Divided and Entwined

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Summary

Fudge doesn’t try to ignore Voldemort’s return at the end of the 4th Year. Instead, influenced by Malfoy, he tries to appease the Dark Lord. Many think that the rights of the muggleborns are a small price to pay to avoid a bloody war. Hermione Granger and the other muggleborns disagree. Vehemently.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or any of the characters in the Harry Potter books or movies.

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Descent into Darkness

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Chapter 1: Descent into Darkness

‘At the time of the Dark Lord’s return, Wizarding Britain had been at peace for over a decade. Long enough to recover from the last war, but not long enough to be ready for another. Most of the Hit-Wizards who had borne the brunt of the fighting in the Blood War had been released from service long ago. The Auror Corps had been deemed more than sufficient to guarantee the security of the country, and the gold so saved had been needed for rebuilding. The people had barely recovered from the ravages of that terrible war, and found the prospect of another war to be intolerable. In short, the British Ministry of Magic had neither the means, nor the popular support to wage war on the Dark Lord.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, Ministry of Magic, June 26th, 1995

“Cornelius, you know that Voldemort is back. You have seen Harry Potter’s memories yourself. You need to act, now. Before he builds up his forces.”

Albus Dumbledore spoke calmly, but the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot was anything but calm. The Dark Lord had returned from death. He had already recalled his inner circle, and the means he had used to resurrect himself might even have rendered Harry’s blood protection powerless.

“And what would you have me do, Albus? Send the Aurors to war?” Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, scoffed. “They’re not trained for war. Half of them are still children!”

Albus didn’t point out that the hiring practises of the Ministry had ensured that the Aurors were not what they could be, to put it mildly. It wouldn’t do to antagonise the Minister at this critical moment.

“If you’re not doing anything, then Voldemort will just grow more powerful,” the old wizard said, ignoring how the minister cringed at hearing the name.

“I will not plunge Britain into a war if it can be avoided! He just returned from death. He might have changed while he was… dead. His former sympathisers and the victims of his Imperius Curses have been integrated into society for over a decade, after all,” Cornelius said. “They’re not ready for a war.”

“That is exactly why we need to strike now, while he and his followers are still weak,” Albus retorted.

Cornelius shook his head. “We cannot afford to push all those suspected supporters into his camp with such harsh and rash action. The public won’t support a war either.”

“Amelia is certain that the balance of power favours the Ministry.” Albus had already spoken with the formidable head of the DMLE.

“Amelia lost her entire family but for her niece to the last war. Of course she will want revenge, no matter the cost to Britain!” The Minister stood up and started to pace behind his desk.

Albus narrowed his eyes. Cornelius was a good politician, but he was not usually that stubborn. Not unless… “You’ve spoken with Lucius, haven’t you?”

The other wizard looked startled, then set his jaw. “Yes. And he told me that the Dark Lord does not
wish a war either. If we adjust our policies a little, an accommodation can be reached.”

“Lucius is a Death Eater. Of course he would claim this. He is manipulating you.” Albus rued the fact that he had allowed that man to grow so close to the Minister. But the only way to prevent that would have been… He had vowed not to give in to that temptation after Gellert.

“He was a victim of the Imperius.” Cornelius stood, facing Albus. “But even if he is… we cannot afford a war. Not right now. And neither can You-Know-Who. That means diplomacy is our best option. Compromise. We need to give peace a chance.”

Albus could almost hear Lucius talking when he listened to the Minister. “Do you honestly believe that Voldemort wants peace?” he asked, incredulously.

“Didn’t you tell me once that everyone deserved a second chance?”

Albus’s long experience in politics allowed him to keep smiling politely. “I did. But I do not think that this is applicable when we are talking about Voldemort.”

Cornelius snorted. “I’ve spoken with several Wizengamot members who share my view. My decision stands. We’ll offer You-Know-Who … appeasement. A few concessions are a small price to pay, if we can avoid another terrible war.”

Albus realised that the Minister wouldn’t be budged from his - or rather, Malfoy’s - decision. He would have to talk to the Wizengamot, but he was not optimistic. Cornelius was correct in that most of its members did not want a war.

“I believe this is a mistake. A mistake that will come to cost us dearly, in the future.”

With those parting words, the Chief Warlock left the office of the Minister for Magic.

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London, Kingston upon Thames, August 15th, 1995

Hermione Granger, sitting in her room at home, read her Hogwarts letter again. There was the usual booklist as well as the announcement of a new subject for all years, ‘Wizarding Customs’. That sounded very interesting. There was nothing else, though. The young witch didn’t consider herself presumptuous, but she had expected to be chosen as the female prefect for Gryffindor for their fifth year. Who else in her year was as smart, or rather, as academically inclined? Who else was as responsible? Certainly not Parvati or Lavender! And the other two girls in their year, Fay and Sally-Anne, were too shy to be prefects.

She bit her lower lip. Maybe… maybe the Headmaster didn’t trust her to uphold the rules, given how often she and her friends had broken them in the past. For a good reason, of course, but still. If everyone followed their example, and with less urgent reasons…

She took a deep breath, fighting her disappointment down. If that was the reason, then so be it. She had done what she had thought was needed, and she would do so again. Not being named prefect was a small price to do what was right.

Besides, you did not have to be a prefect to become Head Girl. James Potter had never been a prefect, and he had been Head Boy. She nodded to herself. She would also have more time to study, without the responsibilities of being a prefect.

Her reasoning helped, but she felt down for the rest of the day anyway. She had hoped that the
Hogwarts letter would cheer her up, after reading the latest Daily Prophet. The Ministry kept telling people that the situation with Voldemort was ‘under control’, but she had not seen anything about any action taken against the monster who had had Cedric Diggory murdered and had tortured and almost murdered Harry! Just a number of new laws and decrees being passed - apparently, the hiring standards at the Ministry were being raised, among several decrees concerning professional standards for current employees.

She had written to both Harry and Ron, but neither had been able to tell her what was going on at the Ministry. Apart from Sirius having been exonerated. Next to having had Kingsley Shacklebolt, an experienced Auror, appointed as Defence teacher, that had been the only good news she had heard lately. But she’d soon join her friends at Sirius’s house. She’d get more information once she was there.

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London, No 12 Grimmauld Place, August 21st, 1995

“Hermione!”

Hermione Granger had barely stepped through the door of the house when she was swept up in a hug by her friend, Harry Potter.

“Hello, Harry.” she managed to get out, surprised and pleased by his greeting - obviously, Sirius becoming a free man again and Harry living with his godfather had been a very good thing for her friend.

He had barely released her before she was engulfed in a hug again, and lifted off the ground.

“No, Hermione!” he said, close enough for his breath to tickle her ear.

“Hello, Ron.”

Her other best friend even twirled her around before setting her down again, despite her giggling protests. It felt good to be back with them.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Sirius Black said, bowing with a flourish.

Hermione looked him over. For a former fugitive from the law, he looked good. Still more than a bit haggard, but he was wearing expensive-looking robes, and a grin she hadn’t seen often on his face. Not that she had met him often.

“Kreacher! Take our guest’s luggage to her room!” Sirius bellowed. A grumbling house-elf appeared at once, and started to take her trunk away. She thought she heard him mumble ‘mudblood’, but she wasn’t sure.

A short tour of the house later - or of the rooms already cleared of cursed objects, traps, and magical pests - she found herself alone with Harry and Ron in her guest room. “So, what have you been up to?” she asked while taking out her clothes and storing them in the armoire.

“I’ve been helping Sirius adjust to living as a free wizard again,” Harry answered, with a smile. She knew he wouldn’t talk about his relatives much, so she didn’t ask what he had been doing before that.

Ron shrugged. “Same old same old at home. Doing chores, flying… I’ve been visiting Harry as often as I could, as soon as their Floo connection was set up.”
“And we’ve been visiting the Burrow as well,” Harry added.

For a moment, Hermione felt jealous, though she had known that from their letters already. She suppressed that emotion by reminding herself of her vacation in France. “You wrote about that already.” She folded her arms across her chest and looked at the two boys. “So, what’s going on at the Ministry? About Voldemort?”

Ron flinched at hearing the name, which was expected. Harry winced, which was not a good sign. The two exchanged a glance, which was a worse sign. She gave them her best glare. “Spill it!”

“Appeasement,” Harry spat out.

“What?”

“They’re trying to avoid a war, and are trying to appease him,” Harry explained.

Ron nodded. “A number of ‘controversial’ decrees and bills have been repealed. Dad’s been livid since his Muggle Protection Act was among them. The Minister said that it was ‘needlessly provocative’.”


Ron shrugged. “Hard to say. Dad said that the Ministry’s been hiring more Aurors, but they’ve also been firing Aurors and other employees. Some for violating new standards of conduct. Dad’s been warned off from making waves, he said, by Dumbledore.”

“What is Dumbledore doing, anyway?” Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. “I don’t know. He’s gathered his ‘Order of the Phoenix’, but that’s all I know. Not even Sirius is telling me anything.”

Ron nodded. “My parents too, but you know Mum - she won’t let us get involved.”

Hermione felt relieved that at least the Headmaster was doing something against Voldemort. She sat down on her bed. “Have you bought your textbooks yet?”

“All but the one for Wizarding Customs,” Harry answered.

“The Defence teacher is a brave wizard. With the curse on the position, and You-Know-Who’s return… not many would risk teaching Defence.” Ron shuddered.

“I’ve seen the note that the book for the new subject will be chosen later,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like they haven’t decided yet what will be taught,” Ron said.

“That would be extremely unprofessional.” She frowned.

“I’ve a brochure though, with some basic outlines,” her friend said.

“What? Where did you get it?” Hermione stood up. Why had Ron received that, and she hadn’t?

“It came with my badge. Apparently, prefects are supposed to uphold proper etiquette as well as the school rules,” Ron said.

“You’re a prefect?” Hermione blurted out before she could help it. She hadn’t wanted to touch that topic yet; it was still a sore subject for her, but now…
He nodded, frowning. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione hastened to say, “I was just surprised.”

“You haven’t heard then,” Harry said.

“ Heard what?” she snapped. It was so frustrating, having to pull out every little scrap of information from her friends!

“They passed a new educational decree, making prefect a pureblood-only position,” Ron said. “Do you think I would have been made prefect otherwise, with Harry in our year?” He scowled. “And Percy said that the only reason I was chosen as a prefect instead of Neville was that Dumbledore wanted to show his displeasure with the new decree!”

Hermione knew that this was unfair, and that she needed to apologise, but all she could focus on right then was that limiting prefects to pureblood was a really, really bad sign.

For the first time in her life, she started to feel uneasy about returning to school.

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London, King’s Cross Railway Station, September 1st, 1995

For the first time in his life, Harry Potter had mixed feelings about returning to Hogwarts. The school still was the first place he had felt at home, but he had a real home now. And a real family. His godfather, Sirius, didn’t have to hide from the law any more, and had become his guardian.

“Come on, Harry, we’re going to be too late to get a good compartment!” Ron shouted, pushing his trolley faster.

“And whose fault is that?” Hermione asked, frowning. Their friend had tried to get everyone ready to go at ten o’clock, together with Molly Weasley, but without success.

“It’s always Sirius’s fault, of course!” his best friend yelled over his shoulder, laughing. Harry blamed the twins, personally. They were still unloading their trunks from the car, under the watchful eyes of their parents. Since Ginny’s trunk was stashed behind theirs, the youngest Weasley would be the last.

“Hey!” Harry’s godfather protested, but he was grinning.

Harry would miss him at Hogwarts. He had spent the last months with Sirius in Grimmauld Place, getting spoiled rotten, if he was honest. But then, both Harry and Sirius had earned it, in his opinion. Sirius had spent twelve years in Azkaban, and Harry … he didn’t want to think about his time with the Dursleys. Hopefully, the two weeks he had lived with them this summer, until Sirius had been exonerated, would be the last time he had to see them.

The three entered Platform 9 ¾, which was filled with wizards and witches seeing their children off. Contrary to other years, there were more Aurors around, though - a reminder of Voldemort’s return. Like the Order members that had been following them discreetly.

Harry sighed. At least, he told himself, Sirius would be happy that he was safely at Hogwarts for the rest of the year. His godfather had said that often enough so Sirius might even believe it himself, he hoped.

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Ron Weasley shook his head at the article he was reading. The Quibbler was as crazy as his mum had told him. ‘Wrackspurt infection in the Wizengamot’ - how did anyone come up with this? He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Hermione asked, looking up from the book she was reading - ‘The Wizard’s Book to Etiquette’, he believed. It had to be better than ‘Etiquette for Witches’, Ron thought. When Hermione had been reading that tome at Grimmauld Place, she had exclaimed and even cursed regularly, and she had been in such a bad mood, even his mum had stepped lightly around her.

He held up The Quibbler. “A magazine published by our neighbour, Xenophilius Lovegood. His daughter is in Ginny’s year, Ravenclaw. It’s full of articles about animals no one knows. Lovegood claims they haven’t been discovered or captured yet, but Mum says they’re all made up. Here, he claims that ‘Wrackspurts’ have infected the Wizengamot, causing all the new legislation to be warped.” Ron chuckled.

Hermione didn’t seem to see the humour. She frowned, even sneered. “That would be preferable to the Ministry becoming infected with Voldemort’s ideology.”

Ron shuddered at the name. He tried not to, but old habits died slowly, or so the saying went. He wished Hermione wouldn’t be so bitter. He understood that she was disappointed that she hadn’t been chosen as a prefect, but it wasn’t the end of the world. Dumbledore would take care of it. Just as he had taken care of Sirius’s Kiss on Sight order.

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Albus Dumbledore let his gaze wander over the Great Hall. Some students smiled at him, some avoided looking at him, some sneered, like Mister Malfoy. And, sadly, a lot of the Slytherins. He had expected that. Many of their parents were, if not outright supporters of Voldemort, then conservative enough to take offence at anyone questioning the status quo, as most muggleborns were wont to. And that stance was not limited to the parents of House Slytherin.

The appeasement campaign the Ministry was leading was not helping, of course. Albus was working against it, but he had to step lightly - Voldemort’s return from death had shaken Britain to its core. Tom’s supporters were exploiting that, asking, in confidence and even openly, if the old Headmaster was strong enough to defeat an immortal Dark Lord. Words alone were not enough to counter this, Albus knew. Not with the lingering resentment in some influential circles about the egalitarian policies he had championed since Grindelwald’s defeat. If they were at war, it would be different, he knew that. But with the Dark Lord hiding, and his mouthpieces and followers claiming they didn’t want a war, there was not much the Headmaster could do to strengthen the backbone of those wizards and witches who were still opposing Voldemort’s poison.

He couldn’t even do as much as he wanted in his own school. Severus’s cover depended on him appearing both useful and loyal to the Dark Lord. If Albus forced him to deal with the spreading bigotry in his house - a problem he had left fester far too long, the Headmaster knew - then that would throw doubts on Severus’s ability to spy on Albus. But even if Severus was not hampered by his mission, there was another obstacle.
He glanced at the new teacher the Ministry had sent to him. ‘The only one qualified to teach’, Cornelius had claimed. It was even true - Dolores Umbridge had written the bill instating the new subject herself, and made certain that she was the only one qualified to teach it. He knew, of course, what her real goal was: Ensure that Hogwarts fell in line with the Ministry’s policy of appeasement. He still had influence and friends in the Ministry. He did not know how exactly she was planning to do this, though. But he’d find out soon.

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Hogwarts, September 4th, 1995

“Hello Students, welcome to Wizarding Customs.”

The new course was taught by Dolores Umbridge, a witch in pink robes. Ron had told Hermione Granger that she was the Undersecretary of the Minister for Magic, and supposedly was teaching the course for a year to show how important it was. She also was said to be behind a lot of the changes to the Ministry’s laws and decrees.

“We will be learning about our most valued traditions here. Most of you will have been taught about those already by your families, but there are always a few families who fail to teach their children good manners. And of course there are those among us who come from muggle families, and never had any chance to learn how to act in proper society. This course will remedy that - but only to a point. The ministry is well aware that to truly understand our traditions, you have to grow up in a proper family, but we’ll do our best to teach you the basics.”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss…” Umbridge trailed off.

“Granger, Professor,” Hermione answered. She thought she saw a hint of distaste flicker over the woman’s face, but the professor was quickly smiling, if a bit condescendingly.

“What is your question? Am I talking too quickly?”

A few of the Slytherins laughed. Hermione ignored them, with a bit of an effort. “Will the testing be taking those course aims you just stated into account?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t fail the exam if you study diligently and apply yourself.”

Hermione heard more laughter from the Slytherins, and had to bite back a comment.

“Of course, for those from proper families, this should be an easy exam,” the professor continued. “Now, open your books at page two, and start reading.”

Hermione had read the textbook already. It wasn’t written terribly well, but it was easy to read - even though the examples used every other page seemed to have come straight from the pages of some of those robe rippers Mrs Weasley claimed she did not read but Ginny said she did. Hermione had no problem with that. What she had a problem with was the subtle and not so subtle undertone in the examples, and the book. Muggles were not mentioned at all, and muggleborns only in menial positions. Or worse. And all the other books she had found showed a similar bias. It seemed as if they were written to teach muggleborns their place - serving purebloods.

She didn’t like this, not at all.

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Hogwarts, September 8th, 1995

“Granger! Casting spells in the hallways is forbidden!”

Hermione, on her way back from the library, turned around and faced Malfoy and Parkinson. Prefects Malfoy and Parkinson.

“I wasn’t casting any spell,” she said.

“Lying to a prefect? No wonder your kind were not deemed trustworthy enough to be prefects!” Malfoy sneered at her. “I saw you cast a spell. And Pansy did as well.”

The sycophantic Slytherin witch nodded. She should really marry Malfoy, Hermione thought, the witch had the sneer down pat already.

“You must have imagined it then.”

“You also show an appalling lack of proper respect for the authorities.” Malfoy scoffed. “I’m certain a check of your wand will prove that you have cast a spell.”

“Of course it will show that I have cast a spell! This is a school of magic, we cast spells in class!” Hermione huffed at the idiot, then saw him smile widely.

“Ah, so you admit it. Lying, lack of respect, and casting in the hallways. Appalling behaviour, but that’s a mudblood for you. I’ll inform Madam Umbridge.” Malfoy laughed while Parkinson giggled.

Hermione gasped, then looked around. No one else was in the hallway. No one had witnessed the scene.

She swallowed what she wanted to say, and glared at the two Slytherins, then turned around and walked towards the teachers’ quarters. She had to speak to Professor McGonagall!

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Hermione was in luck. Her Head of House was in her office. She was even invited inside, and could tell her story. And that was where her luck ran out.

“There is nothing I can do there, Miss Granger. If two prefects claim you have been casting in the hallways…” The teacher looked like she had eaten something Hagrid had left out in stables for too long.

“Don’t you believe me?” Hermione was shocked.

“Of course I believe you! But that is not enough to overturn the word of two prefects.”

“Two pureblood prefects against a muggleborn? I guess not.”

“Miss Granger!” The professor was glaring at her. “If you talk like this to Professor Umbridge, you will be in even worse trouble.”

“Professor Umbridge?”

“She will be handling all the detentions and punishments of …” the witch hesitated.

“Of mudbloods?” Hermione said before she could control herself.
“Miss Granger!” McGonagall looked shocked.

Hermione looked down, but didn’t say anything even though she knew the professor was waiting for an apology. Then she had a thought. “I can show you the memory! The Headmaster has a Pensieve.” Hermione knew that from Harry.

“He needs this for important work, Miss Granger.” The way the old witch stressed work told Hermione that it was about Voldemort.

“It wouldn’t take long, Professor! A few minutes, at most. You know that if they can do this once, then they will do it again. They can get anyone in trouble they don’t like,” Hermione said.

The professor seemed to ponder this, then sighed. “Let’s visit him then.”

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Donating a memory and watching it in the Headmaster’s Pensieve was a fascinating experience. If seeing the whole incident again hadn’t enraged her so much, she would have enjoyed it very much.

“Now you know I haven’t been lying!”

“Yes, Miss Granger. And I will inform Madam Umbridge about this. But I fear your detention will not be overturned,” the Headmaster said.

“What? Why not?” How could they do this?

“You were disrespectful to the two prefects, as the memory clearly shows,” McGonagall said. She even sounded disappointed!

“But…” Hermione fought to keep her composure. To have been outmaneuvered like this by Malfoy and Parkinson…

“I do hope that this will keep them from lying about such things, but they will certainly try to provoke you again,” Dumbledore said. “And I hope you will understand that my Pensieve cannot be used all the time to clear up such accusations.”

“Yes, sir. Will the two liars be punished as well then?”

“That is, sadly, up to Madam Umbridge.” The Headmaster’s tone told Hermione that they wouldn’t be punished. “They’ll do it again then,” she said in a flat voice. And she wouldn’t be able to use the Pensieve to prove her innocence again.

“I suggest you ask Mister Weasley to accompany you next time you would otherwise be alone. As a prefect, he will be able to vouch for you.” Dumbledore smiled.

Had the Headmaster foreseen this, and this was why he had made Ron a prefect? Hermione couldn’t tell. But even if this would help, it galled. “So, I will need a pureblood chaperone as a witness, to be able to escape abuse.” She stiffened when she realised just how that sounded. And she felt a chill run down her spine when she realised that this was a very plausible threat too.

“I am working on resolving the situation, Miss Granger, but it will take time. Far more than your detentions are at risk here, as you know.” The old wizard spread his hands in apology.

“Keep your head down until then,” McGonagall added.

“So until then those Death Eater wannabes can abuse us with impunity. Voldemort would be proud.”
“Miss Granger!”

Hermione mumbled an apology she didn’t really mean.

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“Miss Granger?” Umbridge asked when she opened the door to her office. She didn’t sound sweet any more, or condescending. She sounded pleased. “Sit down!”

Hermione stepped inside. The room was decorated hideously with glaring pink plates with various motives, and framed pages taken from the ‘Wizarding Customs’ textbook. She sat down at the only desk there that had writing materials placed on it.

“Hand over your wand!”

The muggleborn witch hesitated just a second, then drew her wand and handed it over. Without it she felt vulnerable, weak, at the professor’s mercy. Just what the woman had intended, she thought.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat. “You’ve quite a history of infractions, Miss Granger.” She studied a scroll of parchment. “Most of it covered up, or so I hear from respectable sources. But you ran out of luck today. Disrespect. Casting in the hallways. Lying to authorities.”

“The two prefects are the ones lying, professor. Professor McGonagall believes me.” Hermione said. She knew she should have been quiet, but it was just too much.

“Two prefects, from proper, respected families, lying? About a habitual rule-breaker like yourself?” The witch scoffed. “You just added to your punishment. Your habitual rules-breaking ends now.” She gestured to the parchment on Hermione’s desk. “You will be writing ‘I will not disrespect authority. I will not break rules.’ Two hundred times.

Hermione blinked. Writing lines? She had expected something much worse. Snape’s detentions were infamous, after all, and Umbridge seemed… she saw the glint in the woman’s eyes, and fought not to shiver.

“There’s no ink, ma’am.”

“The quill gets its own ink, Miss Granger.”

She found out quickly where the quill got its ink - each line she wrote felt as if it was carved into her flesh, written with her blood. There was no wound though, just the pain. No proof either, she realised.

Briefly she considered running out. But the witch had her wand, and she might be waiting for that, to make the punishment worse. Grinding her teeth, she wrote on, fighting back her tears, not wanting to give the witch the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

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“How was your detention?” Ron asked when she made it back to the Gryffindor dorms. His tentative smile vanished when he saw her. Harry, standing next to him, drew a hissing breath. She must be looking as bad as she felt, Hermione thought. But her friends had waited for her return. It made her feel better.

“How horrible,” she started to say. “I had to write lines with an enchanted quill that made it feel as if I was carving them in my own flesh. Two hundred lines,” she added.
Ron stared at her, then set his jaw. “She can’t do this!”

Harry nodded. “We’ll tell the Headmaster.”

“I doubt it’ll help.” She showed her hands. “See? No trace. No proof. It’ll be ‘the word of a respected teacher against a muggleborn rules-breaker’, ” she said, imitating Umbridge’s voice. “Just as it was the word of ‘two prefects, from proper, respected families’ against mine,” she added, not bothering to hide how bitter she was.

They sat down near the fireplace. Lavender, the other Gryffindor prefect, looked over to them, but a glance from Hermione had her vanish upstairs.

“I’ll escort you from now on, like McGonagall said!” Ron declared.

“And I’ll come with you as well.” Harry nodded.

“Thank you.” Hermione smiled. Her friends stood with her.

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Hogwarts, September 29th, 1995

Another Educational Decree was displayed on the wall next to Umbridge’s office. Hermione was on the way to read it, with Harry and Ron. The three hardly ever went anywhere alone any more, not with Malfoy, Parkinson and the other Slytherin prefects just waiting to catch Hermione or Harry alone. Others, especially muggleborns, had learned the same lesson. Sally-Anne had had a nervous breakdown during her detention. The Hufflepuffs had closed ranks, but the Ravenclaws lacked such unity. Their muggleborns were suffering.

But those the Slytherin prefects missed, Umbridge often managed to provoke during her lessons. Justin Finch-Fletchley had taken one detention to learn to keep his head down. Hermione had, to her embarrassment, taken two until she had managed to bear the scorn and taunts from the Slytherins and the teacher, who barely bothered with hiding her sadistic glee. Seamus and Dean hadn’t completely learned that lesson yet. Gryffindors to the core.

The three Gryffindors reached their goal. The board with the notices on it had been expanded, and the newest decree had been placed prominently in the centre. Hermione read it, and couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Only students who have achieved a passing grade at O.W.L. ‘Wizarding Customs’ will be eligible to sit their N.E.W.T.s?’” She turned to Harry and Ron. “Do you know what that means?”

Ron looked confused, but Harry seemed to have an inkling. She didn’t wait for them to understand it. “It means no one the Ministry dislikes will be able to take their N.E.W.T.s. They will not pass that exam. And you know who the Ministry doesn’t like.”

“But… that’s Umbridge. The O.W.L.s have their own experts!” Ron said.

“It’s a new course. Of course the Ministry gets to choose the expert for it. Just as they chose Umbridge.” She didn’t call that foul monster a teacher. Not unless she had to talk to the woman. Hermione had quickly learned to be as respectful as possible to that witch. Even if it made her madder than having to bow and scrape to Malfoy and Parkinson or suffer another detention for ‘disrespect’.

“Dumbledore’s working on it,” Harry said. But he didn’t sound very optimistic.
Hermione closed her eyes. This was a catastrophe. But somehow she feared that it was just the first step.

“That’s insane! Why would they do that?” Ron asked.

Hermione looked at him, then at the door to Umbridge’s office. She was supposed to have a lesson with the sixth years, but… “Let’s move away.”

She started explaining once they were on a different floor. “Don’t you get it? Muggleborns are the ‘concession’ the Ministry is making to appease Voldemort. They think that if they do this, Voldemort will leave them in peace.”

“But he won’t! Dad said he killed as many purebloods as muggleborns or half-bloods in the war!” Ron shook his head almost violently. “He wants power more than anything.”

“Of course he won’t! But he won’t do anything while the Ministry does his work for him. Each muggleborn gone, driven away, is one less supporter of the Ministry, once Voldemort attacks.” Hermione ground her teeth.

“Dumbledore needs to stop that!” Ron exclaimed.

“I’m certain he’s trying, but he’s not achieving much, is he?” Hermione said. Privately, she had started to wonder why the Ministry was so quick to come down on muggleborns. They must have passed more decrees and laws in the last three months than in the previous three years.

She really had to take a closer look at those laws, she thought.

“But… if you can’t pass that exam… will you be back next year? At Hogwarts?” Ron asked.

Both of her friends were staring at her.

“It only says I can’t take the N.E.W.T.s, it doesn’t ban me from attending school,” Hermione answered. She even smiled, as confidently as she could, at her two best, maybe only friends. They looked relieved, and she felt guilty at not telling them that she expected another decree following this one, one that would stipulate that only those eligible to take N.E.W.T.s were allowed to attend Hogwarts for their sixth and seventh years. Probably giving the waste of gold as a reason.

