate and suggests that Ginny put a Disillusionment charm on herself. They find Susan and Hannah holding on to an unconscious Pansy Parkinson. When Blaise asks them why Pansy is in that state, the two girls turn their wands at him. The tension is only broken when Blaise assures them that he truly is who he says he by showing his crystal pendant to them. Ginny removes the Disillusionment charm on herself when Hannah breaks down. Hannah and Susan recount how they started suspecting Pansy and followed her to this classroom to find the vials labeled with the names of several members of the Resistance. Blaise freaks out when he sees his name on one of the vials. The four of them decide to take Pansy to McGonagall and show her what they had found. While getting the Transfiguration Professor up to speed, Pansy slowly morphs into Lucian Bole, her new boyfriend. Hannah wonders aloud where the real Pansy is.

- Hermione is amazed at how Narcissa treats her house elves. She speaks to them in a gentle and respectful manner and seems to genuinely understand them quite well. Narcissa talks about Dobby, the elf who used to be Draco's playmate and companion, which hits a soft spot in Hermione. She now sees where Draco's gentle side comes from. When Narcissa excuses herself and leaves Hermione alone at the table, Merryl takes her place. Merryl confides to Hermione that the other Muggle-borns are acting weird around her and that she (Abigail) reminds her of Hermione. Hermione, remembering about Merryl's mom, offers her apologies. Merryl brushes it off and instead questions Hermione about Ilvermorny. As they continue to talk, Merryl becomes more and more, spouting Ministry propaganda, including something Hermione is hearing for the first time - that the Muggle-borns' parents are Squibs, not Muggles, as they were told before, because Muggles can never produce children with magical abilities. When Hermione disagrees Merryl becomes enraged at 'Abigail' and tells her that she's nothing like Hermione. Merryl also warns 'Abigail' to not be too comfortable in Draco's company because he is already secretly dating Hermione. After Merryl leaves, Hermione is left stunned and afraid for Draco, wondering if the young Ravenclaw has already divulged Draco's secret to his father. Fearing for Draco, she taps on her ring three times to tell him that they need to talk ASAP.
- Snape witnesses first-hand the effects of Voldemort's brainwashing on Mr. Greene. The father of
Merryl, who recently lost his wife, appears to be more eager to enjoy the company of Alecto Carrow and play his role in disseminating Voldemort's message to the Muggle world through his television and radio networks rather than mourn his wife. As Voldemort explains to Snape, Alecto, using the combined powers of a special spell he designed and a potion she specifically developed for this project, is able to trace the bloodlines of the Hogwarts Muggle-borns up to their magical ancestor. According to her study, Muggle-borns come from a long line of Squibs whose magical abilities have been suppressed due to continuous intermarriage with Muggles, thus proving that they belong in the wizarding world. This somehow annoys the Dark Lord because instead of exposing the Muggle-borns as freaks of nature, as he intended, the study has given them legitimacy and a magical heritage. When Voldemort starts asking about Hermione, Snape correctly surmises that there is more to it than plain concern. As it turns out, Voldemort got his hand on her parents and used them to trace her lineage. Mr. Granger is 100 percent Muggle, but his wife, Jane Flemish, is actually from a forgotten branch of the Gaunts, making Hermione and Voldemort, distant cousins. Due to this newly discovered connection, Voldemort plans to take Hermione as his bride and beget an heir with her. He then orders Snape to bring the girl to him by week's end, or he will go to Hogwarts and retrieve the girl himself. This forces Snape to decide to inform the Order of this new development and go to Plan B.

Ch. 33 Secrets and Parchments

- Lorcan Wilkes finally makes an appearance in the Weasley twins' shop in Diagon Alley. The memory locks Snape placed in Lorcan's brain are removed immediately when Fred uttered the trigger phrase. Lorcan reveals the job that Snape entrusted him and shows the twins detailed schedules of Voldemort's army. George makes copies of the lists using his own spell when he spots an entry showing that Death Eaters will be coming to take them in for questioning. With only minutes to spare, George accios their emergency packs and apparates with Fred and Lorcan to their shop's Hogsmeade branch.  
- Neville puts Dean, Ron, and Seamus in charge of teaching Harry how to fly a broomstick before he is summoned to Hogwarts. His surprise in finding his gran in the Headmaster's office is quickly replaced by fear when she points to the sleeping Pansy Parkinson. She apparently came to their house impersonating him and only his gran's quick thinking enabled her to stun the fake Neville and owl Grimmauld Place to ask for assistance. Lupin surmises that Pansy was trying to gather information and did not come to hurt anyone since she was not carrying a wand. Snape further concludes that Pansy's target isn't really Neville's grandmother, but Neville himself and that whoever Imperiused Pansy knows about the Resistance. Neville then explains to his grandmother what the Resistance is and how he is involved, earning him praise from the stalwart lady. When Pansy appears to still be under the Imperius curse even after waking up, Snape agrees to use Legilimency on her instead of Veritaserum since the potion seems to have an adverse effect on the curse.  
- Arthur and Molly get into an argument with Moody and Kingsley regarding the Snape's daring plan involving Hermione. Sirius understands the Weasleys' point but thinks they can pull it off. Kingsley tells Sirius that he is not going on the mission. This angers Sirius and makes him question the Order member's trust in him. Kingsley tries to pacify Sirius, but Moody gruffly tells him that he's reckless and dangerous, a lone wolf, not a team player. As he prepares for another tirade against Moody, Angela Toffler calls out to him. She appears to be terrified about something. Angela then informs them that guards Lucius sent to watch over them seem to be putting the parents of the other Muggle-borns under some sort of spell. Sirius asks her if her guards tried anything with them and she assures him that she and her husband are well-protected thanks to the spells he taught her and the opal pendants Fletcher helped her purchase. While the Order members talk about the need to get the parents and the students to safety, the Weasley twins barge into the room bearing what they call their secret weapon. The Order members marvel at the lists Lorcan gave them, but when the twins admit that they had a close call earlier, another argument breaks out.
between them and their parents. Sirius, still perusing the lists, tells them that they need to go to America tonight because, if they were accurate, Bellatrix will be attacking the people who helped Harry escape.

- Draco is upset with Hermione for agreeing to Snape's harebrained plan. She tells him that she will be perfectly safe since the entire Order will be there to protect her, but Draco thinks he should also be there. Hermione reminds him of the reason why he cannot be there. When their discussion turns to the time-turner and how Draco employed the help of James to look for it, Draco remembers the piece of parchment he found in his father's desk drawer. Hermione realizing that blood magic was used to keep the parchment blank tries to use her blood to make it reveal its secrets, but to no avail, which makes Draco think that since the enchantment must have been placed by his father, only Malfoy blood will be accepted. It works and they realize that it is a torn page from a diary. Hermione recognizes the initials R.A. concludes that it belonged to Sirius' brother, Regulus. The entries tell them that Regulus found out about five of Voldemort's horcruxes. Hermione tells Draco about the seven horcruxes of their timeline's Voldemort, which included Harry. Draco, recalling what he overheard his father's conversation with Flint, tells Hermione that Lucius is looking for Voldemort's horcruxes. Hermione wonders if the Lucius in this timeline is on the side of Light, but Draco crushes that tiny hope by saying that Lucius isn't that noble and that Lucius' plan is to take the Dark Lord's place.

Chapter End Notes

I still don't have a beta so all mistakes are mine. Chapter 34 is almost done, hoping to post it by next week. :)
Chapter Notes

A/N: And here is the promised new chapter. It took me a loong time to finish it mainly because this is the chapter that will herald the beginning of the end. Hahaha. Seriously, I had to decide if I really wanted to go this way. But, my muse was adamant. We must stick to the plan. And so, here we are. Hope you all enjoy reading this latest installment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco could feel Hermione's eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her. He didn't like crushing her singular hope that his father had honorable intentions regarding Voldemort's horcruxes. If only he could make himself nurture that same hope - that Lucius had at least one virtuous bone in his body. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't. And it hurt more than he expected. It's never easy to admit that one came from a scheming, self-serving git of a father. Not even for someone who had already arrived at that same conclusion a long time ago. At least, he had his mother's noble genes to tide him over. Never mind that those genes were also shared with someone even worse than Lucius - his deranged Aunt Bellatrix. He'd long surmised that her despicable personality came not from the Blacks, but from the Rosier side. The Blacks, at least, were not all bad. They had a few who didn't give a flying fuck about blood purity or the Dark Arts (as he often heard Bellatrix bemoan). Even a couple (Regulus and Sirius) had the guts to defy Voldemort, the most dangerous wizard of all time. And as Bellatrix loved to taunt her younger sister, Narcissa had more of the Blacks than the Rosiers in her.

For which Draco was most thankful. Because, otherwise, he would have had no redemptive trait at all. He shuddered at the thought that Lucius was at one time given the choice between Narcissa and Bellatrix for his bride. Imagine the disaster it would've wrought had he chosen Bellatrix. Their child (meaning him) would've been more fucked up than he already was. Thank Salazar that Lucius preferred quiet, gentle women.

"What do you mean by Lucius taking Voldemort's place? Are you saying that he plans on conquering the world with him as the supreme leader?"

"Maybe not the whole world, not immediately anyway, but the wizarding world, at the very least. Our business ventures alone are already spread all over Europe. It would be child's play for him to...persuade...the Ministers of those countries where he presently has significant political clout to side with him. Especially when he starts throwing money around," Draco answered bitterly.

He'd often overheard his father instructing his minions to use money as leverage. At first, he was impressed. It felt good to know that they were as rich as King Midas himself (if not richer). Later on, as he learned more about how Malfoy money was being used to peddle corruption and propel infamous rising bigots like Voldemort to power, he was sickened. With this new insight into Lucius' boundless ambition, he could actually feel the bile rising to his throat. Why couldn't his father choose to do the right thing just for once?

Hermione was quiet for a while, digesting his words. Knowing her, he was sure that Lucius' plans in overthrowing Voldemort wasn't the only thing brewing inside that magnificent brain of hers.
"I need to see Harry," she said after a few beats.

Draco stiffened at the mention of the Chosen One's name. Had it been the Harry from their world, he wouldn't have any objections. But this world's Harry was a different matter.

"What, now? You want to go to the shack as in now?"

"Well, yes. Now would be the perfect time. Look, it's important to know how many horcruxes this timeline's Voldemort has. Regulus listed five. But maybe only because he didn't know about the others. Even Harry wasn't aware that he was a horcrux until just before the Battle of Hogwarts."

"So why do we need to talk to Potter?"

"I need to know if he's a horcrux in this timeline."

"How can you determine that?"

"Harry told us how his scar always hurt and how he could sometimes see through Voldemort's eyes. At first, we thought that it was just because of the curse, but later on he realized that it was because he was Voldemort's accidental horcrux," Hermione explained.

Draco now understood Hermione's point. If they could destroy all of Voldemort's horcruxes, then Voldemort would be mortal again. But before they could do that, they must find out just how many were really out there.

"What about Nagini? How did you find out that she was also a horcrux?"

"Harry once 'dreamt' that he was Nagini. It turned out that he was having a vision of Nagini attacking Arthur Weasley. He realized that he also had a connection with the snake. Then, when Voldemort learned that we were destroying his horcruxes, he kept Nagini in a protective bubble, always by his side. It became pretty obvious why."

They were both silent for a while, each one lost in their own thoughts.

"Do you think Lucius had already found some of them?" Hermione asked eventually. Draco shook his head.

"I can't tell. I might have to make another trip to Malfoy Manor to find out," Draco replied. He didn't fancy going back home and chance encountering his father, but if it would help them figure out where Voldemort's horcruxes were, then he didn't really have a choice. He'd already asked Toffler (despite his misgivings) to find the Time-Turner (without telling him what it really was) for him, he could ask him to help on this one, too. Hitting two stones with one bird, as Hermione used to say. Or was it 'two birds with one stone'? Damned Muggle expressions! So illogical and nonsensical.

"If Lucius had already known about the horcruxes when he altered our timeline, then he would've had enough chances to locate them without Voldemort knowing since he'd been in a coma for ten years," Hermione said, "I wonder if he knew how to destroy them."

"Why? Is it hard to destroy a horcrux?"

"Well, yes. To destroy a horcrux, it's container must be damaged beyond repair, meaning it can't be repaired even with magic. The diary and Hufflepuff's cup were destroyed using basilisk venom, the diadem by Fiendfyre, Salazar's locket, the Gaunt ring, and Nagini by Gryffindor's sword. The bit of Voldemort's soul inside Harry was destroyed when he used the Avada on him."
"So...only those three things destroy horcruxes?"

Hermione seemed to mull over that. "Actually, there could be other ways to destroy a horcrux that we never discovered. It was a bit of a trial and error on our part. I had researched about horcruxes. A lot had been said about how to make them and the dangers involved, but nothing much about how to destroy them."

"Do you think they're still in those places where you found them before - the horcruxes?" Draco asked. "What if my fa-...Lucius had already moved them?"

"We'd still have to search those places. At least we now have a few starting points. The diary was in your father's possession back then, before he purposely left it inside Ginny's cauldron. It possessed her and used her to open the Chamber of Secrets during our second year at Hogwarts."

"What? He gave Voldemort's horcrux to the Weaslette?" Draco was incredulous. He couldn't believe that his father could be that diabolical.

"He knew that it was imbued with dark magic, for sure. But I doubt if he would've left it in Ginny's care if he knew that it was also a horcrux. He wouldn't be that careless."

"But now he does know," Draco shook his head in frustration.

"I don't think Ginny got hold of the diary in this timeline. Voldemort was in a coma for ten years. Lucius wouldn't have been eager to bring back the Dark Lord in that way. If he already found the diary, it would still be with him."

Draco gunted, anger flooding his veins. "He changed so many things with that fucking time-turner. If not for that we wouldn't be in this fucking situation!" He was nearing the end of his rope with this cursed time shift. He'd already survived Voldemort once, albeit painfully...now he was being forced to go through that hell again. If not for Hermione, he probably would've just killed himself.

"We'll figure something out," Hermione said, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Together, we can do anything, right?"

His rising fury quickly subsided at her soothing words. He couldn't lose his shit now. He must use his brain and get them out of here. Think like a Slytherin, idiot. He chided himself. Leaning down, he kissed Hermione and hugged her tight.

"Yes, together. We can do this together," he sighed and pulled away to look down his girlfriend's warm, brown eyes. Faith. That's what he saw in them. Faith that everything would turn out right. Faith in them. Faith in him.

And it was frightening.

No one had ever believed in him that much. Hell, no one ever believed in him, period. Not even his own flesh and blood. His father loathed his lack of ambition. His mother, yes, she loved him, but she still saw him as a little boy, her eternal little boy that needed her protection.

Which gave him more reason not to fail. He couldn't afford to fail.

With renewed determination, Draco rose to his feet, pulling Hermione up with him. "Come on, let's go to the shack. Perhaps we could eliminate one bloody horcrux tonight," he mumbled the last beneath his breath, but Hermione still heard.

She playfully punched his arm and scowled at him. "We are not eliminating anything or anyone
tonight, Malfoy. Horcrux or not."