Hermione hooked her arms through those of Harry and Ron, and tried not to think about the fact that she didn’t expect to be at Hogwarts in a year. Not unless Dumbledore managed to do whatever he was working on.

And the longer that took, the less she thought of his chances of success.

And with what the Ministry was doing, in the name of appeasement, she started to doubt if she even wanted to return.

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Hogwarts, October 15th, 1995

Hermione Granger had received the latest laws the Ministry had passed, courtesy of Sirius. His note had told her not to let anyone know she had them though, which was a bit worrying in itself. Not quite as worrying as the laws she had read, in the days since.

She leaned back in ‘her spot’ in the library, waiting for either Ron or Harry to appear so they could
escort her back to the dorms without Malfoy accosting her. Again.

“Hey!”

Harry and Ron were approaching her table. She tried to smile at them, but her mood must have been obvious, since even Ron frowned and asked: “What’s wrong? Did Malfoy do anything?” He hadn’t dared to do anything in the library, not after Madam Pince had taken great offence to anyone accosting her favorite student.

For a moment, Hermione considered lying. Sirius had told her not to let anyone know about this. But Harry and Ron were her best friends. She wouldn’t lie to them. She pointed at the parchment on the table. “It’s those laws the Ministry passed.”

“Oh?” The boys peered at them.

“What about them?” Harry asked.

Ron skimmed one. “Doesn’t seem like it’s something bad. Just a new bunch of rules.”

She sighed. “It’s in the details. Not many of them are openly discriminatory, but each has the potential to be abused. Easily.” She pointed at the scroll he had in hand. “See there? The new hiring standards could easily be twisted to bar muggleborns. The tests for the existing staff members offer the same potential. There’s no standard testing, so it all depends on whoever does the testing. Can you imagine Umbridge passing anyone she doesn’t like? She just has to grill them on the intricacies of pureblood society until they make a mistake, no matter how tiny. Or,” she added with grim expression, “she can invent a new ‘tradition’ just to make them fail.”

The boys winced. Hermione was certain there was no ‘specific way to hold a wand when receiving a flower bouquet after Yuletide’, as Umbridge had claimed once when testing Hermione. She was also certain the witch knew that she knew that, and had done this just to show what Hermione had to look forward to, should she dare to aspire to anything as a muggleborn. Not that she could do anything against it - the kind of ‘traditions’ Umbridge was asking about were not written down anywhere, but taught to the pureblood children by their families. The young witch had ranted and vented for an hour after that debacle.

She took a deep breath, to the relief of her friends, and continued: “The new laws concerning businesses are less obvious, they mostly concern new standards for business with corresponding inspections, but the potential for abuse is there as well - it would be enough to simply be stricter with muggleborn-owned shops than with pureblood-owned. Or let it be known that those businesses who employed muggleborns in ‘unsuitable’ positions would face stricter and more frequent inspections.”

Umbridge was fond of going on about suitable and unsuitable positions for the ‘witches and wizards of various backgrounds’. And Hermione suspected that she thought the only suitable positions for mudbloods were as janitors, servants, or whores.

She looked at her two friends. “I just think that a Ministry where Umbridge is an undersecretary will abuse those laws. Not to mention that they are requesting everyone to register their ‘blood status’.”

“They did that already,” Ron pointed out. “Hogwarts does it too.”

“Yes. So why make everyone do it again?” She paused a second, then went on: “They want to know where everyone lives and what they are doing.”

“Isn’t that a bit paranoid?” Harry asked, then winced at her glare.
“I think with Voldemort back, we all are not paranoid enough,” she shot back, gathering her notes and scrolls. “Speaking of - I got those laws from Sirius, and he asked me not to tell anyone.”

“But why would he ask that?” Ron blinked.

“Good question,” Hermione smiled without any humour. “Why would he ask that of me?”

It was a very quiet trip back to the Gryffindor dorms. And Hermione hadn’t even pointed out what she thought was a subtle change in the articles appearing in the Daily Prophet lately. In her impression, a growing number of articles included things that presented muggles and muggleborns in a bad light.

Or that she wondered if the Ministry, or Voldemort’s followers were behind those laws - or if anyone would be able to tell the difference.

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Hogwarts, November 10th, 1995

Dean Thomas’s right hand was trembling but he didn’t seem to notice, Hermione thought, watching her fellow Gryffindor, and fellow muggleborn, in the common room of their dorm. He was playing a muggle boardgame his mother had sent him with Seamus Finnigan, another frequent victim of Umbridge. The Irish student had a temper, and not as much self-control, and was probably the one Gryffindor that had had the most detentions with Umbridge. She hadn’t seen much of Sally-Anne Perks. That witch spent a lot of time in her bed these days, with the curtains silenced, and when she was out of the dorms, she did her best to fade in the walls.

It wasn’t just Malfoy and the other Slytherin prefects any more who were ‘reporting infractions’ to Umbridge. Most of House Slytherin had started to do it, after Umbridge had emphasised ‘the duty of all proper purebloods to keep an eye on the less cultured members of our society’. After that it had been open season on muggleborns. Or ‘mudbloods’, as many, even opportunists from other houses, called them openly now. Not in Gryffindor, at least. McLaggen had done so, once.

She saw Mary Smith sitting in a corner. The sixth year muggleborn had her wand in hand, and looked ready to hex anyone who looked at her wrongly. She had been largely responsible for McLaggen learning his lesson in tolerance and house unity. The witch saw Hermione looking at her, and nodded.

Hermione nodded back. She didn’t fear any hexes from Mary. Muggleborns understood each other. Even across houses. Sometimes you didn’t even need to speak, a nod or glance was enough. Getting persecuted by Umbridge had that effect. Most muggleborns had learned to keep their heads down by now, but that didn’t mean they had accepted their treatment. Or forgotten. Hermione certainly hadn’t. She had kept track of each detention. Each punishment. Each barb.

But as the muggleborns were finding unexpected common ground across the houses, so were the bigots finding support in the other houses. Hermione had stopped going to the teachers to complain. They too were keeping their heads down or so it seemed. And claimed that ‘words don’t hurt’. And the Headmaster was still ‘working on it’, as Harry had heard from Sirius and Ron from his dad.

Sometimes Hermione feared that Dumbledore would still be ‘working on it’ when the last muggleborn had been driven from Hogwarts.

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Hogwarts, December 1st, 1995

Hermione had thought she knew what to expect. The new Daily Prophet headline proved her wrong; ‘Muggleborn shop owner attacks Ministry Inspector, killed by Auror.’ She quickly read the article. Apparently, Mel Fuller, owner of ‘Fuller’s Boots’ in Diagon Alley, had failed a health inspection, and, in a rage, had attacked the inspector and her Auror guards, who killed him in self-defence.

She snorted. It could be true, of course, but she doubted it. A Health Inspector failing a bootmaker shop? The shop owner attacking at least three people, two of them trained Aurors? And he was killed in self-defence, instead of stunned? As if! She shook her head. That was simply too implausible.

But, she noticed, looking around, at least half the students seemed to believe it, judging by the amount of ‘mudblood criminal’ she heard. And judging by the glares from the muggleborns - by now she knew every muggleborn at school on sight - some were taking offence.

She glanced at Mary. Her fellow Gryffindor had been even more eager to start a fight lately, but today she seemed to be controlling herself. Gryffindor’s table should be alright then. The Hufflepuffs wouldn’t start anything either, but the Ravenclaws…

She almost winced when she saw spells fly. She relaxed a bit when she saw that Allan Baker was involved. The seventh year Ravenclaw was quick with his wand, and had a sharp tongue, but he generally was smart enough to let the pureblood bigot he clashed with make the first move. Flitwick broke the fight up before Umbridge could meddle, Hermione saw, and that seemed to have cooled tempers, somewhat.

Seemed. Hermione was asking herself, not for the first time, just how much influence Voldemort had at the Ministry already. If muggleborns were now getting killed in their shops by Aurors… She stiffened when she had another thought. What if those muggleborns were attacking, but under the Imperius? All the Death Eaters had to do to poison the public opinion further against muggleborn was to make a few of them attack purebloods.

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London, Diagon Alley, December 23rd, 1995

‘Don’t buy from mudbloods!’

Hermione stared at the words, painted on the wall in Diagon Alley. She felt as if she had been punched into the gut. It wasn’t just the words, no matter how much they made her think of another country, in another time. It was that they were still there. Dry. Dozens of passersby had walked past that wall, and no one had done anything.

Either they agreed with the words, or everyone who cared was too afraid to do anything. Too busy keeping their head down. She was very glad that she was wearing robes, instead of muggle clothes, right now. She hadn’t seen anyone in muggle clothes during her trip to Diagon Alley, she remembered. She wasn’t in Britain any more, she realised. She was in another country. A country where such ugly, hateful words could be written on a public wall, and no one batted an eye. A country she didn’t want to be part of.

“Kauft nicht bei Juden,” she mumbled, walking away. When she was at the next corner, she turned around and drew her wand.

“Scourgify!”
Her spell wiped away the words, and much of the grime on the wall, leaving a shiny patch of clean bricks and mortar surrounded by filth.

A fitting image, she thought.

But the small amount of satisfaction this granted her couldn’t push away the dread she was feeling. She knew where this country was headed. Voldemort had made his plans clear, and if the Ministry continued with their ‘appeasement’, he wouldn’t have to do much to take over Wizarding Britain and finish it.

She had to do something. No one else was doing anything, and she wouldn’t let history repeat itself. She had to study, harder than ever in her life. And she had to talk to her parents.

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London, King’s Cross Railway Station, January 12th, 1996

“Hermione! I’m so sorry! The Headmaster has to do something about this!”

Hermione Granger stared at Harry, not certain what he was talking about. Had she missed something?

Ron, closing the compartment door behind them - even when staying at Sirius’s house they were almost late, Hermione thought - kept her from asking. “The new Educational Decree! If you do not pass the ‘Wizarding Customs’ test you’re not allowed to go to Hogwarts after your O.W.L.s!”

“Oh, that.”

“Oh that’?” Ron stared at her. Is that all you have to say?

Hermione sighed. “I expected that, months ago.” She had much bigger problems than this, anyway.

“And you didn’t tell us?” Harry sounded as hurt as Ron was looking.

She shrugged. “Compared to what’s going on in Britain, that’s not really important.”

“Not really important? Are you sick?”

Ron tried to put his hand on her forehead. She slapped it away. Then she noticed that Harry was staring at her, and had his wand ready.

She rolled her eyes. “Dear Lord! I’m not under a spell, and I’m Hermione, not a polyjuiced impostor. Ask me anything!”

The resulting grilling took a while - almost long enough so the effect of a Polyjuice Potion would have ended anyway - but her best friends finally were convinced she was their friend. Apparently, Mad-Eye Moody had been staying at Sirius’s as well.

“So, why aren’t you, you know, more worked up about this?” Harry asked.

“Yes. It means you won’t be with us at Hogwarts next year!” Ron looked as if he was worked up enough for three of them.

“I told you, I expected this. And compared to what I saw in Diagon Alley, it’s really nothing.”
“What?”

“There were calls not to buy from muggleborns, written on the walls,” Hermione said. Harry hissed, but Ron looked puzzled, so she added: “That’s how the Holocaust started, in Germany.”

Of course, she had to explain what the Holocaust was.

“But… that’s insane, Hermione! That would never happen in Britain!” Ron protested, after a short but detailed introduction to the Shoa.

“Really?” Hermione stared at him. “The Ministry is driving us away. Out of the school, out of business, out of sight. All in the name of appeasing Voldemort. Who wants to kill us all.” She leaned forward. “Do you think the Aurors will lift a finger to protect us, after they enforced those new laws? Half of them will probably help him!”

“But… the Headmaster won’t let them do that!” Ron stared at her, desperation plain written on his face.

“He hasn’t stopped them yet.”

Hermione leaned back, folding her arms.

“What can we do?” Harry asked. Ron nodded.

“You can’t do much. Don’t tell anyone, but I’ve spoken with my parents. They’re preparing to move.” And hadn’t that been a fun discussion. If her parents knew what else she was planning, it would have been even worse. But she was a Gryffindor because she was braver than she was smart - and she was the smartest witch at Hogwarts.

Her friends looked dejected, and she patted Harry’s thigh. “It’s not yet the end of the school year. Maybe the Headmaster will come through.” She didn’t expect it. She hadn’t been at Grimmauld Place over the holiday, her preparations had taken priority, but she had written to both of them, and Harry had told her he was studying Occlumency - though the lessons he had received from Snape had sounded far more painful than the exercises she had found in a book from Knockturn Alley. She’d thought about giving him a copy, but that would mean Snape would find out during his next lesson. Hermione didn’t want to risk that.

And hadn’t that been telling, that she had felt safer in Knockturn Alley than in Diagon Alley?

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Hogwarts, January 19th, 1996

The ongoing persecution of muggleborns had one advantage, Hermione thought, watching the students file into the abandoned classroom she had prepared. No one would miss them, since everyone was used to them trying to stay out of sight. She glanced at the Marauder’s Map. No one was trailing the last stragglers either. She would have felt guilty at asking Harry to borrow the map, and to help create a diversion, if needed, if not for the importance of this meeting.

When the door had closed behind Colin Creevey, Hermione stood up from the desk the room had created for her, and stepped on the small platform in front of it.

“Welcome,” she said, then waited until the whispering died down.

“I’m glad so many of us found the way to this room. We’re here because we’re all in danger. In
greater danger than some of us might have realised."

“What do you mean?” Colin Creevey asked. “And why is Harry not here?”

“Harry is not here because he’s ready to distract the prefects,” Hermione said. And because he was too close to the Headmaster to risk getting involved in this - if they got caught, the consequences would be dire. But, she added to herself, he was absent because this was a meeting of muggleborns. Harry, despite his upbringing, was not facing the same problems as they were.

“But as to the danger we face,” she continued. “Have you been to Diagon Alley lately? Have you seen the laws passed by the Wizengamot? The decrees by the Ministry? The articles in the Daily Prophet?”

The murmurs more or less agreed with her, she saw. But not many of them had understood what was coming. Allan had, she was certain - his expression was grim. Mary too, she thought. And Dean of course, who was nodding, with Seamus. Both had a special perspective.

She took a deep breath. “Does all this, the calls to boycott muggleborns, the articles about muggleborns ‘killed while resisting arrest’, the purges at the Ministry, remind you of something?”

Again Allan nodded, but most looked confused. She flicked her wand and ended the Disillusionment Charm she had cast on the board behind her, and gasps and shouts filled the room when the assembled muggleborn students saw her presentation. On the left side, she had listed the laws and decrees and calls she had seen in Wizarding Britain. On the right side, she had copied the historical documents from Germany in the 1930s. Voldemort was facing Hitler at the top.

“Do you see where this is leading? How it will end?”

Colin was trembling now, his brother was crying. Allan looked grim, as did Mary, Seamus and Dean. Many others were cursing.

“They already know where we live. Where our families live. They have taken steps to ensure that we’ll not get a higher education, keeping us weak. The Minister’s own undersecretary has been torturing us, trying to break us. They have fired our Aurors. With each day, we grow weaker, and they grow stronger.”

She paused trying to meet everyone’s eyes.

“Until Voldemort strikes, and the Ministry looks away - or helps him - while he slaughters us and our families.” She flicked her wand, and a map of Magical Europe appeared. “If you think about leaving Britain, think again - the other countries don’t like muggleborns either.” At least not the average muggleborn. Hermione could probably get a place at Beauxbatons thanks to her talent, but she’d be one of very few, and she wouldn’t just be the mudblood, but the foreigner as well. Durmstrang didn’t even let their own mudbloods attend. And her friends and fellow muggleborns would be left in Britain.

“But Dumbledore! He can save us!”

She didn’t know who had said that - probably a Hufflepuff. But she scoffed in return. “He will save us, just as he has been saving us from Slytherins and other bigots? Just as he has been saving us from Umbridge?”

“No!” she shouted over the increasing volume of whispers and curses, “We need to stop them! We need to save our families!”
“How?” Allan spoke, for the first time. “How can we achieve what apparently not even Dumbledore can do?” He sounded sceptical, but his eyes told another story. He had understood, she knew.

“Dumbledore is a wizard, born and raised in Wizarding Britain. Over a century ago. We’re different. We’re muggleborns. We’ve been born and raised in the real world. We know things the purebloods have no idea about. They don’t even know what electricity is!” She scoffed. “Their idea of war is a bunch of wizards casting spells at each other. That works against other wizards, or against outnumbered, helpless and surprised muggles.”

The room was silent now. She lowered her voice slightly. “But we know how a real war is fought. A civil war.” She nodded at Seamus. “We can use magic, and we can and will use technology. When they come for us, we won’t let them slaughter us like animals. We will teach those bigoted bastards what war means.” She snarled the last words through clenched teeth while the other muggleborns shouted their agreement.

When the students had fallen silent again, Hermione smiled. “And now, let’s start preparing for war. We’ve got a lot to cover.”

Seamus and Dean made a show of groaning, but they were smiling, if grimly.

“But first,” Hermione said, holding up a parchment, “We’ll ensure that no one of us can betray the others.”

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The rest of the meeting was spent organising a training schedule - Kingsley was a good Defence teacher, but every one of them would need to be able to apparate if they wanted to escape Death Eaters, or attack them. They had to prepare plans to protect and evacuate their families. Changing addresses would hopefully be enough for most - their parents didn’t have to register, after all, being muggles. They’d have to find a way to contact the older muggleborns, especially the former Aurors and Hit-Wizards. They needed addresses, and contacts.

And they’d have to learn how to fight like a resistance, like guerillas. They needed resources. Wands without the trace. Muggle supplies. They needed to learn how to make bombs, how to get weapons - for their families, and for themselves.

Hermione had planned this for weeks, and had answers for a lot of questions, but not for all of them. Fortunately, she was no longer alone. There were others who knew the answers she was missing. Or, like Seamus, knew people who could help them.

The Muggleborn Resistance had been formed.

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**Hogwarts, February 4th, 1996**

Harry Potter felt at peace, for the first time in days. He was flying in the sky above Hogwarts, alone. And he had no torture session with Snape in the evening. He had had one last night, and would have another tomorrow, but today he was free. Free of the pain and anger that was the inevitable result of those git’s ‘lessons’.

He flew over the Black Lake, and executed a Wronski Feint. Cutting it a bit too close - the tips of his shoes dipped into the water when he pulled out of the dive. He loved it. If Hermione saw him, she’d have a fit. He chuckled, then grew serious again.
If Harry was suffering from nightmares caused by his connection to Voldemort, which Snape’s torture didn’t seem to help against, Hermione was suffering from torture sessions by that bitch Umbridge. She wasn’t the only one, but she was his best friend, apart from Ron. Harry wished he could help her. But short of killing another teacher, he couldn’t do much. Dumbledore had been quite clear on that - the Ministry wouldn’t take interference well, and things were apparently ‘too delicate’ right now to risk a confrontation, especially for the Boy-Who-Lived. The Headmaster claimed he had a plan, but refused to share details, and each time Harry saw Hermione walk back from a detention, cradling her hand and trying not to show her pain, he lost a bit more confidence in Dumbledore.

And each time he saw her like that, hurt and vulnerable, he wanted to hug her and console her, and maybe something more. His relationship, if he could call it that, with Cho wasn’t going anywhere. She was still hung up on Cedric, and while Harry couldn’t fault her for that, he really didn’t want to serve as a hug pillow, as Ron called it, for a witch in mourning. Not to mention that Cho didn’t get along well with Hermione.

And if he had to choose between Cho and Hermione, well… it wasn’t a choice, not really. He’d do anything to help her. So would Ron, Harry knew - they had an understanding. In that, at least.

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Hogwarts, February 25th, 1996

Hermione closed ‘On Guerrilla Warfare’, disguised as a tome on magical plants. Mao had been successful, but not all of his lessons were applicable to the situation of the muggleborns. Though his advice on hiding among the population… that fit right in. The wizards would have trouble finding a muggleborn among the muggles. She looked at the next book on her pile. She had taken a lot of books, magical and mundane, with her. Including documentation on a number of the latest terrorist attacks. One of those, the one in Oklahoma, stood out - that one had not been done with commercial explosives.

Apparition training was going well, for the older students at least. Allan was not the best teacher, but he understood the matter perfectly, and he could deal with any accidents. She made a note to prepare more potions, and learn healing spells. That would mean another trip to Knockturn Alley over Easter.

The door to the common room opened, and Harry stumbled inside. He looked like hell warmed over, as Dean would say. She was up and at his side in a heartbeat, holding out a pain relief potion. Her friend nodded gratefully and gulped it down. “Snape’s killing me with his lessons.”

“Do they at least help with the nightmares?” She had researched the matter, and while Snape’s method was said to be the quickest to learn Occlumency, it was also the most painful - and most prone to failure. And the only one that let the instructor enter the student’s mind. Which was the reason she hadn’t told her friends about the Muggleborn Resistance. Or not what it really was. Ron and Harry thought it was a support group for muggleborns. Maybe. She was aware that they knew her too well and might suspect she was doing something more than exchanging advice with fellow muggleborns.

“Somewhat,” Harry said. “Ron still on patrol?”

“He’s still with Lavender,” Hermione said. Probably on patrol, unless the girl had made her move, as she had heard Parvati calling it, one evening the other two girls had thought she was already asleep behind the curtains of her bed.
“Ah.” Harry didn’t say anything. His own pursuit of Cho had ended in dismal failure. She would have told him that, if she had thought it would do any good.

“Come on, let’s sit down and wait for Ron.”

“How’s your hand?”

“It’s fine,” Hermione answered. Malfoy had managed to get her into detention yesterday. It had been painful, but Hermione had found some consolation in the knowledge that while Umbridge tried to break the muggleborns, they were growing closer, and more prepared for the coming conflict. The worse that sadist treated them, the more determined the muggleborns grew.

The two made some idle chat - a welcome relief from the lingering pain of Snape’s lesson for Harry, and a distraction from her planning she knew she needed for Hermione - until Ron and Lavender returned. Hermione was about to subtly check them for telltales of making out, but Lavender’s frustrated expression and curt ‘good night’ told her all she needed to know.

Ron sat down in the seat next to them, sighing.

“Bad patrol?” Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. “No. Yes. I don’t know. Lavender is …”

“Lavender is?” Hermione asked, curious despite herself.

“Well, I’d rather be patrolling with you.”

“You would?” Hermione was surprised. She would have expected her friend to be happy to patrol with a pretty witch who didn’t take rules as seriously as Hermione used to.

Ron nodded.

“Even though I’d make you work much harder in her place?” Hermione said, half-teasing.

“Well… maybe?” Ron grinned, and the three laughed.

For the rest of the evening, Hermione felt as things were back to how they had been. Though she didn’t know if Ron wanting to patrol with her meant something, or not. But she liked hearing it.

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Hogwarts, March 4th, 1996

“Are you listening to me?” Lavender Brown asked.

Ron Weasley looked at his fellow prefect. She was pouting. He smiled, and tried to sound as sincere as he could. “Of course. Just checking if there’s someone lurking around. I think I heard something.”

He hadn’t been listening to Lavender. He had been thinking. About his friends. They were not doing well. Harry was having frequent nightmares, despite - or, Ron thought, because - Snape’s lessons in Occlumency. Hermione had said the method Snape had chosen to teach Harry was the quickest, but not the most successful. To think Voldemort - he could think the name now, though saying it still was a bit difficult - could invade Harry’s dreams to torment him… he shuddered.

“Are you cold?” Lavender asked, stepping closer to him.
“No, no. I just remembered the last Potions lesson.”

That made the witch shudder, and stop trying to wrap her arm around him. Ron was relieved. He didn’t dislike the witch. It was even flattering that she was obviously interested in him. But he wasn’t interested in her. Not in being her boyfriend, at least. And he was not the type of wizard to use a witch who liked him. Mum had raised him better than that, and Hermione would be furious at him if she found out. And disappointed.

And he really didn’t want to disappoint Hermione. The poor girl was suffering. Ron felt enraged just thinking at what she was enduring from those Slytherin slime bags, and that ugly toad. He wanted to help her, prove he was a good friend, be there for her, but… she wouldn’t let him, not much. She had become rather closed-off, lately. Moodier than Harry, even. And she spent more time with the other muggleborns than with Ron and Harry. He didn’t like that, even though he understood that she needed to.

His friend wasn’t one to tolerate injustice. Or what she saw as it. Buckbeak, house elves, Sirius… she had thrown herself into helping them, no matter if they wanted it or not. At least the muggleborns wanted her help. Whatever kind of help she was giving them.

He wasn’t dumb. Hermione was brilliant, but scary, and he knew her well enough to know that she was doing more than holding hands and consoling students. He just didn’t know how much more she was doing. And he didn’t know if he wanted to know.

But he was jealous anyway. She was his best female friend, after all. And he didn’t want to lose her. Not when he was not certain if she might be more than that.

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London, No 12 Grimmauld Place, April 4th, 1996

“Hermione, what a surprise! You should have called ahead though, Harry’s off visiting Ron at the Burrow.”

Hermione Granger nodded. “I know, Sirius.” They had told her their plans, after all. “I’m here for you.”

Sirius flashed her an exaggerated smile. “Why, Miss Granger, that’s quite daring of you! I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist me forever!” He waved her inside, laughing when she rolled her eyes at him.

Inside the entrance hall, Kreacher was waiting, scowling. “Mudbloods in the halls of the Blacks’ ancestral house! What a shame! To have them dirty up those floOOF.”

The foul little cretin smashed into the wall hiding the portrait of Sirius’s mother, with permanent Silencing Spells cast on every brick around her. Hermione lowered her wand and stepped closer, crouching down next to the stunned elf.

“Call me ‘mudblood’ once again, and I’ll petrify you, and then donate you to a muggle garden, do you understand?” she snarled at him. When he didn’t answer at once, she dug her wand into his throat. “Do you understand?”

The house-elf nodded shakily. Satisfied, she stood up. Sirius was staring at her, and she blushed a bit. “I’m sorry, but… too many have called me mudblood this year.” She should feel guilty for hexing the poor house-elf who didn’t know better, but she didn’t. Kreacher should know better too.
Sirius waved her apology away. “Don’t worry, he had it coming. Remind me not to tease you, though.” More seriously, he asked: “Are things really that bad?”

Hermione snorted. “Worse. That’s why I’m here.”

“And that’s why you came when Harry was with Ron?”

She nodded. “They have their own troubles, with those sadistic lessons for Harry, and Ron’s family…” she trailed off. Everyone knew that Ron’s father had been demoted because he liked muggles, even though the official reason didn’t state so. If Ron was caught up in what she was planning, his family would suffer, and the Order would lose more of its dwindling influence in the Ministry.

Sirius nodded, and led her to the living room. They sat down and the older wizard summoned two bottles of Butterbeer. No glasses, but Hermione wasn’t complaining.

“So, what do you need an old wizard who has just recovered from more than a decade in prison for?” he asked while toasting her.


That made him blink. “Err…”

“I’ll need your word that you will not tell this to anyone, before I can explain,” she added.

Sirius hesitated. “That sounds dangerous.”

She nodded. He would cave in, she knew that. Besides, he owed her for saving his life, in their third year.

After a moment, he nodded. “You have my word. Now spill!”

And Hermione explained about the Muggleborn Resistance. Not everything, of course. But enough so he’d know what the gold would be used for. Buying wands on the black market for the underage members. Securing safe houses. Acquiring supplies, for potions and other things. Relocating families.

He listened, both bottles empty before she stopped. She was certain he’d agree - the Blacks were among the richest families in Britain, and he had spent half the sum she needed, according to her estimates, on Harry’s firebolt.

“That’s not all you need the gold for though, right?”

He was also smarter than he liked to appear, she reminded herself. She nodded. “Yes. I’m also planning to strike at the enemy.”

“The Death Eaters?” He asked, his eyes not leaving hers.

“Anyone who wants to see muggleborns dead,” she answered, meeting his gaze without flinching.

After a few moments, he nodded. “Can’t say I don’t understand, after Azkaban.” He stood up. “I’ll fetch the gold. Do you need an enchanted purse as well?”

“Two or three, if possible,” she said at once - those could be used for other purposes as well.

He grinned. “I’ll be right back.”
Hermione smiled, relieved. Now she just had to start acquiring those supplies. Though she had a feeling that Sirius might be able to help her there as well. He had, according to himself, had a misspent youth, after all.

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Hogwarts, April 28th, 1996

“You never learn, do you, Miss Granger? You keep breaking rules. It’s a habit for you, isn’t it? Not that this should surprise me, given your unfortunate origin. Blood will tell.”

Hermione Granger stared at the ground, avoiding the gaze of the bigoted sadist masquerading as a teacher. Umbridge had stepped up her efforts after the Easter break. The witch had at least one student in detention each evening. Sally-Anne had spent two nights crying after her detention, and the girl hadn’t done anything. Just like Hermione - ‘disrespecting authority’ apparently now meant not moving fast enough to the side when purebloods came along, even though she had been in a hallway wide enough for everyone to pass, with room to spare for a whole column. If the Weasley twins had not stepped up their undeclared prank war against the Slytherins, Hermione was certain someone would have lost it, and killed one of the snakes or other bigots by now. Dumbledore had to know that as well - he had personally taken over the twins’ punishment, if you could call sitting in his office and listening to tales of his life that.

“Answer me!”

“Yes, Madam Umbridge,” Hermione said, forcing herself not to let her anger show.

“A hundred lines! Maybe then you will learn.”

She gripped the quill with a trembling hand and started writing, hissing with pain as she felt a blade cut in her flesh. They had tried everything to beat the quill. Numbing the hand before the detention didn’t help. Invisible gloves didn’t help. Lotions didn’t help. Hermione was certain that the quill used a variant of the Torture Curse, since nothing could stop the pain, or relieve it afterwards. She had told McGonagall, and Shacklebolt, but nothing had been done.

While she tried to ignore the pain, she glanced at the witch. Umbridge was smiling widely. She was a sadist, Hermione realised. No matter what she or anyone else would do, that monster would keep torturing them. She hated that woman so much, if she had had her wand on her, she’d have hexed her and damn the consequences.

Umbridge would pay for her crimes, the young witch swore.

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Hogwarts, June 1st, 1996

‘Dumbledore duels You-Know-Who in Ministry!’

When Hermione Granger saw that headline on the Daily Prophet an owl had dropped off at the table in the Great Hall during breakfast, she immediately looked at her best friends, who were just arriving.

“Did you know about this?” Both looked tired, and for a moment Hermione wondered if they had been involved. Without her.

Both looked guilty.

“Sirius told me late last night,” Harry admitted. Through his communication mirror, no doubt. “The
“Order fought the Death Eaters there.”

“Harry told me. I needed to know about my family,” Ron added. His two eldest brothers were in the Order as well. “You were already asleep.”

Hermione huffed, but she couldn’t exactly encourage them to try to get to her when she was in bed, could she? She read the article. It was light on information, and heavy on speculation. Dumbledore claimed it had been an attempt to take over the Ministry. An attack. Fudge was calling every wizard and witch to remain calm until the situation was resolved - and claimed it was under control.

“I’ve been dreaming of him, you know,” Harry whispered.

“Yes,” said both Hermione and Ron.

“I saw him last night. In the Ministry. But not in the Atrium. In a hallway, with a massive door at the end.”

So much for the Occlumency lessons, Hermione thought. She would send him a copy of her own training plan and instruction manual, even if it would take him longer.

“Do you think this means we’re at war with Voldemort now?” Ron sounded hopeful.

“Maybe,” Harry ventured.

“It’s too early to tell, I think.” Hermione felt hope. If Dumbledore had saved the Ministry, or had managed to make them believe that, then those awful laws could be repealed. She would be able to return to Hogwarts next year. Be with her best friends.

It wouldn’t be as before though. Too much had happened. Too many students had been revealed as bigots. Too much harm had been done. At Hogwarts, and in Wizarding Britain. She’d never be able to trust that Ministry again. Not after this year.

If the laws and decrees were repealed. The O.W.L.s would start next week.

*****

Hogwarts, June 9th, 1996

Hermione Granger left the examination room with her head held high and an expression on her face that sent anyone nearby seeking cover. Anyone but Ron and Harry, and even her two friends hesitated just a second before approaching her.

But they did approach her, hug her, and tried to console her. They didn’t need to ask how the Wizarding Customs exam had gone.

“Don’t worry. Dumbledore will have the laws repealed over summer. We’ll all be together next year!” Ron said. He didn’t sound that convincing though. Or convinced.

Hermione snorted. “They’re still debating who attacked the Ministry. Malfoy’s cronies claim that it was a trap for the Dark Lord.” Which she strongly suspected was true. “I doubt they’ll get around to repeal the anti-muggleborn laws until they finally admit that Voldemort is an enemy.” And that, she suspected, would take a long time.

They passed Malfoy and his cronies, and Hermione did her best to not react to their taunts. Even if she had to clench her jaws together so hard, it started to hurt. And Harry had to restrain Ron from
They didn’t go far. Harry and Ron still had to take their exam. But they stepped around the corner, out of sight of the other students.

“I expected that,” she said, leaning against the wall. “I told you so, right when Umbridge managed to stay at the school.”

“She’ll be gone next year. She’s apparently ‘urgently needed’ at the Ministry again,” Ron spat.

“Your dad’s demotion wasn’t reversed either, was it?” Hermione looked at her friend.

“No. Dad says they have more important things to worry about than his career.”

“It sounds as if a lot of ‘not so important’ things are getting sacrificed, while nothing ‘important’ is gained.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll be fine. You have your exams still ahead. Don’t let Malfoy unnerve you.”

“They could make us fail as well,” Harry said, looking morose.

“The Boy-Who-Lived and a Weasley? No one would believe that. Or accept it.” Even though Harry knew far less about Wizarding Customs than herself.

Her two friends looked away, probably feeling guilty for not having been born to muggles. She patted them on their shoulders. “Come on, go and blow them away! Do it for me!”

They’d be much safer at Hogwarts, Hermione knew, in the months to come.

She watched them go back to the waiting area, smiling. Then she turned around and started towards the Gryffindor dorms.

A voice coming from a dark alcove stopped her. “Failed?”

It was Allan. “As expected,” she said, glancing at him.

“So, nothing has been changed.” He sounded almost happy.

She shook her head. Dumbledore had wanted to start a war against Voldemort, had he? They’d give him what he wanted.

Hogwarts, June 16th, 1996

Dolores Umbridge was smiling when she entered her office. The year teaching those stupid children was finally over. If she had known how much work it took to make the mudbloods behave and obey their betters… she sighed. If the mudbloods acted uppity, it would provoke those among the purebloods with less patience, and might even start the war everyone wanted to avoid. Even the mudbloods were subjects of Wizarding Britain, after all, and you could only overlook so much before the power of the Ministry was threatened.

It had been hard, but someone had had to do it, and she had been the best choice. And, Merlin!, she had done it, for Cornelius, and for Britain. She hadn’t been completely successful. Some mudbloods still hadn’t learned their place, like that Granger girl. Malfoy had warned Dolores that the girl had no respect at all for tradition or purebloods - although the son of Lucius Malfoy wasn’t the best source for unbiased information, and had clearly wanted to ingratiate himself with her. But Snape had
warned her as well, had told her that the girl was a habitual trouble-maker, breaking rules, flaunting them, and was protected by McGonagall and Dumbledore. And Snape was Dumbledore’s man. To tell her this meant that the girl was even worse. But now she was gone, from Hogwarts at least. She wouldn’t ever set foot into those halls again, not as long as Dolores had a say in who took the exams for ‘Wizarding Customs’.

“Petrificus Totalus.”

The curse hit her before she realised what was happening. Stiff as a board, she fell down.

She tried to see who had dared to curse her, but she only saw the floor. Then she heard footsteps coming closer.

“Wingardium Leviosa.”

She was levitated, no, her robe was, pulling her up, and she was floating towards her quarters, behind her office. Someone had covered the floor with a weird transparent material, she saw, before she was dropped on it, and not too gently.

“Good evening, Madam Umbridge.”

She couldn’t place the voice. Male, none of the teachers… a student! Attacking a teacher! Dolores couldn’t believe it. That criminal would pay! Azkaban at least!

“I’ve taken the liberty to prepare your room. Wouldn’t want the furniture to get dirty, would we?”

What was he talking about? Dolores started to get more worried than angry. This didn’t look like a prank, or even… no!

Something metallic hit the floor next to her head. She could see it if she glanced to the side, it looked like some metal piece on a stick.

“I don’t think you recognise this. It’s a golf club. A piece of muggle sporting equipment. It used to be your favorite quill, by the way.” The ‘club’ was pulled out of her sight.

“You’ve spent a year torturing all of us. Today you pay.”

He was a mudblood! Dolores wanted to yell, to scream for help, to flee. She couldn’t. She was helpless.

“They’ll never find your body.”

Then the blows started.

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Hogwarts, June 17th, 1996

Hermione Granger looked over the Great Hall during breakfast, feeling both sad and angry. She was leaving Hogwarts for the last time today. She looked at the Slytherin table, where Malfoy and his cronies - most of the table - were sneering at her. They thought they had won.

They were wrong. She would study on her own. So would the other muggleborns. If Wizarding Britain didn’t want them, then they’d create a society of their own. And they would be ready if the purebloods took offence at that. More than ready.
She looked at the staff table. Umbridge was not present, she noted. That was unusual; she would have expected the toad to be there to gloat. At least her last meal at Hogwarts wouldn’t be spoiled further by that sadist bigot’s presence. It was just a small consolation, though. The witch glanced at the Ravenclaw table. Allan was sitting there.

He met her eyes and smiled.
Chapter 2: The Fugitive

‘Historians still debate whether the Dark Lord truly attempted to raid the Ministry on May 31st, 1996. While there is no doubt that he used the ‘Year of Appeasement’ to build up his forces, this act seemed considerably premature. His influence both in the Wizengamot as well as in key departments had grown considerably during that year. A ‘peaceful takeover’ had become very likely. Only a very reckless wizard - which the Dark Lord wasn’t - would have jeopardized that by breaking into the Ministry. So why did he break in that night? Why did he fight Dumbledore? And why was Dumbledore present? All we know is that Dumbledore ‘expected this’, as he stated in the Wizengamot’s emergency session the next day. Following that famous duel, the opinion in the Wizengamot shifted, and the appeasement policy of Minister Fudge lost crucial supporters. If not for the controversy about the disappearance of Dolores Umbridge from Hogwarts a few weeks later, the appeasement policy as well as the muggleborn laws might have been repealed completely.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Hogwarts, June 17th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore stood at the window in his office and watched the students leave his school and board the carriages that would take them down to the train station in Hogsmeade. Usually, he’d smile at the sight of children returning to their families after a year at Hogwarts. Not today, though. He had too much on his mind. Too much to worry about. Too many of the children in the yard below him were facing an uncertain, even dangerous future.

After Tom had fallen for his trap two weeks ago, he had been certain that he could turn the Ministry around. The Dark Lord, breaking into the Ministry, trying to plunder the vaults of the Department of Mysteries, showing his true colours… it had been a perfect setup.

And yet it had failed. Not completely, no. Too many Wizengamot members took offence at such a crass, crude display of contempt for the Ministry for that. The increase in Aurors and Hit-Wizards he and Amelia had fought for had finally been granted. But the repealing of the muggleborn laws he had hoped for had not happened. Lucius was blocking his efforts with proposals for even stricter laws, to ‘preserve order in these confusing times’. Albus had underestimated the number of bigots who would rather see the Dark Lord grow in power than restore the rights of muggleborns taken away by Cornelius’s policies. He shouldn’t have, Albus thought. In hindsight, it was obvious just how deep the rot went, just how many wizards and witches truly believed the lies of blood purity. The ease with which the new laws had been accepted. The eager compliance many showed when presented with the new rules. The hatred shown, on the streets, in the Ministry, and even at Hogwarts.

He had been blinded by his faith in people, and his need to keep up the spirits of his friends might have led to him lying to himself, partially. And his own vanity, of course - he had not wanted to admit that he had so little to show for, after decades in the Wizengamot. That despite his reputation and influence, he had not succeeded in changing the hearts and minds of the purebloods.

Sometimes Albus wondered if Britain was a country worth defending any more. He was certain that most of the Wizengamot were in favour of a harder stance against the Dark Lord now not because it was the right thing to do, but because they had realised that they would lose their power should Tom take over. As long the Death Eaters were not attacking ‘blood traitors’ and the Ministry, the leaders
of Wizarding Britain were all too ready to sacrifice the muggleborns.

And yet, he couldn’t abandon Britain. Not while there were innocents and good people left. Not when people put their trust in him. Not when people were ready to risk their lives even, to fight against the Dark Lord. How could he do any less?

But he had to reconsider his plans. Question them, even. He couldn’t afford any more mistakes. Too much was at stake. The Order had been preparing for the war against Voldemort he knew was coming, gathering supplies, preparing safe houses, training, and recruiting. With the needed care and caution, of course - Pettigrew had shown all too tragically how much damage a single spy could cause. Albus had planned to focus on muggleborns, since they would be the least likely to turn traitor, but many of them seemed to have lost their trust in him, or had disappeared before they could be contacted.

Below him he saw Mister Malfoy board a carriage, in the company of Miss Parkinson, followed by Messrs Crabbe and Goyle. He knew how they had abused their positions as prefects this year. Knew it, but had not stopped more than the worst excesses. Had it been a wise decision to let Severus protect them and the others like them, all those years? The professor had gained the trust of their parents as a result, and the trust of the Dark Lord - as much trust as Tom was able to show, at least. But it had also resulted in almost a generation of Slytherin students learning that bigotry was acceptable. A lesson they had learned all too well, as the last few months had shown. And which had spread to other houses too. Dolores had had an ample base of support to draw from. And, he added, so had the Dark Lord.

Thinking of Dolores… he would have expected her to have shown up already. She had made no secret about her desire to leave Hogwarts and return to the Ministry as soon as possible during their last meeting.

He wasn’t looking forward to meeting that disgusting witch again. But he was glad Hogwarts would be rid of her. And he would do what he could to ensure that her successor would not continue her work.

And no matter how long it took, he would see muggleborns return to Hogwarts for their N.E.W.T.s. Seeing a prodigy like Miss Granger outperform all the purebloods in her year was one of the best ways to disprove the ideas of blood purity.

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London, King’s Cross Railway Station, June 17th, 1996

There were more Aurors present when the Hogwarts Express entered the station than usual, Hermione Granger noticed. They were meant to ensure the safety of the students and their parents, but she didn’t feel safe. She knew she was just a mudblood for many of the red-robed wizards and witches. Her parents couldn’t even step on the platform. Scoffing, she stood up and turned away.

“Let me,” Ron said, taking her trunk down for her.

“Thank you.” She smiled at him.

“And here’s Crookshanks,” Harry said, presenting her with her pet.

“Thanks, Harry.” She kept smiling, even though she felt more like crying. Judging by the glances the two boys exchanged, she hadn’t managed to hide her feelings.

“Dumbledore will get those laws repealed. Or he’ll find a rule that lets him decide who gets to attend
and who doesn’t,” Harry said.

Ron nodded. “It’s over two months away, plenty of time for it.” With a slightly forced grin he added. “You’ll have read all the books for next year in that time anyway.”

Hermione chuckled at that, for a moment. Then she couldn’t hold her tears back any longer and hugged them, hard. She just knew she wouldn’t return in the fall. Dumbledore might try, but he’d fail. He couldn’t change a country that allowed what she had seen, and suffered through. She felt the two stiffen, and awkwardly pat her back while she sobbed.

“You’ll visit during the summer, right?”

That Ron asked, rather than stated it told her enough about what he really thought, but she nodded. “Yes, of course.” She would, but she didn’t know how long she would be able to.

“It’ll be much easier, now, with me living with Sirius,” Harry said. “You can easily reach Grimmauld Place, and Ron can use the Floo Network.”

“Something good that has come of this whole…” Ron swallowed what he had been about to say. “No more Dursleys for you.”

Hermione nodded, even though she wasn’t certain if, all things considered, the loss of the blood protection Harry’s mother had granted him was worth leaving that abominable household. It would have been better, she thought, if Voldemort hadn’t been rendered immune to it by using Harry’s blood for his resurrection. But that couldn’t be changed, and so it was better to focus on the positive result of that. And she would have to visit Sirius anyway. His gold was needed.

She stepped back, and cleaned her face with her wand. She grinned, but without humour. “That’s another good thing: With me not allowed to return to Hogwarts, I’m no longer considered an underage witch out of school.” No more trace for her. Dumbledore had managed that, at least.

“Would you hex me if I say I’m jealous?” Ron asked, semi-seriously.

“Maybe,” she answered, sticking out her tongue.

“I should be jealous,” Harry cut in. “I’m going to be living with Sirius, and I’m not allowed to use my wand to deal with him!” He was grinning while he complained, though.

They kept the light-hearted pretense up until Hermione stood in front of the portal that would lead her to her parents. She turned to her friends. “Enjoy your holidays, you hear?”

The two nodded. They didn’t wish the same to her. They knew her too well. She hugged Harry, then Ron.

“Take care of yourself,” Harry said.

“See you soon,” Ron said.

Hermione nodded and turned to the portal.

She didn’t cry when she left the platform, and with it, Wizarding Britain.

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London, No 12 Grimmauld Place, June 22nd, 1996
“Hermione! Come in!”

Hermione Granger smiled at her best friend while stepping through the door. Once inside, she hugged him.

“I missed you,” he said in a low voice.

“I missed you as well.” It wasn’t entirely accurate. She would miss him, once he would be back at Hogwarts and she … wouldn’t be. It was weird how knowing - or at least, being reasonably certain - that she wouldn’t return to school with her friends made her feel differently about not seeing them for a few days.

It affected Harry as well. He was still hugging her. She was tempted to make a comment about not going to vanish the second he released her, but decided against it and instead enjoyed the closeness. Living with Sirius was good for Harry; her friend had been a bit shy about hugs in the past.

“Do you want to skip the drawing room, and go straight to Harry’s bedroom?”

Sirius’s comment made Harry break off the hug, and glare at his smirking godfather. Hermione snorted; she had expected that from the older wizard as soon as she had seen him arrive.

“Hello Sirius.”

“Hello Hermione.” He bowed with a flourish. “Be welcome in my humble home.”

“Ron’s not here yet but he’ll not be long,” Harry said, taking her hand. “Let’s go to the drawing room before Sirius tells Kreacher to enlarge my bed.”

“Oh, good idea!”

Hermione chuckled at the antics of the two while they left the entrance hall. The drawing room sported a nice selection of snacks and drinks - even muggle ones - on the small table, and new furniture.

Hermione sat down on the couch. “So, what have you been up to this week?”

“I’ve gone and picked up the rest of my stuff from Privet Drive.”

“Oh?” She had thought that Harry had taken all his meagre belongings with him when he left the Dursleys last year.

“They are moving, and they discovered things that belonged to my mum in the attic. My aunt left the stuff for me.”

“That was nice of her.”

He grimaced. “Maybe. Or she was simply afraid to make me mad. They were moving because they were no longer safe there, with the protection gone, and the Order was helping them.”

Hermione thought that that was more likely, seeing what she knew of Harry’s relatives, but refrained from commenting. She also didn’t mention that her own parents were moving. Harry would feel guilty about it. And she didn’t want anyone from the Order knowing where her parents were moving to. “Did you read the book about Occlumency I gave you?”

“I’ve started it. The method is very different from Snape’s.”
“It takes more time, but it has a better success rate.”

“I see.” Harry frowned, apparently remembering his torture sessions with Snape. “What have you been doing?” he asked, a bit hesitantly.

“I’ve been spending time with my parents.” Organising the move. “And I’ve been buying lots of books to study.” From Knockturn Alley. Her parents had already bought her more books about guerilla warfare. And chemistry. “I’ve also been meeting a few members of my former study group.” In one of their safe houses.

Harry frowned at that. “Dumbledore will come through, trust me. You’ll be at Hogwarts with us.”

She smiled, and tried to sound as if she believed him. “I hope so.”

He nodded. “Oh, before I forget: Here!” He handed her a small box.

She opened it, and saw there was a small mirror in it. A familiar looking mirror. “Is that Sirius’s communication mirror?”

“Yes.” Before she could hand it back, he stopped her. “He said you should have it. He doesn’t need it any more, you know, since I now live with him.”

And it would allow her to talk to Harry and Ron when they were at Hogwarts. “Thank you.” She smiled at him, feeling both happy and sad.

For a while, neither of them said anything. Then, Harry coughed. “You know…”

“Yes?”

“Master’s godson’s friend has arrived.” Kreacher interrupted Harry before he could continue. Behind the elf, Ron waved at them.

“Ron!” Hermione jumped up and went to hug her friend. He had grown, she thought, even though she knew it wasn’t possible. He felt taller though. And he hugged her tightly.

“Hermione. Harry.”

“Hi Ron. Butterbeer?” Harry said.

The redhead seemed to hesitate, then she felt him nod and release her. “Sure.”

“How are you doing? How’s the family?” she asked once all were seated again.

Ron sighed. “I’m doing fine, but… It’s just me and Ginny at home. The twins live above their shop. Mum doesn’t like that. She and dad are tense, something’s up with the Order.”

“What about Percy?”

He scowled. “That git’s still ignoring us. Trying to cozy up to the Minister!” He took a sip from his bottle. “He’ll be kicking his girlfriend out any day now, so he’s not tainted by her ‘impure blood’!

“Clearwater’s a half-blood,” Hermione pointed out.

“So? That means she’s ‘half-tainted’. Our dear brother will be looking for a pureblood girlfriend soon enough so he can advance faster!” Ron spat out. He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to bring this up… he just makes me so mad. Mum’s been crying because of him!”
He waved his hands, and Hermione couldn’t tell if he was apologising for bringing up family trouble, or blood purity in general.

Ron finished his Butterbeer, and grabbed another. “What have you been up to? Are you travelling to France again this summer?”

Hermione repeated what she had told Harry, and added that they wouldn’t be going to France this year. Soon all three were chatting about less troubling topics. Sirius’s pranks. Tonks’s clumsy entrance through the Floo connection a day ago, when she had managed to topple over three others. But mostly the past four years they had spent together.

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The young witch met with Sirius under the pretext of searching his library for a book before leaving. It wasn’t really a pretext - there were a number of tomes she’d like to read, and copy.

“How are things going?” Sirius asked, leaning against the door.

“As well as can be expected. We’ve set up safe houses. Most families are moving, or getting ready to,” Hermione said. “The Creeveys are adjusting to their new wands. We’ve made contact with a few older muggleborns as well.” Among them a few Hit-Wizards who had been fired by the Ministry last year. The 7th years, like Allan, had done that; they had known them from school. Hermione herself hadn’t really known any muggleborns that had already graduated.

The wizard nodded. “You haven’t told Harry or Ron yet.”

“No,” Hermione said. “Why not? They’ll help you.” Sirius was staring at her.

“I don’t want them involved.” She leaned against the closest shelf. “The political repercussions for Dumbledore, should Harry be caught up in this, are too serious. And Harry will be safer at Hogwarts. With his link to Voldemort, he’ll need that protection.” It wasn’t as if he had learned enough Occlumency from Snape to do him any good. “And he’ll need Ron with him.” Harry hadn’t many friends he could trust. And, she added to herself, with his link and lack of Occlumency, Harry would be a danger to the muggleborns. If Voldemort could track him, then no safe house he visited would remain hidden for long.

Sirius nodded, apparently accepting her reasoning. “They’ll not stay away if things start to get ugly.”

“I know.” She sighed. “Things might not become that bad though.” Not that quick, at least. The Resistance still needed a lot of time before they were ready to fight back. Time to recruit, to train, to plan. To gather supplies.

Sirius scoffed. “Even if the Ministry stops their stupid policy, the Death Eaters will target you and your families.”

“That’s why most of us are moving. They won’t catch us.”

“They can set the muggles on you. Like they did when I escaped Azkaban. Brand you as criminals.”

“They already had a lot of trouble for trying to get the muggle police to hunt you.” Ron’s dad had mentioned that before their fourth year. “The ICW was not amused about this ‘blatant threat to the International Statute of Secrecy’. Fudge was so scared, he had his security detail doubled for a month.”
Sirius laughed. Hermione didn’t. The muggleborns would be safer in the United Kingdom, but they also couldn’t get help from the government, and would have to be very careful about getting help from other muggles, like some of Seamus’s extended family. Otherwise, the Resistance would be branded as a threat to the Statute. And that they couldn’t afford. The ICW was usually quite ineffective, but when the Statute was in actual danger, they tended to react very harshly.

The African tribal shamans had found that out when they had used magic to fight against the muggle colonialist forces. These days, there were no native wizards left in Central and South Africa.

Hogwarts, June 23rd, 1996

Auror Brenda Brocktuckle stared at the hideous room, not bothering to hide her revulsion. “You know, seeing how Umbridge decorated her quarters here, she probably had to disappear before the Castle turned against her for inflicting those atrocities on its walls.”

Her new partner, Radcliff Macmillan, a rookie fresh out of the Academy, scowled. The wizard had no humour at all.

She sighed. Sometimes she felt far older than her 30 years. “Check for magical residue. I’ll search the room.”

She doubted Macmillan would find anything. The last time the witch had been seen had been a week ago. But there might be some clues left among Umbridge’s belongings. That was why Brenda was searching the room, and her partner was wasting his time casting spells.

She didn’t find anything. No notes, no scraps of parchments in the wastebasket, nothing. Which was suspicious by itself. If Umbridge had had to flee in a hurry, she wouldn’t have taken the time to clean up the room. If she hadn’t been in a hurry, she’d have taken all her clothes, at least.

There were no portraits in the room to serve as witnesses. The dozens of kittens populating dishes and frames couldn’t talk. If this had been a murder or a kidnapping, then the culprit had done his homework.

“Nothing!” Macmillan glared at her. “Why are we wasting our time here? We already know who did this!”

Brenda rolled her eyes. “Macmillan! We don’t know who did this. We don’t even know if a crime has been committed here.”

“We’ve been ordered to arrest that mudblood, Granger.”

She glared at him. The way he stressed ‘arrest’ reminded her of how some Aurors spoke of those arrests that led to fights. Fights that ended with dead suspects. “We’ll be taking the girl in for questioning, nothing more.”

“She was ordered to arrest that mudblood, Granger.”

She almost sighed again. Rookies either were too eager to follow procedure, not knowing when to bend the rules, or they had no clue about it and acted as if they were prefects at Hogwarts under Snape. Well, the idiot would learn. The Auror Corps was not
Fudge’s personal guard, no matter what some people thought.

“Well, we’re done here. Let’s go talk to the witch.” She glared at him again.

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London, Kingston upon Thames, June 23rd, 1996

Hermione Granger peeked out through the window above the door to her parents’ home when she heard the doorbell ring. Two people outside, one man, one woman, both in mismatched clothes even she could tell had been out of fashion for a decade or two. Pureblood wizards then. She couldn’t see anyone else around, but others could be hiding, or disillusioned.

“I’m getting the door, mum!” she shouted, and ran down the stairs. She opened the door, though not all the way, using it to hide her wand, which she had already drawn.

“Good evening. Can I help you?”

“Are you Miss Hermione Granger?” the witch asked.

She nodded, tensing up. “Who are you?”

The female Auror smiled at her. “I’m Auror Brocktuckle, this is Auror Macmillan. We need you to come with us to the Ministry to answer a few questions.”

She could see the other Auror sneer at her. Macmillan… that was an old pureblood family. Quite obsessed with their ancestry, as Ernie Macmillan had demonstrated at Hogwarts. And, as the Hufflepuff had demonstrated as well, not fond of muggleborns. And why would they want to question her? She acted as if she was confused. “Questions? What about?”

“I can’t tell you that since it concerns a criminal case.”

The Auror was smiling, but Hermione wasn’t really listening. Her mind was racing. She hadn’t done anything illegal! Even the preparations for the Muggleborn Resistance were not against the law… apart from the books she had bought in Knockturn Alley. But why wouldn’t they tell her the reason they needed to ask her a few questions? And why couldn’t they do it in her home? The obvious answer was not one she liked.