"What I meant was, if he's not a horcrux, then we'd at least cross out one from the list. Whoever gave you the idea that I want to eliminate Potter?" he scoffed. Hermione gave him a baleful glare. He pulled her to him and nuzzled her nose. "I promise to play nice."

Hermione smirked, "You better."

"We better get going. I'd rather this be over and done with as soon as possible. I want to be back here before curfew so I can claim my reward for being such a good boy," he wiggled his eyebrows at Hermione, making her blush.

He was amused at how shy she still was when it came to their slowly deepening intimacy. Knowing that he'd just embarrass her further if he pointed that out, Draco stood back and quietly watched as Hermione transformed herself into Abigail Adams. Once that was done, he slung an arm around his prim and proper Gryffette and guided her out of the Room of Requirement. They didn't want to risk being overheard so they made their way to the Whomping Willow in silence. They hid behind a row of thick bushes when they saw Ron, Lavender, Seamus, and Dean climbing out of the opening between the still subdued tree's roots. In that group, only Ron knew about Draco's involvement in the Resistance, and he wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. As soon as they were out of sight, Draco and Hermione ran to the Whomping Willow to take advantage of its current immobile state. Within minutes the couple was striding down the kitchen where they found Harry sitting at the small table, surrounded by Neville, Luna, and Daphne. The Chosen One was looking intently at what appeared to be a small mirror. Neville was the first to notice their arrival.

"Oi, look who's here. Draco and Abby," Neville said. Daphne was yet to be told about 'Abigail's' true identity. The two girls waved at them. Hermione and Draco waved back. Harry just raised an arm in greeting, his full attention still focused on the small mirror propped up on the table.

"What's up?" asked Neville.

"Uh, we need to talk to Harry," Hermione said, walking over to the group. Draco followed tentatively behind her. He still didn't feel that comfortable around the Chosen One, in spite of the many times he'd been in his presence.

"Draco! Abigail!" a shrill, child's voice called out to them.

Draco nearly jumped at the sound and was astonished to find that it was coming from the tiny mirror sitting atop the table.

"Hey! Good thing you two are here. We've been talking to the kids. Here, sit down," Harry said, waving Draco forward. "Jason's been asking about you," Harry rose from his chair and stepped aside to let Draco take his place.

Daphne also gave up her seat to Hermione, smiling at her as she stood beside Harry. Draco couldn't help but notice the warm, but shy smiles the two exchanged. His attention was however diverted when Jason's voice squealed his name.

"Draco! Draco! Look! I have a new jumper," Jason was jumping up and down before the mirror. The only thing Draco could see was a golden snitch sewed onto blue wool.

"That's awesome, kid! But can you please sit down? I want to see you better," Draco said, not able to contain the chuckle that went with it.
They heard Elena urging Jason to sit down before they finally laid eyes on the hyperactive 5-year-old. "Did you see, huh? Did you see? It's a snitch! The ball with wings! Did you see? Emmet said it's used for Queewitch! Can a broom really fly? Huh, Draco? Can it? Have you seen a flying broom? Have you-" Jason rolled his eyes after Elena's voice came in the background, telling him to slow down.

Draco laughed. "Yes, Jason. I've actually seen a flying broom. Maybe someday I'll show you how it's done. And if you're really, really good, I'll even let you ride with me."

Jason's eyes were as big as saucers. "Will you? Will you? Promise? Promise, Draco?"

"Yes, I promise. Just be a good-"

"I'm good! I'm good! Ask Elena!" Jason insisted, jumping up and down again so only the snitch on his jumper was visible in the mirror.

"Okay! Okay," Draco chuckled. "Stay good so I can take you flying. And-" the rest of his words were cut off at the insistent pounding from outside. He looked up to find the others exchanging puzzled looks.

"I'll see who it is," Neville said, pulling out his wand from his pocket.

"I'll go with you," said Luna, mimicking her boyfriend's actions. Neville nodded to her and the two left for the foyer.

Draco's wand was in his hand before he even noticed that Harry and Daphne had also done the same. He didn't have to look at Hermione to know that she'd also drawn hers. Even though the Weasley twins had assured them that no one aside from those recognized by the wards would be able to get past the wire gate, they couldn't be too careful. The tense situation was easily diffused when Neville and Luna came back with the Weasley twins in tow.

"Forgot the new password. Sorry," Fred said, shaking his head.

It was only when Harry rushed toward the newcomers that Draco saw the three wizards standing behind them - Sirius Black, Arthur Weasley, and Alastor Moody. Draco shifted on his feet, dismayed at being reminded of his brief stint as a ferret. Hopefully, this Moody wouldn't display the same dastardly conduct.

"Sirius! What a nice surprise," Harry was saying as he encased the older wizard in a bear hug. Sirius had returned the hug, but there was a notable anxiety in his stance.

"Harry! I wish I had come at a better time. Unfortunately, we're just passing through," Sirius said, disengaging himself from his godson's embrace.

"Passing through? What do you mean?"

Sirius was about to explain the situation to Harry when his eyes had swiveled to Draco. And before Draco could react, he found himself being threatened by the older wizard's wand.

"What is he doing here?" Sirius snarled, "That's Lucius' spawn!"

"And your cousin, if I'm not mistaken," Arthur Weasley said, gently pushing Sirius' wand hand down to his side.

"Well, he's not mine," growled Moody, shoving past Arthur with his wand pointing menacingly at
"He's my friend, Moody. He's here because he's a member of the Resistance," Harry all but yelled. "Sirius, he and Abigail were the ones who helped the children at my orphanage escape the Death Eaters when they came for me."

"But he's the Minister's son," Sirius retorted.

"And he's on our side," Neville said, shuffling past the older wizards, with Luna following behind him. The two stood on either side of Draco and Hermione. Draco was grateful for the show of support because Moody's wand, he noted in relief, was now pointing at the floor.

"Do you trust him?" Sirius said, turning to Harry with piercing eyes.

"Yes, I trust them both," Harry said, glancing back at them.

"Who's the girl?" Arthur quietly asked George who was standing to his right.

"Abigail Adams, the hot transferee from Ilvermorny," George replied, winking at Hermione. Draco felt a violent urge to punch the smarmy look off of the redhead's face.

"Enough of this! We don't have time to waste on this nonsense. Show us the fireplace," Moody bellowed at the twins. Fred and George eagerly complied, beckoning Moody to follow them to the sitting room. The former Auror turned to Draco as he hobbled away. "I'm keeping an eye on you, boy, remember that," he growled, his magical eye spinning furiously in its socket.

He would never admit it, but fear coursed through Draco. Moody was one crazy, unpredictable wizard. Who knew what other creatures Moody could turn him into? Hermione squeezed his hand, as if reading his thoughts.

"What's that?" Arthur asked, the animated mirror catching his eye.

"Oh, it's an enchanted mirror. Lanie gave it to me the first time we met. We use it to talk to each other," Harry explained.

Arthur was waving at a beaming Jason when Fred and George came back into the kitchen, wearing sheepish grins. Sirius and Moody were looking disgruntled.

"Uh, we forgot that we cannot go through unless the Floo on the other side is open. We need to owl Emmet. Ask him to summon Twinkle so she can open the Floo," said Fred.

"Or we can use this, Emmet also has one, doesn't he?" Neville said, pulling his crystal pendant from beneath his shirt.

"Hang on. Why do you need to open the Floo?" Harry blurted.

Draco was about to ask the same thing. After Emmet had found out that the Ministry was conducting random sweeps of all international Floo travel and communications, Dumbledore had instructed Gordon to close the Floo in his US townhouse. It would only be opened in case of an emergency.

"Uh...well...because…" Fred turned desperate eyes to his father.

Arthur had cleared his throat and was about to give an explanation when a man's voice was heard coming from the mirror, calling out Harry's name. Draco quickly left his seat to give way to Harry.
"Leo! Hey, what's wrong?" Harry said, leaning closer to the mirror. From his position behind Harry, Draco could see the terrified face of the American Auror.

"We're in trouble, Harry. I saw people scouting my sister's house early this morning. When I came back there this afternoon, they were still there," Leo explained.

"Tell him to open the Floo, dammit!" Moody bellowed.


Harry nodded and said, "Leo, can you open the Floo?"

"On it, Harry," Leo said before disappearing from view.

Lanie's face appeared in the mirror, fear evident in the young girl's eyes. They had met her before they came back to England. Hermione liked the precocious 10-year-old. Draco had teased her by saying that it's probably because Lanie reminded her of herself. Hermione huffed, her own way of agreeing to something without admitting that she did.

"Harry, I'm scared. I can feel them...the bad people," she said, nibbling on her lip.

Whatever Harry's words were never had the chance to leave his lips. An ear-splitting scream followed by a series of loud explosions resounded from somewhere inside the Fawley townhouse, causing Lanie to drop the mirror. All they saw and heard next were several running feet and terrified screams. A blue toy car bounced on the floor and landed before the mirror.

"That's Jason's," he heard Hermione gasp beside him.

Draco's heart jumped to his throat, a grim thought freezing his blood.

They had been found!

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James glanced at the battered piece of parchment in his hand. He held the wand closer to it to see if he was going the right way. Apparently, Draco, he had to grudgingly admit, was good at keeping his promises. Behind the portrait of a dancing Veela, James found what Draco had said he had left for him - a map of the Manor and an old wand. He wished he had his own, but this was better than nothing. The Minister only let them use their wands during training and their guards were very diligent in making sure that they were returned right after.

This was actually his third trip to the Minister's study. He'd taken the first one the day after Draco's visit. At first he was wary of the Slytherin Seeker. Had he not heard of the rumors going around Hogwarts about Draco's feud with his father, he wouldn't have even considered Draco's request. Still, he was a bit skeptical. It could be just another of Draco's attempts to infuriate his father, in which he didn't want to be involved. But when his Quidditch nemesis told him things about the Resistance, including the blood oath they all took, he decided to listen. There was something different about the Minister's son, too. He just couldn't put a finger on it.

Yet, if he were to be honest, the one thing that made his mind up about the younger Malfoy, was due to selfish reasons. He'd seen how the Slytherin Prince doted on the blonde transferee from Ilvermorny, Abigail Adams, during dinner. That made him think his previous theories on Draco's interest in Hermione and his unusual treatment of her were unfounded. Draco couldn't have been in love with the Ravenclaw witch if he was easily distracted by a blonde beauty. Which was fine by
him. One less rival in his pursuit of the most wonderful witch he'd ever met. It was a relief, if nothing else.

What really baffled him about his 'assignment', though, was the object he was looking for. Draco couldn't (or probably didn't want to, his cynical self said) tell him what it was exactly. He was given a mere description of it - a necklace, probably a chain, with an hourglass pendant. He couldn't even tell James if it was gold or silver, if it was big or small, heavy or light, only that it would be found hidden inside one of the hollow books in Lucius' study. He'd already examined dozens of books, but none of them had a hollow center. Sometimes he felt like he was getting played by the Malfoy heir. If not for his insatiable curiosity, he would've given up the search after his first unsuccessful outing. Still, a promise was a promise, and James had as yet to break one. Hopefully, he'd find something tonight.

James stopped in front of the secret entrance to the Minister's study, ready to push against the canvas backing of the painting when he heard voices from within. It was the Minister, and he was furious.

"I can't find the damn list, Flint," Lucius Malfoy bellowed. James could hear crashing and thumping, like things were being flung around in anger.

"I'm sure you've already memorized it word for word by now. You don't need it. Besides, we already destroyed four of them-"

"I know, but that's not the point. It's not where I hid it, meaning someone had gone through my desk. Who knows what else that thief had found!"

After a brief pause, Lucius' guest replied, "Are you saying that someone could be spying on you? This place is impenetrable. Don't you think you're just being paranoid?"

"I am not being paranoid, Flint. Someone was here. We could have a traitor in our midst and you're smirking there like an imbecile."

"I just think-"

"I'm not interested in what you think. I need to find the spy and you're going to make your son find him for me."

"What? We don't even know if there really is a-"

"Just do it. Find the spy and bring him to me!"

"Fine. It's not as if Marcus is doing anything more important than spying on your exalted guests."

Ice slithered down James' back. Draco was right, there's a spy in their midst.

"We can't risk being exposed, Flint. Too much is at stake now."

"I know. I just don't understand why you're not telling Draco about-"

"I don't want him to be involved. It will kill Narcissa-"

"Right. You don't want your son to be involved, but you're ordering my son to risk his neck-"

"He volunteered, didn't he? You should be proud of him."

"I am! It's just that-"
"I'll be forever indebted to your family, Flint. And when everything is in place, you two will be the first to reap the rewards."

"No need to sell steak to me, Lucius, when I already bought the whole cow," came the laughing reply.

And that broke the tension in the room because James heard Lucius chuckling as well.

"You're a good friend, Flint. We're almost there. Just have a little more patience."

"Shouldn't I be the one telling you to be a little more patient, my friend?"

James heard the two men laugh briefly.

"You're right. After we destroy his last horcrux he'd be just as vulnerable as you and me. If not a little more. He thinks he still has them, after all, the arrogant prick. And that's how we'll destroy him," Lucius said.

James wondered what a horcrux was and who was going to be vulnerable after the last one was destroyed. He just hoped Lucius wasn't referring to anyone from their side. Whatever or whoever that was wasn't his mission, however, so he dismissed it immediately. No need to clutter his brain with things that didn't concern him. He must focus on his 'assignment', though he doubted if he could do anything about that tonight. Lucius didn't seem in a hurry to leave the study, forcing James delay his planned exploration.

Sitting on the cold stone floor, James studied the map to keep himself occupied. He'd decided that he would wait for Lucius and his guest to leave. He couldn't afford to let this night go to waste; the quicker he found the object Draco wanted, the earlier he and Draco could finalize their means of escape. Angus would keep an eye on the others for him. Draco's warning about the impostor in their midst, which he had shared with his cousin, had made both of them even more protective of their fellow Muggle-borns. Tired from the day's training, James slumped against the wall and was slowly drifting off when he heard a name that was all too familiar, swiftly pulling him from his stupor.

"Are you sure that Snape will meet the deadline? Is he really willing to turn over the Granger girl on Friday?" It was Flint. "I need to know so I can arrange for additional people."

Granger...they found her...but...Snape...the Headmaster...is turning her over? To who?

"Arrange it. But only the most trusted ones. And make them use Muggle faces. Have them stationed as near as they can get to the Apparition point. You probably should lead them. We can't risk losing the girl. Volde-... You-Know-Who is dying to make her his bride. Or so I heard. We can't let that happen, can we?"

Voldemort wants Hermione to be his bride? What the effing hell?

"Agreed. He would be unstoppable once he's bound to her magic, Gaunt descendant that she is. He'll be twice as strong."

Hermione's a...Gaunt?

"I know. All our hard work will be wasted if he gets a new source of magic. We must not fail in this, Flint. We have too much to lose. Make it appear like she had been snatched from Severus. Spread some rumors if you have to."
"But won't that make the Dark Lord more vigilant?"

Lucius laughed, "He put me in charge of security, didn't he? Leave it to me. He won't know what hit him. Just make sure that you play your part as planned."

"Why don't we just kill the girl?"

James' heart stopped. Don't say yes Lucius!

"No, I have plans for her. We must keep her safe."