“We’re about to eat dinner. Can I visit the Ministry tomorrow?” Hermione asked, as innocently as she could.

The female Auror frowned, but her partner positively scowled and was drawing his wand! It was a trap! They had come for her! Hermione whipped her wand up and took a step back with her left foot, moving into a classic duelling stance. The female Auror’s eyes widened, and her wand started to slide out of her sleeve.

“Stupefy!”

Hermione’s Stunning Spell hit the witch in the chest before the surprised Auror could finish drawing her wand and the witch slumped over, starting to fall down. The young muggleborn spun around, her free hand grabbing the door and slamming it closed before she dived to the floor.

“You damned mudblood! Confringo!”

The door exploded, showering the entrance hall with splinters. They were here to kill her! She
jumped up, leading with her wand. The male Auror was staring at his partner, who had probably been hit as well by his spell’s effect. His eyes widened when he saw her, and he started to cast, but was too slow to stop her. She had trained months for this!

“Reducto!”

Her spell hit the man in the face, leaving barely more than the stump of his neck. Blood, bone, hair and brain matter was scattered over the lawn and driveway. For a moment Hermione started at the sight, shocked. She had killed a man. Bile rose inside her throat. She had killed an Auror.

“Hermione? Dear Lord!”

Her mum’s scream broke her out of her shock. She had killed a filthy bigoted murderer who had wanted to kill her! And if she didn't get her act together she and her parents would be murdered!

“Mum! They are coming for us! You need to move at once!” she yelled.

“Hermione! You’re bleeding!”

She blinked. Some of the splinters must have hit her. There was blood running down her face. Head wounds always bled a lot, she remembered. Then she started to feel the pain from that wound, and from others.

“Mum! They tried to kill me! Call Dad, you need to move, now! More will be coming soon!”

“But… you’re hurt!”

“Episkey! Scourgify!”

She closed the wound on her head and cleaned her face, hoping she hadn’t closed the skin over a splinter in her head. “Not any more. Please, Mum, move!” She grabbed the enchanted coin in her pocket, and used it to alert the other members of the Resistance. If the Aurors were coming for her, then they’d be coming for everyone!

“Accio Emergency bags!”

Three bags came flying at them from upstairs. One for her, two for her parents - the Grangers had been prepared for this for weeks.

“Mum…” she hugged her mother, crying.

“Hermione…”

“Tell Dad I love him. I’ll call you as soon as I can do it safely.” Which would take a while.

Two more spells removed her blood from her mother’s and her own clothes. They really had to go now.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

She moved the stunned Auror and the corpse inside the house, put the witch in a full Body-Bind Curse for good measure, then repaired the door and cleaned the lawn and driveway. The explosions and screams would have alerted the neighbours, but the hedges would have hidden what had happened, and this way, the police wouldn’t be looking into this.

Her mother had already left with the car. Hermione took a last look at her home, then apparated

Brenda Brocktuckle almost pushed her quill through the parchment she was writing her report on. Her partner had been brutally murdered, and it was her fault! If she hadn’t been surprised by a muggleborn witch who had just passed her O.W.L.s, Macmillan would still be alive. Probably. She didn’t know what exactly had happened in the time between her getting stunned, and waking up, in a full Body-Bind, next to her partner’s headless corpse. No matter what exactly had happened though, Scrimgeour would have her ass for letting a kid get the drop on her.

And yet, despite her anger, she couldn’t help but wonder about something odd: Why had she been stunned, and her partner killed? Tactically, it made no sense. If Macmillan had been quick enough, he could have renervated her. But why hadn’t he been stunned as well?

A junior Auror dropped off a report with a mumbled greeting, then walked away with such haste, she bumped into a desk and almost fell to the ground. Brenda sighed. It seemed that news of her blunder had spread to the rookies already. She was well on her way to become a pariah - no Auror wanted to pair up with a screw-up who let her partner die.

She read the report. Macmillan’s last spell had been a Blasting Curse. Since he had apparated with her to Granger’s house, he must have cast it in the fight. There hadn’t been any sign of what he had hit though. The wizard in charge of the investigation, Shacklebolt, thought that he had hit the door, judging by the wounds Brenda had suffered from splinters. She frowned. Had that idiot almost killed her with his spell? And why had he used that spell, instead of a Stunning Spell, as Aurors were trained to use for arrests? Was that why the girl had killed him?

Scrimgeour thought this proved that Granger had been involved in the disappearance of Madam Umbridge. Not that it mattered - as the suspect in the murder of an Auror, the girl was now hunted by the entire Corps. They would find her, and they would arrest her. Or, Brenda thought, they’d kill her. No one would want to risk joining Macmillan in the grave and take his killer alive.

She saw Malcolm Parkinson walk into the office, scowling. After a moment, she stood up and walked over to the Auror. She might be a pariah, but she wouldn’t hide. “What happened?”

Parkinson looked at her, frowning, before he said: “Went to take in Allan Baker, another suspect in the Umbridge case. He wasn’t home. No one from his family was.”

“There was another suspect?” She hadn’t been informed of that.

Parkinson shrugged. “Every mudblood fifth year and above is a suspect.”

Brenda scoffed. “So what, the Minister fears a muggleborn conspiracy now?” She stressed the ‘muggleborn’.

Parkinson had noticed that, and sneered. “If the mudbloods are hiding, then there’s a reason for that. You complete the spell.”

“The muggleborns might be hiding because the Ministry is persecuting them!”

Brenda glanced to her side. The clumsy junior Auror was glaring at Parkinson. Brenda recognised her now. Nymphadora Tonks, a half-blood. Of course she’d take offence at Parkinson’s words. But the rookie should have known better than to defend suspects’ rights after an Auror had been killed.
Parkinson stood up, glaring at the kid. “The Ministry is doing what it can to keep Britain safe - from mudbloods and other threats. Our duty is to uphold the law. If you have a problem with that, you should quit before you get fired.”

Tonks wasn’t cowed, unlike most rookies faced with a veteran Auror dressing them down. Instead, she glared right back. “Of course you’d say that, wouldn’t you? Parroting your uncle’s words? Oh, wait, you can’t, because your uncle was killed in the last war, fighting for the Dark Lord.”

Parkinson ground his teeth. “Watch your mouth, rookie, or someone will teach you to hold your tongue,” he growled. “Black’s gold can’t protect you from everything.”

Black’s gold? Brenda blinked, then remembered that Tonks’s mother was Sirius Black’s cousin. No wonder she was standing up to Parkinson; Black’s name and fortune might not carry as much weight as they once had, but the family was infamous for protecting their own, and that was a tradition the new Head apparently hadn’t dropped.

Tonks sneered at Parkinson, then turned away and left them. Parkinson sighed and sat down again. “I don’t like this, Brocktuckle. First Macmillan gets killed, and now we can’t find the mudbloods.”

“We’ll find them,” Brenda said. “No one kills an Auror and gets away with it.”

“Damn right they won’t! Can’t let them get ideas!” Parkinson nodded at her. “Don’t take it too hard. My cousin told me that Granger was a sneaky bitch at Hogwarts, always hanging out with Potter and getting into trouble. Attacked other students too.”

That would have been useful to have known before she had went to the girl’s home, Brenda thought. She didn’t say anything though, just nodded. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Don’t kill off your next partner though. I’ve a feeling that we’ll need all the wands we can get.”

Brenda scowled at Parkinson, who grinned at her. She just knew she’d be hearing similar comments for weeks. And it was all Granger’s fault. Granger’s and Macmillan’s.

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London, No 12 Grimmauld Place, June 23rd, 1996

Harry Potter heard his mirror buzz. Hermione was calling him. He smiled - he had been waiting for that call. She used to write him every day, so she certainly would not let the mirror lay idle. He put the book he had been reading down, grabbed the mirror from the side table and flopped down on his bed. “Hey there!”

“Harry? Are you alone?”

He blinked. She sounded tense. And why would she ask if he was alone. “Yes, I’m alone. Why? What happened?”

“Two Aurors attacked me at home.”

“What?” Harry Potter all but shouted into the mirror. “You’ve been attacked by Aurors?” He jumped up from his bed. “Are you OK?”

“I’m OK. Barely hurt. But… I killed one of them. He tried to kill me with a Blasting Curse, and I blew his head off. Called me ‘mudblood’. I stunned the other Auror, but… they’ll hunt me.”
“Merlin! Come to Grimmauld Place!” She was hurt. She needed help.

“I can’t. They know we’re best friends, so they’ll expect that. They might even search the house. I killed an Auror, Harry.”

Harry ground his teeth, He wanted to tell her the Aurors wouldn’t search Grimmauld Place, but… even Malfoy Manor was raided once, and that had been when the Death Eater had been Fudge’s best friend and the Dark Lord hadn’t been back yet. “But where will you go then? What about your parents?” he added, a bit belatedly.

“I’ve been expecting this, just not that soon. I’ve been preparing for this.”

“What?”

“My parents have moved to a flat. The Ministry doesn’t know their new address. But I’m not with them. Even if the Aurors find them, they’ll not be able to find me. And it might take them a while to track them down. We’ve rerouted the mail to the clinic.”

“But if you’re not with them, where will you be going?” The Burrow? No.

“I’m headed to a safe house.”

“A safe house? Where? I’ll meet you there.” He could grab a few potions from Sirius. A book or two, to distract her. Some food.

“No, you can’t! They’ll be keeping an eye on you, if they tie you to this you’ll be arrested. Act surprised, don’t defend me if they ask you about me!”

The hell he would. He didn’t say that though, she had a point. But he needed to help her. “I can send Hedwig with supplies.” Or he could take his cloak, and his firebolt.

“Owls won’t reach me.”

“What?”

“If owls could find me, Aurors could.” She took a deep breath. “Anyway… I’ll contact you again, once I’m in the safe house. Make sure you’re at home and alone, or just with Sirius, when you answer.”

“Sirius?” Harry blinked. It made sense. His godfather had been on the run from the Ministry for years, without getting caught. If anyone could help Hermione escape getting arrested, it would be him. “I’ll get him!”

“No, I’ll call later. I have to stop talking now. Bye, Harry!”

“Wait!” he said, but she had already deactivated her mirror.

He sat down on the bed. Merlin’s balls! Hermione was being hunted by the Ministry. She had killed an Auror! He closed his eyes, cursing. He remembered killing Quirrell. And the ghost of Voldemort. She must be feeling terrible! He ground his teeth. She had just been defending herself. Those had probably been Death Eaters. Dumbledore! Dumbledore would be able to solve this. He froze. Dumbledore hadn’t been able to keep Hermione at Hogwarts. And he hadn’t been able to get Sirius exonerated for over a year. He punched his mattress out of frustration. How could he help her? How could anyone help her?
London, East End, June 23rd, 1996

Hermione Granger looked at the safe house. It was an old, almost derelict house. No one would be planning to buy and renovate it. No one would be missing rent from it after they had tampered with the records. She hadn’t spotted anyone trailing her, nor had she seen anyone observing the house, and not many of the Resistance knew of this safe house in the first place - they had compartmentalised such knowledge - but if the Ministry had struck at all of them, then a number of the members could have been arrested, and the defences they had prepared might not have been enough to keep the house secret. She needed to find out how to cast the Fidelius!

They hadn’t placed any wards on the place in order to avoid attracting attention. It looked safe, but she still had her wand out when she entered the house.

The entrance hall was empty, no sign of any intruder. She took a deep breath, and continued to the stairs. Her side hurt - she had caught a splinter there - and her head was itching; she really hoped she hadn’t closed the skin over another splinter. The stairs creaked, and when she reached the first floor, she saw that the door was ajar. Someone had entered the flat.

“Who’s there?” she asked, wand aimed at the door’s gap.

“It’s me, Allan.”

It sounded like him. She kept her wand aimed though, as the door was opened all the way, revealing the Ravenclaw. Former Ravenclaw, she amended the thought - he had completed his seventh year, even if he hadn’t been allowed to take the N.E.W.T.s.

It looked like him. And if this was an ambush, then they’d have struck already. And if the Aurors had found this house, then she was probably doomed already. She wasn’t in the best shape either, after travelling for hours.

“Good to see you.” She lowered her wand and entered the flat, sitting down on the couch in the living room. Then she filled him in on what had happened. She didn’t mention how she had emptied her stomach as soon as she had managed to feel safe enough to take a small break. And how ill she still felt thinking of how she had levitated the headless, bleeding corpse of the Auror into her home.

Allan nodded. “They’ve hit my house as well, though not at the same time. I was already gone by then.”

“So it was either an incompetent operation, or they were after me specifically,” Hermione said. If she focused on this, tried to make sense of this, then she didn’t have to think about the headless dead.

“Both are possible,” Allan said. “Let me check your wounds.”

“Alright,” Hermione said, “but not here. If they are monitoring magic, then we could compromise the safe house. And I need something to eat first.”

A bit later she was lying in her underwear on a bed in a hotel while Allan was running his wand over her, casting diagnostic charms. She would have felt embarrassed, but she was just a bit too tired, too hurt, and Allan was the closest to a healer she could get right now. She made a mental note to learn more diagnostic charms herself, and healing charms.

“You’ve got several splinters under your skin. None of them are deep though, and I can’t detect any internal bleeding. The splinters have to come out though.” Allan even sounded like a healer. At least
like those in the wireless shows; Madam Pomfrey sounded quite different.

“Can you summon them out?” It would hurt, but it would be over in a second, and he could close up the wounds right away.

He stared at her, shaking his head. “Is that the result of hanging out with Potter?” He was grinning though. “I’ll get them out with minimal pain, and we’ll not have to use Essence of Dittany to avoid scarring that way.” He winked at her. “It would be a shame to mar your skin.”

That remark made her blush, and he laughed while he started working. She wondered if he had just tried to put her at ease, then pushed the thought away.

She had to focus on far more important things. She had killed a man. She was now a wanted fugitive.

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Devon, Ottery St Catchpole, June 24th, 1996

“What?”

Ron Weasley stared at Harry. He had wondered why his friend had visited so early in the morning, just after his dad had left for work. That Harry had cast a privacy charm before talking was odd as well, but not too unusual, even if the twins didn’t live there any more.

“I said Aurors tried to arrest Hermione. She killed one and stunned the other, then fled.”

“Merlin’s balls! Why did she kill an Auror?” And how? Aurors were said to be the elite of the DMLE! He had known his friend was scary, but that scary?

“They tried to kill her. Well, at least one of them - tried to blow her up. She was hurt when she called me,” Harry said.

“We have to help her!” How could that have happened to his best female friend? She wasn’t a criminal!

“I know. But she doesn’t want us to help. She said it’d be too dangerous, that we would be watched by Aurors.” Harry’s frown told Ron what his friend thought of that.

“That’s probably true,” Ron said. “If she killed an Auror, they’ll hunt her down.”

“They’ll try. She’s been preparing for that.”

Ron felt a pang of envy. Why hadn’t she told him? Why did Harry know that? He forced that feeling away; his friend needed help. “But if she’s hurt, and can’t go to St Mungo’s, what will she do?” Muggle healers were brutal; they cut you up.

“I called her late last night. A ‘friend’ has helped her,” Harry said, frowning. “Apparently, he’s great with healing spells.”

“A ‘friend’?” Ron repeated. He hadn’t been aware that Hermione had other friends among wizards who were close enough to her to help her in such a situation.

“Must be a muggleborn,” Harry said.

“Why can he help her, and we can’t?” Ron asked.
“He’s on the run from the Aurors as well, or so she said.”

“Blimey! Did they go after all the muggleborns?” Ron hadn’t thought things had become that bad. Not with his dad telling him that Dumbledore was making progress in the Wizengamot.

“Hermione thought they did, but she couldn’t tell me.”

“We could ask Dad, but he’ll not be home until the evening,” Ron said. “And there hasn’t been an Order meeting either.” And there was still this mysterious friend with Hermione. “But what can we do? There has to be something we can do to help her!”

“She said to simply act normally, and do nothing until we know more. And not to tell anyone,” Harry said.

Ron didn’t like to lie to his family, but he could see the necessity of keeping secrets. And he didn’t want his dad to lose his job. “I don’t like this.”

“I hate it,” Harry said.

Ron nodded. He hated feeling useless. But for the life of him, he couldn’t think of anything they could do right then. If Hermione had killed an Auror, then the only way their friend could be saved from the Aurors was to prove that the dead Auror had been a Death Eater or a traitor. And that was pretty much impossible without knowing anything more than what she had told them. There was nothing they could do. Unless…

“Harry! We have to go to Diagon Alley!”

“What?”

“We have to visit Fred and George.”

“Hermione said not to tell anyone.”

“We won’t. But they have a lot of stuff made. Useful stuff. Remember the Extendable Ears?”

Harry grinned. “Hermione could use some of that.”

Ron nodded. And so could they. It might not be much, but it was something. Ron hated feeling useless.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, June 24th, 1996

“Daphne?”

Daphne Greengrass looked up from the latest issue of ‘Teen Witch Weekly’ she was reading when her mother knocked at the door.

“Yes, mother?”

“We just received an invitation to the Summer Ball at Malfoy Manor.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows. “A ball in summer?” Leave it to the Malfoys to champion wizard traditions, and yet come up with such a newfangled thing! Summer was for travelling, everyone knew that!
She must have let her distaste for the Malfoys show, since her mother frowned at her. “All the Old Families have been invited. This will be a memorable event.”

Daphne rolled her eyes. “Father will be ‘networking’, you will be gossiping, and I’ll be stuck with Draco and his ilk.”

“It’s important to make a good showing, dear. Especially in those troubled times.”

“You mean you don’t want to make the Death Eaters mad at you,” Daphne said, rolling her eyes.

Her mother’s mouth turned into a thin line. “You don’t remember the war. Gestures such as attending this event allowed our family to avoid it.”

“I thought father voted to kick the mudbloods out of Hogwarts to avoid a war.” At least that was what Daphne had understood his reasoning to be. It made sense to her. It wasn’t as if anyone cared about the mudbloods anyway.

Her mother sighed. “It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

Daphne shrugged. She didn’t care about politics. Sighing, she said: “I guess one evening in the company of idiots won’t be too much of a sacrifice for the family.”

Her mother didn’t smile, so Daphne probably had overdone it a bit. “Will Tracey be there as well?”

“I believe so.”

“Good. I’d hate to be without any pleasant company during the evening.”

“Your sister will attend the ball as well.”

“And?” Astoria was a stupid little girl. She would have fallen for Blaise’s lines if Daphne hadn’t told her what the git was like.

“Daphne! It will be her debut! You will not ruin that evening for her!”

Daphne rolled her eyes again. “Alright, I won’t ruin the squirt’s evening. Is that all?”

“Yes.” Her mother frowned again, but left.

Daphne shook her head. The things she had to put up with!

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Chapter 3: The Spark

‘To understand the Ministry’s reaction to the disappearance of Dolores Umbridge, one has to understand the views of the time: It wasn’t that the Ministry didn’t know that Umbridge had spent a year torturing muggleborn students, it was that very fact that made them look at prominent muggleborns as the likely culprits. For over a year, Wizarding Britain had been presented with reports and tales of muggleborn aggression. Even the most peaceful purebloods lived in fear of a war provoked by muggleborns. It was therefore seen as simply logical that they would lash out at anyone tormenting them, with lethal means even. The fact that the muggleborns managed to evade the Aurors trying to take them in for questioning was therefore seen as proof that there was a conspiracy of muggleborns working against the Ministry. Which, given the subsequent events, proved to be somewhat correct.’
- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, East End, June 24th, 1996

She raised her wand slowly, very slowly, but time seemed to be frozen for everyone else. The man’s eyes were widening, his mouth opening, but he couldn’t stop her.

“Reducto!”

The spell hit him right in the face and his head exploded, showering her with blood. It ran down her face as she turned, spotting his partner on the ground. The woman was awake, and staring at her. Pleading. Hands raised in supplication.

She pointed her wand at her.

“Reducto!”

The woman’s head exploded. Blood splattered against her door, flowed over the entrance, until she was standing in a pool of red. Blood ran down her face, soaking her top. She was laughing.

“Hermione?”

She whirled around. Harry and Ron were standing there, staring at her with horror frozen on their faces. And she was raising her wand, aiming it at her friends.

“Red…”

Hermione Granger woke up screaming. She patted herself down. No blood. Just sweat. She wasn’t at home. For a moment, she didn’t know where she was, and grabbed her wand. Then she remembered. She was in the safe house. She was on the run from the Ministry. She had killed an Auror. She closed her eyes and started to calm down. A nightmare, again.

“Hermione?”

She was out of the bed and aiming her wand at the door before she recognised the voice. Allan.

“Hermione? Are you alright?”
She lowered her wand and took a deep breath. “Yes. Just a nightmare. Sorry.”

“Can I come in?”

“What?” Her hand rose until she forced it down again.

“You don’t sound as if you’re alright.” He sounded concerned.

For a moment, she was torn. She wanted to send him away, but she didn’t want to be alone either. She wanted her parents. Or her friends.

“Give me a second.”

She was a mess. Her T-shirt was soaked with sweat and her shorts were not doing that much better. And her hair looked frightening. Nothing could be done about that now, though. She changed into another T-shirt and shorts, then went to open the door.

Allan was wearing pyjama pants and a T-shirt himself.

“Did I wake up anyone else?” she asked, after she had closed the door again.

He shook his head. “No. I was awake myself, that’s why I heard you. The rest are still asleep.”

“I’d say we need Silencing Charms, but…” Hermione said.

“… it’d mean we wouldn’t hear an alert, or even an attack.” Allan nodded. “And we don’t know how well they can detect magic.”

“If they can’t, then how do Obliviators work?” Hermione asked. Focusing on something, especially a problem, helped her. They hadn’t done any magic in the safe house so far, out of fear of attracting Aurors.

“That’s a good question. The Ministry has to be able to detect magic, but it’s not certain how capable their system is.”

“Further testing is required,” Hermione said, almost grinning.

“You should have been a Ravenclaw,” Allan said, smiling. “The hat must have been confunded when it sorted you.”

Hermione snorted. “I like to think I’m braver than I am smart.”

“You must be the bravest girl ever then.”

The compliment caught her off-guard. Was he humouring her, or simply trying to comfort her? Or, was he trying to impress the girl shaken by her nightmare? Allan wasn’t like that, she told herself. Out loud, she snorted. “Some brave girl I am, screaming because of a nightmare.”

“You’ve been through a very traumatising experience. You’ve been attacked, hurt, and had to kill a man,” Allan said. “It’s natural that this will affect you. No one can deal with such an experience easily. You’ll be feeling better soon. You only defended yourself and others, after all.”

Hermione knew that, but the knowledge hadn’t helped her. Hearing it from Allan, though, helped. A bit at least. She nodded. “You sound like you’ve got experience with that.” As soon as she had said it, she regretted it. Prying, when he was trying to help her?
He smiled and shook his head. “I’ve just read about such things. Trying, you know, to prepare for the worst case.”

Smart. But then, Allan was a Ravenclaw. And one of the best students in his year. “The worst case seems to have happened. They’re hunting us all.”

“They’ll not find us easily. And they’ll have an even harder time taking us.” Allan sounded confident, even fierce when he said it.

Hermione wanted to warn him that killing wasn’t easy, but she didn’t. He knew that already, intellectually, and she feared he’d experience it himself all too soon, if things continued as they were. She shook her head. “No, they won’t. We’ll make them regret coming after us.”

Hermione suddenly felt uncomfortable, standing there in her sleepwear, and sat down on her bed, wrapping the blanket around her. “I just wonder why they came at us, now. Did anyone of the Resistance talk?” The precautions they had taken should prevent that, but nothing was certain. They didn’t know everything the Ministry could do, especially the Department of Mysteries.

“I doubt it. They probably simply realised that kicking us out of school and then trying to keep us from getting any work was bound to make us look for ways to show our opinion of them, and so tried to act preemptively.” He took a step toward her bed, then stopped.

“Maybe. I’ll ask my friends about it.” Ron and Harry should be able to find out more, Hermione thought. Without endangering themselves.

Allan frowned. “Maybe.”

“You don’t think so?”

He hesitated. “They’re not like us.”

They were not muggleborns, he meant, Hermione realised. “They’re my best friends. I trust them with my life. If we start thinking like the bigots, judging people by their blood, we’ll be no better than them!” she said, with more than a little heat in her voice.

“I didn’t mean that.” He held up his hands. “It’s just… if we trust them because they’re your friends, then others will expect that their friends will be trusted as well. And those friends won’t be Harry Potter.”

Those friends could be spies or traitors, he meant. “We’re talking about information. We’ll be needing a lot of information about the Ministry and the Death Eaters. And that will come from pure- and half-blood friends.”

“As long as it’s just information it should be fine,” Allan said. “I’m just concerned about setting a bad example for our security.”

“I see.” She bit her lower lip. He had a point, and she hated to be biased, but… Harry and Ron were her best friends. She trusted them with her life. Had trusted them with her life. And she missed them already. Terribly.

She forced herself to yawn. “I think I should go back to sleep now. Sorry about … you know.”

Allan looked at her, then nodded. “Of course, that’s what friends are there for.”

He left with a smile, leaving her alone with her thoughts.
Hogwarts, June 24th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore looked at the clock on the wall of his office. Almost midnight. He ignored the glare from Fawkes; his phoenix was too protective and didn’t understand that sometimes, his own needs had to give way to the needs of others.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. The incident involving Miss Granger was a tragedy. A tragedy he should have foreseen. He had known from Nymphadora and Kingsley, who had returned to the Ministry after his year teaching at Hogwarts, about the attitude that was so widespread among the new Aurors.

He was not certain that he could have prevented it. Not unless he had warned Miss Granger of such a danger. And, given what had happened shortly after that disastrous attempt to ‘take her in’, he might have simply caused another tragedy. Might. Mister Macmillan would almost certainly still be alive, but Miss Granger would still be a wanted witch, her flight having been taken as proof of her being guilty. It was ironic, actually. Albus was quite certain that the Aurors wouldn’t have found Miss Granger if the witch had been involved in Dolores’s disappearance. She would have expected to be a suspect, and would have fled already.

None of that changed the fact that she was now a fugitive. She wouldn’t be able to attend Hogwarts next year, not even once he managed to get the laws repealed. The most brilliant witch of her generation, forced out of Hogwarts… it was a travesty. He would have to start working on exonerating her. Macmillan’s views of muggleborns were well-known. It wouldn’t take much to paint him as a Death Eater. Severus could almost certainly help there. And once Tom was fighting the Ministry, things would change with regards to the muggleborns. Even, or especially, with regards to those who had taken up arms against Death Eaters. He faintly smiled. If he played it right, then he could even use this to ensure that such laws would never be passed again.

If. He wasn’t as confident of his influence as he had been. Not any more. At least Miss Granger and her compatriots were not in immediate danger. They would be hiding in the muggle world, out of reach of the Ministry. The only danger right now, apart from rash action on the side of the muggleborn students, something he was certain Miss Granger would not condone, were the muggle authorities. Albus didn’t think that the Minister would try to get them involved though - Cornelius had learned his lessons after he had set the muggles on Sirius three years ago. Still, it would only be prudent to leave Kingsley at 10 Downing Street, and keep the Prime Minister informed about the recent developments. Just in case. Fortunately, Albus had kept good relations with every Prime Minister since Winston.

He sighed, and returned his attention to the parchment on his desk. Young Percival had taken some risk, sending this report to him while the investigation into Dolores’s disappearance was still going on and Aurors were looking into all of her activities, but it had been worth it. Two more names were added to the list of Tom’s agents in the Ministry. A flick of his wand rolled the scroll up and he placed it in the expanded pocket of his robes.

He wasn’t looking forward to the next Order meeting, despite this bit of good news. Molly would be blaming him for the whole incident with Miss Granger. She wouldn’t be entirely wrong either.

London, East End, June 25th, 1996

Breakfast reminded Hermione Granger almost painfully of Hogwarts, with so many students, former
students, present. Seamus, Dean, Sally-Anne, Justin and the Creeveys had appeared yesterday. They were fortunate, Hermione thought, that Seamus had been visiting Dean, or he’d be in Ireland still. Sadly, neither Jeremy Chadwick nor Louise Clifton, the two former Hit-Wizards she had heard about from Allan, had made contact yet.

The food was far from what was served at Hogwarts, though. It was edible, and that was all that could be said about it. Hermione made a mental note to look into ways to improve someone’s cooking skill. Her mental list was getting rather long.

“Has anyone heard from Mary, Martin, Tania or John?” she asked, once most had stopped eating, interrupting the talk about football between Dean and Seamus.

Allan shook his head, but she already knew he hadn’t heard from his fellow Ravenclaw.

“Martin lives in Edinburgh, he should be making his way to us today,” Justin said.

“Mary and Tania are together,” Sally-Anne said. “They’re camping.” And scouting locations for some of the training they had discussed, as well as emergency rally spots.

“We need to get better communications.” Mobile phones, though she was certain they wouldn’t work in every part of Britain. Certainly not in the parts the muggles thought were empty wilderness. Alternatives were needed. They had already barred owls from finding them. Letters were too slow. Phone booths would do in a pinch, but wouldn’t let people be called. E-mail needed a provider and a landline. “We need to test if the Ministry can track magic,” Hermione said. “I’d hate to hamstring myself and rely on muggle transportation if we could safely apparate.” Communication would be much easier as well.

Allan nodded. “We can prepare an ambush, in case they can track magic.”

Seamus nodded eagerly. “Oh, yes.”

Hermione frowned. “That’s not a good idea. We still do not know what the Ministry was planning. Until we have more information, a more cautious approach is needed.”

“What’s to know? They came for us, just like we knew they would. We have to teach them to leave us be,” Dean said.

“We might be playing into their hands if we blindly start fighting,” Hermione retorted. Justin nodded.

“If we capture an Auror or two, we could get more information out of them,” Allan proposed.

“We do not have Veritaserum ready for an interrogation. And none of us is a trained Legilimens,” Hermione said.

“There are other ways to interrogate people.” Allan licked his lips.

“What do you mean?” Hermione narrowed her eyes. Did he want to torture Aurors? Even if they were to stoop so low, everyone knew torture didn’t work.

Allan met her eyes, then calmly said: “Like the police interrogate people.”

Seamus snorted. “With rubber hoses?” He obviously was looking forward to a fight.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Fortunately, she was well-used to dealing with reckless wizards. “Even if we had a trained interrogator among us, we are not prepared for a fight.” They had expected more
time to prepare. Hermione hadn’t thought the Ministry would move so fast against them. Fortunately, they had already set up a few safe houses. She looked at her fellow Resistance members. “If we go at this half-cocked, we might as well just surrender or flee. We need to be prepared. We need Veritaserum ready for interrogations. We need potions to treat wounds. We need more training. And we need more information.”

Her not-quite-glare made the Gryffindors among the students agree quickly. Justin would follow the majority as the only Hufflepuff present, Hermione thought. Allan seemed to ponder the matter, before he slowly nodded.

“All right. We’ll test the Ministry’s magic detection capabilities first thing after this. I have an idea how to do it safely.”

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London, Silvertown, June 25th, 1996

The faint sounds of explosions reached Hermione Granger’s ears. She sighed. Of course Seamus would use Blasting Curses for the test, and not the more sensible spells she had proposed. She consoled herself with the fact that the Millennium Mills, the abandoned complex of concrete granaries in the Docklands area of London, were big and stable enough to take the abuse.

“Fifteen minutes of constant casting between Seamus and Dean,” she noted. “No response from anyone.” At least not on the best areas to apparate to. She checked the walkie-talkie, then looked at Allan. “I guess the two do not get to use the escape tunnels.”

Allan shook his head. “I concur. It does seem as if the Ministry cannot detect magic.”

“Which begs the question: How can the Obliviators uphold the Statute of Secrecy if they cannot detect magic?” Hermione added. “Even if everyone followed the law, they’d have to cover up accidental magic at least.”

Allan seemed to mull this over while they heard more explosions. “We could try to break the statute, and find out.”

Hermione shook her head. “No. That’s far too dangerous, given the possible consequences.” Compared to intentionally breaking the Statue of Secrecy, murder or mass murder was a small thing in the Magical World. Even those purebloods who supported them might turn against the Resistance.

Allan scoffed. “They might try that anyway.”

“I’m rather certain that the Ministry will not dare to lie about this. Fudge already got into a lot of trouble when he set the police on Sirius Black two years ago.” Arthur Weasley had been quite vocal about that during that summer. It was another reason - apart from the fact that the Ministry had the Prime Minister under surveillance, allegedly to protect him against mind-control spells and other magical assaults - why the muggleborns couldn’t simply get help from Her Majesty’s Government.

Allan still looked unconvinced. Hermione sighed. “We’ll test if they can track Apparition now. If they cannot track that either, then a lot of our work will be far easier, and we’ll have to adjust our plans. We simply can’t risk another confrontation right now.”

Finally her friend nodded. They used their walkie-talkie to call the others, so everyone would apparate at the same time to the prepared spot near Victoria Station. Even if the Ministry could track Apparition they’d vanish in the throngs of people using one of the busiest stations of the Capital.
While she was waiting to apparate, Hermione was already making plans. Seamus would be able to reach Ireland and his ‘contacts’ there in a few minutes. They would have more options for safe houses as well, and for the planned ‘school’. And they could place anti-muggle wards on the safe house, to keep squatters or the police out, and renovate the inside with Mending Charms, and a few more exotic charms the Ravenclaws had dug up.

And she’d be able to meet up with Harry and Ron more easily. Once they had learned Apparition as well. Which they would, if they knew what was good for them!

The young witch was smiling when she apparated to Victoria Station.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, June 25th, 1996

“What? I didn’t touch that monster!”

Harry Potter winced at the volume of Hermione’s outburst and held the mirror a bit further away. Fortunately, he and Ron were in his room at Grimmauld Place, and the doors were charmed to keep people outside from overhearing whatever was said inside.

“And that would have been stupid anyway, giving them more pretexts to paint us as dangerous elements! If I’d have killed her, I’d have framed the Acromantulas, for example. That way, I wouldn’t have been suspected. But this? Damn those bigots! They don’t even know if she’s dead, or simply got lost in Hogwarts due to her own incompetence! All they see is an opportunity to attack muggleborns!”

Harry saw that Ron shuddered at the mentioning of the Acromantulas. He was more concerned about the ease of which Hermione talked about murdering Umbridge. It sounded as if she had given that more than a little thought. He snorted. What was he thinking? He knew Hermione. She was always making plans and schedules; of course she would have made plans for this.

But she wouldn’t have done this. He was certain. Mostly.

“Sorry…” His best female friend took a few deep breaths. “It’s just… I killed an Auror because of this?”

“You had no choice,” Harry was quick to say. Hermione looked very troubled, and with good reason, he told himself. He remembered killing Quirrell, and the nightmares that had caused. He hesitated, then added: “I know what you are going through. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

“As am I,” Ron added. Harry shot him a glance. His friend hadn’t killed anyone; he didn’t know how that felt.

“Thank you, but…” Hermione trailed off, looking surprised, then embarrassed. “Oh, I forgot… I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t think about our first year.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got a lot on your mind,” he tried to reassure his friend.

She sighed. “Yes. And so much to do.”

“We’ve been in the twins’ shop,” Ron said, leaning towards Harry so he could see the mirror better. “They’ve created a lot of useful things. You need to see their inventory.”

“The twins… ah! Ask them to teach you Apparition. The Ministry can’t track that. You’ll need a
wand without the trace on it, but Sirius can get you some.”

Harry wondered how she knew all that, but he trusted her. He exchanged a glance with Ron, who smiled. “We’ll do it.” They knew what Hermione was telling them - if they could apparate, they could help her.

“We’ll study hard!” Ron announced, grinning.

“You better!” Hermione smiled, but Harry thought it was a bit forced. “It’s getting a bit late here… I’ll call you tomorrow, same time?”

“Yes. Good night,” Harry said. He would have liked to talk some more, but she needed her sleep.

“Sleep well,” Ron added.

The image in the mirror faded out.

Harry turned to his friend. “She’s not doing well.”

Ron shook his head. “And she won’t tell us about it. Like someone else we know,” he added.

Harry rolled his eyes, but otherwise ignored the remark. This wasn’t the same. “We need to do more. Not just learning how to Apparate.”

“Fighting, you mean.” Ron grinned, but without humour.

“Yes.”

They would show Hermione that they were her best friends, and could help her. Protect her. Better than that other friend of hers.

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London, Diagon Alley, June 26th, 1996

“Welcome to… oh. Hello, Ron. Hi, Harry.”

Alicia Spinnet dropped the overly cheerful smile and nodded at the two wizards who had just entered Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. “Fred and George are in the back.”


Harry smiled at the former chaser for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. “We could be here to buy something, you know. No need to drop the friendly act.” He grinned.

Alicia snorted. “If Ron wants something, he’ll ask his brothers, and we have standing orders not to let you pay for anything.”

Ron didn’t want to be reminded of the state of his finances, and of Harry’s, and tried to change the topic: “Are you now working here?”

“I’m just helping out,” the witch said, “until my tryouts with the Harpies.”

“Oh! So that was a scout at the last match!” Ron smiled.

“Indeed. There were a number of them, but most were checking out the Boy-Who-Lived,” Alicia
said, grinning. “But since Harry’s simply not measuring up to the stringent standards of the Harpies, I had an easy time impressing her.”

“And Angelina?” Ron asked while Harry snorted.

“She’s trying out as well. It would be nice if we both made it, but…”

Ron nodded. All of them knew that the chances of that were rather slim. The ‘Flying Foxes’, as Lee had dubbed them, were good, but not that good compared to experienced professional players. “Well, good luck!”

“Thank you.”

Harry and Ron headed to the back of the store, where the entrance of the twins’ workshop was.

“Hi Fred, Hi Geo…” was as far as Ron got, before he had to duck to dodge a black blur that almost hit him in the face.

“Opps, sorry Ron. That prototype needs a bit more work,” George said.

“What’s it supposed to do?” Harry asked, peering at the black stain left on the wall behind Ron.

“Close the door and we’ll tell you!” Fred, looking up from his desk, said. “Can’t have anyone listening in; they might sell our secrets to Zonko’s.”

Once the door was closed, the two grew more serious. “So… did you give Hermione our ‘samples’?”

“Not yet.” Ron winced. “She doesn’t want to risk visiting Grimmauld Place right now.”

Harry nodded. “Which is why we need you to teach us Apparition, so we can meet her anywhere.”

Fred raised an eyebrow. “While we tend to encourage rules breaking, you’ll need a wand without a trace to escape notice by the Ministry.”

“And breaking the trace is rather complicated and illegal,” George added.

Ron snorted. Harry grinned. “Someone supplied us with two clean wands.”

“I see.” Fred shook his head. “They grow up so fast.”

More seriously, George asked: “Do you know what you are doing? The Ministry’s about to bring down the bat on muggleborns.”

“Yes, we know,” Ron said, indignantly. As if he and Harry would leave Hermione to the Aurors!

George nodded. “Alright then, we can teach you.”

Fred looked at them. “There’s more, right?”

Ron nodded. “We want to spy on the Aurors. Any warning before a raid could save Hermione’s life.” He held up his hand when George opened his mouth. “Not inside the Ministry. But there’s that pub we heard about, ‘The Thin Red Line’. We think they’ll talk about all sorts of things there.”

Tonks had mentioned it over the Yuletide break.

“They will be using privacy spells,” Fred said, rubbing his chin. “But… an extendable ear, placed
there before the spell is cast would probably defeat that.”

George nodded. “We’d need to modify the ear, but… entirely doable.”

“Placing them there though…” Fred shook his head. “That will be difficult. And if caught… That’s not a prank.”

“We’ve got my cloak. We’ll be fine,” Harry said.

Ron nodded. “We thought about asking Tonks, but…”

“You don’t ask prefects to help with pranks, not even against Slytherins,” George said, nodding. “Good thinking.”

Ron would have helped with pranking the Slytherins, but he didn’t say that. Once back at Hogwarts though, if the snakes tried to lord it over them…

“It’s settled then,” Harry said. “What else do you have that’d be useful in dealing with Aurors?”

“Glad you asked. Did we ever mention our Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder?” Fred asked, showing them a small bag. “Instant Darkness. Nothing can penetrate it, and it’s resistant to light spells.”

“And here’s a Screaming Skrewt,” George said, holding up something that looked far too much like a spider for Ron’s comfort. Then he remembered Hagrid’s abominations from 4th year. “It doesn’t blast things, but it screams and can serve as a nice distraction.”

“A nice surprise to hide in the bathroom too!” Fred added. Ron just knew who his brothers had had in mind as the target for that

“Glamorous Glue.” George held up a vial with a green liquid in it. “Spreads easily and will hold anything until dissolved with a special solution.”

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. If Hermione couldn’t use those, then he had a few uses in mind already. And targets.

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London, Silvertown, June 27th, 1996

“Stupefy!”

Hermione Granger ducked under the spell Dean cast at her, and stepped behind a concrete ramp in the Millennium Mills, disillusioning herself as soon as she had broken line of sight, then stepped back. As expected, Dean was casting a hex at the top of the ramp. Her own Stunning Spell hit his Shield Charm, shattering it, and her next clipped him on the side while he was throwing himself backwards. He landed unconscious on the dusty floor of the Granary they were duelling in.

“Good show,” Allan said, clapping.

Hermione was pleased, but shook her head before waking up Dean. “Good fight, Dean. If you had guessed the right end of the ramp, I’d have been hit. I need to be quicker with casting a shield.”

Dean chuckled, cleaned himself of dust, and said: “I’ll take a break now, before I break something.”

Hermione grinned while her friend went down to the rest area, to recover.
“A Shield Charm won’t stop a Killing Curse,” Allan said. The former Ravenclaw liked to discuss magic as much as she did, and was as tenacious about a topic.

She nodded, acknowledging the point. “That’s true. But it’ll stop a lot of other curses. Duellists vary their spells for a reason.” Even the Dark Lord didn’t use the Killing Curse that much.

Allan shrugged. “If you can hit them with a Stunning Spell, you can hit them with a Killing Curse.”

“That doesn’t apply to indirect spells, or to conjurations and transfigurations. And you can cast a number of spells much faster than the Killing Curse,” Hermione said. “Our enemies can’t be counted upon to stick to the Unforgivables.”

“History shows that they were the Death Eater’s spells of choice in the last war,” Allan pointed out, “but I guess the Ministry will try other spells first.”

“They’re not allowed to use Unforgivables without a formal order from the Ministry,” Hermione said. She had looked that up at Hogwarts.

“That won’t stop the Death Eaters among them. No witnesses, no trouble.”

“If they get caught the propaganda value would be immense though,” Hermione said. If only they had a Pensieve; they could take pictures of memories and use them for some leaflets. The Gemino Charm would let them create as many copies as they needed. That they wouldn’t last that long was no problem with leaflets. It would even be environment-friendly, she thought with a snort.

Allan scoffed. “The purebloods won’t believe us anyway. And the half-bloods should know better than to trust the purebloods in the first place.”

She frowned. “Many purebloods disagree with the blood purists. They fought the Death Eaters in the last war, and will fight them again.” Like Ron and his family. Hermione ran a hand through her hair and redid her pony tail. “Let’s go down to the others.”

“And none of them did anything during the last year, when the purebloods passed law after law to oppress us,” Allan said, sneering, while they walked to the break area. “Or when the bitch tortured us.”

“I hope she’ll burn in hell forever!” Dean said, having caught the last line.

He was limping slightly. Maybe she had hit him harder than she had meant to during practise, Hermione thought. She snorted. “If she’s even dead, and not just hiding, and laughing while we’re blamed for her ‘death’.” It would fit the evil toad.

“Umbridge?” Sally-Anne asked, standing up when she saw them arrive.

“Yes,” Dean said, sitting down next to the girl.

“You think she’s not dead?” Sally-Anne said, sounding horrified while handing Dean a pot of muggle salve to treat his bruises. They’d save the magical ointments for serious cases. And, Hermione thought, it would toughen them up some.

She sat down and grabbed a soft drink from the cooler. “Who could have killed her? It wasn’t anyone of us. And her disappearance has given the Ministry a pretext to attack us. We lost weeks if not months of preparation due to this.” All her plans and schedules, wrecked!

Allan frowned. “She deserved death. And her death has helped us. Shown us that we can fight
Dean and Sally-Anne nodded. Hermione suppressed the urge to sigh. “That still leaves us scrambling to catch up. We haven’t managed to get enough tutors. Aisla is good, but she’s just one witch.”

Allan shrugged. “She only has a few of us to teach.”

Hermione frowned. Allan already had his education completed, even if he hadn’t been allowed to take his N.E.W.T.s. And Hermione was almost as advanced, not counting the studying she had done for the Resistance. But Seamus, Dean and the others would need more help. Their education would be hampered. “It’s not just us. If we had a decent alternative, the younger muggleborns wouldn’t have to return to Hogwarts and hope Dumbledore can protect them better than he protected us.”

“Colin and Dennis won’t return to Hogwarts,” Dean pointed out. “They’re too gung ho.”

The two Creeveys were still training, with Justin as their spotter. Hermione pressed her lips together. She didn’t want them to fight. They were too young. Even, as her traitorous mind told her, she had been doing worse at an even younger age. She’d do her best to keep them safe. As lookouts, maybe as couriers. Not on the frontlines.

“I hope Seamus returns soon,” Dean said.

The others nodded. They hadn’t heard anything from their friend. It had been deemed too dangerous for him to call back. His contacts in Ireland might be under surveillance by the muggle authorities. If the Resistance lost the muggle world as a safe haven, they were finished. If Seamus succeeded though… everyone knew that the IRA was among the most capable guerilla fighters - or terrorists, depending who you asked. A little bit of Semtex would be enough for a Gemino Charm, and Hermione wouldn’t have to think about how best to use a fertilizer bomb any more. And she really would prefer to use professionally made detonators, instead of her own designs.

Getting blown to bits by her own bomb would be a rather ignoble end to her burgeoning career as a freedom fighter.

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London, East End, June 29th, 1996

“A ball?” Hermione Granger asked, frowning at the mirror in her hand.

“A Summer Ball, at Malfoy Manor,” Ron explained. “On the 27th of July. Dad said that Malfoy has invited all of the rich pureblood families.”

“He didn’t invite Sirius, though,” Harry added. “Not that Sirius would ever attend a social gathering at the Malfoy Manor.”

Of course he wouldn’t, Hermione thought. Sirius hated Lucius Malfoy, and with good cause - the man had been responsible for Fudge issuing the Kiss-on-Sight order after Sirius’s escape from Azkaban.

“A ball for Death Eaters and their supporters?” It sounded like such a gathering to her. ‘Bigot Ball’, she thought.

“Or for possible supporters and sympathisers,” Ron said. “I checked with Neville; his family declined their invitation.”
“Do you think this is a recruiting effort?”

“People use those events to make deals and alliances, in business and politics,” Ron said. “So, Malfoy will definitely try to recruit more.”

“Sirius said actually recruiting for the Death Eaters would be gauche, but he also said that holding a ball in summer already was gauche. Something about summer being the season for vacations, not balls,” Harry said.

“I see.” Hermione frowned. The enemy was recruiting, and the Resistance still had trouble getting more people. “So, how are you doing?”

“We’re mostly waiting for Fred and George to finish an order for us,” Ron said.

“You could use the time to do your homework.”

“Err… “ Ron and Harry laughed, slightly embarrassed, and for a moment Hermione almost forgot that she wouldn’t be joining them at Hogwarts in two months.

“You’ve been flying and fooling around, hm?” She grinned, a bit wistfully.

“Training, actually,” Harry said.

“Quidditch?” Hermione asked, trying to keep the tone light.

“Defence. Sirius is tutoring us,” Ron said. “In secret. We’re also learning Occlumency.”

Hermione bit her lower lip. She felt jealous that her friend could learn from an adult with experience in the last war, while she and the rest of the Resistance had to make do with manuals and each other. She buried that feeling, though - her friends needed the training, with the Dark Lord trying to kill Harry, and the Resistance would find more instructors as well. Muggles too, if Seamus was successful and they could get weapons.

“You could join us,” Harry said. “Sirius would train you as well. No one would know.”

Hermione was tempted. Very tempted. But she told herself that it would be too dangerous. And she had too much to do. And she couldn’t leave the others to be with her friends. She had to set an example. So she shook her head. “I can’t. Too dangerous for you. If something happens to you because of me…”

Ron looked like he wanted to argue, but Harry nodded. “Alright. But once we can set up a safe location to train…”

She nodded. She didn’t think they’d manage. But it was a nice thought. And it felt very good to know her friends cared that much about her.

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London, Diagon Alley, July 5th, 1996

Harry Potter stared at the row of ‘Wanted’ posters attached to the wall of the ‘Thin Red Line’. They showed various muggleborn students. Former students, he corrected himself. Hermione’s poster was the most prominent one, offering the highest reward, and they had chosen to draw her as unfavorably as possible - her hair filled the picture and she was sneering more than Malfoy at his worst. The Ministry was really going all out in their manhunt.
He pulled his father’s invisibility cloak a bit closer around him when he saw the door of the pub opening. A single wizard stepped out of it, pausing to take a deep breath. Harry slipped past the man, and into the pub before the door closed. The smell of beer and smoke made him wish he had cast a Bubble-Head Charm beforehand. How could people stand this stench? Even the Leaky Cauldron wasn’t that bad in the evening!

He didn’t dwell on the question, but sneaked to the back of the pub, avoiding the tables still occupied by red-robed wizards and witches. As Tonks had told him, the pub was a favourite among Aurors, run by a retired Auror. On the way, Harry stepped on a bottlecap, right when a witch turned her head towards him to order a last beer from the bartender. He saw her frown and she drew her wand before he could react.

“Homenum Revelio!”

The spell washed over him, and he froze. Busted. He remembered the excuse he and Ron had prepared. He was here to look for Tonks, personal matter. To his surprise, the witch blinked, and stared at the crushed cap.

“Brenda? What are you doing? Trying to blow up the pub?” the wizard at her table said.

“I thought I noticed a disillusioned intruder.” She pointed at the cap, and Harry carefully took a few steps away. “Something crushed that cap.”

“Well, unless you blew your spell, there’s no invisible intruder in here,” the other Auror said, grinning.

Another witch at the next table sneered. “At least her failure didn’t get her partner killed this time.” The Aurors at her table laughed. Brenda snarled at them, and for a moment, Harry thought she would curse them. She didn’t, though. Instead she threw a few coins at the bartender, who caught them with a Levitation Charm, and walked out.

“Stupid bint got beaten by a mudblood,” the other witch muttered, glaring at Brenda’s back before returning her attention to her drink.

Harry moved towards the back of the pub, choosing a spot in the corner. Now he just had to wait until the pub closed, and the owner was gone. It shouldn’t take too long.

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When the bartender had finally left, Harry had been fighting the urge to cough for what had felt like an eternity. He really should have cast a Bubble-Head Charm. After he had recovered his breath, he walked to the closest table and pulled a bag of the twins’ latest invention - the Wireless Ears - from under his sweater. He knelt down and slipped under the table, placing the first on the underside of the top, near the centre. The ear adhered and changed color to match the wood. “Test one, test one,” he whispered, then pulled back and stood up. He had a dozen more of the things to place.

The twins had assured him that the ears would not be affected by the standard privacy spells, being counted as another participant of the supposedly private talk. Dictaquills would note down what was said, on Endless Scrolls, inside silenced boxes. The whole setup had been rather expensive, in Harry’s opinion, but Sirius hadn’t even blinked at the cost. Not that he had objected either - if it gave them information about Auror raids, if it saved Hermione, then it was worth every Galleon anyway.

Now he just had to apparate back to Grimmauld Place. He raised his wand.

He couldn’t apparate. The pub was warded. He closed his eyes and cursed, bending down to the
“Ron, I’m stuck here. I’ll have to wait until the owner returns in the morning, to sneak out, or he’ll know someone broke in.”

He sighed, and went to the booth in the back. It’d be a long and uncomfortable night. Then he thought about Hermione, having to live in hiding, hunted by the Aurors, and felt ashamed for griping about a minor inconvenience. At least he was finally doing something to help her.

*****

London, East End, July 8th, 1996

“Seamus is back!”

Hermione, reading the textbook for 7th year Transfiguration, looked up when she heard Dean’s shout, a smile breaking out on her face. After Martin Cokes, who had taken over a week to reach the safe house because he hadn’t known that Apparition and muggle public travel was safe, had returned, Seamus had come back now as well!

She closed the book and went downstairs. Their redheaded friend was surrounded by the other Resistance members, grinning widely.

“How did it go?” she blurted out.

Seamus didn’t take offence. “Oh, it went great. Took me a time to talk my cousin around - The years I spent in a ‘Scottish public school’ didn’t do me any favours - but I managed to convince him I wasn’t an English spy. My family moving helped - the rest of my relatives think I’m in trouble with the law. Mum told him something to that effect.”

Hermione winced. She hadn’t thought of that - and she knew what the IRA did to spies. Seamus had been in greater danger than she thought.

Dean laughed though. “Well, with your history, everyone would think you’re in trouble.”

Seamus chuckled. “Anyway, I met with a friend of my cousin. It was like in a spy movie - we were in the middle of nowhere, on a moor even. He was suspicious of me, but once I told him that I wanted to buy a sample of explosives and a detonator, and would pay in gold, he warmed up. I paid too much, but it was worth it. Even if he thinks I’m an idiot.”

He grew serious. “I didn’t get any help with getting guns though. And I didn’t even ask about instruction. We’ll have to find someone else for that.”

Hermione nodded. She hadn’t really expected the IRA to teach a bunch of British teenagers, much less share part of their support network. And it would have run the risk of attracting the attention of the British muggle authorities. If they were hunted as terrorists by the muggles as well, they would have lost the war before it started. “We can probably hire a mercenary for that kind of instruction.”

She had one in particular in mind, who had written a book about his activities. If he wouldn’t do it, then he would know people who would.

“Good,” Seamus said. “Here’s the detonator and the Semtex.”

Hermione took the package. “Radio controlled detonator?”

“Yes. Seemed the most useful. But give me some time, and I’ll rig up timers too,” Seamus said.
Hermione nodded. It should be safe enough if he only had a duplicated detonator to work with. She checked the bag. The sample of Semtex was far too small to blow anything up. No wonder the IRA had parted with it. A Gemino Curse would easily multiply it, of course. “Good work, Seamus.”

“Now we just need a target,” Allan said. “Like a ball full of Death Eaters.”

Hermione glared at him. He had been talking about blowing up the ball ever since she had told them about it. “We don’t know if there will be just Death Eaters. And we’re not ready to take that step yet.” She had been making that argument ever since. “We are still too few to wage a war, even a guerilla war, and if we blow up Malfoy Manor, it will be war.”

Seamus frowned. “Didn’t you find more muggleborns?”

Hermione sighed. “It’s harder than expected, though part of that is because we are hunted by the Aurors. That makes approaching others more difficult.” Even those sympathetic wouldn’t want to be seen - and caught - with them. Aisla Ewart had withdrawn her offer to tutor them.

“And those older muggleborns who’d be willing to fight are probably hiding already,” Allan said.

“And you know old people,” Dean cut in, “They will want to take over anyway. Even though we have done more than they thought of.”

Hermione knew that this was a likely outcome. And she knew that she was fed up with following adults who didn’t do as much as they could. Or kept information from her. And she certainly wouldn’t trust any stranger. Not without them signing the enchanted contract she had created for the Resistance. Anyone who broke it would lose all the memories of the Resistance. It wouldn’t work on muggles, though.

“We’re doing fine so far,” Allan said. “And once we use the explosives we just received, they’ll know what we are capable of.”

That wasn’t exactly a good enough reason to kill people, in Hermione’s opinion. “We’re not going to kill people just so we can impress older muggleborns.”

“Of course not. It’s just a side benefit of killing Death Eaters,” Allan said, smiling.

Dean and Seamus, and the Creeveys eagerly agreed, laughing.

“Don’t talk lightly of killing!” Hermione said. “You haven’t killed anyone yet.” She had, and had suffered from nightmares.