"I still can't believe that Severus would turn her over without a fight."

"He didn't have a choice, did he? The Dark Lord was clear. If he didn't surrender the girl, Hogwarts would be leveled. Severus would never let that happen."

"What if he double-crosses the Dark Lord?"

"What do you mean?"

"You yourself doubt his loyalty. What if he's really working with the Order? They wouldn't give up the girl that easily. They could be planning on snatching her themselves."

A moment of silence passed, making James wonder if Lucius would even answer. After a few beats, he heard a deep sigh followed by the Minister's tired voice.

"Then, there's going to be a bloodbath."

That's when James decided he'd heard enough. Stashing the map back in his pocket, he rose to his feet and ran down the corridor as quietly as possible. He must contact the Resistance and tell them about this. Now. But how? It would be extremely hard to convey everything he'd heard through their pendant. He must speak with someone. Someone who could come to him at Malfoy Manor without drawing suspicion on themselves. Better yet, someone who knew how to get in and out of Malfoy Manor without being detected.

Only one person came to mind. Draco.

But how would he get in touch with him? Draco had warned him that not everyone in the Resistance, or the Order, knew about his involvement. He must not jeopardize Draco's position. As he looked at his borrowed wand, an idea came to mind. There was a way to get to Draco safely, after all. Angus had been bending his ear about the peculiarities of one Malfoy house elf for the longest time. Good thing he had paid attention.

To get to Draco, he must first find Dobby.

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Draco slammed a hand on the table, causing the empty mugs to jump a few inches. Neville winced, but said nothing. He understood. Waiting was the hardest thing to do when you're left behind and people you cared about were out there risking themselves.

"Can't you get that mirror to work again?" Draco snapped at Neville.

"The other half appeared to have been broken...crushed. We can't establish a connection without it," Neville said, calmly. Or as calmly as he could because he really wasn't.
The others who had not gone with the Order to the Fawley townhouse had already returned to Hogwarts. Only he, Draco, and Harry were left in the Shrieking Shack. Moody had been adamant in not letting Harry or Draco go with them. So adamant, in fact, that he had used his own modified version of 'Stupefy' on the two in spite of Arthur's protests, knocking both of them out immediately. Strangely, Sirius seemed to agree with the former Auror. Neville had been forced to stay behind in order to keep Draco and Harry from charging after them. Moody sealed the fireplace for good measure, as well. Neville had to admit that it made his job a bit easier. But not by that much. He still had to face the wrath of both men once the spell had run its course.

Draco had been livid, no, raving mad, when he found out that Abby (Hermione) had gone with the Order. He didn't know, of course, that she had jumped into the fireplace at the last minute, just when Moody was conveniently distracted by a sudden explosion in the kitchen, which she had probably set up herself. Neville didn't know how to tell Draco about that, so he just kept that information to himself. The Slytherin Prince would surely turn violent when told about his girlfriend's reckless (but brilliant, in Neville's opinion) move. Neville actually wished he'd thought of that, too. Then, he wouldn't have been tasked with babysitting these volatile and extremely dangerous wizards. They wouldn't hurt him, of course. But listening to their ranting was just as bad, his eardrums were now practically bleeding.

"How long has it been?" Draco asked, pacing up and down the length of the kitchen, his pale face hard as marble.

Neville glanced at the clock hanging above the stove. "Forty minutes, I think," he replied, grimacing when Draco turned to him with narrowed eyes.

"You think? You're not sure?"

"Well, I didn't really mark the time, did I?" Neville grunted, getting irritated himself. What did Draco think he was, anyway, his house elf?

Before Draco could retaliate, Harry came barrelling into the room, his face as stormy as the weather outside. The Chosen One dropped into a chair and threw his wand on the table.

"It's useless. I tried everything! Nothing worked," Harry said, slumping down his chair.

Draco snorted and took the opposite chair. "I told you, didn't I? That fucking Moody locked us out with an untraceable spell."

"He used to be an Auror, probably the best of his generation. He must have used another one of his own spells," Neville said, ignoring the glaring eyes of his companions. "Moody's known for capturing a lot of people using customized spells. I won't be surprised if that's what he did here."

"And you're suddenly a fan of that demented fuck?" Draco huffed.

Neville swallowed the anger rising from the pit of his stomach. Nothing good could come out of an argument with Draco. He must try to empathize with the Slytherin. Had it been Luna risking her life out there, he'd probably be in a worse state. Keep calm, Neville. Words, they're just words, he told himself.

"I'm not a fan of anyone, Malfoy. I just stated facts. Facts about Moody. He may be a demented fuck, but you can't deny that he's an exceptionally talented, demented fuck!"

Draco raised an eyebrow, speechless at Neville's outburst. The blonde Slytherin averted his eyes and stared at the table in silence, his fingers wrapping around an empty mug, strangling it.
"I should've been there. Amy...her parents...their family and friends...they're all in trouble because of me," Harry said, his voice cracking at the end.

"You'd be dead if you were there," Draco said without looking at Harry.

"Oh, yeah?" Harry said, jumping to his feet. "I defeated them the first time, when I didn't even know what I was. I killed them with my inert Magic!"

"Bellatrix wasn't there that night, Potter," Draco replied with a smirk and an exasperated shake of his head.

"So what? She's just a witch, just another one of Voldemort's dogs."

Draco's eyes snapped to Harry, his lips twisting into an unpleasant sneer.

"You don't know Bellatrix. You haven't been in the same room with her. You haven't felt evil rolling over you just by being near her. You haven't experienced her special curses, her highly developed Crucios. You haven't stared into her eyes. You haven't seen true Dark Magic until you've stood before her. Talk to me again about defeating 'just another witch', 'just another one of Voldemort's dogs' when you've done all that. But before then, keep your fucking superiority complex in check because you don't know even half of what Bellatrix can, and will, do to you."

Neville felt the air shift with Draco's anger. Harry must've felt it, too, because his face held none of his former bravado. He sat back in his chair and stared at Draco with wide eyes, filled with the same terror that Neville was currently feeling. He had never met Bellatrix, either (fortunately!). But he'd heard stories...terrible stories that kept him awake at night when he was younger. Still, they were nothing compared to what Draco's words had conveyed. There was a genuineness to them, a surety that could only come from first hand knowledge. Neville had a feeling that Draco had been, at one point or another, subjected to his deranged Aunt's wicked and violent ways. He shuddered at the thought.

He often bemoaned his lack of relatives, it's been just him and Gran since he was little. Now, he found his situation much better than having someone like Bellatrix for an Aunt. He looked at Draco with new eyes. Could the Slytherin Prince's swagger and irritating arrogance be just a front? He often hid his insecurities, his nervousness, behind a smiling face and careless laughter. Could Draco be hiding some insecurities, too?

"Potter, let me ask you something. Have you ever felt like you're in someone else's head?" Draco asked, breaking the silence and surprising both Neville and Harry.

Harry turned narrowed eyes at Draco. "I don't understand."

"Like you're seeing things through someone else's eyes. Do you get visions?" Draco said, leaning on the table.

"Visions? No... I don't think so," Harry replied, brows furrowed in thought.

"Do you hear voices in your head?"

Harry's eyes turned stormy when he retorted, "Do you?"

Draco stared at Harry, but said nothing. After a beat, he turned his slate gray eyes back to his much-abused mug.

Harry sighed. "What is this about, Draco. Are you implying that I'm going crazy or something?"
"No," Draco replied, eyes swiveling back to Harry. "Do you know what a horcrux is?"

"A hor…a what?" Harry said, bewildered.

Neville had heard of that word before. From Luna. His eccentric girlfriend once told him about it one afternoon from out of the blue. She was, as she often liked to do when they were in her father's library, reading one of her mother's old journals when she started lecturing Neville about the evils of creating a horcrux. Neville didn't quite understand what a horcrux was, but Luna had drummed into his head that it was not something a good wizard or witch would dabble in. Why Draco was asking Harry about it, he didn't dare guess. It couldn't be just to pass the time. Discussing horcruxes was not for light banter. Well, at least he's stopped ragging about being left behind, Neville said to himself.

"A horcrux is basically a vessel, usually an inanimate object, though sometimes it could also be an animal or on extremely rare occasions, a person. It's used to contain a piece of the creator of the horcrux' soul," Draco said.

"The creator's soul? Then, it's something that can be created to contain a person's soul."

"Just a piece," Draco said, cutting into Harry's analysis. "You'd be dead if you put the entirety of your soul inside one horcrux."

"Right, of course. But why would one want to make a horcrux? And how is it made? I don't suppose it's that common since I didn't encounter it in any of the books that Prof. Dumbledore made me read."

A dry chuckle was Draco's response. "Dumbledore would never let you read any books about the Dark Arts. And yes, it's not so common. But only because you have to be really desperate to make it. You need to commit murder in order to create a horcrux."

"Murder? Why would anyone murder people just to have a horcrux?"

That's why it shouldn't be done, Neville said to himself. He obviously missed that part in Luna's lecture.

"To become immortal. A horcrux would enable its creator to return to life even after their body was destroyed."

Harry's brow furrowed as he digested that bit. "Why are you telling me this? What have I got to do with a horcrux?"

Draco smirked. "I was wondering if you are one."

"What?" Harry and Neville chorused.

"If this is a joke, it isn't funny," Harry said.

"Do I look like I have a sense of humor? And even if I did, a horcrux isn't something to joke about," Draco said. "I remember hearing about how the Dark Lord tried to kill you with an Avada and that it rebounded on him. I was just wondering if in his attempt to kill you the Dark Lord accidently turned you into a living horcrux."

"But… you said to create a horcrux one has to commit murder. I'm still very much alive, as you can see," Harry said.
"You are, however, your parents died that night, didn't they? That was double murder, more than enough to create a horcrux."

Harry's eyes blazed at the reminder. Neville's fingers inched towards his wand, ready to intervene should things turn ugly. But Harry closed his eyes and sighed, slumping against the back of his chair.

"How would I know if I'm a horcrux then?" the Chosen One said eventually, his voice heavy with the weight of the world. Neville felt sorry for him.

"I...I'm not really sure… but one of the signs would be what I asked you earlier… seeing through someone else's eyes."

Harry mulled this over, his forehead crunching in concentration. "I don't remember ever experiencing that. When I was younger, I had difficulty controlling my abilities when I'm angry. Bulbs and pipes would explode."

"Voices, do you hear voices in your head?" Draco interrupted in a rush, his face animated in a way Neville had never seen before.

Why was Draco so intent on knowing if Harry was the Dark Lord's horcrux? Neville thought it strange. And creepy.

The loud crack of apparition diverted their attention from the intense conversation (interrogation, more like) and sent their wands pointing at the new arrival. It was a thin, smiling house elf dressed in a clean, gray toga with the Malfoy rest emblazoned at the center.

"Dobby?" Draco said, "Why are you here? How did you find me?" Draco raised a hand before the elf could reply. "Never mind. I know, elf magic. Just tell me why you're here."

The elf named Dobby looked warily at Harry and Neville before motioning Draco to lean down. When Draco complied, the elf rose on tiptoes and whispered into his master's ear. Draco frowned, evidently not liking what he had been told. He straightened and looked down at the elf with stern eyes that reminded Neville of the current Minister for Magic.

"I must go to the Manor," Draco said, sounding baffled and irritated. "It's Toffler. He wants to talk. Said he didn't want to risk sending a letter."

Draco cursed and paced the floor, torn between waiting for Hermione to return and leaving to find out why James had asked for a meeting. Neville wasn't really surprised that James didn't use his crystal pendant to communicate with them. The crystals could only transmit short messages during emergencies, not long discourses. What surprised Neville was that Draco didn't immediately dismiss James' request. As far as he knew, the two weren't even on speaking terms.

"Send a message to Toffler when they get back," Draco said to Neville before turning to the fidgeting house-elf. "Come on, Dobby. Take me to the Manor." Dobby took Draco's outstretched hand and they both disapparated with a loud crack.

Neville almost sighed in relief. At least he only had one dangerous wizard left to baby-sit. Later, Neville would be even more thankful that Draco had left when he did and had not been there when the team that went to America came back through the Floo.

Because had the Slytherin Prince been there, all hell would have broken loose.

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Fred threw a shield charm on himself as soon as he landed on the Fawley fireplace, standard operating procedure for all Order members when entering unknown territory. What wasn't standard procedure was how he jumped out and rolled on the floor towards George right after. That was something he copied from the Muggle detective movies he used to watch with Lee Jordan.

"Always wanted to try that," he whispered to George with a wink. His twin rolled his eyes and snorted, but didn't say anything. Fred understood the unsaid message - put your game face on and be serious.

And George was right, no time for jokes now. This was not just unknown territory, this was dangerous territory. Deadly dangerous, in fact, considering that Bellatrix could already be in the vicinity. In Lorcan's list, Bellatrix's reinforcements were to arrive before midnight, which was also when they were supposed to attack the Fawley house. Clearly, the vicious witch didn't give a damn about schedules or reinforcements.

A soft whoosh behind him made Fred glance back to the fireplace. He'd expected to see Moody since Arthur and Sirius had come before them and were already stationed on each side of a dark, oaken door, wands drawn and ready for action. Fred blinked hard when he saw Abigail's slim form calmly stepping out of the fireplace.

"What are you doing here?" Fred said before he could stop himself.

The former Ilvermorny student shrugged, "I'm here to help."

Another whoosh and Moody was stepping out of the fireplace in swift angry strides, his wand pointed at Abigail's face.

"You are one tricky, little witch, aren't you?" Moody growled.

"You didn't let her come here?" Arthur said, frowning at Abigail.

"Of course not! The little trickster set up an explosion in the kitchen knowing that I would run to it and investigate. When I came back she was already engulfed in green flames. It was too late to pull her back without tearing her limb from limb."

"You tricked Moody? The legendary and feared Auror?" George said, his eyes glowing.

"Cunning," Sirius said, winking.

"A witch after my own heart," Fred said, falling to one knee. "Marry me, my lady."

"Oh, get up, you fool," Moody said, grabbing Fred by the scruff of his neck. He turned to Abigail and pulled her towards the fireplace. "You're going back, missy. I don't want to have you burdening us with your incompetence."

Abigail yanked her arm away and ran back to Fred's side. "Incompetence? You don't even know me. How can you judge me like that? Besides, I'm the only one in this group who's ever been here before. I know the layout of the place. We can do this faster with me leading," Abigail said, her eyes throwing daggers at Moody.

Fred's estimation of the blonde Slytherin princess just went up a notch higher. Beautiful and smart, with guts to match his own. He definitely wouldn't mind her slithering up to him.

Stop it, Fred! This is not the time!
"I hate to admit it, but she's right, Alastor," Arthur said. "She's the only one here who knows this place. We can move faster with her guiding us."

"I agree with Arthur. I also think she's very competent. She's one of the two people Snape trusted enough to fetch Harry, wasn't she? And much as I hate to credit that man with anything, I know he's not one to put his trust in incompetent people. I'm sure she can take care of herself, right, sweetheart?" Sirius said, winking at Abigail.

"Absolutely," Abigail said, winking back.

Oh, shit. She's so sassy! So...sexy...

Don't go there, Fred.