That sobered the group up. Allan frowned at her, but she stared at him until he looked away.

“We need more time, and more information,” she insisted. No one disagreed. At least out loud.

“Now, let’s celebrate Seamus’s successful return!” Dean said.

As everyone grabbed drinks, Hermione forced herself to join in. She couldn’t afford to isolate herself. Even if she wanted to return to studying. And talk with Harry and Ron.

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Hermione Granger felt nervous when she walked towards the Café overlooking a park. She wasn’t afraid of Aurors spotting her, not with her wig and sunglasses concealing her identity without magic,
but she couldn’t help fearing that Seamus’s contact with the IRA had been noticed by the muggle authorities. She didn’t think they could have tracked him to their safe house, but she was glad she had Justin with her, to provide backup.

A former mercenary and current author, she corrected herself. He was over seventy years old now, and hadn’t been active in over fifteen years. As far as she knew, at least. She spotted him at once - he did look like the picture on the back cover of ‘A Tour in Africa’.

“Good morning, Colonel,” she greeted him. Justin, at her side, nodded.

She noticed that Colonel O’Bannon’s eyes widened slightly. “Miss Smith? I confess I had expected someone a bit… older.” He sounded amused.

Hermione took a seat. “This is Mister Brown.” She nodded towards Justin.

“Good morning, sir.” Justin’s upper class accent hadn’t been affected by his years at Hogwarts, and Hermione saw the Irish mercenary take notice.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with us,” she said, before ordering. A discreet privacy spell followed.

“For that much money I’d meet with almost anyone,” he said, grinning.

She nodded. Apparently the restored gold doubloon they had sent with the letter asking for a meeting was worth more than Hermione or Sirius had thought.

“I don’t suppose you’re just here to interview me about my books.”

“I’ve read them,” she said. “I like your style, though they were a tad light on military knowledge. But we’re not here to talk about your literary career.”

He nodded. The waiter arrived with their order.

“What did you want to talk about then?” he asked. He was smiling, but in a guarded way.

“We’re looking for instruction in small arms and small unit tactics.”

He chuckled. “And what would you need that for? Are you trying to follow in my footsteps? You’re a bit young for that, dear, and it’s not exactly a profession for girls.” He nodded at Justin. “You’d could join the British Army for a stint. Or Sandhurst.” O’Bannon leaned back. “It’s not glamorous, it’s not romantic, and if you can pay me in gold just to meet me, it certainly won’t pay better than what you’ve been doing.”

He probably thought that they had stolen the gold coin. Or that Justin and her were eloping, and he had raided his parents’ safe. Hermione pulled her sunglasses off and stared at the man. “Colonel. We’re not about to play mercenaries. We don’t have any illusions about war. We have enemies who want to kill us, and we need training to survive.”

He lost his smile, meeting her eyes. “If you have the money to hire instructors, you could as well hire bodyguards. Or people who solve your problem for you.” He didn’t sound convinced, but he at least sounded as if he took them a little more seriously.

“That’s not an option.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really?”
“Yes.” Hermione wished she could tell the man about magic. But she really didn’t want to be seen as threatening the Statute of Secrecy. “We’ve got the money to pay anyone willing to train us. But hiring mercenaries to fight our battles is, sadly, not an option.”

O’Bannon’s eyes narrowed again. “I don’t work with terrorists, and neither do my men,” he said in a cold voice.

Hermione had been afraid of that. It was a logical assumption. “We’re not terrorists. We’re about to fight terrorists. Outside Britain.”

“Girl, don’t lie to me! If you were doing that, you could hire mercenaries for the job.”

Hermione sighed, and drew her wand. “Do you know what this is?”

He looked confused. “A stick?”

She pointed it at him.

“Obliviate.”

While the man’s eyes lost focus, she looked at Justin. “Plan B.” They should have started with that, but Hermione didn’t like to lie to people she wanted to work with.

They waited until the man blinked.

“Colonel O’Bannon? Thank you for meeting with us,” Justin said.

“Ah.. yes?”

“Are you well, sir?” Hermione sounded concerned.

“Just a … I’m alright.” O’Bannon smiled. “You piqued my curiosity. Not many would pay me a gold doubloon to meet me.”

Justin grinned. “We wanted to ensure that you wouldn’t dismiss us as a bunch of kids. Money talks.” He leaned forward. “We need your help, sir. I’ve recently inherited some property in a part of Africa you’re familiar with. It’s sadly currently occupied by some bandits. We need to hire a few specialists to secure it, and at least one instructor who can teach the locals to defend it afterwards.” He grew serious. “My father tried to deal with the local authorities, if you can call those bastards that, but that didn’t work out. I don’t want to make the same mistake.”

“I see.” O’Bannon smiled. “I can put you in contact with a few good men.”

Hermione exchanged a glance with Justin. They smiled.

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**London, Waterloo Station, July 17th, 1996**

“Take a look at this, Hermione!” Ron Weasley smiled, and pulled out the rolls of parchment the Dictaquills had filled since Harry had placed the wireless ears.

His friend’s eyes widened when she skimmed them. “Wow…” she looked up at the two boys and smiled. “Thank you! Thank you!”

Ron was certain that if they hadn’t been sitting at a table in a restaurant, she’d have hugged them.
She might still do it, he realised.

“But… wasn’t that dangerous? How did you manage to get those?”

“It wasn’t dangerous at all,” Harry said. “I used my invisibility cloak.” Ron’s friend proceeded to tell Hermione in detail how he had placed the wireless ears. Ron knew that it hadn’t been quite as easy as Harry told it, but neither of them wanted their friend to worry about them.

Hermione nodded. “That was a very smart idea, to bug the Aurors.”

Ron smiled. “Just a thought I had, when I saw the extendable ears.” Her beaming smile at him felt very good.

“There’s some speculation among Aurors about Malfoy’s ball,” Harry cut in. “They think it might be a recruiting attempt.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s almost certain.”

“They think the Dark Lord himself could be in attendance,” Ron said.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Really?”

She started to go through the scrolls. Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. “You didn’t plan to, you know… attack the ball?”

Hermione looked up. “What? No. But someone else might. We’re not exactly the only muggleborns who have gone into hiding. We’re just the ones hunted by the Aurors.”

“Going after students…” Harry scoffed.

“Former students,” Hermione corrected him. “We’ve been banned from Hogwarts.”

That was not a topic Ron liked to talk about. “Yes. So… how are things going?”

Hermione sighed. “We’re still organising. It’s a bit like a dorm, right now. Just without teachers.”

That sounded like a nice setup to Ron. Although… “And you’re acting as a prefect, right?”

She nodded, frowning. “I think that description fits well enough.”

Ron looked at Harry. Both grinned. That was their Hermione.

She glared at them, but not for long.

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London, East End, July 17th, 1996

Hermione Granger felt guilty about lying to her best friends when she arrived back at the safe house. Despite her claims, she had made plans to attack the Summer Ball. She hadn’t been expecting to actually do it, though. It had just been a mental exercise. This new information, though…

She entered the ‘living room’, where the Resistance members tended to hang out.

“How was your double-date?” Seamus asked, grinning.

She rolled her eyes at him, but didn’t react further. Taking a seat at the dinner table, she took a deep
breath. She didn’t like what she was about to do, but she had to. “I’ve got some new information. Aurors speculate that the Dark Lord himself might be present at the Summer Ball.

Allan jerked, and she knew he’d be smiling. “That changes things. If we can kill the Dark Lord with a bomb...”

Everyone perked up, as Hermione had known they would. “It’s just a rumour. Speculation,” She said. “We don’t know if he’ll be there.”

Allan scoffed. “Even if he isn’t, it’s a ball full of Death Eaters and their supporters.”

“And their families. Civilians,” Hermione pointed out. The argument was now very familiar.

“Some civilians,” Dean said with a sneer. “Their gold will pay for the deaths of muggleborns.”

“And for the deaths of ‘blood traitors’,” Seamus added. “But most important is the Dark Lord. If we have a chance to kill him, it’s worth it.”

Hermione didn’t like it, but she had to agree. Everything had started with the Dark Lord’s return. Without him, there wouldn’t have been an appeasement policy. The purebloods would have hidden their bigotry still. They’d be going to Hogwarts in six weeks, instead of hiding in muggle Britain. She slowly nodded. “I agree. We still aren’t ready for a war, but the chance to kill the Dark Lord is an opportunity we can’t let pass.” And if they succeeded, there wouldn’t be a war. She suspected that even if they managed to kill the Dark Lord, he might return from death - he had done it before, after all. But it would take him time, and the Death Eaters would collapse without him to lead them, like in 1981. She didn’t say that, though.

That surprised the others. Seamus even gaped at her while Allan smiled widely.

“We’ll bomb the ball. After midnight, so any children and those who just attended out of a misguided sense of social obligation but don’t share the Death Eaters’ views will have left already.” No one opposed that statement. She took a deep breath. “We’ll need a detonator, and we’ll need to be able to levitate quite a lot of weight.”

As she laid out her plan, Allan’s smile grew, and Seamus’s grin widened. Hermione hid her own feelings. As horrible as it was, this could end the war before it started.

And, as much as she hated herself for feeling that way, a lot of those purebloods attending the ball deserved it.

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Hogwarts, July 20th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore looked at the assembled Order of the Phoenix. There were so few, he thought, not for the first time. So few left from the last war. They fit into his office with but one Extension Charm. He didn’t sigh, though, but kept smiling. Confidently. Reassuringly. After all, the new Order would not have everyone gathered in the same place anyway, but be divided into smaller cells.

“My friends, I thank you for coming.” He stood in front of them. “You all know the situation: The Ministry is still foolishly insisting on persecuting muggleborns, instead of fighting the Dark Lord and his followers. Although we’ve been making progress in the Wizengamot. More and more members are realising just what kind of wizard the Dark Lord is, and what would await them under his rule. His attempts to influence them have grown cruder lately, after our fight in the Ministry.”
“They wouldn’t fight him for being a murdering bastard, but they’ll fight him for being a rude bastard.” Alastor sneered. “Bunch of worthless wankers.”

Sirius chuckled, and Albus continued before the young wizard could say something even more inflammatory. “A few more weeks, and we’ll have a majority in the Wizengamot.”

“Unless Malfoy manages to bribe more people at his ball,” Elphias pointed out. “He’s invited everyone who hasn’t been proclaiming their support for you.”

“Is anyone among us attending the ball?” Remus asked. “It would be useful to know what happened there.”

Alastor scoffed. “As if they’ll let anyone they’re not certain about attend the real meeting. And if we had a spy there, we’d certainly not mention it to you. That’s how spies get killed!”

“Do you think there’s a traitor among us?” Sirius asked, in a dangerous tone.

Albus smiled gently, even though he agreed with his friend. While he trusted the members of the Order, not many of them were accomplished in Occlumency. “I trust everyone here. But there are ways to extract information even from the unwilling.” He wasn’t that concerned about the Summer Ball, even without any of his spies being present. Severus would be able to inform him about any new developments later.

Sirius nodded, accepting that.

“Nymphadora, how goes the recruiting?”

“It’s ‘Tonks’!” she muttered, glaring at him for using her first name. In a normal voice, she continued: “Not that well. Most Aurors I talked to, carefully, don’t like muggleborns much. Not after one of us was killed by Hermione.”

“Bloody Death Eater deserved it!” Sirius said.

Albus knew that Harry and Mister Weasley were in contact with Miss Granger; only an utter fool would expect them to abandon their friend, but he didn’t know if Sirius was privy to what they were talking about. His remark though seemed to indicate that though.

Young Nymphadora coughed. “Anyway, I tried to talk to a few former Aurors. Muggleborns, who had been kicked out. But some are hiding, and those I met don’t trust me.” She winced. “I’m not certain they’re trusting anyone working for the Ministry. One almost hexed me.”

Albus nodded. He knew the last year had caused a lot of resentment among muggleborns, and quite understandably, but it was still worth to reach out to them. That they were aggressive, even to Nymphadora, was a bad sign. As were former Aurors going into hiding. Things were already quite volatile, after attacks by imperiused muggleborns. The damage even one misguided man could do was considerable.

He had to keep an eye on Miss Granger too, he knew. And on the group of students she was part of. It would be difficult though, since he doubted that she’d trust him. Albus would have to work through Harry and Mister Weasley. At least Harry could protect his mind better now. To think he had made such progress, after Severus had stopped teaching the boy…

“Thank you, Nymphadora. Now, how about our supplies? Were you able to acquire the potions we need, Emmeline?”
The witch winced. “I did, but the prices have risen considerably in the last month.”

“People with more sense than most are stocking up, of course,” Alastor grunted. “Of course, it doesn’t take much to have more sense than most.”

Albus sighed when a few more members took this as an insult. They were correct, but their bickering was proving Alastor correct as well. It looked like it’d be a long and tiresome meeting.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, July 18th, 1996

“I didn’t expect you to visit. Much less when Harry isn’t around.”

Sirius was smiling, but his tone showed his surprise at Hermione Granger’s arrival.

“I can’t stay long,” she said. “I just came to get more supplies, and to ask you something.”

“And my hopes are dashed once more!”” Sirius said, handing her a bag.

She chuckled, briefly, at his joke, then met his eyes. “I wanted to check that none of our friends is attending Malfoy’s ball.”

Sirius raised his eyebrows. “To my knowledge, none of my friends and colleagues will attend the ball.”

She nodded. “Good.”

“Should I hold a dinner party myself, at that date, to ensure no one tries to crash Malfoy’s party?”

“That’s a good idea.” She didn’t have to say anything else. Sirius’s grim expression showed he had understood.

“I’ll never forgive you if you get killed. Harry would be devastated.”

“I know. I’ll be safe.” More or less.

Sirius frowned, but didn’t press her further.

*****

Wiltshire, Britain, July 27th, 1996

Hermione Granger could see Malfoy Manor in the distance. It was brightly illuminated, even shortly before midnight. She took a closer look through her binoculars. She didn’t see anything suspicious.

She turned to Seamus and Dean. “Are you ready?”

The two former Gryffindors nodded, astride their brooms, with a large chest floating between them.

“Remember to get enough distance before you trigger it. Too close and you’ll get caught in the shockwave.”

“It’s not a nuke, Hermione,” Seamus said, grinning. “Just a chest full of Semtex!”

“Allan?”
The former Ravenclaw smiled, holding up a bottle. “I’m ready.”

“Be careful, everyone,” she said.

“Always!” Dean said, as the three boys started to fly towards the manor, levitating the chest between Dean’s and Seamus’s brooms.

Hermione bit her lower lip nervously as she saw her friends disappear in the dark sky. She was worrying about them, and about her plan. If she had miscalculated the blast radius…

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Wiltshire, Britain, July 28th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass forced herself to keep smiling when she left the ballroom in Malfoy Manor. Her idiot of a little sister was simply too stupid to listen to her, or their parents. The squirt had accepted Draco’s invitation to show her the garden. Daphne didn’t know what was worse, her sister’s naiveté, or Draco’s willingness to flirt with her. The two had danced so often together, Parkinson had left the ball in a huff. Not that that had been a loss. Tracey had gone home as well, or rather, had been sent home by her parents after she had been a bit too blunt with her opinion. Which had left Daphne bereft of intelligent company.

And now they were out in the garden. Her parents were in a ‘private talk’, so it fell to Daphne to act as a chaperone. Which meant she had to spend even more time with Draco, and without anyone else to act as a buffer. For a girl who should have gone home already. Daphne certainly hadn’t been allowed to stay up that long when she had debuted! A Summer Ball was still a stupid idea anyway. It wasn’t even on Solstice!

“Those trees were imported from the Amazon basin, and specially enchanted to grow in the colder climate of England,” Draco was telling them.

“Oh… how exotic!” Astoria chirped.

Daphne rolled her eyes. Trees… were they Hufflepuffs, or Slytherins? Who cared about trees? “How fascinating,” she said in the most bored tone she could manage.

“Daphne!” Astoria glared at her, but she simply smiled at her little sister.

“Yes?”

“Oh! You’re impossible!” If she hadn’t been wearing her new dancing shoes, Daphne was certain her sister would have stomped her feet. Or tried to step on hers.

Draco chuckled. “We’ve got a pond with various magical fishes too. Let me show you!”

“Oh!” Astoria chirped.

Daphne sighed, and followed them towards the small lake at the boundary of the estate. She doubted they’d see any actual fish.

She had been right, she thought a few minutes later, staring at a small lake.

“Look at the moon’s reflection in the water!” her sister exclaimed.

Daphne rolled her eyes and sighed. She was about to make another sarcastic comment when she saw a group of wizards appear at the edge of the lake, almost hidden by the bushes there. In the
moonlight she recognized the robes. Obliviators. But why would they…

Behind her, night turned to day when the manor exploded in a giant fireball.

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Chapter 4: Backlash

‘There is a controversy about the exact start of the Second Blood War. Some claim that it started with the disappearance of Umbridge, citing her as the first casualty in the war. Others claim that the fight between Hermione Granger and Aurors Brenda Brocktuckle and Radcliff Macmillan was the first action of the war, causing the Muggleborn Resistance to take up arms. In my opinion, the war started with the bombing of Malfoy Manor. This was the first action taken by any side in the Second Blood War. It was a planned, prepared and well executed attack by an organised group. Something that cannot be said about the other two incidents. With one blow, almost all of the Dark Lord’s followers in the Wizengamot had been killed. As had many of their families. Cries for revenge were heard before the fires in the ruins of the manor had died down. After that night, the war was definitely on.’
- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Wiltshire, Britain, July 28th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass whirled around and froze, blinking and gaping at the horrible sight. Most of the manor had collapsed, the ground floor buried under the remains of the upper floors. A huge cloud of dust had been thrown up, and as it slowly started to settle, she could make out the remains of the ballroom, covered with rubble. Someone gasped next to her, and she couldn’t tell if it was Astoria or Draco.

“Merlin! Mother and Father are…” she said, noticing that something was wrong with her ears.

Right that moment, huge flames shot up from the rubble. The already terrible scene turned into an inferno.

“Fiendfyre!” she shouted, horrified. What else could burn that fiercely?

“No, no… that’s not Fiendfyre,” Draco said. She didn’t ask why he’d know. She barely heard him, and realised that her ears were ringing.

Movement to her side caught her eye. She turned around, shielding Astoria with her own body before she saw it was one of the Obliviators. She started to relax, then tensed up. They had arrived before the explosion. Why would…

Hermione Granger swallowed, lowering her binoculars again. The bomb and the home-made Napalm had worked as expected. With Apparition blocked by their spells, no one would have been able to escape from Malfoy Manor. She tried to calmly, clinically observe the effects, but couldn’t. The sight of a human torch stumbling out of the fire while another figure twitched under a pillar, the
flames coming closer and closer, had been too much.

She had done this. It had been her plan. No one else had thought of using Gemino-cursed bottles of Napalm right after the bomb. And no one, including her, had thought what that would mean for the people inside. What it would really mean. Next to her, Sally-Anne was mumbling "Dear Lord!" over and over again. Justin was simply swearing.

"Yes!"

She looked up. Allan and the other broom riders were coming down. The former Ravenclaw was smiling widely. "Your plan worked perfectly, Hermione! No one escaped!"

Seamus and Dean looked more shaken, but were smiling as well. They wouldn’t have seen the effect, not from above, through all the smoke and dust and fire. She nodded, numbly.

"Yes."

"If the Dark Lord was in that mansion, then he’s dead now!" Allan jumped off his broom and hugged her.

"Let’s hope he was," she managed to say. It would make all of this worth it. She shook her head. "Let’s go. The Aurors will arrive any second."

They apparated several times, until they reached a prepared ambush location, then waited half an hour to check if someone was following them. By the time they reached their safe house, now very well-furnished thanks to magic, Hermione had managed to calm down enough to hide her emotions. She just knew she’d have nightmares again though.

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Wiltshire, Britain, July 28th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle shook her head in disbelief, staring at the remains of Malfoy Manor. The entire house was just a smoking ruin. And what her spells were telling her… she didn’t want to believe them.

"Merlin’s balls! Was this a dragon attack?"

She sighed at her new partner, Martin Runcorn. Another rookie. "A dragon couldn’t have done this," she said. "Not in the time this took, at least."

"But… what then? The Dark Lord?" The wizard looked around as if he expected Death Eaters to charge them right then.

"Why would the Dark Lord attack Malfoy Manor?" She stared at him, and his response died on his lips. Brenda didn’t know what exactly had happened here, but she knew what or who hadn’t done it. Or at least was pretty certain about that.

"Come on!"

She led Runcorn towards the terrace. To their left, the burned remains of a guest were levitated out from under the stone pillar that had killed them. It was impossible to tell if it had been a witch or wizard. She heard Runcorn choke, and hoped he wouldn’t lose his dinner, or early breakfast, if the kid had been as dumb as to eat something before coming. Hopefully his Bubble-Head Charm would
help.

Scrimgeour was there, staring grimly at the carnage. Over a dozen bodies were laid out next to him, covered by conjured blankets, from what Brenda could see, and more were being recovered.

“Sir,” she greeted him.

“Ah, Brocktuckle. And…” he looked at her partner.

“Runcorn, sir, Martin Runcorn.”

“Right,” the Head Auror said in a tone that made it clear that he didn’t care. “What do you have for me?”

Brenda took a deep breath. “One big blast took the house down. The wards couldn’t withstand it. Afterwards, the fire was set using some inflammable liquid. No sign of Fiendfyre.”

“What?”

“That’s what my spells showed, sir.” She had checked the results three times.

“But… a Blasting Curse that strong… with old wards…” Runcorn trailed off.

Brenda nodded grimly. Old wards, erected back in the day with blood sacrifices, were serious. Not even the Dark Lord had managed to power through them like that in the last war.

Scrimgeour cursed under his breath. “Who could have done this?”

Brenda shrugged. “Dumbledore might have been holding back.”

Runcorn gasped, and Brenda and Scrimgeour exchanged a suffering glance. Rookies!

“More seriously, I don’t know who had the means to do this. But there’s one group with the motive,” she said.

“Muggleborns.” The Head Auror nodded with a grim expression.

“But how?” Runcorn stammered.

Both ignored him. If the muggleborns had done this, then the situation had just grown far worse than Brenda could have imagined a day ago.

“Sir! We’ve found the entrance to the basement! It’s intact!” John Dawlish walked towards them, almost losing his footing in the rubble.

“Any survivors?” Scrimgeour asked.

Dawlish’s grimace told Brenda all that she needed to know.

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Dawlish’s grimace hadn’t told Brenda all that she had needed to know, she realised a few minutes later.

“It seems ‘dear Lucius’ had his dungeons stocked,” Scrimgeour said in a cold voice. “ Likely muggles or muggleborns, judging by their clothes. Suffocated by the looks of it.”
Brenda agreed with the deduction. All that fire above them, no Bubble-Head Charm… a nasty way to die.

“We’ll need to identify them quickly,” the Head Auror said.

Brenda nodded. She didn’t know what would be worse.

“Rufus! There you are!”

Brenda turned around and winced. The Minister for Magic was walking down the stairs, with Bones at his side. She suddenly was glad that after her blunder, there was no way she’d get the lead on this case.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, July 28th, 1996

“This is a catastrophe, Albus!”

Now he was ‘Albus’ again, Albus Dumbledore thought. The Minister had always been quick to adapt to ‘changing circumstances’.

“I would agree, Cornelius.” If not for the same reasons the Minister thought of.

“Three dozen members of the Wizengamot, killed! Entire families, wiped out!” Cornelius was pacing behind his desk.

"Including Lucius Malfoy himself,” Albus pointed out. It was a bit petty, but Cornelius could do with a reminder of just who he had been so friendly with, even if their relationship had cooled down somewhat during the last year. Even the Minister had realised just how close the man had been to the Dark Lord.

“It’s a miracle that the Obliviators acted quickly enough to restore the anti-muggle wards and had a muggle-worthy excuse ready, or we’d be in hot water with the ICW as well!”

Albus nodded. He had visited the site himself, earlier. He hadn’t seen sights like this since the war in Europe. The bombed out cities in muggle Germany he had traveled through, fighting, then hunting down Gellert’s forces… And in an ironic twist, the excuse used here was an unexploded bomb from the Blitz going off. Which meant he knew very well who had done this. In hindsight, he should have expected it. You could only push people so far before they lashed out, and Miss Granger had been pushed far beyond the point at which others would have broken. To think the young witch would be capable of such carnage… once again, Albus told himself he shouldn’t be surprised. He probably would have done something similar, in her place, when he had been her age. Before he had learned the cost of war.

“And Rufus and Bones think the muggleborns are behind this!” The Minister whirled around, facing him. “Is that true?”

Albus slowly nodded. “It is very likely, in my opinion.”

Cornelius paled, and staggered over to his seat. “But… it can’t be true! How could they have done this?”

“You really do not know anything about muggles, do you?” Albus asked, smiling mildly. Then his expression grew hard. “I warned you, Cornelius. I warned you against taking this course of action. I
fought for a year to prevent exactly this situation from happening. But you didn’t want to listen. And now Britain is reaping what you have sowed.”

It was stretching the truth, more than a bit. Albus certainly hadn’t focused on the danger muggleborns represented - that would only have played into Tom’s hands. But if Cornelius had listened to him, instead of heeding Malfoy’s words, then the muggleborns wouldn’t have any reason to consider the Ministry an enemy.

“But… what can we do?”

“You can repeal those cursed laws against muggleborns, Cornelius. Rein in your bigots, and hope that this will be enough to placate those who have done this.”

“We can’t do that! The rumour that this has been done by muggleborns has spread already. The heirs of the Wizengamot members killed today won’t ever accept surrendering in the face of such … such…”

“The Wizengamot had no qualms surrendering the muggleborns to the Dark Lord,” Albus said. He knew though that the Minister was very likely correct. ‘Blood called for blood’ was a saying many of the Old Families lived by.

“We didn’t surrender. We compromised to avoid a war!”

“And yet, a war is the result. A war that will be more terrible than you and I imagined.” Albus stood up. “Mark my words, Cornelius: If you do not change those laws, if you do not change your policy, then Britain will enter her darkest time, ever.”

“I can’t! You know they’ll want revenge, not appeasement!”

Albus nodded, and left the Minister’s office. If he couldn’t change the Ministry’s policy - and with the Wizengamot dominated by the families of those who had just been killed, that was very unlikely - then he could only hope that Tom’s followers had been hurt worse by this attack than it seemed, or the Order would soon be facing not just the Death Eaters, but the Ministry as well. And he didn’t know what the muggleborns would do.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, July 28th, 1996

Harry Potter was in the kitchen when he heard the tapping noise. He looked up and spotted an owl on the windowsill. When he let it inside, he saw that it was carrying an Evening Prophet edition. He froze for a second, suddenly afraid. The Daily Prophet only put out a second edition if something very important had happened. Had they arrested Hermione?

Afraid for his friend, he all but ripped the newspaper off the owl, ignoring its screeching protests. “Kreacher, pay the owl!” he shouted, unrolling it. When he saw the headline, and the pictures beneath it, he gasped.

‘Malfoy Manor destroyed! Dozens Dead! Dark Magic?’

He read through the article with a sick feeling in his stomach. So many dead...

“Harry?”

He looked up and saw Sirius had entered the kitchen.
“What’s wrong?”

“Malfoy Manor was destroyed,” Harry said, returning his attention to the article.

Sirius stepped up to him and started reading over his shoulder. “First ever Summer Ball at Malfoy Manor… dozens of the most prestigious families in attendance… debutantes… entire manor destroyed by a single explosion… survivors burned alive… “Harry’s godfather whistled. “Hermione doesn’t do things by halves.”

“What? You think she did this?” Harry gaped at him. He had told her about this ball. Had shown her the records from the Auror pub… Merlin’s arse! Was this his fault?

“Hm? I know she did it. She asked me to make certain that none of our friends attended,” Sirius answered. “Oh… Draco survived. Damn! I had hoped the entire family had died.”

“Hermione did this?”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, she did.” He grinned. “And she did it well.”

“But… she killed dozens of people!”

“Dozens of Death Eaters and their ilk.” Sirius scoffed. “Malfoy… Parkinson… Nott… Selwyn… all of them voted to convict me at my trial last year, despite the evidence Dumbledore had gathered, and despite my testimony under Veritaserum! I wish I could have seen them die!”