"Aright! Just don't slow me down, missy, or you're going to get it when we get home," Moody growled as he walked past Abigail and the twins.

"What's the plan then, Miss-" Sirius said.

"Abigail. Just call me Abigail," she said, looking nervous for the first time. "I...I don't really have a plan...besides getting to the children and leaving here in one piece."

"Guess we're on the same page then," Arthur said, smiling encouragingly at Abigail. Leave it to Dad to put everyone at ease even during the grimmest of times, Fred thought, his heart brimming with affection for his father.

"Let's start with how to get to them. Where are we right now?" Moody barked.

"This is Gordon's study. Just outside the door are the stairs that lead to the children's bedrooms. Let's hope they're all in one place."

"Okay. Let's disillusion ourselves. You lead the way, Abby," Sirius said.

Abigail smiled at Sirius and walked towards the door as they prepared to put disillusionment charms on themselves. Then, she turned to them and said, "Wait, how are you going to follow me if I can't be seen? I can't disillusion myself."

"I have an idea," George said, walking up to Abigail. He pulled out a thin, silver ribbon from his pocket and handed it over to Abigail. "Here, tie this around your finger after you cast the disillusionment charm so it won't be affected. I already put a special spell on it so it won't be noticed by anyone aside from the people who already know what to look for."

"Brilliant!" Abigail said, taking the ribbon from George. She placed it on a nearby table so it would not be affected by the disillusionment charm.

"What? You already finished that spell? And you didn't tell me?" Fred said, playfully punching his twin's shoulder.

"I just finished it last night! I forgot to tell you because of everything that's happened, okay? It wasn't intentional," George said in a rush, his cheeks blushing.

"Boys! Boys! Enough of that. We're running out of time," Arthur said. "But great job, both of you. I'm sure your mum will be proud that you've finally made something that doesn't cause physical pain on anybody."
"Enough of this chit-chat. Let's get going," Moody growled.

"Right! Remember, look for a floating silver ribbon and follow it," George said before casting a disillusioning himself.

Fred shivered as the spell washed over him. He never really liked that spell. It made him nauseous. When he looked up, the door was slowly opening, a tiny silver ribbon bobbing out into the hallway. He knew George was in front of him because he was the closest to Abigail when they were in the room. They were halfway through the hall when the silver ribbon abruptly stopped at the foot of the stairs, causing Fred to bump into George, who muttered a curse beneath his breath.

"Sorry," he whispered to George.

"Look to the right, but don't say anything," George whispered back.

Fred's heart clenched at the sight that greeted him. There were about a dozen masked Death Eaters scattered around the room, three of them standing behind a bloodied man suspended a few feet from the ground. His arms were stretched out on either side of him, as if tied to invisible ropes. It took Fred a couple of seconds before he realized that it was Leo, the American Auror they once met during an Order meeting. His face was beaten to a pulp and his arms, chest, and legs were cut in so many places blood was literally pooling on the pristine marble floors.

One of the Death Eaters hit Leo with a Crucio, sending his body into a grotesque mid-air dance. "Where is Harry Potter?" the Death Eater said. "It's better if you tell me now before Madame Lestrange returns. She's not as patient as I am. I promise to kill you quickly."

"Then you better do it now because I'm not telling you shit," Leo rasped.

The other Death Eaters laughed while the one torturing growled and sent Leo another Cruciatius, sending him writhing like a broken marionette in the air.

"Bellatrix is not here," George whispered.

"Is that good or bad?" asked Fred.

"Terribly bad if she's with the children," replied Abigail.

"We're going to get Leo. Find the kids," a voice he recognized to be Sirius whispered behind him. Fred grunted in response. His throat had closed up on him after hearing Leo screaming in pain again.

"Abby says we should move," George whispered to him, grabbing his arm.

"Okay," Fred croaked, his heart beating like drums inside his chest.

Shit! This is not going to end well.

They had barely reached the top of the stairs when they heard the tell-tale sound of hexes being exchanged. Apparently, not all of the Death Eaters were caught by surprise. Before long, a full battle was raging downstairs.

"We need to hurry," said Abigail. "Go to the boys' room at the end of the hall, I'll check in the girls' room. If you find them there, show yourselves and tell them you're with Abigail."

"What if they're not there?" Fred asked.
"Wait for me there. It's better if I do the searching," Abigail said after a beat.

"Okay. Be careful," Fred said before moving off with George, who should be just in front of Abigail. As if to confirm this, Fred felt a strong hand clamping around his arm.

"Be careful?" George chuckled softly. "You're losing your touch, brother."

"What's wrong with that? It shows that I'm a caring person."

"I wonder what hex Malfoy would throw at you when he finds out how caring a person you are to his girl," George snorted.

"Oh, shut it. We're here," Fred said, turning the doorknob as soon as they reached the boys' room. The room was dark and cold, but there were still smoldering embers in the small fireplace lending them a bit of light. It appeared to have been put out hastily, based on the smattering of embers on the carpeted floor, scorching it in several places. Pushing the door forward, Fred slipped inside and quickly stepped away to let George through. He could make out two bunk beds set against opposite walls, a desk near the door, and to his right, another door which probably led to a bathroom or walk-in closet.

"I'll look under the beds, you go check out what's behind that door," George said.

"Okay, get me when you find them," Fred said as he moved towards the small door.

It was a combination bathroom and walk-in closet. The shower stall was empty and Fred doubted if the kids would've been able to disillusion themselves even if they were not Squibs. The best hiding place would be the closets. But then, that would also be too obvious. And boys, Magical or not, don't always go for the obvious. He was pretty sure George wouldn't find them under the beds, either. He started to back out of the room when he noticed the large clothes hamper under the marble counter. It was big enough to hide a young boy. He touched his wand to the top of the hamper and silently chanted a special spell he and George developed to detect magic. He smiled when his wand vibrated. The hamper was locked from the inside and had an extension charm. Perhaps to hide more than one boy?

Fred removed the disillusionment charm on himself and knelt before the hamper, his cheek pressed against it. "If anyone's in there, my name is Fred and I'm here to help you. Abigail sent me. She's looking for the girls."

Even if the boys were talking amongst themselves, he knew he wouldn't hear them. Anyone wise enough to cast an extension charm on a hamper to hide the boys would surely put a silencing charm on it as well.

"Are they in there?" George said when he found Fred's face pressed into the hamper. He had also removed the disillusionment charm.

"Yes, but they're scared and won't come out. I think you better get Abby," Fred said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "Leo must've told them to never come out for anybody but him."

"That's going to be a problem. I'll get Abigail," George said, running out of the room. He came back within seconds. "Abigail's here with the girls."

Fred jumped to his feet to give Abigail room. "They're scared."

Abigail nodded and took Fred's place before the hamper. "Aaron? It's Abby. Are Brian and Jason with you in there?"
The words had barely left Abigail's lips when the cover was thrown open and a young boy with platinum blonde hair was jumping into Abigail's arms.

Godric's red socks! That kid could be mistaken for a Malfoy, Fred said to himself, wondering why the thought made him uncomfortable.


"No, but I'm taking you to him-"

"Jason! You shouldn't have leapt out like that. Good thing it's really Abby," a boy with wavy brown hair said as he stepped out of the hamper. He reached a hand inside and pulled up another boy with dark hair and glasses. "Leo told us to wait for him."

"Uhm, Leo's a bit preoccupied so he sent us instead. Now, girls hold hands," Abigail said, turning to the five girls behind her, one of them Fred recognized to be the girl in the mirror. "Fred and George will be your leaders. They will take you all to Gordon's study, remember that room? Good. You have to move as fast but as quietly as you can, okay? Straight to the study, no looking behind you or anywhere else. And don't let go of each other's hands, no matter what happens," Abigail said.

"Can't we put on disillusionment charms?" George asked.

"It might disorient the children. We can't risk causing a panic," Abigail replied as she started to walk away from them.

"Wait, aren't you coming with us?" Fred said, his gut twisting inside him. He didn't like where this was going.

"I'm going to help the others get away with Leo. Don't worry, I have a plan," she said, pulling a small pouch out of her pocket. Fred recognized it immediately, Peruvian Instant Darkness. His heart swelled with pride.

She patronizes our products! I think I'm in love!

"I know you two developed a spell that allows one to see through the darkness created by the powder-"

How did she know about that? We haven't even told Lee...

"-will meet you in the study, but if you can establish a connection to the Shack before we get there, don't wait for us. The children's safety is our priority. Fred, are you listening?"

Fred snapped out of his thoughts and nodded. He'll deal with this mystery later. "Of course. I'm all ears."

"Before we leave, I need you to promise me something."

"As long as it's not my firstborn. I kinda promised mum and she would really be pissed," George chuckled. Fred snorted and was amused when Abigail did the same.

"Nothing so drastic, you dolt. I just want you to promise not to wait for me if ever we get separated. And don't look for me, either. Just get out of here as fast as you can."

"But how will you get out of here? Where will you go?" George asked.
"We're in New York. I know the city like the back of my hand. And I know what you're going to ask, Fred. I'll find a way to get back to England. Just promise me those two things, please? No matter what happens, you are not to wait or look for me. I can take care of myself."

There was a pregnant pause, broken only the quiet sobbing of the girls. Jason wrapped his arms around Abigail and said, "Take care, Abby. Come back to us."

"I will, I promise," Abby said, kissing the top of the boy's head. "Are we all ready?"

"I'm ready to go. Hold on to my jumper you two and don't let go," Fred said to the two boys standing beside him. "Things might get scary for a while, but I'll take care of you."

"We have to hurry. Fred, can you please carry Jason? We can move faster that way," Abigail said.

"Sure, no problem," Fred said as he hoisted Jason into his arms.

"I don't scare easily," the blonde boy in Fred's arms said, his head tilted proudly.

"I know you don't," Fred said, ruffling the boy's hair. He had to push away the thought that he was holding Draco Malfoy in his arms.

"We're all set here, too," George said, his wand held high, two of the girls holding on to his jacket while the rest were holding each other's hands.

"Okay, let's move."

Abigail opened the door a crack and peeked outside. She gave them a nod to let them know that it's safe and slipped out the door without a word. George gave Fred a thumbs up and quickly stepped out with the girls. They were near the stairs when everything went dark. There were soft gasps from the girls, but the boys remained quiet. Only the tightening of their hands around Fred's jumper gave away their emotions.

The spell he and George created enabled them to see a few steps ahead of them, which helped with the navigation of the stairs. The darkness beyond thankfully aided keep the horrors of the battle still raging downstairs from the children. They didn't need to see how Magic could be used to hurt people. Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, they were able to move faster. George and the girls were just a few feet from the study when the darkness was suddenly dispersed by someone shouting a spell that Fred did not recognize. And just like that, they were exposed and defenseless.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Another bunch of redheads? Weasleys, I suppose?" a cold, throaty voice said, forcing Fred to turn to its source. A slender witch with curly, black locks and eyes just as dark was pointing her curved, knotted wand at them, a sinister grin twisting her lips.

Bellatrix Lestrange. In the flesh. Godric's socks, we're screwed, Fred thought. She looked as deranged as the stories made her out to be.

But what nearly stopped Fred's heart was not the sudden appearance of the infamous witch. It was seeing his father lying on the floor, stiff as a board.

"Oh, don't worry, young Weasleys. I just knocked him out. I have other plans for you lot. The Dark Lord would be so pleased," Bellatrix said, laughing maniacally.

That was when Fred noticed Sirius and Moody kneeling beside an unconscious and bloody Leo, their wandless hands raised above their heads. He also noticed that there were only five Death
Eaters standing behind them. All the rest were also laying on the cold marble floor, most of them, if not all, probably dead. Moody was not one to hold back.

"Uncle Leo," one of the girls sobbed.

"Ah, yes! The children. I knew you were hiding somewhere. Those two elves fought so hard to keep you safe. Stupid creatures, aren't they? They should've known they're no match for real wizards."

Bellatrix laughed when the girls started crying. "The poor, little things. Did I scare you?" Bellatrix said as she walked towards them, twirling her twisted wand. She was eyeing the blonde boy in Fred's arm with curiosity.

Setting Jason down on his feet, Fred shoved the boy behind him and pointed his wand at Bellatrix. He scanned the room for Abigail as quickly as he could, but he couldn't find her. Fred hoped that she had time to cast a disillusionment charm on herself. There's a better chance of her helping them escape if she stayed hidden.

"Stay away, Bellatrix. They're just kids," Fred said.

From the corner of his eye, he could see that George had his wand trained on the deranged witch as well.

Bellatrix pouted and pointed her wand at Fred, her eyes gleaming with evil intent. Excruciating pain hit Fred instantly, like hundreds of white-hot knives were slicing through every inch of his body, setting his blood aflame and his head to near bursting. His eyes would not open and he feared that he would soon bite off his tongue. He would never scream for this bitch!

By the time the pain lifted, Fred found himself on the floor, panting heavily, his wand a couple of feet away from him. The children were all crying. Jason had his arms wrapped around Fred's waist, soaking his jumper with tears.

I really should've practiced wandless magic!

"What brave boys you are, not even a pip. I'm going to enjoy breaking the both of you. Maybe I can look into those brilliant minds, too. See what secrets you're keeping from Auntie Bella. Oh, but look, you're bleeding," Bellatrix said with a fake sigh. "Bit off your tongues? Don't do that again. You still have to scream for me later. Yaxley, take the children with you. The Dark Lord might find some use for them yet. He does like young girls," Bellatrix laughed. She pointed her wand at Fred and smirked. White ropes flew out of it and wrapped around Fred's legs, immobilizing him. "Later, my pets."

"Let them go, Bellatrix. They don't know anything," Sirius rasped.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and turned to Sirius. "Trying to be noble, dear cousin? Like your stupid baby brother? I watched the lights go out of his eyes, did you know? I was there when the Dark Lord killed him. He was quite brave, actually. Took him almost three days to die. I wonder how long you can hold out under the Dark Lord's special curses."

"You bitch! I'm going to kill you with my bare hands," Sirius screamed. It took two of the Death Eaters to restrain him from lunging at Bellatrix.

"If you still have hands when the Dark Lord finishes with you," Bellatrix's laughter turned into a scream when her wand flew out of her hands.
"I wonder what the Dark Lord will do to you when he finds me dead by your wand," a female voice said. "I heard he's eager to meet me. I can call for him now, if you want."

Fred strained against his bindings to look up at the voice. It sounded familiar. His heart leapt when he saw who it belonged to. A girl with dark brown curls was standing behind the Death Eater she had immobilized, Bellatrix's wand pointing at the Dark Mark on his left arm. Four other wands were pointed at her, but she didn't seem to mind.

Hermione Granger. Where did she come from? Is she here with reinforcements?

"Well, look who's here. If it isn't the little bride-to-be. Eager to be with the future husband, are we?" sniggered Bellatrix. "Couldn't wait for Snape to surrender you to us?"

Bride-to-be? What's she talking about?

Confusion flitted across Hermione's face, but it was quickly replaced by a dangerous gleam in her eyes. She smirked at Bellatrix and pointed the tip of the latter's wand at her temple.

"Me for them, Bellatrix. Let them all go and you can have me," Hermione said.

"What are you doing, Miss Granger?" said Sirius.