Harry stared at the older wizard. “You… you think this is a good thing?”

“Of course it is!” Sirius said, narrowing his eyes. “What did you think this ball was, a party? It was a gathering of Death Eaters and their supporters. Murderous bastards, all of them. Do you know how many of my friends they killed in the last war?” He shook his head. “You should be glad none of those dark wizards and witches will be able to murder anyone else. Your parents would have approved of this.”

“They would have?”

“Of course! They were fighting in the war. What did you think they were doing, holding hands? Lily and James killed their share of Death Eaters, before they had to go into hiding.”

Harry blinked, trying to make sense of this all while Sirius continued reading. Would his parents really have approved of this… massacre? They weren’t at war, were they? He still couldn’t believe that Hermione, his best friend, had done this. Had murdered so many people. Even if they were Death Eaters… Then he remembered what Malfoy had done in their second year. How Cedric had been killed, on a whim. And those names in the article… he remembered those names as well. Voldemort had called them out, and they had come. Harry had killed as well. Quirrell, in his first year. Burned alive. But the wizard had been trying to kill him. To kill in cold blood, like this… to think Hermione could do this...

“Damn!” Sirius said suddenly. “According to this, ‘the bodies of two muggleborns were found at the scene of the crime’. Did you call Hermione yet?”

Harry forgot about his turmoil. Hermione might have been killed? He pulled out his mirror at once. She had to be safe!

*****
Ron Weasley didn’t remember ever seeing his parents like this. His dad was sitting on the couch in the Burrow’s living room, shaking his head. Ron’s mum was sitting next to him, holding his hand. She wasn’t yelling, wasn’t saying anything.

A crumpled Daily Prophet, evening edition, lay in front of them, on the floor. Ron had read the article. The elder Malfoys were dead. Killed together with half the Wizengamot. With a single spell, according to the reporter. Dad had confirmed that - the rumours had spread like Fiendfyre through the Ministry.

“Who could have done this?” he asked.

“I don’t care,” Ginny said. “I’m glad Malfoy is dead,” she added in a whisper.

Dad stiffened, and Mum exclaimed: “Ginny!”

Ron’s sister raised her chin. “What? Have you forgotten what Malfoy did to us? To me? I remember! I remember what that diary made me do! And it was all his fault!”

For a moment, Ron’s mum and sister stared at each other, then his mum looked away, tears in her eyes.

Arthur hugged his wife and shook his head. “You don’t understand. This is terrible!” He took a deep breath. “The entire Ministry is in turmoil. A lot of people have lost family. And they want revenge. Dumbledore was so close to repealing those laws, but now?” He shook his head. “I doubt people will come to their senses before the Wizengamot gathers again.”

“What?” Ron was confused. Weren’t all of those who had pushed those laws through now dead? Then he remembered that their heirs would be poured from the same cauldron.

“Some are already blaming the muggleborns for this because rumours claim that two muggleborns were found dead in the ruins.” Ron’s dad winced.

“But they say it was a single spell. How could they have done this?” Ron asked. “Only the Dark Lord, or Dumbledore could have cast such a spell.”

“Do you know what a bomb is, Ron?” Arthur Weasley asked, then started to explain.

Ron had to struggle to keep his composure while his father told him about muggle explosive devices. Not just because the thought of bombs able to destroy entire cities was terrifying. But because he had just realised who had destroyed Malfoy Manor.

And that he and Harry had helped her.

*****

Brenda Brocktuckle scowled when she entered the ‘Thin Red Line’. Someone had torn down the wanted poster depicting the muggleborn students next to the entrance. She had felt like tearing down Granger’s face herself, a few times, but to see that someone else had done it… probably a muggleborn, thinking they were unjustly persecuted.

“Two ales, Bran,” she said while passing the bar.
Brandon Smythe, the bartender, nodded at her. Martin Runcorn wisely didn’t protest her ordering for him. It wasn’t yet noon, but still, she needed that. And the kid would drink as well. She wasn’t in the mood for anything, anyone else going against her wishes. The Auror sat down on the bench at her usual table with a huff. Fortunately, the two pints were floating towards her before Runcorn had managed to sit down himself. Brenda grabbed one, and took a mouthful.

“Ah!” She closed her eyes and sighed, and smiled. It was rather weak, and didn’t last long, but it was her first smile that day.

“Rough morning?”

She opened her eyes. Bran was there, looking concerned. He was mostly curious though, she knew that well. He had retired from the Aurors, but he craved gossip from the Corps like no one else. And, well, no one really quit being an Auror. She sighed. “The worst. Fucking politics!”

“Someone meddling with your case?”

“It’s not my case. I’m just helping.” And Brenda was damn glad it wasn’t her case.

“Half the Wizengamot got killed. Of course everyone will be meddling.” Bran snorted. He didn’t launch into one of his own war stories though, so he was really curious. Not surprisingly - Brenda had dragged her new partner to a very early lunch.

She leaned forward. “You’ve heard about the two prisoners found in Malfoy’s cells.”

He nodded.

“We identified them. Kevin Baker and Joline Chase. Former Hit-Wizards. Fired last year.”

Bran raised his eyebrows. “So, the story the Malfoy kid had been telling about his father capturing two burglars during the Ball, and not wanting to disturb the event by calling the Aurors right away was actually true?”

“That’s what the Minister wants to be the official story. Two burglars, caught and then killed in the attack. Nothing that could rile up anyone.” Brenda snorted. “If Malfoy managed to capture those two by himself, I’m eating my robe. And I don’t think they were trying to break into Malfoy Manor the day of the Summer Ball to steal things.”

Bran’s eyes widened. “You mean… they were part of the attack?”

Brenda shrugged. “Maybe. They were captured hours before the blast.”

“Acomplices could have blown up the Manor,” Runcorn said.

“With their friends inside?” Brenda scoffed. They had had that discussion before. She knew that anyone willing to kill so many people wouldn’t balk at killing two of their own, especially if they had been captured and could look forward to execution or worse, but she had a feeling that there was more to this. And this was the only lead they had. They couldn’t bury this, and investigate the case correctly.

“We haven’t been able to contact Chase’s sister,” Runcorn added. “Unemployed enchanter, disappeared a week ago.”

Bran cleared his throat. “Used to be, that meant the Death Eaters got another one, back during the last war.”
“Well, we’re not in the last war. She could have been captured as well, just taken somewhere else. Or she could have gone underground, like so many others,” Brenda said.

Bran snorted. “We’re not in the last war, Brenda!” After a pause, he added: “But I fear we’ll be soon wishing we were.”

Brenda glared at him, and drank the rest of her pint.

*****

“Blimey!”

In the basement of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, Ron Weasley was staring at the parchment in front of him, where the quill was still writing down the Aurors’ conversation. Not even his dad had known about this! He copied the scroll and hid it in the enchanted pocket on his belt. He had to inform Harry about this!

If those Hit-Wizards had blown up the manor, then that would mean that Hermione wasn’t involved. Unless she knew them. Had known them. But she would have told him and Harry, wouldn’t she?

He stood up and hesitated, looking at the boxes laid out in the room. They needed to transfer those to a safer location. Keeping them below his brothers’ shop was too dangerous. But it was the only place within range of the wireless ears. He frowned. His brothers needed to come up with a better solution, or they would be in deep trouble should the shop ever be searched.

*****

London, Greenwich, July 29th, 1996

Hermione Granger, disillusioned, looked at the two boys standing near the Cutty Sark through her binoculars. Her Human-presence-revealing Spell didn’t reveal anyone hiding nearby. Not close, at least. Of course, anyone following them would be able to observe them from outside her spell’s range. Or disguised as a tourist. Although she doubted a pureblood would fit in with the muggles. And how could have anyone followed her friends when they had apparated from Grimmauld Place?

She shook her head. She couldn’t be careless, especially not after Malfoy Manor, but if she couldn’t trust her best friends, then who else could she trust? And she trusted them more than anyone else. Including Allan and the other Resistance members.

The young witch stepped back out of sight and ended her spell before walking towards the two. Harry spotted her and nudged Ron, who was staring at the ship’s figurehead.

“Hermione!” the two said together, but she thought they were more tense than normal.

“Harry. Ron.” She stopped two yards away from them and bit her lower lip. She wanted to hug them, but she didn’t dare. What if they stopped her? They knew she had killed dozens of people. Did they hate her?

After an awkward pause, Ron pointed to the ship. “Why do they have a witch with her boobs hanging out mounted on the bow?”

Hermione snorted. “It’s because of the name. She’s a character in the poem ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, after which the ship was named.”

“And why is she half-naked?”
“That’s because in the poem, she’s wearing a cutty-sark that’s too short for her.”

“They named a ship after a witch’s undergarments?” Ron shook his head in apparent disbelief.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“That’s crazy!”

Harry laughed, Ron joined him, and Hermione smiled. For a moment, the awkwardness was gone. Then Harry grew serious again. “Did you, you know…” He trailed off. He hadn’t asked through the mirror either.

Hermione nodded. “We wanted to kill the Dark Lord.”

“He’s not dead, though,” Harry said.

“Did you have a vision?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not a real vision. My Occlumency shields worked. But I felt his anger yesterday.”

Hermione closed her eyes, cursing under her breath. She had still held a faint hope that they had killed Voldemort. That would have made the deaths worth it. She opened her eyes again and saw that her friends were staring at her. “Do you hate me for what I have done?”

“No, no!” Harry said. Ron shook his head. She didn’t know if they were lying though. Or if they didn’t know. She didn’t know if she hated herself for what she had done, after all.

“They were Death Eaters and their friends,” Harry added. “Sirius said they deserved to be killed.”

Sirius would think so, Hermione knew. She had talked with the wizard often enough.

“Dad’s not happy. Says this will lead to more violence. And more hatred against muggleborns,” Ron said.

Hermione scoffed. “I doubt that. It might make them speed up their plans for the muggleborns, though. But more hatred? They already hate us. They were already killing us, when they could get away with it.” They had tried to kill her as well.

“That’s what Sirius said as well,” Harry said.

Ron looked like he wanted to say something, but he took a deep breath instead. After a pause, he pulled out a scroll. “Anyway… our spying operation gave us more information. Sorry.”

He handed her the scroll, and she skimmed through it, then gasped. “Dear Lord…” She had killed two prisoners of Malfoy! She looked at the two.

“You didn’t know,” Harry was quick to say. “And Malfoy probably would have tortured them.” That sounded like another line from Sirius. But Hermione wouldn’t argue against it. She felt guilty enough already.

Ron nodded. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was my decision, though. I decided that the deaths were worth it, that the chance of killing the Dark Lord and his inner circle was worth killing their families as well.”
There. She had said it. She forced herself to meet their eyes. If she was honest with herself, then she’d do it again. She didn’t say that, though.

Harry nodded. “It might teach the other purebloods not to join him, or support him.”

“Or it might make them fight you. For revenge,” Ron said. “That’s what Dad thinks will happen.” He must have seen her flinch, since he quickly added: “You didn’t know the Dark Lord would survive though. If he had died...”

He hadn’t, though. She still nodded. It wasn’t an absolution, but she’d settle for this... understanding by her friends. Even if she still felt a tremendous amount of guilt for her actions.

“Thank you.”

When she moved to hug them, they hugged her back.

*****

London, East End, July 29th, 1996

“I’m sorry to bring bad news, but I just received confirmation that the Dark Lord is still alive.”

Hermione Granger watched her fellow Resistance members react to her pronouncement. Allan, Dean and Seamus showed their anger openly. Sally-Anne, Justin, Mary, Martin and Tania seemed to be shocked, sad, maybe even sick - Sally-Anne was wiping some tears from her eyes and Tania looked rather green. And John ... John was mumbling something that sounded like a prayer under his breath. Or maybe Hermione was just projecting. She wasn’t socially inept, not any more, but she wasn’t exactly an expert at reading others, and she had felt all of those emotions, ever since she had seen Malfoy Manor crumble and burn.

“It may be a small consolation, but we took a chance, and tried our best.” She forced a smile. “I’ve also found out that there were two prisoners in the Manor. Two former muggleborn Hit-Wizards, who were allegedly captured trying to enter the manor. I think it’s very likely that they had the same goal as we had, but failed.”

“We killed muggleborns?” Sally-Anne sobbed. Mary slung an arm around her shoulders.

Before Hermione could say anything, Allan spoke up: “No. We didn’t know Malfoy and his accomplices had kidnapped them. They were going to die anyway - tortured to death by the Dark Lord and his murderers. It’s not our fault.”

Hermione thought that was a small consolation, and not a good excuse - they should have thought of that - but she nodded. They couldn’t afford to feel too guilty about this, not with everyone from the Ministry hunting them.

Allan smiled at her. “And don’t forget: We might have missed the Dark Lord, but we destroyed a lot of his followers! You all know how the purebloods treated us last year. How they tortured us. Those we killed won’t be able to do that to anyone else any more.”

Sally-Anne flinched again. But Dean and Seamus nodded.

“Yes. We dealt the Death Eaters a blow they won’t recover from any time soon!” the Irish Gryffindor said.

Hermione nodded. “Draco Malfoy survived, and he’ll inherit his father’s gold and position. He’ll not
be even nearly as skilled at using either.”

“Exactly. The Death Eaters lost their most experienced politicians,” Justin said. “Maybe Dumbledore will be able to push through his proposals now.”

Hermione shook her head. “There will be a lot of new members in the Wizengamot. Members he doesn’t know that well. I don’t think anyone can tell how they’ll react.” She didn’t mention that Ron’s father expected the Wizengamot to be radicalised.

“Sod the lot of them! If they continue to emulate Hitler, then we’ll blow up the Ministry!” Seamus said.

Hermione wasn’t the only one who gasped. “And kill everyone inside, even our friends and allies?”

“What allies?” Allan asked. “What did they do for us while the purebloods started their campaign to sacrifice us to the Death Eaters?”

“Where do you think I got this information?” Hermione asked, then regretted it at once.

“From Harry?” Colin piped up.

Allan scoffed. “Harry Potter doesn’t have access to that kind of information. It has to be a Ministry employee.” He looked at her. “But if they’re a pureblood, they might try to manipulate you. You can’t trust them.”

“I know what I’m doing.” She stared at him until he nodded.

“In any case, we need to plan our next action,” Allan said. “While the Ministry and the Death Eaters are in disarray. We need another target, to keep them off-balance.”

“Another Death Eater manor,” Seamus said at once. “Or the Ministry if they don’t repeal those laws!”

“We’d have to find one, first. Most of the known Death Eaters were at the Malfoys’ ball. And we’re not going to attack random purebloods; we’re better than that.” Hermione looked around to drive that point home. “Further, the Aurors will be out in force, hunting us,” she pointed out. “And we’re not ready. We only struck at the Malfoys because there was a chance to kill the Dark Lord. We need more training.”

“We did well enough,” Dean countered.

“We were lucky as well. Unlike those two muggleborns,” she said. “But you’re overlooking something: Other muggleborns are fighting as well. We need to find a way to contact them. Recruit them, or at least coordinate with them.”

Allan nodded. “Our attack on Malfoy Manor shows that we are to be taken seriously. That should help with recruiting more people.”

“They’ll be hiding, though, and suspicious of anyone trying to find them,” Justin said.

“And trying to find them will be dangerous,” Seamus added. “Some of them could be plants, traps by the Ministry. Or they could think we are working for the Ministry.”

This was likely based on what his ‘relatives’ had told him about their experiences in the IRA, but it was a good point, Hermione knew. That was why their had their enchanted contract, to protect them
against traitors. But how many older wizards and witches would willingly agree to sign it? “We’ll proceed with caution. Try to contact those a year or two above us, through their families.”

“Allan and Tania are two years above us!” Dean said, grinning. When he saw her frown, he held his hands up. “Just kidding!”

“In the meantime, we need to train more. We can’t count on being able to sneak up on a manor like we did before. We will be ready to fight Death Eaters,” Hermione said.

“And Aurors. Though you already did that,” Allan added.

She didn’t want to be reminded of that fight, but nodded. If the Aurors were hunting them instead of hunting Death Eaters, then they would have to defend themselves.

“We can recruit those muggleborns who are not yet hiding. There are still shops in Diagon Alley that are owned by muggleborns, or at least employ them,” Martin said.

Hermione was sceptical. “I am not certain they’d want to fight.”

“They don’t see what’s coming. We need to tell them,” Allan said. “We can tell them that the Ministry’s trying to hide the fact that Malfoy had muggleborns locked up in his dungeon and was torturing them.”

“That would mean admitting that we killed them,” Hermione said. Which was hard enough to admit to herself.

“We can claim he killed them.”

Hermione bit her lips. She didn’t like to lie, but Allan had a point. Those people needed to know that they were in danger, and that no matter how law-abiding they were, the Ministry or the Death Eaters would ultimately come after them. “The first casualty when war comes, is truth,” she quoted, nodding. “We can create a leaflet, and duplicate it. It won’t be hard to charm them to spread through Diagon Alley.”

It would be good to save people, instead of killing them. But she knew she’d have to kill again. After what they had done, all of them would have to if they wanted to survive this.

*****

London, St Mungo’s, July 30th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass stared at the bodies of her parents on the table in the bowels of the hospital.

“Are you certain that those are my parents?” She hated to ask, but she had to. They didn’t look like her parents. They didn’t look like humans at all. Black, shriveled up, skeletally thin. Nothing of the two things reminded her of her family.

“Yes,” the Healer answered. “They were still wearing the rings and other jewelry you’ve already received.”

Daphne closed her eyes and took a deep breath, grateful that the Healer had cast a Bubble-Head Charm on her. And that Astoria wasn’t with her. She felt her uncle’s hand on her shoulder, consoling her. She could have stayed at home as well, Daphne knew that. Eric could have handled it. But she was the heir, she had to come. She owed it her parents.
“Please have them delivered to Greengrass Manor,” Eric Greengrass said.

“Of course, sir.”

The funeral would be in three days. It wouldn’t be a big affair - too many important people had died, too many funerals would be held at the same time. She was glad. She didn’t want more people telling her how lucky she had been to survive. More people offering their condolences while looking at her, trying to guess how she’d do as the heir. And more people trying to find out who’d she name as her proxy in the Wizengamot. Courting her favour even, for their own aims. As if her parents hadn’t left a will dealing with all of that. Her uncle Eric was her and Astoria’s guardian and proxy.

She was sick of those people. Her parents had died, had been murdered. She didn’t want to think about politics, or anything. She wanted her parents back. But no one could do that for her. Not her uncle, not the Dark Lord, not anyone else.

In the lift taking her up to the hospital’s Floo connections, she leaned against her uncle and shivered, fighting to keep her composure. She wasn’t a child any more; she couldn’t cry in public.

“You’ve been brave, Daphne. Your parents would have been proud.”

She nodded, even though she didn’t feel as if she was brave. Or lucky. She didn’t know why she had survived while so many had died. She took his hand and held it. When the doors opened and she stepped out, she didn’t show her grief.

On the way to the Floo connections they met Pansy Parkinson and her Aunt, Petra Rowle né Parkinson. Daphne realised at once that they were there for the same reason she and Eric were. She nodded at her classmate. “My condolences, Pansy.”

“Thank you. I offer you my condolences as well, Daphne.”

“Thank you.” She felt a connection to the other girl she hadn’t felt towards anyone. Both had lost their parents. And both had only survived because Draco Malfoy had been flirting with Astoria. “When will the funerals be?” she asked, impulsively.

“Two days from now.”

“If the bodies have been identified correctly,” Pansy’s aunt said, wrinkling her nose. “If the ineptitude of the Aurors has spread to the Healers, they might well have made a mistake.”

Pansy flinched, and Daphne winced. She wouldn’t have wished that attitude on anyone. Apart from the murderers of her family, of course.

“The Auror’s ineptitude?” Eric asked. Daphne ground her teeth, She didn’t want to talk, not about that, and certainly not with this horrible witch.

“They still haven’t identified the mudbloods who committed this atrocity, much less arrested them!” The witch sneered. “Even though they found two of the mudbloods responsible!”

“I didn’t hear that,” Eric said, sounding puzzled. Daphne shared the sentiment - she certainly hadn’t heard about this.

“Of course not! The Ministry is trying to cover this up, on the orders of Dumbledore. To protect his precious mudbloods!” Rowle spat.

“They should all be killed, before they murder more of us!” Pansy said through clenched teeth.
“Dear, not here,” Pansy’s aunt said, with a forced smile. She nodded to Eric and Daphne. “We have to go now. I assume we’ll be seeing each other in the Wizengamot, next week, Eric.”

“Indeed, Petra.” Eric nodded at her.

Daphne wanted to say something to Pansy, but she couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t sound stupid, and so she simply nodded as well, then followed Eric to the Floo connections. Her thoughts, though, focused on what she had learned.

Mudbloods had killed her parents. And Dumbledore was trying to protect them!

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, July 31st, 1996

A year ago, Harry Potter had thought that the first birthday he could celebrate with his godfather would be a happy occasion. All his friends from Hogwarts would attend, they’d have a big cake, lots of presents - even though he was not as obsessed as his cousin, he did like presents - and lots of fun.

He had his big cake, made by Ron’s mum, he had lots of presents, and yet the mood was rather sombre, as Sirius had put it. Even with his godfather and the Weasley twins doing their best to outdo each other. All three were currently fixing what had happened to Ginny when she had accidentally been hit with their latest spells.

“Maybe I should have followed Neville’s example, and canceled the party,” Harry muttered under his breath.

“No,” Ron said, sitting down next to him on the couch. “We’d still be feeling the same, but we wouldn’t have cake.” He handed one piece to Harry, smiling rather cynically. “You know, Neville would have liked to have a party, but his grandmother didn’t want him to be seen with us.”

“What?” Harry blinked.

Ron nodded. “Yes. We’re too close to Dumbledore, who is apparently protecting the muggleborns who blew up Malfoy Manor from ‘righteous retribution’.” He nodded towards Sirius. “Him refusing to attend the funeral of his cousin Narcissa didn’t help, or so Dad said.”

“Damn,” Harry said, then winced, then sighed.

Ron nodded. “She should be here, nagging us about our language.” He didn’t have to say who he meant.

“And so should be Seamus and Dean,” Harry said.

“What about the Chasers?” Ron asked.

“Try-outs for Angelina and Alicia. They’re in training camp.” And since all the teams of the league were owned by purebloods who had lost family at the bombing, attending his party wouldn’t help their future careers. He had told them so. “Katie’s in France.”

Ron looked around, then leaned forward, and cast a privacy spell. “If anyone asks, we were talking about girls.” He paused for a second. “Do you regret what we did?”

“Helping Hermione?” Harry sighed. “A little. I have to admit that the number of people killed in that blast was a shock. But then, I wouldn’t regret it if she had managed to blow up Voldemort with
them. And Sirius is really happy about the attack anyway.”

Ron nodded. “Dad’s not happy. Mum says she isn’t either. But I’ve seen her smile at the note of
Malfoy’s funeral. And Dad’s mostly unhappy about the consequences of the bombing, I think.”
Harry knew that the Weasley’s hadn’t forgotten or forgiven what Lucius Malfoy had done to Ginny.

“Maybe,” he said. “You know we’re accomplices.” If the Ministry learned of their involvement, it’d be Azkaban for them. If they were caught. And for Sirius as well. He had no intention of letting them
catch him or his godfather.

“I know.” Ron rolled his eyes at him. “But they won’t find out. Only Hermione knows.”

“So, we’ll keep helping her.”

“Of course.” Ron noded. “We’re her best friends.”

Harry agreed. He still wasn’t certain if what Hermione was doing was the right thing. But she was his friend, and he’d do anything for her. And he hadn’t known what Hermione would do. But now he knew, and he still was helping her. Even if he felt bad about it. So many people had died. But he hadn’t known most of them. And those he had known he didn’t miss. And Sirius, who had known more of them, was glad they were dead.

And he knew he’d feel worse if anything happened to her. Far worse.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, August 6th, 1996

“The chair recognises Madam Rowle.”

Albus Dumbledore smiled politely when Petra Rowle née Parkinson stepped up to speak for the first time as a member of the Wizengamot. The whole morning had been spent welcoming the new members replacing those killed in Malfoy Manor, but the real session was now underway. And it wasn’t going well, in his opinion.

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! We all know why I’m standing here, instead of my brother. I am my niece’s proxy, a niece orphaned by a cowardly attack like so many others.” Petra looked pointedly at Eric Greengrass, the proxy for young Daphne, Albus noticed. He didn’t know if that meant anything more than an attempt to curry favour.

“Three dozen members of the Wizengamot were murdered while they were enjoying a ball! And what is the Ministry doing in response? As my esteemed colleague before me already said: Nothing!” She took a - in Albus’s opinion - rather theatrical breath before continuing. “Nothing! The bodies of two suspects were found in the manor. They were identified. But has anything been done to arrest their accomplices? No!”

“They were prisoners in Malfoy’s dungeon!” Arlene Abbot shouted. “Do you think they could have blown up the manor from their cells?”

Petra glared at her. “Their accomplices did! And they did it even though they knew that they’d kill their fellow criminals as well!” She raised her chin. “That’s how mudbloods act - like rabid animals! We’ve seen that in the attacks on inspectors of their shops in Diagon Alley, and now we have seen just how far they are willing to go! And the Ministry is doing nothing to protect us!”

“Madam Rowle, your language is out of order,” Albus said. A year ago nobody would have dared to
use such a slur in the Wizengamot. Times had changed.

The witch glared at him. “I apologise,” she said, with a fake smile, “I was remembering my family’s death at their hands.”

Murmuring, almost all of it approving, filled the chamber.

“When will the Ministry act? When the next manor gets destroyed? When they attack our children at Hogwarts? I say: Let the Ministry hunt down those animals, and round them up before they murder even more of our families!”

Thunderous applause, and not just from the new members of the Wizengamot, filled the chamber. Albus didn’t have to look at Cornelius to see that the Minister for Magic wouldn’t be able to oppose that proposal. Fortunately, there were others.

“The chair recognises Madam Bones.”

Amelia stepped up, her expression grim. “Madam Rowle demands and says a lot, but she certainly doesn’t know a lot. We have found the bodies of two muggleborns, yes, but there is no evidence at all that links them to this attack. Our Aurors are tracking down other suspects, but this will take some time. Too many muggleborns have gone into hiding to easily find the suspects among them.”

“That they are hiding proves their guilt!” Augustus Malfoy, a distant cousin of Lucius, and proxy for Draco, shouted.

“It proves nothing,” Amelia answered. “We’ll find the suspects, and we’ll solve this case. The entire Auror Corps is hard at work. That they haven’t found the suspects should not be a surprise to anyone - or do you expect that stupid criminals could have done this?” She scoffed. “Trying to round up the law-abiding muggleborns will not help, but hinder our efforts.”

Albus saw that Cornelius was nodding, but Eric Greengrass was already raising his wand.

“The chair recognises Mister Greengrass.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot, we should not act in haste, driven by fear. But we do need to act deliberately and decisively to prevent another such attack. As we know from our past, murderers trying to sow terror in our hearts will not stop unless faced with determined force. That was the case in Grindelwald’s War, and then again in the last war.”

He didn’t call it the ‘Blood War’, Albus noticed. A bad sign, or so he feared.

“We need to be united in the face of such atrocities! We need to show those cowards that we will fight them!”

“Like we were united against the Dark Lord?” Philip Bones shouted. “Or did you already forget what he did in the last war?”

That got a bigger reaction, and supportive as well.

Eric wasn’t impressed though. “And what has he done since his return? Has he attacked us? Has he attacked anyone? Should we start a war with him while we are already at war with muggleborns who want to murder us all?” He looked at Philip. “I do not make light of your loss, but we are faced with a clear danger to us all.”

“A danger we created by trying to sacrifice the muggleborns to the Dark Lord!” Arlene yelled.
“Even that was true, it wouldn’t change the fact that they are a danger. If a werewolf threatens your family you kill it, no matter who is responsible for its curse!”