"Damn it, girl. Don't be stupid! They'll kill you," growled Moody. The Death Eater behind him silenced with a hard blow to the head. The former Auror crumpled to ground.

"And what makes you think you can make my wand do your bidding?" Bellatrix sneered.

"Oh, I've done it before. I can do it again," Hermione said, smirking.

Fred saw Bellatrix's fingers twitch and even though her back was turned to him, he could still feel the murderous rage enveloping her. She must be thinking the same thing he was, how and when did Granger ever gain control of Bellatrix's wand?

"Yaxley, you're going to pay for this," Bellatrix muttered under her breath. "Alright, Mudblood. I will let them go. Come here so I can take you to your groom. As you said, he's very eager to meet you."

Eager to meet…

Godric's nuts! Voldemort is her intended? Gross!

Hermione visibly paled, as if realizing the same. But she quickly regained composure and gave Bellatrix a knowing grin. "I'm not stupid, Bellatrix. The moment you get your hands on me, you're going to kill them all. They're going to leave first."

"Smart. Oh, well, you're more valuable than all of these fools combined anyway. I guess our session will have to wait, young Weasley. Go help your father and the rest of his useless gang. Oh, yes, I forgot, I bound you. Little boy," she said, pointing a slender finger at Jason, "Get his wand and give it to him." Jason grabbed the wand from the floor and gave it to Fred. Before Fred could cast a stunning spell on Bellatrix, the witch's fingers were already wrapped around Jason's neck, her evil grin giving him chills. "No tricks, young Weasley, or I'll wring this little one's neck. I do know how to kill without magic," she cackled. "Now, get moving! Get your companions before I change my mind."

Fred pointed his wand at himself, muttered Finite and hobbled towards the others. His left foot
must've have twisted when he fell. He glanced up at Hermione, but her eyes were glued to Bellatrix. The look in them actually scared Fred. Taking his father's and Moody's hand in his, Fred apparated them into the study. After making sure that they were fine, he disapparated and went back for Sirius and Leo.

"He'll die if we apparate with him. Use levicorpus," Sirius said.

Fred nodded as he pointed his wand at the bloodied Auror and levitated him. Sirius paused when they reached Bellatrix, but the witch tightened her fingers around Jason's neck.

"Don't test me, cousin. We can kill each other some other time," Bellatrix chuckled when Sirius growled at her.

"Sirius, take George and the kids with you now," Hermione said. "Let go of Jason, Bellatrix or I'll kill myself with your wand. After I summon the Dark Lord here, of course."

Fred had to admire the guts of the Ravenclaw witch, her voice didn't betray even a hint of fear or doubt. It was, in fact, vibrating with a dangerous and barely controlled rage. Bellatrix apparently recognized that as well because she quickly shoved Jason away from her and raised her hands. Fred removed George's bindings and pulled his twin to his feet. George quickly grabbed the children toward him and ran for the study.

They had barely made it to the room when Fred heard Bellatrix drawl, "Crabbe, bind the Mudblood. Goyle, break her fall, you stupid oaf. We can't risk damaging the Dark Lord's prize."

Shit, Granger. What have you gotten yourself into?

As he was stepping through the door, Fred glanced back at Hermione. She was now bound from the neck down to her toes, but there was no fear in her eyes, just sadness. And she was staring intently straight at him. Fred felt a gentle nudge in his mind and he could've sworn that he heard her voice say, Tell Draco I'm sorry.

Before he could process that, however, Sirius was banging the door shut. He commandeered Fred's wand and sealed the oaken door with enchantments. He tossed the wand back to Fred when he was finished and sat in the nearest chair. The children were huddled in one corner, the older girls consoling the little ones, while the girl in the mirror sat beside Leo, sobbing softly.

"Hang on, Where's Abigail?" Sirius asked, his head swiveling around in search of the blonde witch.

Fred glanced at George, seeking support in telling Sirius about the promise they made to Abby, but his twin was already working at establishing connection in the fireplace. Jason had apparently found George's wand after he fell on the floor when Bellatrix shoved him away.

"She said to not wait nor look for her. That she'll get out on her own," Fred said.

"And you agreed to that?"

"She."

"Wait. Abigail knew she'd disappear because she told you not to wait nor look for her. After which Ms. Granger suddenly materializes out of the blue. Alone. The Order wouldn't have let her come here to rescue us on her own. She wouldn't even have been allowed to set foot inside a fireplace," Sirius paused, rubbing his chin. "Let's see what we have then...Abigail vanishes, Granger appears. That's just too fucking perfect to be a coincidence, don't you think?"
Fred felt like he had been doused with cold water. Why hadn't he realized that earlier?

"Never mind. We'll talk about it later," Sirius jumped to his feet and went to George. "Are you done yet? I want to get home fast so I can break Snape's fucking nose again. That Snivellus has been hiding too many secrets from us."

"Finished. The other side's open. I had to undo about a dozen of Moody's locking charms. Good thing I've had some practice breaking into locked fireplaces," George said, winking at Fred. "What's wrong?" He asked, sensing his twin's troubled thoughts.

"I'll tell you later. For now, let's get us all home," Fred said.

"Are we going to see Draco?" Jason asked, his eyes wide with hope.

"Absolutely," Fred said, wondering how the Slytherin Prince would take the news about Abigail's disappearance. Did he know who she really was? Of course, he did!

That's why Hermione asked him to tell Draco she's sorry.

And, by Godric, the Slytherin Prince wouldn't like that message one bit.

Not in a million years.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As you all must've noticed, most of the later chapters are composed of three to four segments, which take longer to write and edit. The next chapters might be shorter (one or two segments) so I can post them faster. :)

Comments? Violent reactions? Anything?
Pandemonium. It was the only word that came to Harry's mind the instant the Order arrived at the Shrieking Shack. The children were crying, Moody was snapping and cursing at everyone who got in his way, while the twins were arguing as they carried Leo between them. Harry, too, had to control his rage when he saw the state Leo was in. He had to tamp down his fury at how terrified the children were. If not for the rush of concern that washed over his volatile feelings, the Shack would have been a burning mess.

If not for Sirius' quick intervention, he would be a burning mess.

Sirius had taken over with a quiet authority that amazed Harry. He dispatched Neville to the Headmaster and assigned the twins to help the kids get settled in the upstairs bedrooms. They had calmed down after seeing Harry but were still shaken up by their earlier traumatic experience. Lanie didn't want to leave her uncle's side and only agreed to go with the other children when Harry promised that he would look after Leo himself. He was bursting at the seams with questions, especially after he noticed Hermione's absence. Still, Leo and the kids were the top priority, so he kept his inquiries at bay.

She would be arriving any minute now, he kept telling himself. It was only when Moody was sealing the fireplace that he broke his silence.

"What are you doing? Why are you closing it? Herm—, I mean, Abigail isn't here yet," he said, pushing the former Auror away from the fireplace.

"Sirius, control the boy," Moody growled, pushing Harry back.

"Get away from me," Harry said, shrugging Sirius' hands away.

"We have to seal it, Harry. We can't risk having Bellatrix's people following us here. She mustn't know about this place," Sirius said, pulling him away from Moody.

"What about Abigail? How will she get back? Why isn't she with you?"
Sirius glanced around as if looking for support, but Arthur was passed out on the couch and Moody was in too foul a mood to bother with questions. With a sigh, Sirius led Harry to the kitchen and sat him down the nearest chair.

"Tell me what happened out there, Sirius. Where's Herm-, er, Abby?"

"What do you know about her?"

"What do I know…Do we have time for this? Just get to the point, will you?" Harry said, frustration getting the better of him.

"Did you know that she was in disguise?"

Holy crap. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"She's not who she says she is, isn't she? She's not Abigail Adams because there is no Abigail Adams, is there?"

Harry wanted to protest, keep Hermione's secret intact, but Sirius shook his head like he had read Harry's mind. "Just tell me what happened, please?" he said in resignation.

Sirius took the seat opposite him and rubbed his eyes. He looked exhausted, as if he had run all the way from America, yet thrumming with barely controlled anger.

"We were almost done freeing Leo," Sirius said, leaning back in his chair. "Only three Death Eaters were left fighting us and we were winning."

"Why didn't you just kill them all?"

Sirius blinked as if surprised by how quickly he dismissed the previous topic. After a few beats, Sirius sighed and resumed recounting the fateful events in the Fawley townhouse.

"Well, my deranged cousin decided to make an appearance. She took us by surprise and disarmed us before we even knew she was there. We could've still escaped, even without wands. We do know how to use our fists, Harry. But we couldn't leave Leo or the kids. With us alive, there was a better chance of escaping together later."

"Where were the kids?"
"When we didn't see them in the hall with Leo, Abigail realized they must've had enough time to hide in the bedrooms upstairs, so we split up. She and the twins went to look for the kids while we went to rescue Leo," Sirius paused, his eyes glazing over the memory.

Harry cleared his throat, hoping to break into Sirius' reverie. The older man blinked and shifted in his seat, his voice shook when he spoke.

"They were making their way to the study when Bella saw them. The bitch crucioed the twins in front of the children. I'm sure they were traumatized by what they saw. I begged Bella to stop, but, of course, she only laughed at me. When she instructed Yaxley to take the kids, Miss Granger appeared out of nowhere," this time Sirius' eyes were sharp and focused on Harry, watching like a hawk. "She had somehow disarmed Bella and used her wand to immobilize Yaxley. Then, she threatened to summon Voldemort and kill herself with Bella's wand."

"WHAT? She did what?" Harry couldn't believe his ears.

"Bella's wand was pointed at the dark mark on Yaxley's arm. She told Bella that she would summon Voldemort and then kill herself with Bella's wand."

"What was she thinking?" Harry said, jumping to his feet. He found that pacing helped control his emotions and prevented any magical outbursts.

"It was brilliant. She knew Voldemort was looking for her and Bella would do anything to be the one to hand her over to him. By threatening herself, Bella had no choice but to agree to her demands. Miss Granger 'hostaged' herself, in other words. And she demanded that we all be released. Her, for all of us."

"What's so brilliant about that? She sacrificed herself for all of you. Bellatrix would have killed her by now!"

"That's what I thought, too, at first. But then, Ms. Granger seemed to know Bella quite well. My cousin was devoted to Voldemort, to the point of insanity. She would never go against his wishes. And if Voldemort wished to have Miss Granger for a bride-"

Harry stopped mid-stride and gaped at Sirius. "Wait. Did you say...bride? What in blazes are you talking about?"

"It's the reason why Voldemort was looking for her. He wanted to marry her."

Harry couldn't decide if Sirius was joking or not. If he was, he wasn't funny.

"Okay. Let me get this straight. Voldemort, aside from being a power-hungry bigot and the darkest wizard of all time, is also a pedophile?" Harry said, sitting back in his chair. His legs were turning to jelly. "That's so absurd!"

"Well, I don't know if he is a pedophile or not. Technically, Miss Granger is of marrying age. But that's beside the point. Voldemort must have heard of her abilities. He wants to have her under his wing. Someone like Miss Granger would make a powerful ally in the coming war. Or maybe he's going to use her to control the other Muggle-borns. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless he wants to marry her using the ancient rituals..."

"I don't understand. Is that even worse?" Harry said, more confused than ever.
Before Sirius could reply, however, Neville was walking up to them, followed by Headmaster Snape and Emmet Fawley, whose face was pale and drawn. The Headmaster, seeing Arthur stirring awake, broke from the group and went to him.

"Sirius, our house elves, Mimsy and Twinkle, are they okay?" Emmet said, walking up to Sirius. He slumped into one of the chairs when he saw Sirius' face. The sadness in the older man's eyes was enough of an answer.

"I'm sorry, Emmet. Bella said they protected the children with their lives," Sirius said.

"I have to get them. They must be buried here," Emmet's voice was shaking, but the fury in his eyes was unmistakable.

"It's too dangerous to go back there," Sirius protested.

"I have my ways. I can get into the house without being seen. Don't worry, I can take care of myself. Just don't tell my dad, please. He must stay with Prof. Dumbledore. Mum already left for France yesterday. She's staying with her friends in Beauxbatons where she's safe. I'll send a message as soon as I get there," Emmet said, tapping his chest before running out of the room. Harry wondered what it meant. Then, he remembered the crystal pendant Daphne had shown him once. He now regretted not asking Hermione for one.

"I'm going to ask Poppy to come here and look after Leo. We can't risk bringing him to Hogwarts," the Headmaster was saying when Sirius jumped up and ran towards him. Thankfully, Neville was quick on his feet and was able to step in front of Sirius before he could reach the Hogwarts Headmaster.

"Step aside, Neville. That git deserves to have a broken nose," Sirius growled at Neville, but the Resistance leader only shook his head.

"No more violence, Sirius," Neville said, folding his arms into his chest.

"What have I done now, you mangy mutt?" Snape said, smirking.

"Fuck you, Snivelus! Your secrets are going to get us all killed. Had I known that the blonde girl wasn't actually who she said she was, I would've stunned her myself to keep her here," Sirius spat.

"Give me your wand, Neville. If I can't bash that git's nose in, I'll just turn it into a giant pumpkin!"

"Don't worry, Black. I might not even have a nose when I get back. If I ever get back. You seem to forget that with Ms. Granger now in the Dark Lord's hands, my cover might very well be blown. The Dark Lord will not be so happy to learn the circumstances by which she was captured. Who do you think is going to bear the brunt of that unhappiness, hmm?"

Sirius' eyes were still blazing, but his aggressive stance had lessened. Harry understood. They had been so caught up in the day's events they'd forgotten the possible consequences for the Hogwarts Headmaster. Voldemort would want to know why Hermione was not in Hogwarts when the Headmaster said that she was still recuperating from her illness. That alibi would also be questioned now and might be seen for what it was - a ploy to keep her from Voldemort's hands. Neville had explained to Harry why Hermione must keep her disguise even after their mission to America was finished and why Prof. Snape was hiding her in Hogwarts. No one needed to explain to him why the Headmaster was now in deep trouble. This could well be the last time they'd see him alive and it saddened Harry. In the short time he'd known Severus Snape, he'd come to admire him. He wasn't the most amicable of men, but he had more courage than three men put together. Why he would risk his life every day to spy on the Dark Lord for the Order, Harry would never
"Has he summoned you yet?" Arthur said as he walked towards them with the help of Moody. "I'm sorry, I don't seem to react very well to the binding curse Bellatrix used on me," he said, noticing the wary looks on their faces.

"Nobody reacts well to any of Bella's hexes," said Sirius.

"I must be getting old," Arthur sighed, taking the chair Harry vacated.

"No, you're not. Bellatrix's curses are more potent because they're always laced with evil intent," the Headmaster said, "Their after-effects also last longer. You really should check everyone she's hexed. They might not be feeling well either."

"I'll go look in on Fred and George. Bella used her special binding spells on them, too," Sirius said, rushing out of the room. Moody followed him, while Arthur slumped back in the chair with closed eyes. Neville had turned to the stove and was brewing tea.

"Mr. Potter, a word?" Prof. Snape said, tilting his head towards a corner of the room.

Harry came forward with a heavy heart, afraid that the Headmaster was going to say a final goodbye. "What is it, Headmaster?" he croaked.

"I'm not dead yet, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said with a smirk, but his eyes looked both sad and amused.

Harry wondered how the man could manage two contradictory emotions in one expression. "And I hope you stay that way for a long time, Headmaster."

"As do I. However, that is not what I want to discuss with you. I assume you're aware that Miss Adams and Draco are somewhat...involved...and that Ms. Adams is in truth, Miss Granger. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Headmaster. I knew from the first night we stayed at Mr. Fawley's house."

Prof. Snape nodded. "Good. Then, I must ask you to talk to Draco and keep him away from Ms. Granger. Do not let him go looking for her. She will be safe for the time being."

"For the time being? What do you mean?"

The Headmaster hesitated, but said in the end, "Albus will meet with the Order tomorrow. He will take care of everything."

"But...why entrust Draco to me? We're not that close. I'm not even sure he trusts me."

"Oh, he trusts you, Mr. Potter, more than you know."

Harry hid his surprise and said, "He won't listen to me. He probably won't listen to anybody anyway because his girl is in danger."

"Then, tell him the only way he could save her is if he controlled himself. Tell him to use his brain, not his heart. I will do the same if I ever get the chance to see him. If I'm not back within 24 hours," the Headmaster lifted a hand when Harry tried to protest, "If I'm not at Hogwarts by tomorrow night, ask Draco to take you to my quarters. Only the two of you must know about this, no one else," Headmaster Snape said, pressing something metallic into Harry's hand. "It's the key to
one of the desk drawers in my office. Draco will know what to do. Just in case his brain is still fogged up with sentimental nonsense, remind him that the future of Ms. Granger, and the whole bloody wizarding world, depends on his knowledge of a different time. Don't worry, Mr. Potter, he will understand what that means."

"What if he doesn't come back here?"

"You mean he was here earlier?"

"He was, but Dobby came to bring him to Malfoy Manor to-"

"He's at the Manor now?" the Headmaster hissed at Harry's nod. "For Salazar's sake! Why did Draco have to go there now of all times?"

"I-I think one of the students wanted to talk to him," Harry replied, afraid he'd just put someone in trouble. He almost sighed in relief when the Headmaster's face cleared.

"Bloody hell. I'd forgotten about that. Let's just hope Draco doesn't get wind of what happened to Ms. Granger before you get to talk to him. I must tell Neville to warn the others from sending messages about through those damned crystals." Prof. Snape heaved a deep sigh and shook his head, "I'll leave word with Mr. Zabini, just in case Draco doesn't turn up here. He's bound to go to his dorm room at one time or another. If you don't see him within the day, send word to Mr. Zabini. He'll know where to find Draco."

"Okay, I'll do that. Anything else, Headmaster?"

"I think that's all for now, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster paused, his eyes filled with sorrow and something Harry couldn't identify. "You do have your mother's eyes," Prof. Snape said, his voice barely a whisper. A moment passed before the Headmaster shook himself and said solemnly, "Stay strong, Mr. Potter. The war is almost here."

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat and smiled. "You, too, Headmaster. I'm looking forward to fighting Voldemort with you by my side."

The Headmaster nodded and turned on his heels, his dark cloak billowing behind him. Harry prayed to all the gods that it would not be the last time he would see the Hogwarts Headmaster, the bravest and loneliest man he'd ever met.

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Narcissa Malfoy could always tell if something was bothering her husband. After being with him for more than two decades, she would not consider herself a good wife if she couldn't. And tonight, he was seething. Despite his perfectly calm exterior, he was as tense as a tightly wound clock. It was in the rigidity of his posture, in how his breathing was too shallow, how his narrowed eyes hardly blinked, how he ignored his favorite goblet of Superior Red though it had been cradled in his hand for the best part of the hour, little things only a wife would notice and understand.

Her husband might appear cold and distant to other people, but he had always been kind and, on rare occasions, even affectionate to her. Their marriage had been arranged by their parents, but that didn't prevent Narcissa from falling in love with the tall and dashing heir of the Malfoy clan. In truth, Narcissa never thought Lucius would choose her for his wife. She wasn't a legendary beauty like Bella, nor as charming and witty as Dromeda. She was more like a watered-down version of both and always in their shadows. To be wed to Lucius was an accomplishment in itself for Narcissa. And for the first few years of their marriage, she was content. Somewhat happy even.
Especially after Draco's birth.

Lucius wasn't the fawning, romantic husband she had dreamt of as a girl, but he loved her in his way. She was sure of that. Even after he became more focused on expanding the 'Malfoy Empire' (as he liked to call their conglomeration of business interests and properties) than his small family, she never regretted marrying Lucius. The only regret she ever entertained in their marriage was her inability to bear him more children. Lucius never said anything about it, nevertheless, she knew he did want more than one child. Draco, too, would have been happier growing up with at least one brother or sister. She did enjoy having Dromeda and Bella for sisters. All three of them were close once. Until Dromeda decided to go against the Black family tradition and married a Muggle-born. Bella, ever the 'good' daughter, wholeheartedly supported their parents' decision to disown Dromeda, while Narcissa, being the youngest, just went along with her family's wishes.

Which was also what she had been doing from the moment she married Lucius. She followed his every wish and every command without complaint. Because that's what she had been taught to do. She had also been taught that Purebloods were superior to everyone else and that Muggle-borns were not to be trusted. They were either anomalies of nature or thieves who stole Magic from unsuspecting witches and wizards. Lately, however, she'd been having doubts. She could not tell Lucius, of course. He would never hurt her, but it would put a big dent in their otherwise tranquil, if not perfect, marriage. A wife's place was beside her husband, always supportive of his views and beliefs. Or at least that's what her mother had drummed into her brain for as long as she could remember. She never had the guts to challenge her mother then, was it any surprise that she couldn't challenge her husband now?

As the years went by, Lucius' interests went beyond making the Malfoys the richest Pureblood family in England. He wanted power as well. And in his search for it, he was dazzled by the rhetoric of a charismatic rising wizard calling himself Lord Voldemort. This new mentor promoted Pureblood Supremacy fanatically, further ensnaring her husband to his cause. Lucius had become so obsessed with the Dark Lord's dream of a New World Order, he went as far as risking everything they had - their reputation, their fortune, their lives.

All in the name of blood purity.

I wonder how Lucius would take the news that his only son and heir had at one time fancied a Muggle-born? She thought, smiling to herself. He would be driven to apoplexy, she almost laughed, quickly catching herself when Lucius' eyes swiveled to her.

"What is it that you find so amusing, Cissy?" he asked with a raised brow.

"Oh, nothing, dear. I was just reading Rita Skeeter's column," she said, swiftly folding the paper in her lap at Lucius' frown.

"I still don't understand why you enjoy wasting your time reading that rubbish. She hardly qualifies as a journalist. I will talk to the Prophet's Editor-in-Chief and have her dismissed. She should be banned from writing anything besides her name. Probably not even that. The woman is a disgrace to the world of journalism."

Narcissa laughed, relieved at having diverted her husband's attention, even if temporarily, to something as trivial as Rita Skeeter's writing skills. "Leave the poor woman alone, Luci. She also needs to eat, you know. And she's amusing at times."

Lucius snorted. "Hah! Amusing my arse. She's a menace if you ask me. Remember that time when she wrote about the-"
The sudden flaring of flames in the fireplace stopped Lucius mid-sentence. His eyes grew sharp when a man's face appeared floating in the blaze.

"Lucius? Are you there? This is urgent," the floating head said. It was Garvin Flint, a frequent visitor to the Manor.

Narcissa was already on her feet by the time Lucius turned to her with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Cissy. I have to take this. Do you mind-"

"Of course not, sweetheart. I was planning on turning in for the night, actually," she said, walking over to Lucius to kiss her husband goodnight.

"Sleep well, Cissy. Don't wait up for me, I might be going back to work," Lucius said, kissing her back. There was a flash of fear in his eyes, which worried Narcissa.

"I understand," she replied, her hand going to Lucius' cheek. Her husband turned to it instinctively and kissed her palm. Narcissa smiled and abruptly turned away from him, not wanting Lucius to see her concern. It would only add to his burdens.

When she pulled the door shut though, she didn't immediately leave. She stood outside her husband's study, leaned her head against the wall and tapped it with her wand twice. The voices inside were instantly amplified. She could hear everything that was being said by her husband and his caller.

"Thank Salazar you're home, Lucius. We have a big problem," Garvin was saying.

"What is it, Flint? Has one of our spies been captured?" Lucius asked, his voice edgy.

Spies? Who is he spying on?

"Worse. He has the Granger girl."

Narcissa gasped. Thankfully, the sound was covered by the sound of glass shattering. Her husband must've hurled his goblet at the wall.

"How did this happen? I thought Severus was supposed to bring her to him on Friday? Was he that anxious to gain the Dark Lord's praise?"

"No, it wasn't him. It was Bellatrix who brought the girl to the Dark Lord. Said she captured her during her mission in America."

"America? What was Miss Granger doing there? I thought she was in Hogwarts?"

"I'm not too clear on the details yet. My man contacted me as soon as he heard. You're probably going to be summoned soon. Prepare yourself."

"Damn it! We're so close, Flint," Lucius said, his voice breaking with rage.

Narcissa didn't like the sound of that. So close to what? What were they planning?

"I know. We just have to adapt, I suppose. You still might be able to swing this in our favor. Remember how the Dark Lord wants to marry the Granger girl using the old ways? To bind her Magic to him permanently? He's relying on your help on that, isn't he?"

What? The Dark Lord wants to marry an eighteen-year-old girl? What a pervert!
She didn't like to ponder on what Draco's reaction to that would be. Miss Granger had been Draco's crush since their third year. Maybe even before that. Boys only incessantly talked about girls they liked. Even if just to complain about how 'awful' they were. And Draco couldn't shut up about her. It was always Granger did this or Granger did that. But then, he also had Abby. She's living proof that Draco had finally got over his childhood crush. Or had he?

"Yes. My family is probably the only one left who knows how to perform the old rituals because everyone's afraid of a little dark magic nowadays. I can buy us a bit of time to formulate a plan to extricate the girl. We'll meet after he summons me. I want to know first if he's willing to go through the whole ritualistic wedding. If he's not, we'd have to mobilize within twenty-four hours. Set-up everything, Flint. We'll stick to Plan A for now."

*If there's a Plan A, there's a Plan B. How many plans do they have?*

"Understood. We'll be waiting for your instructions."

"Do you know where they're taking her?"

"Now I know where I got my penchant for eavesdropping," a soft voice whispered into Narcissa's ear, making her jump. Grabbing Draco's arm, she propelled her son away from the door and into the empty ballroom down the hall. Narcissa locked the door with magic and placed imperturbable and silencing spells on it. No one would even know they were inside.

"Why didn't I recognize you coming through the wards?" she said, turning to Draco.

"Well...maybe because I asked a house-elf to apparate me into the Manor?" Draco said, smiling sheepishly. "The elves are allowed to do that, aren't they?"

"It was Dobby, wasn't it? I'm seriously thinking of taking him back from you."

"You know you can't do that, Mother. You already gifted him to me. A house elf, once gifted to someone, cannot be recalled by the gifter without the giftee's permission," Draco said with a smirk. "And I will never give my permission."

"Alright! Enough about gifters and giftees. Dobby will never return to me anyway. What I'd like to know is why you're here. Did Severus let you leave Hogwarts?"

Draco's eyes shifted away from her and said, "Naturally. I wouldn't be here if he didn't."

*He's lying. Draco could never look her in the eye when he lied.*

"You haven't answered my question. Why are you here on a school day?"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am, son," Narcissa said, squeezing Draco's hand. "I just find it strange that you're allowed to leave Hogwarts whenever you feel like it."

"I needed to get something from my room."

"Why didn't you just ask Dobby to bring it to you?"

"I forgot where I put it. I have to search for it myself," Draco said, eyes on his shoes.

"And you couldn't wait for the weekend to get it?"
"No. It's for a school project due on Friday."

"I see. Well, I suppose that's why Severus let you leave," Narcissa said. "He's a bit zealous about school work."

"Why were you eavesdropping on Father? Finally believing the rumors about his mistresses?" Draco said, wiggling his brows.

Narcissa smiled. Draco was baiting her, hoping for a distraction. "You know very well your father would never take on a mistress. He's too proud to stoop to that level."

It's true. Lucius considered keeping a mistress distasteful. He was prudish in that area.

"Or maybe because he hasn't found a fitting Pureblood witch willing enough to be his mistress? He's rather too proud about his blood status, too, isn't he?" Draco said with a smirk, his tone turning venomous.

And there it was. The big wedge between him and his father. Blood purity.

"Do not talk like that about your father, Draco. Not to me," she said icily. It pained her when the two argued, but more so when Draco made his feelings for his father crystal clear.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Draco said. He wasn't apologizing for what he said about his father, only for offending her, that much she understood.

"Is it just you or is Abigail in your room?" Narcissa said, changing the subject.

Draco blushed. "N-no, it's just me."

"Why didn't you bring her? I do enjoy her company. I think you two fit perfectly." Another blush, brighter this time. Oh, Cissy. Draco's in love! She could almost hear Dromeda's teasing voice. She was always the romantic in the family.

"Uh...she's busy with school work. Catching up on all those lessons she missed before transferring," Draco said, still averting his eyes.

More lies. Why was he lying so much?

"You should stay the night. Have breakfast with us. I mean, with me. Have breakfast with me," she said, silently berating herself when Draco's eyes turned hard again.

"I really should go, Mother. I don't want the Headmaster thinking that I'm abusing his trust. Maybe I can come back this Saturday with Abby," he said, smiling. It didn't reach his eyes.

Three lies in a row. What was he up to?

She could use Legilimency on him, but Draco's also a natural Occlumens like her. It would be a futile exercise. And would only infuriate Draco. Perhaps she should test her theory.

"How's Miss Granger? I heard she's almost fully recovered."

Draco's eyes flashed with danger, strengthening Narcissa's suspicions.

"Why are you asking about her?" he asked, raising a brow at his mother.

"I was just wondering if she'd be staying with us, too. She's a Muggle-born, after all, isn't she? And
a very gifted one, I heard. You did hate her for beating you more than once in your classes.”

There was irritation in Draco's voice when he answered. "Hate is too strong a word to use, Mother. I just didn't like being bested by her. It's embarrassing."

"Because you're a Malfoy and she's a Muggle-born?" Narcissa said, watching her son's reaction closely.

"No, because I'm an arrogant and competitive arse-"

"Language, dear," Narcissa said, patting Draco's cheek. "You don't have to defend yourself to me. I understand you better than you think, son."

Draco's smile reached his eyes this time. He was amused. "I'm not sure if I should be thankful for that or not," he chuckled. "It's scary when someone can see through you."

"I will always protect you, Draco. You know that, don't you?"

"I know. And that scares me, too," he said, kissing her forehead. "I'm sorry, but I have to get going now. Still, need to search my room, you know."

"Okay, son. Tell Dobby to apparate you back to Hogsmeade."

"How did you know that's where we came from?"

"Well, that's the closest apparition point to Hogwarts, isn't it? I haven't forgotten the things I've read in 'Hogwarts, A History'," Narcissa said, chuckling.

"Oh, right! Right, then. Goodbye, Mother. Take care of yourself, okay?" Draco said, kissing her cheek.

"You take care of yourself. And don't get into trouble," she said, waving her wand to undo the charms on the door.

"Always, Mother," he said, winking as he walked away from her.

Narcissa watched as her only son slipped out the door, fear twisting her insides. How she wished she could always be there to protect him from the evils of this world, but she couldn't. He wasn't a child anymore. She knew in her heart that he was involved in something dangerous and it concerned the girl, she now was sure, he not only admired but loved.

If only her instincts were wrong, just this one time. Unfortunately, a mother's instincts hardly ever were.

And her instincts as a mother were telling her that her job was to do everything in her power to help her son, whether he liked it or not - no matter the consequences.

But first, she must find Miss Granger.

***************

Draco knew in his heart that his mother was troubled about something. Finding her eavesdropping on his father was sufficient proof. She did that only when she's worried. His joke about his rumored mistresses was an attempt to make her talk about what she'd overheard. She usually did,
which was actually how Draco knew so much about his father's dealings. She didn't bite this time, though. She evaded and even became angry when he forgot to hold back his distaste for his father's pure-blood mania. That surprised Draco. She hardly ever defended Lucius from him anymore. And she was defending him this time, no doubt about it.

Still, that wasn't what tipped him off. It was in how she brought up Hermione from out of the blue. Hermione wasn't a taboo subject between them, but whenever the name Hermione Granger was inserted into a conversation, it was him doing the inserting. His mother would quietly listen as he ranted about the insufferable, bushy-haired, Know-it-all from Gryffindor House. She would smile and nod, or sometimes frown, depending on what opinion he was expressing concerning Hermione. Except for that time when she subtly teased him about Hermione in front of Abigail (which was quite embarrassing), he'd never heard his mother even mention her name to him. Now she was asking about her? Something wasn't right, he could feel it in his bones. Had his mind not been too preoccupied, he would've had no trouble deciphering his mother's unusual behavior. Unfortunately, Toffler couldn't have picked a worse time to summon him to the Manor. Draco had been trying to reach Hermione through their linked rings, just to be sure that she was okay, but his ring didn't even blink in response. How could he focus on whatever Toffler was about to say if his brain was elsewhere?

And that irradiated him to no end. Severus really shouldn't have made him Toffler's contact. He understood why his old Potions professor chose him - he was the only one who could go in and out of the Manor without raising any suspicions. However, Draco believed that Severus should've found a better way to get in touch with the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, one that didn't involve him. He could sense Toffler's dislike for him the couple of times they talked and it ran deeper than the usual House rivalry. Could they've been enemies in this timeline? But if they were, Toffler wouldn't have agreed to search for the time-turner. He would've thrown the request in Draco's face. Could he have agreed out of fear? He was, after all, the Minister's son and Toffler couldn't be a hundred percent sure if his open hatred for his father was genuine or not.

No, Toffler agreed to help him because Severus assured him Draco was worthy of his trust. Gryffindors put a premium on trust and Severus had Toffler's. Draco smiled, it was good to know the Severus Snape of this timeline wasn't as hated as the man in their original one. He just hoped this Snape wouldn't suffer the same fate as the other one did.

Draco, setting aside all other thoughts, cleared his mind as best as he could. Hermione would always be in the background, albeit locked behind his impenetrable defensive walls. He couldn't risk walking around the Manor with a cluttered brain when he didn't know who he would run into. His thoughts were safe from his father. Lucius' Legilimency skills wouldn't even breach the weakest, mental walls he had. It was a habit he carried over from the time Voldemort turned the Manor into Death Eater Headquarters. Even though the Manor in this timeline was free of Voldemort's dark presence, he still must not relax his guard. Better safe than sorry, as Hermione used to say.

Enough! Keep her behind closed doors.

When he stepped into the hidden hallway behind his father's study, Toffler was already there waiting for him. This was the safest place in the Manor for a clandestine meeting. Only he, and now Toffler, knew how to access this area. Soon, the others would also know, but not until the Order had a finalized, smooth-as-a-baby's-arse plan for their escape. This passageway, as he had assured Severus, would take them to a tunnel connected to an underground cave beyond the wards of the manor. He hadn't told Toffler yet. He feared giving him that information now could end in disaster, considering how foolishly audacious Gryffindors usually were. Case in point - his very own Gryffette.
"Don't go there, Draco."

"I know!"

"Sorry to call you here this late, but I have information the Order must have before it's too late," James said without preamble. The Gryffindor captain seemed upset.

"It's fine. Just tell me what it is so I can leave immediately. I need to get back to-"

"Hermione's a Gaunt and Voldemort is planning to marry her," James blurted out.

Draco froze. If Toffler was joking, he would pummel the stupid fool to the ground and stomp on his bloody mouth. "What the fuck are you talking about, Toffler?" he snapped.

James glared at him and shook his head in frustration. "You don't believe me, do you? Well, Voldemort found out about Hermione's lineage. She's descended from the Gaunts. Meryll told us what the tests they did on us were for. They were using our blood to trace ancestry. Your father said that Voldemort wants to bind Hermione's magic to his own because she's a Gaunt, related to Salazar Slytherin like himself. The Minister also said that if Voldemort gets to bind his magic with hers, he would be unstoppable."

Draco's heart was pounding like mad. His instincts were right. There was something more to Voldemort's obsession with Hermione than wanting her to join his army. The Order's plan had been for Snape to take Hermione to Voldemort before his ultimatum expired. Then, the other Order members would ambush them during the exchange and 'abduct' Hermione. It was too dangerous, to begin with, but with this new development, it had become insanely precarious. If they went ahead with the plan, Voldemort would make sure that Hermione was captured and her would-be-abductors slaughtered to the last man. Draco must not let that happen. Had he not been so well-trained in keeping his face emotionless, his torment would've been displayed in full glory. Toffler must not know about his feelings for Hermione. Not yet, anyway. Not until Toffler was safely away from people who could torture the truth out of him.

Fuck! Did Severus know about Voldemort's real plan for Hermione?

"I'll relay your message to the Order as soon as I get back to Hogwarts," Draco paused. He hoped he was wrong in thinking that Toffler wasn't searching for the time-turner. "What about the object I asked you to find?"

The Gryffindor Quidditch captain looked away and shook his head. "I tried, but it's really hard to look for something when you don't even know what it is you're looking for. I wanted to examine the other books in your father's study tonight, but he was already there with a visitor when I arrived. It took me a while to get away from the group unnoticed."

Well, at least he tried, Draco thought. It was a long shot, anyway. Toffler would have to be extremely lucky for him to find something he hadn't seen before. Still, if there ever was an instance that Draco needed a time-turner, this was it. The time-turner would instantly take them away from here, solving all their problems in a flash. No more Voldemort, no more fearing Hermione would be forced to take that hideous monster for a husband.

No more fucking Dark Lord. Period.

"You must try again, Toffler. That object would change our futures."

And indeed it would, his and Hermione's, particularly. Draco couldn't remember what happened to their timeline's James Toffler after the war. He wasn't in the list of casualties, nor was he indicted
for war crimes (very few Gryffindors joined the Dark Lord's side during the Second Wizarding War), so he had probably just left Wizarding Britain and went to live with his Muggle parents.

"Shouldn't we concentrate on keeping Hermione safe instead of looking for some-"

"That's the Order's (he almost said my) job, not yours," Draco said, irritated by Toffler's blatant show of concern for Hermione. "If there's nothing else, I'll be leaving," he said, itching to get away from Toffler so he could go back to the Shack and await Hermione's return. If he must kidnap her again to keep her safe, he would do it without blinking. Hopefully, without a wand, too. He did swear to not turn his wand on her again—

"There's something else, actually," James said, pulling Draco from his thoughts. "Do you know what a Horcrux is?"

What a freaking coincidence. Potter and I were just talking about Horcruxes before I left.

"I do. Why do you ask?"

"It's one of the things your father and his visitor were discussing. Your father said that Uhm, let me see...they needed to find the last Horcrux and destroy it. After that, he would be vulnerable. Unfortunately, your father never said who the 'he' was."

Oh, gods Hermione. I wish you were here! You know more about this than I do.

"It doesn't matter. The Order will know," he said, his mind already going to the page from Regulus' diary. He must find out what that last Horcrux was and destroy it. "I must go now. Look for the object, Toffler, and keep your eyes and ears open. Tell Dobby to find me when you have new information," Draco said, turning to walk back the way he came.

"Tell them to protect Hermione," James called after him.

Draco paused mid-stride and took a deep breath. He so wanted to tell the nosy Gryffindor to shove his concern up his arse, but he swallowed the angry words in his throat and let it pass. No sense arguing with a disillusioned fool.

"She's their Golden Girl. Of course, they'll protect her," Draco said, glancing back at James. "Take care of the others and stop worrying about her." She's not your concern, he wanted to add. James nodded, but his eyes were worried. Draco ignored the lovesick Gryffindor pup and walked out of the secret passageway with clenched fists, the only visible sign to his turbulent emotions.

Why are all these fucking arseholes panting after my girl? First, Potter, now Toffler, and even Voldemort? What the fuck is going on?

He didn't need to get anything from his room, but he went there anyway. It was the best place to summon Dobby and get apparated to Hogsmeade without triggering the wards. He was still reeling from the bombs that Toffler dropped on his lap and wasn't paying attention to his surroundings when he heard a voice he often dreaded.

"Why, if it isn't my beloved nephew skiving off school. Finally got bored with Hogwarts, eh boy?" Bellatrix cackled, sending chills down Draco's spine.

He took a deep breath and hurriedly reinforced his mental locks before turning to his dangerously perceptive aunt. She never used Occlumency on him without his permission, but it wouldn't harm to be careful. "Aunt Bella, what a pleasant surprise," he said as he walked over to where Bellatrix was standing. He leaned down to give her a quick peck on the cheek and a fakely-affectionate hug.
"What brought you here?"

His aunt's eyes were twinkling with mischief as she twirled a lock of hair with her long fingers, not a very good sign. It meant that she had been wreaking havoc, like torturing some poor soul with her special hexes.

"You must congratulate me, dear nephew. I just brought glory to this family again," Bellatrix said, sashaying away from Draco.

He didn't like the sound of that. "Congratulations, Aunt Bella. I'm sure you deserve it." What could his deranged aunt be gloating over?

"Where's Lucius? I want to personally deliver the good news to him."

"I don't know—"

"I'm right here, Bella. What news are you so eager to deliver to me?"

Draco silently cursed his rotten luck. It was bad enough running into Aunt Bella, but seeing his father at the same time compounded his misfortune. Lucius would, at the very least, be suspicious of his son's sudden appearance at the Manor. As a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, Lucius would've known that the rule preventing students from leaving Hogwarts to go home whenever they pleased hasn't been repealed. He would be curious how Draco was able to circumvent that rule.

Slowly turning to face his father, Draco braced himself for a severe tongue lashing. Miraculously, it didn't come. Lucius' eyes were focused on Bellatrix and gave Draco only a cursory glance that wasn't even harsh. He should be thankful for that, yet he couldn't help but think that something was amiss. His father's posture gave away nothing, he looked calm and collected like always. Still, Draco sensed the tension rippling in the air.

"Lucius darling, so nice to see you," Bellatrix cooed. "I've just been telling Draco about the honor I brought to our family again."

"Our family? I wasn't aware that you're part of this family, Bella. Correct me if I'm wrong, but your last name is Lestrange, not Malfoy, isn't it?" Lucius said, smirking.

Anger flashed in Bellatrix's eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared. "Of course it is. But Rodolphus doesn't mind. I doubt if he even has a mind," Bellatrix snickered, "You know how much I hate being associated with his worthless family, Lucius. I'd rather give the honor to my...sister's...family."

Lucius was clenching his jaw so hard Draco feared his molars would be crushed. Why was his Aunt Bella acting like this anyway? Was she still bitter that Lucius chose his mother over her? It couldn't be because she loved him, Bellatrix was not capable of that. The only reason Draco could think of was his father's current standing in the Dark Lord's organization. Rodolphus Lestrange was not a very smart man, nor was he ambitious. Even with Aunt Bella's prodding and occasional assistance, he would never rise to Lucius Malfoy's level, which made him dirt in his wife's eyes. To Bellatrix, a man's worth was measured by his power and influence. Rodolphus had neither.

"Tell us then, Bella. What 'honor' should the Malfoy family be thanking you for now?"

If looks could kill, both would be lying dead on the floor.

"Oh, nothing much, Lucius," Bellatrix said, slowly walking towards Lucius, her hips swaying with
every step. "Just the honor of giving the Dark Lord his heart's greatest desire."

"Really? And what do you know about the Dark Lord's heart and its desires?"

Bellatrix sneered as she stood before Lucius, her hand reaching out to touch his chest. Lucius stepped back and raised a perfect eyebrow at his pouting sister-in-law.

"Still jumpy, I see," she giggled, "I know how to delve into men's hearts, my dear Lucius. The Dark Lord is no exception. Although, I must admit he gave away the challenge when he expressed his desire to have the Granger girl for his bride quite explicitly."

Draco's world stopped spinning. He didn't like where this was going. Toffler had warned him about Hermione's newly discovered lineage and how Voldemort wanted to use it to his benefit. That Bellatrix was mentioning Hermione like this to his father didn't bode well.

"Say that again?" someone said. It took him a moment to realize the voice was his.

Bellatrix looked at him with knowing eyes, "Ah, yes. I forgot how much you despised that Mudblood. Cissy once told me how you hated that filthy, little girl for getting top grades in class. It's not your fault, I'm sure. A lot of favoritism going on in that school, especially when it comes to the underdog. Cheer up, my dear nephew. She's finally going to get what she deserves. Once she's bound to the Dark Lord, she'll never see the light of day ever again," Bellatrix said, laughing maniacally.

Draco's heart went to his throat. He felt sick. He felt like he was dying.

"What does that have to do with the honor you're going on about?" Lucius said. Bellatrix eyed him with brazen condescension.

"Why, dear Lucius, I was the one who brought her to the Dark Lord. Remember that important mission in America he entrusted to me? Well, she was there, playing hero. Thanks for those Portkeys you gave me, by the way. They made traveling with that Mudblood much easier. I came here right away to deliver the fantastic news to you myself. Isn't bringing the Dark Lord his bride the greatest honor one can bestow upon the Malfoy name? I succeeded where everyone else failed," Bellatrix drawled.

Everything became a blur. Draco couldn't focus on what his father and Aunt Bella were talking about anymore. It was like he was underwater...drowning.

"Draco, aren't you going to congratulate your Aunt?"

Lucius' voice broke through the fog and pulled him from the depths of despair, frantically gasping for air. He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth and gave his aunt a brilliant smile, the natural Occlumens in him rising to the surface.

"Congratulations, Aunt Bella. I'm sure you will be greatly rewarded for this," he said, swiftly adding more locks on the doors inside his brain. He must not let them see even a sliver of emotion.

"We all will be, nephew," Aunt Bella said, giving him a genuine smile. She always did like him, in her twisted way. In her mind, she was doing the right thing for the family.

All Draco wanted to do at this moment was to slam his fist into her smiling mouth, knock all her teeth out and shove them down her throat.

"Thank you, Aunt Bella," he said instead, carefully planning on which hexes he would use on the
Order members who allowed Hermione to fall into the hands of his fucking insane aunt.

Never mind that Hermione went with them on that bloody rescue mission willingly.

Never mind that she was a stubborn witch with a fucking savior complex.

They still should have protected her! They should never have let her be captured.

If anything happened to Hermione, if fucking Voldemort ever harmed even a fucking strand of her hair, everyone on that mission would fucking pay.

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She woke up in a room so dark and cold it reminded her of a mausoleum. The only source of light was the four tiny sconces on the wall to her left. She was seated on a hard, leather chair, unbound, but still unable to move. Bellatrix had placed another spell on her before leaving. Strangely, the witch had the decency to remove the bindings on her body. At least she could move her arms and legs now. She just couldn't get out of this chair.

"What the hell were you thinking, Hermione?" she muttered to herself.

She didn't plan any of it. Not the whole 'me for all of them' insanity. Not even the last-minute tagging-along on a daring rescue mission to America. The looks on Draco's and Harry's faces when they were forced to stay behind made her decide to go in their stead. She understood the Order members' reasoning. They couldn't risk Harry getting captured - he was the freaking Chosen One, after all, the prophesied vanquisher of the Dark Lord. They couldn't risk Draco getting captured, either - he was their ace in the hole, the one capable of going into Voldemort's organization deeper than Severus ever could. Exposing him as an ally of the Order could also cause the deaths of several people, including his.

But then, she also empathized with the two. Harry loved those kids and felt responsible for them. Draco, too, was committed in some way. He had promised Jason he would come back for him. And Draco always kept his promises. How then could she not go? She had to help protect and rescue the children, not only for Harry and Draco's sake but for her sake as well. She wouldn't have been able to forgive herself if something bad happened to the kids because she didn't do enough. It just wasn't in her nature.

What she did plan on was how they would get the children out. Another reason why she wanted to go was because of her familiarity with the layout of the Fawley townhouse. They could make better time if they knew where to look for the children, and they did find them where she thought they would be. Good thing she also had her trusty beaded bag with her when they went to the Shack. The Weasley twins' Peruvian Instant Darkness powder which she always kept in stock, had been so effective she was confident they would all escape without a hitch.

Until the subject of her unending nightmares appeared out of nowhere and took Sirius, Moody, and Arthur by surprise, overpowering them in the process.

Her initial plan had been to free Sirius, Moody, and Arthur by surprise, overpowering them in the process.

Unfortunately, dark memories were triggered when Bellatrix began torturing Fred and George. It
took all of her remaining strength to overcome the terror washing over her and focus on what to do next. She had already disarmed and immobilized Yaxley when Bellatrix said the words that forced her to take drastic measures. Bellatrix had ordered Yaxley to take the children to Voldemort, with the implication that they, especially the girls, would be subjected to unspeakable horrors. She had to prevent that from happening. Her brilliant idea came when she remembered something she'd learned a few days ago.

Severus had told her and Draco about the Dark Lord's ultimatum - surrender Hermione Granger to him, whole and unharmed, or Hogwarts would be leveled. Voldemort had heard about 'Hogwarts' exceptionally gifted Muggle-born witch' and wanted her to be included in his cadre of brainwashed Muggle-borns. Bellatrix, being in the Dark Lord's inner circle, would have known this and, therefore, wouldn't dare kill her. Deranged or not, Bellatrix was one loyal, fanatical soldier and would never go against her Master's wishes. Blackmailing Bellatrix into taking her instead of the kids and the captured Order members was the only way she could save them all. Bellatrix was many things, a fool was not one of them. She couldn't refuse the Dark Lord's future wife, could she? She had been shocked by that revelation, of course, but instead of letting it paralyze her, she turned that knowledge to her advantage.

Or at least that's what she'd been telling herself.

She would never admit to considering killing herself when she turned Bellatrix's wand on herself. Better off dead than the bride of that snake-faced bastard! Who, in his sick mind, would've thought that Voldemort would want her for a bride? It was just so unthinkable! A little part of her now wondered if Severus knew the real reason why Voldemort was looking for her. Would he have told her if he did? She couldn't decide because she didn't know the Severus from her original timeline. Even after being his student for six years, all she knew was that he was extremely secretive and had turned double-agent only after Voldemort killed the woman he loved. Bellatrix had called her the 'little bride-to-be'. Could Severus have also known about that? Why didn't he tell them about that nasty, little detail when he revealed to them the audacious double-cross he planned to orchestrate?

"Would that knowledge have kept you from jumping into that fireplace? Would you have backed off if you knew how important you have become to Voldemort?" Hermione asked herself.

No, it wouldn't have.

"It would've emboldened you even more because you would've realized that you're untouchable. No Death Eater would have dared lay a hand on the Dark Lord's bride-to-be," she said, pressing the palms of her hands into her eyes to stop the tears from falling. Taking a deep breath, she went through all the locked rooms in her mind and placed more locks on them, especially the ones where she kept Draco hidden. Thinking of him brought a new stab of pain into her heart.

He would be furious. No, he would be livid!

She could imagine him ranting about reckless Gryffindors and their uncontrollable bloody need to save everyone.

"Are all Gryffindors cursed with a freaking savior complex?" she cried, unaware that she had said it aloud.

"So I've heard," a deep voice laced with unmistakable amusement replied.

Hermione's head snapped up, searching for the source. "Who's there?" she asked, squinting into the dark. Warm air washed over her as more sconces came to life, bathing the room with a soft glow.
Looking around, she wasn't surprised to find herself inside a small library.

_That's why the place smelled familiar - old parchments and books!_

_Imprisoned inside a library, how poetic._

_These bastards must have a sick sense of humor._

"Miss Granger, I presume?" the tall man standing by the open doorway said, his dark eyes staring at her intently.

"And who should I presume you to be?" she said, swiftly rummaging through her brain for a name that could go with the face. She had this strange feeling she knew him.

The man laughed, eyes sparkling with mischief, "Who would you like to presume me to be, my dear? Do you have anyone in mind? I do hope he's a handsome devil," the man said, walking towards her with the grace of a panther stalking prey.

When he stopped just a few feet from her, Hermione was given a clearer view of the smiling stranger. He appeared to be in his late thirties to early forties, around 6 feet tall and built like an athlete. Wavy, ebony hair framed an aristocratic, ageless face with a slim nose that complemented his high cheekbones, and lips that were rather too beautiful for a man. His eyes, which Hermione earlier assumed to be black, were the darkest of grays. They were perceptive and calculating—the eyes of a predator. He moved and spoke with the confidence of someone used to getting his way. Hermione couldn't deny that the man dressed in a plain black turtleneck and slacks was quite handsome, attractive even. Still, there was something about him that made her wary. He radiated raw power. Dangerous and deadly power. He was a man who wore death and destruction like a mantle.

_A high-ranking Death Eater? But which one?_

After Voldemort's defeat, the faces of his unaccounted top soldiers had been plastered on countless Wanted posters everywhere. She had committed them all to memory. She didn't remember seeing this man's face on any of them. Could he be someone who wasn't a Death Eater in her original timeline?

"I-I don't have anyone in mind," she muttered, unnerved by the man's unwavering gaze. Despite that, she found it hard to take her eyes away from him.

The man arched an elegant brow at her and said, "I think that's better. Not fond of being compared with another man. I consider it a sacrilege."

_Arrogant, too, I see._

"Really? Do you think no one compares to you? Not even Voldemort?" she said, carefully watching his reaction. Would he rise to the bait? Would he punish her for blaspheming? Death Eaters didn't like hearing their Master's name taken lightly.

The man replied with a smile that made her cringe. He looked feral. "You're a brave and cunning girl, Miss Granger. The Dark Lord will find much pleasure in breaking you," he said, chuckling malevolently.

Hermione pushed down the fear rising from her gut. She must not appear weak. "And I'll find much pleasure in thwarting him," she smirked.
This time his laugh was genuine, a full-bellied laugh that vibrated around the room. "Oh, he will never be bored with you. But enough of this. It's time to present you to your future subjects," he said, turning to leave.

"Subjects?"

The man turned back to her with a frown.

"Why do you sound surprised? Once you're married to the Dark Lord, you will be his Lady. Lord and Lady of this Manor and soon, the whole wizarding world. Everyone else will be your footstool," he said, walking back to her. "Come, Miss Granger. They're all very eager to finally meet the famous Muggle-born witch everyone's been talking about," he said, extending a hand to her.

Hermione leaned back and crossed her arms across her chest, thereby earning her another frown from the man. He didn't look amused.

"You must get me out of this chair first," she said. "I can't seem to part with it."

The man looked ready to reprimand her when his face suddenly cleared, at last realizing her predicament. "I really should ask Bella to stop using that spell on our guests. I'm surprised you didn't even try to free yourself. Conceding defeat to Bellatrix, are we?"

He smiled and with a snap of his fingers released Hermione from the chair, surprising her with how easily he broke the spell. He truly was powerful. Bellatrix's spellwork was legendary because they were extremely difficult to undo. How was he able to do it without breaking a sweat?

"Shall we?" Hermione stared at the hand being offered to her again. Would he be offended if she refused it? Would he dare—

"I'm just being courteous, Miss Granger. Enjoy it while you can."

She didn't miss the implied threat. He was telling her this wasn't the norm, he could've treated her much worse if he wanted to. She decided not to test him. This wasn't the time to play the brave fool. He certainly must be high up in Voldemort's organization. High enough to have a license to be rude to the Dark Lord's future bride.

"And indeed I will, Mister—"

The man mulled this over. "Lord. You may call me Lord," he said, taking her hand to help her to her feet.

*His name is 'Lord'? Or is that his title? Lord of what?*

*No matter. I will find out soon enough."

*And I'll make him pay for his insolence."

Hermione froze. Where did that come from? Why was she planning on avenging something as trivial as her bruised ego? Was she already accepting her fate and slipping into her role as Voldemort's wife? Was she turning power-hungry? Was she going mad?

Her eyes swiveled to the man beside her, afraid his darkness was already influencing her thoughts. 'Lord' tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and smiled down at her.
"You never stop thinking, do you? It must be exhausting!"

Hermione blinked. Was he reading her mind?

"Not yet, Miss Granger. You will know when I am."

"Then, how did you know—"

"It's written on your face, my dear. Don't worry, I will teach you how to hide your emotions more effectively. We'll suppress the Gryffindor in you yet if you even are one," he teased as he escorted her out of the room.

Hermione took a deep breath and cleared her mind. This man was a highly skilled Legilimens. She couldn't risk relaxing around him. She must not think about anything.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you for quite some time, Miss Granger," he said, breaking the silence.

"Why ever for?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the tapestries and paintings hanging on the walls. A couple of men standing along the hallway had dropped to their knees upon seeing them. She found the reverence they gave her uncomfortable.

"You don't seem to think much of yourself, do you? Or are you just being modest?"

"No, I just didn't think anyone outside of Hogwarts even knew of my existence. Well, aside from the parents or siblings of my friends, anyway."

"Students go home on holidays, don't they? And they often talk about school. Somehow, word about an exceptionally gifted Muggle-born witch began spreading like wildfire. A good friend of mine assured me the rumors are true. However…"

Hermione almost stumbled when her escort abruptly stopped walking and turned to her with a quizzical look, as if debating with himself. She didn't have long to wait to find out what he wanted. He released her hand and stepped away from her, eyes devouring her.

"Summon your wand, Miss Granger. Show me that you truly are worthy," he said.

What's going on here? Why is he doing this? Why is the testing me? Why isn't he afraid of antagonizing Voldemort's future wife? Unless of course...

"Aren't you scared of dying?" she said before she could stop herself, the question hanging in the air with dire implication.

What are you doing, Hermione?

Testing a theory.

It can't be true, what you're thinking.

That's why it's still a theory, stupid!

Lord's smile was one of amusement when he replied, "Are you?"
Hermione ignored the question and turned her back on him, her mind reaching out to the beloved vinewood wand that had been her companion since she was eleven. Her faithful wand came flying to her hand within seconds. It had hardly touched her palm when it went flying from her again. When she glanced back, the tall wizard behind her was twirling her wand in his long fingers, that irksome smile gracing his lips again. She wanted to smack it off his face.

"Very good, Miss Granger. I'm afraid I must hold onto this for a little while longer," he said, vanishing Hermione's wand into thin air. He laughed when Hermione gasped. "Don't worry, my dear. I didn't harm it. You'll have it back after the binding ceremony. Now, come. We've been delayed for far too long."

Hermione didn't protest when he took her hand and tucked it into his arm once more. Her skin was crawling where he had touched it, but she brushed the feeling aside. Being reminded of the reason why she was here was bad enough and made her insides churn. Having him this close was even worse and made her want to jump out of her skin.

Stop thinking, Hermione! He'll sense it!

She took a deep breath and focused on her surroundings, amazed that they were now entering a beautiful, brightly lit dining room. She didn't think such a cheerful place could be found in this dark and ominous house. There were colorful peonies on brass vases everywhere, greeting her with their alluring fragrance. The ceiling was decorated with a fresco of smiling cherubs dancing around the canopies of two, dainty, crystal chandeliers. Striped Silver and green wallpaper covered the walls, while clam-shaped glass sconces gave the room an ethereal glow. There were more Death Eaters here, all dressed in black dress robes, kneeling in deference to him. It wasn't her they had been greeting earlier with such esteem. It was the man walking beside her.

As she was led to the seat next to his at the head of the table, Hermione endeavored to remain calm, to appear in control, no matter how much she wanted to scream her head off. Her heart was pounding so hard, she half expected it to explode from her chest. She hadn't planned this far. How could she when she had not even expected this?

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present Miss Hermione Granger, a long-lost descendant of the Gaunts like myself, touted as one of the most brilliant witches ever to set foot in Wizarding Britain, and soon to be, my dearest wife," the man beside her said, a hand snaking around her waist to pull her closer.

Curiosity winning, she looked up only to find him staring at her with ferocious intensity, as if ready to devour her. Bile rose to her throat, making her nauseous. She lowered her head, closed her eyes, and prayed she wouldn't faint.

"May I offer a toast, my Lord?" one of the men said.

Hermione couldn't bring herself to look at the one who spoke. She couldn't bring herself to look at anyone, afraid to find a familiar shock of platinum blonde hair—

Stop it! Stop thinking!

"Of course, Yaxley. You deserve the honor as you're one of those who brought my beautiful and brilliant bride to me."

"Thank you, my Lord," he paused, waiting for his companions to join him in lifting their goblets to the Lord and the soon-to-be Lady of the Manor.
"A toast to our Lord and Master, Lord Voldemort, and the future Lady Voldemort. All hail!"
Goblets were lifted to accompany the shouts of 'Hail'.

It's official. Her theory had just been confirmed without a doubt.

Regrettably, this was one of those rare times when she'd rather be wrong.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just a heads up. You've all been very good to me, and I hate to leave you wondering when the next update will be. I will be focusing on a Dramione Fairy Tale Fest I recently joined so I might not be able to post an update until the latter part of September. Sorry...
Comment, suggestions, violent reactions, anyone? :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!