Applause interrupted Eric’s next words, and Albus knew that this session would not help Britain’s future. They were refusing to acknowledge that they had created this conflict in the first place, and would persecute the muggleborns even more. He and Amelia would be able to blunt the worst proposals, but things would get worse for the muggleborns, again. And the more radical elements of the muggleborns, such as Miss Granger and her friends, would retaliate, again.

Albus would have to try to keep them from turning this conflict into a war against the Ministry. But with each decision those frightened fools in the Wizengamot took, it would get harder to prevent an even worse escalation.

He shook his head when Eric proposed to extend the trace on the wands of minors to all muggleborns, with harsh punishments for those who failed to comply. Judging by the approving comments, it would pass into law. Sometimes he wondered if he shouldn’t simply try to protect the innocents, and let the bigoted fools reap what they had sown.

But he couldn’t. He knew just how bad a war could get. He, unlike almost everyone else in Britain, had fought in Grindelwald’s War and survived it. Compared to the horrors he had seen on the continent, the First Blood War had been a rather minor affair. More like a blood feud between a few old families and their allies. Gellert and his followers had waged total war, and the muggleborns flocking to his banner had not shied away from using anything at their disposal. Nor had their enemies.

If the fools unwittingly doing the Dark Lord’s bidding had seen the Inferi rising from the ashes of destroyed cities, forming unrelenting armies made up of women and children! Or the abominations Gellert’s followers had created using the Dark Arts, spreading plague to everyone they touched! The French had started to use Fiendfyre on anything that looked like it might hide enemies, and the amount of muggles caught and killed by such tactics...

He would do anything to spare Britain such a fate. And yet he didn’t know any more if it would be enough.

*****

London, Knockturn Alley, August 8th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle didn’t like Knockturn Alley. No Auror liked it. It was a hive of thieves and other scum, and dark creatures like hags and werewolves. Rookies and Aurors who had messed up were those who got stuck patrolling it. Which currently fit her and her partner, Martin Runcorn. On the other hand, Knockturn Alley also offered opportunities. It was home to more than its share of muggleborns, including shop owners. Shop owners who, like most of Knockturn Alley, were more than a bit on the shady side, which gave a good Auror leverage. Especially with the new legislation the Wizengamot had passed in the last year.

Michael Beckett was one of those. He ran a potions shop near the entrance to Knockturn Alley. And he had just informed them on the Floo that one of the wanted muggleborns was in his shop. Sadly, it wasn’t Granger, but at this point, any arrest of a wanted muggleborn would help Brenda get her career back on track.

She and Martin had apparated right to the mouth of the alley, and were making haste to the shop. On the way, she saw someone had stuck more of those ‘Muggleborn Resistance’ leaflets urging muggleborns to go into hiding to the walls. “Martin, cover the shop and the surroundings in Anti-
Apparition and Portkey Jinxes,” she ordered.

“Wouldn’t the shop be warded already? To dissuade thieves?” the rookie asked.

“It would be warded, but I don’t trust those wards to cover more than the shop. And I don’t want the suspect to be able to jump out of a window and apparate away, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Martin sounded hurt. Maybe she had been a bit too curt, but she didn’t want to lose another partner.

“Do we disillusion ourselves?”

“No. The door opening without anyone entering would alert him. We charge in and stun the bastard.”

She was almost at the shop now. Unfortunately, the locals had noticed her and Martin, who was casting already, and were melting away as usual when they saw red robes. If that kid was paying attention…

The window to the side alley was blown out by a Reductor Curse. Apparently, the suspect had been paying attention. Brenda sprinted forward, casting a Human-presence-revealing Spell, followed by a Repair Charm that closed the window again. A glance over her shoulder revealed that Martin was covering the front door. Good thinking. She waved at him and pointed to her, then to the back of the building. He nodded, and started for her position, where he could cover both the front and side. What a change from her last partner!

Brenda sprinted through the side alley, to the back of the building, casting a Shield Charm on the way. An Unlocking Charm opened the back door, and she disillusioned herself before entering, wand out.

Inside a dusty storage room full of old and probably useless ingredients, she heard voices.

“Hey, you can’t go through here!”

That was Beckett.

“Shut up!”

That had to be the suspect. He was trying to escape through the back. Right where she was. Brenda grinned. She heard shelves getting toppled and glass breaking. Someone was making a mess.

Then the door to the storage room was blown up. She side-stepped the splinters, and a marker appeared in the door’s place. The suspect was disillusioned as well! A quick Finite rendered him visible, but also warned him and he managed to dodge her Piercing Curse. Angry at herself, she charged through the doorway.

The suspect banished the ruins of a shelf at her, but her Shield Charm held. His own shattered when she hit it with a Reductor Curse, but he jumped back, into the main room of the shop, before she could follow up with a Stunning Spell.

“Depulso!” That was Beckett!

A crash followed Beckett’s spell, and Brenda rushed forward.

“Traitor!” That was the suspect!
She entered the room and saw that the suspect was lying crumpled up at the wall, on top of a shattered shelf. The vials on it had fortunately not been broken. He saw her, and pointed his wand at her, snarling.

“Reducto!”

She side-stepped the boy’s curse, and sent a Stunning Spell back. He slumped over.

“Did you see what he did to my shop?” Beckett asked almost hysterically. She glared at him, and he shut up.

After a quick sweep of the shop, she called Martin. “All clear in here.” While her partner came inside, she checked the suspect out. “That’s Cokes. Your namesake. Hufflepuff, sixth year.”

“See? I told you, he was wanted!” Beckett said. “I did!”

“Yes, you did,” Brenda said, already sick of the man’s drivel.

Martin didn’t react to the comment about him sharing the same name as the suspect. He was keeping an eye on the alley outside. The rookie was shaping up to be a decent partner. And with this arrest, the two of them would hopefully move back into the good graces of Scrimgeour. No one else had arrested a fugitive yet, after all.

*****

“What’s your name?” Brenda asked, an hour later in an interrogation room in the Ministry of Magic.

“Martin Fitzgerald Cokes,” Cokes said, tonelessly. A Dictaquill was noting down everything he said - standard procedure for Veritaserum interrogations.

“What do you know about the attack on Malfoy Manor?”

“That....” the boy shuddered suddenly, blinking. “What?”

“The attack on Malfoy Manor. What do you know about it?” Brenda repeated her question.

“I don’t know anything about an attack.”

Brenda sighed. There went that dream of a promotion. Though if she was honest with herself then she had to admit that she hadn’t really expected that kid to be involved in the massacre. Well, there were other questions to be asked.

“What do you know about Hermione Granger’s whereabouts?” It was not exactly standard procedure, but she really wanted to know right away if he knew anything important.

“She’s usually in class, in the library, or in the Gryffindor common room.”

What? “Where is she now?”

“I don’t know. I am not in her year.”

What was the idiot talking about? This was not making sense. “When and where did you see her the last time?”

“This morning, during breakfast in the Great Hall.”
What? Brenda stared at the boy. That was impossible… they couldn’t be hiding at Hogwarts, not without the help of the Headmaster, but… “What date is it?”


*****

“Obliviated, you say?” Scrimgeour looked doubtful.

“Yes, sir. He doesn’t remember anything past January 13th this year.” Brenda stood at attention.

The Head Auror sighed. “Someone must have obliviated him. Could it have happened in the fight?”

“No, sir. I took him down and then kept my eyes on him.” She doubted Beckett could even cast an Obliviate.

“I see. We might have a traitor in the Ministry. Probably a half-blood.”

Or one of the purebloods who loved mudbloods still, Brenda thought but didn’t say anything.

“But you saw him fight you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And he was using potentially lethal spells.”

“Yes, sir. A Reductor Curse.”

“It’s enough to take to court. Not that there will be much of a trial. A mudblood accused of trying to kill an Auror, judged by the Wizengamot? The only question is whether he gets the Kiss or the Veil.” The Head Auror snorted. “Good work, Brenda.”

She nodded. It wasn’t Granger, but it was a start.

*****

London, East End, August 10th, 1996

“They executed Martin Cokes.”

Hermione Granger stared at the communication mirror. “What?” That couldn’t… Martin had been missing for two days, and they knew he had been arrested, that was why they had moved out to another safe house, hopefully only temporarily, but...

“They executed Martin Cokes. It’s all over the front page of today’s Prophet,” Harry said. “Pushed through the Veil for the attempted murder of an Auror.”

She wiped her eyes. She couldn’t cry right now. There was too much to do.

“I’m sorry,” Harry added. He must have seen her reaction.

“It’s not your fault. How did they catch him?”

“He was caught in Beckett’s potion shop, according to what we overheard. The shop owner called the Aurors when he recognised him, and they arrested him.”

Rage replaced Hermione’s sorrow. That shop owner was a muggleborn, and had sold them out?
“Someone obliviated him though - the Auror was angry about that. Cokes didn’t remember anything that happened this year.”

Hermione was relieved. Her plan had worked - Martin must have lost all the memories since the day he had signed the scroll she had prepared. And a few days before that date, to be precise. Then she felt ashamed. One of her friends had been killed. Murdered. And she was glad her plan had worked and she was safe herself.

“I see.” They would be able to return to the old safe house, which was in better shape than the temporary one. Which would be built up to the same standard though. They couldn’t stay in the same location forever.

“Hermione…”

“Yes?”

“They executed him for attempted murder of an Auror….” Harry trailed off. She saw he was looking more worried than she had seen him in a long time.

“... and I actually killed one. I know.” She forced herself to smile. “I expected that.” She knew that she would be executed should she get arrested. After Malfoy Manor, no other sentence was possible. “They don’t care what we did, they’ll use any pretext to kill us. Either during the arrest, or afterwards.”

“Tonks didn’t say anything about that.”

“Did you ask her?”

“No. I haven’t seen her in a while either. I think she had a falling-out with Sirius.”

That didn’t surprise Hermione either. Tonks and Sirius were family, but she was an Auror, and Harry’s godfather didn’t exactly hide his opinion of the Ministry. At least in private - he controlled himself in the Wizengamot.

“Is there anything else you found out?”

He shook his head. “Sorry, that’s all.”

“Thank you.” She forced herself to smile. “I’ll have to inform the others now…”

He nodded and his image in the mirror faded.

*****

“Can I come in?”

Hermione looked up from her notes and saw Allan was standing in the door to her room. They had returned to their old safe house an hour ago, and she had retreated to her room rather than facing the other members of the Resistance while they were trying to come to terms with Martin’s death.

She nodded. “Of course.”

He stepped inside and closed the door.

“How are the others doing?” she asked, feeling more than a bit ashamed for not checking on them herself.
He sighed. “Not that well. Seamus and Dean are alright I think. The others seem to just have realised what we’re doing, and what the risks are.” He frowned. “They should have known better. Didn’t they choose to join us because they knew the purebloods want to kill us all?”

“No one wants to contemplate their own mortality,” Hermione said.

“Well, they know the stakes now. We either win this war, or we die.”

She sat up on her bed and scooted over. Allan smiled and sat down next to her. She sighed, then said: “If we kill all the Death Eaters, they’ll be hopefully so scared of us that they’ll offer us peace.” She hoped so, at least. The alternative would mean that the Ministry and the Wizengamot would rather risk death and destruction than appeasing mudbloods. And with such an enemy, there wouldn’t be any peace.

“Hopefully.” Allan didn’t sound any more convinced than she felt. “But I want them to appease us. I don’t want to go back to the status quo ante. Not after what they did to us. To Martin. We deserve more!”

He had a point, Hermione thought. After what the Ministry had done, the muggleborns needed more so they could be safe. Laws to ensure that this could never, ever be repeated.

Her friend sighed. “Damn… I should have gone with Martin. But he thought he was safe. He thought he knew that traitor.” Allan rubbed his forehead.

“He said he has been buying from the shop for years. Stuff that wasn’t exactly legal,” Hermione said and put her hand on Allan’s shoulder.

“Yes. Some of our experiments in Ravenclaw needed things we couldn’t get legally.” He chuckled. “We felt like bad boys, dealing with Knockturn Alley.”

“Ah.” Hermione didn’t know what to say. She had done similar things, but she didn’t like to talk about them. That was between her, Harry and Ron. Not something to be shared with others.”

“Did you expect we’d end up in this situation when you learned you could do magic?” Allan suddenly asked.

She shook her head. “No. I was convinced it was the best thing ever. That there was a magical world, waiting for me.” A world where she’d find others like her, make friends. A world where she could do miracles. She had done that, actually.

“It was the same for me. My parents didn’t like it - they had planned my life out already. I was to go to Harrow, then attend Cambridge.” He snorted. “All the plans they had for me went up in smoke that day McGonagall visited.”

“Theoretically, we can still attend university. We just need to study a few years to catch up,” Hermione pointed out. That was what she had told her parents, back then, so they’d accept sending her to Hogwarts. Not that they had had a choice, she knew that now. Every young wizard or witch had to attend.

Allan laughed. “Would you do that, instead of studying magic?”

“Well… maybe.” She had a few ideas that required both muggle and magical knowledge. “Did your parents accept your choice?”

“Not really. They didn’t realise that this was my life. That I’m a wizard, first and foremost. They
didn’t accept that my entire life had changed.”

“I guess having to hide because the Ministry wants to kill us all didn’t help them accept you.” Her parents certainly hadn’t taken that well, and from what she could tell, her relationship to her parents was miles ahead of Allan’s.

He shook his head. “No, it didn’t. But to be honest - I stopped caring about what they wanted, years ago. I don’t need their acceptance any more.”

“But it would be nice to have,” she said.

He nodded. “We’re a little like the children of immigrants. Torn between two worlds, and not really accepted in either.”

She thought they were far more like immigrants than ‘a little’.

He looked at her. “I’m not letting anyone take magic from me. Not my family, not all the purebloods in Britain.”

She chuckled. “They can take our wands once they pry them from our cold dead hands?”

He nodded, entirely serious. After a second, she nodded as well. He stood up, and seemed to want to say something, but he only smiled at her before leaving her room.

*****

London, Knockturn Alley, August 12th, 1996

“Shop’s still closed,” Hermione Granger said, staring at Beckett’s Potions. She was wearing the body of a pureblood witch who had left her hairs in the Leaky Cauldron, but she still had cast a privacy spell.

“He might have cut and run,” Allan said. He was polyjuiced into a rather ugly wizard.

“The shop’s still stocked. He’s probably laying low.” Or, Hermione thought, he was in a cell for trying to cash in the bounty on Martin’s head and ‘overstepping his bounds’. It would serve the traitor well, even though their vengeance would be delayed.

Allan cursed. “Checking each day while disguised will get expensive.” Polyjuice was not cheap. And it took a lot of time to brew.

“We can buy some more supplies while we’re here. In Diagon Alley.” She tried not to show how nervous she was. What if the Aurors expected them to ‘visit’ Beckett, and were waiting for them? But wouldn’t they have made certain that Beckett was there as bait? Harry and Ron hadn’t heard anything about such a plan, but the Aurors wouldn’t discuss every operation in the Thin Red Line.

“Good idea.” Allan said.

They were halfway to Diagon Alley when they heard the screams and yells. And saw the smoke rising. They exchanged a glance, and ran towards the mouth of the alley. There they saw the mob. And the burning shops.

And they understood what the mob was yelling.

“Death to mudbloods!”
Hermione’s first impulse was to charge ahead, wand out. Allan held her back though.

“We can’t rush in!” he said through clenched teeth, “There are too many.”

People were running past them, away from Diagon Alley. Scared, screaming people. She saw a witch clutch a child in her arms, waving her wand ineffectively - she must be trying to apparate, Hermione realised.

“We can’t just do nothing! We have to at least know what’s happening,” she retorted, even though she had a clear idea what was happening.

It turned out she had been wrong. What they saw when they reached Diagon Alley was far worse than what she had imagined. Several shops were burning - muggleborn-owned shops, so close to Knockturn Alley. And there were bodies on the street in front of the shops. Some of them far smaller than herself. Children. Dozens of wizards and witches were cheering when the roof fell in on what had been a shoes shop. She thought she saw someone move inside the flames, but she couldn’t tell for certain,

“Burn like the people you murdered!” a wizard near her shouted. She almost killed him with a spell from behind.

More smoke was rising from further up the Alley. She couldn’t recall many shops owned by muggleborns there, apart from Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, but the mob looked like it was out of control anyway. Maybe they were starting early on massacring the half-bloods, she thought.

A child’s scream behind her made her whirl around. A young girl, too young even to attend Hogwarts, was dangling in the air, held up by a Levitation Spell. A man in dark-green robes was sneering at her. “Thought you could escape, you little mudblood, huh?” he said.

Hermione snarled and hit him in the head with a Pimple Jinx.

“No… what?” Allan sounded confused. He must have expected her to use a lethal spell, Hermione thought.

The man was screaming and clutching his face, which was covered with growing sores and boils now. He dropped the girl, and Hermione barely caught her with a spell of her own, after hitting the man’s robe with a Colour-Changing Charm.

Half a dozen purebloods from the mob had turned around at hearing the screams. Before anyone could act, Hermione gathered the girl in her arms and shouted: “That mudblood tried to kidnap our child!” and pointed at the wizard she had jinxed.

The mob fell on the man with curses and hexes, cutting his protestations off. Hermione turned the girl’s head away from the sight, but kept watching until she was certain the man was dead. Allan was grinning.

“We need to leave now,” she said. “The Aurors won’t be long.”

“They’ll take their time as long as it’s only mudbloods that are dying,” he said, scoffing, but then he nodded, and the two headed down Knockturn Alley until they were out of range of the Anti-Apparition Jinxes. Behind them, Diagon Alley was still burning.

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Chapter 5: Breakout

‘The riot in Diagon Alley had profound effects on Wizarding Britain - some even argue that the effects were more important than those of the attack on Malfoy Manor. The dead Wizengamot members were quickly replaced by their heirs. The radicalisation of the Wizengamot's policy towards muggleborns that had resulted from that had been blunted by the still-influential faction of Albus Dumbledore. But the death of dozens of muggleborns as well as half-bloods and the occasional pureblood caught in a targeted shop, had far greater effects. Until then, the majority of muggleborns had been obeying the law and paying their taxes despite the persecution they suffered. After the riot, that changed irrevocably.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

London, Diagon Alley, August 12th, 1996

“A riot in Diagon Alley? Aren’t those kind of events supposed to stay in Knockturn Alley?”

“If things were as they ought to be, we’d be unemployed. Now shut up and make haste!” Brenda Brocktuckle briefly glared at Martin Runcorn as they rushed towards the Ministry’s Floo connections. For a rookie, he was getting a bit too sassy. Although he was correct - Diagon Alley was supposed to be safe. Was that another mudblood attack?

Scrimgeour was standing on the main floor, directing the Aurors to the Floo connections. “Anti-Apparition Jinxes were spotted, so expect the worst. The Leaky Cauldron is a safe location, but the rest of the Floo connections are suspect. We’re gathering at the Cauldron before moving into the Alley proper!”

Anti-Apparition Jinxes? That sounded far more like an attack than a riot. Brenda cursed under her breath as she entered the Floo connection. Maybe they’d better send for the Hit-Wizards as well, but that wasn’t her call to make.

She stepped out of the pub’s fireplace into a scene straight out of a nightmare. Screaming people filled the main room, some of them bleeding or otherwise wounded or cursed, the worst cases lying on tables, whimpering with pain. No, the worst cases were on the ground, unmoving. More people kept coming in from the Alley as red-robed Aurors all but fought their way through. “Merlin’s balls!” she shouted. “Parkinson! Apparate back to the Ministry! Get some Portkeys to evacuate the wounded!”

“Why not use the Floo?” Martin asked, staring at the sight.

“We need the Floo to come in,” she muttered, already moving towards the entrance to the Alley.

“Merlin’s arse, what’s happening?” her partner yelled as he followed her.

“I don’t know. But we’re putting a stop to it!” she yelled back, shoving an elderly witch who looked unhurt but was not moving out of the way.

“Make way!” she shouted, entering the Alley. The first thing she saw was the smoke rising above the crowd of fleeing people. “They’re burning down the Alley!” she shouted. After Malfoy Manor, they were now attacking the heart of Britain!
Then she saw the mob and heard the cries. “Death to the mudbloods!”

“That’s Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour!” Martin shouted. “But he’s a muggleborn!”

“Those are not muggleborns. Those are purebloods…” Brenda said. For a moment, she was frozen. Could it be that the mudbloods had attacked, and the purebloods were driving them back? That would explain the Anti-Apparition Jinxes.

But there was no sign of a fight. Just a mob cheering at a burning shop. And, she realised with horror, a burning body. She cast an Amplifying Charm on herself. “In the name of the Ministry, stop this and disperse at once! Anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted!”

“Mudblood lover!” someone shouted.

“Traitors!” another.

“Useless!”

For a moment, it seemed as if the mob would turn on them. Brenda saw how wands were raised, how wizards and witches started to spread out. Then more red robes appeared at her side - where had the Aurors who had arrived before her been, she wondered briefly - and the mob faltered.

“Move away! Go home!” she ordered once again. “Or we will use force!”

Martin showed initiative and cast a Reductor Curse at the ground between the mob and the Auror line. The mob started to give way, a few actually running. Brenda noticed that a couple wizards didn’t turn away at first, though, and only retreated after a few glances to each other.

She ordered the closest Aurors to start containing the blaze - there was no saving the parlour any more - and moved forward with the rest of the force. It wasn’t long until they saw the next body. She couldn’t tell if it had been a wizard or witch; dozens of curses must have hit it. Martin swallowed audibly behind her. Up ahead, more smoke was rising. Far more smoke.

She set her jaw and pushed on. They had a duty to fulfill.

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**London, Diagon Alley, August 12th, 1996**

Ron Weasley was in the basement of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, checking on the reports from the Wireless Ears, when Fred came running down the stairs and yelled: “Ron! Someone just blocked Apparition!”

For a moment, fear filled him. An Auror raid? A Death Eater attack? “We need to remove the evidence!”

“Yes.” Fred was already waving his wand, and an instant later, the Dictaquills were summoned into a box. “Collect the scrolls, and vanish them!”

Ron did as he was told while Fred turned the wireless receivers off. “They’ll look like normal wireless sets now,” his brother declared, summoning some boxes to store them in.

“Fred! Ron! Get up here! Diagon Alley’s burning!”

George’s shout made them stop covering up their spying operation and run upstairs instead. Their brother was there, near the door. “It looks bad. I can see lots of smoke.”
Ron could hear screaming before he reached the door. People were running towards them. Fleeing, he realised. He heard cries, screams, from further away.

“Merlin’s arse!” Fred swore.

“Good thing we strengthened the wards last week,” George added, in a grim tone.

“It’s coming from Knockturn Alley,” Ron said.

“The Aurors should be here before it reaches us, then,” George said.

“I’m afraid that doesn’t look likely,” Fred added in a tense tone. “There’s smoke on the other side as well.”

“That’s no riot then, that’s an attack,” George said.

“It’s going to be a massacre,” Ron whispered. A few meters away, a witch was running, dragging a child along. “Get inside!” he shouted, waving at her.

The witch ran towards him, followed by more panicked people. Fred groaned, but didn’t say anything.

“Get to the back, to the back! The Floo’s there!” George shouted at the people rushing inside. Some of them were bleeding, Ron noticed, but his attention was already on the Alley. The shouting was getting louder.

He finally understood what the mob was shouting.

“Death to mudbloods!”

Ron almost smiled, feeling relieved. It was one thing to attack Malfoy Manor, chock-full of Death Eaters. It was another to attack Diagon Alley, full of ordinary people shopping and doing errands. If Hermione and her friends had been behind this…

Of course, there was a downside to this as well, he thought grimly, pushing a limping young wizard wearing muggle clothes under his torn robe through the door when someone screamed: “Mudblood lover!”

Right afterwards, a few spells splashed against the wards protecting the shop. He snarled, and sent a Stunning Spell at the first caster. The man went down.

“The Floo’s not working!” George informed them.

Ron felt a chill run down his spine. A coordinated attack on the Alley, and the Floo Network went down? He knew what that meant. Death Eaters. Trying to kill him and his family.

“Confringo!”

His next spell struck the ground between two wizards in long robes, blasting them off their feet. One of them, protected by a Shield Charm, stood up again, sending more curses at the shop. The other didn’t.

His brothers joined in, Fred baring his teeth as he cast several borderline dark curses. George was running to the back again. “I’ve just the thing for those blighters!”

The wards were flickering - they wouldn’t hold out forever, Ron knew. And the attackers had
ducked behind what cover they had found. At least most of the mob seemed to be looking for softer targets. For a moment he wondered if this was how his uncles had felt when Death Eaters had come for them in the last war. And if he’d take as many with him as they had.

Then George returned, his arms full of the twins’ special products. He threw a disc at a corner behind which a wizard was hiding, and part of the street turned into a swamp. With crocodiles. One of them lunged, and a screaming wizard was dragged into the swamp.

That drove the rest of the attackers back. Ron grinned and grabbed a Screaming Skrewt. If they could keep them off-balance, they would be able to hold out until the Aurors arrived. And if the Aurors took too long… the swamp wasn’t the most dangerous product his brothers had invented.

The screaming bug sent more fleeing, and a particularly nasty curse from Fred dealt with one of the more stubborn assailants.

Yes, Ron thought, they could win this. They would win this.

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Hogwarts, August 12th, 1996

“Please have a seat, Severus,” Albus Dumbledore said when his Potions Master entered his office.

“Thank you,” Severus said. He sat down stiffly, but Albus couldn’t see any sign of wounds, or curses. He might just be tired - it was close to midnight, after all.

“How did your meeting with the Dark Lord go?” he asked.

“As well as could be expected, given the circumstances,” the younger wizard said.

Albus raised an eyebrow.

The Potions Master sighed. “He was not happy to hear about the attack on Diagon Alley. And he demonstrated his displeasure using the people responsible as an example.”

Albus nodded. It had been rather obvious to anyone but the densest Wizengamot members that the ‘riot’ had been orchestrated. It had been far too coordinated and planned out to have happened spontaneously. Blocking Apparition, and sabotaging the Floo connections of the shops owned by muggleborns and so-called blood traitors? Everyone knew the Death Eaters were behind it.

“Who was responsible?”

“Ackerly Nott was the one who had planned it.”

That was a surprise. Abus would have suspected a younger, brasher wizard than the brother of the late Quentin Nott. “Will there be a new vacancy in the Wizengamot then?”

Severus shook his head. “No. That he is holding his brother’s seat was what saved his life, or so I assume. But I doubt that he’ll dare to do anything without his Master’s permission any more.” He snorted. “Not even breathing. The Dark Lord was most impressive.”

Albus nodded. “I presume that Tom is planning to keep waiting while the Ministry continues to do its worst to make the muggleborns raise their wands against it?”

“Yes. Though he doesn’t like it. The attack on Malfoy Manor cost him most of his Inner Circle, and the new recruits are not yet used to following his every whim, nor are they as experienced in combat
as those he lost. He must be aware that without more wands, he cannot currently hope to win against
the Ministry, should it oppose him.” He left unsaid what both of them knew: That this was only true
as long as Albus stood with the Ministry. And that the Ministry was unlikely to oppose the Dark
Lord with all its power.

Albus nodded. Tom always had had a temper. He generally could control himself, but not always. “I
see.”

“I’m not privy to all of his plans, of course,” Severus added.

“Try to subtly influence him into taking more direct action. Tell him that I am confident that this
incident in Diagon Alley will allow me to sway the public’s opinion again, and reverse the latest
laws.”

Severus nodded. “Are you, then?”

Albus smiled ruefully. “Sadly, this tragedy will not sway that many of the Wizengamot members.”
Augusta at least had realised just who the real enemy was, as her missive to him had shown. And the
mood in the Auror Corps was shifting again, or so Nymphadora claimed. Although that the Aurors
had been attacked by both pureblood rioters and some muggleborns defending their shops had
lessened the effect by some degree. “But if Tom thinks it will, then he might do something rash that
will ensure a change of policy.” It had to.

Severus nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

Albus knew he would. And he fervently hoped that the young wizard would succeed. If an overt
action by the Dark Lord didn’t change the minds of the majority, then Albus wouldn’t be left with
many legal options any more. There were alternatives, of course. But he had learned decades ago, to
his immense chagrin, that those kind of measures led a wizard down a very dangerous path.

A path he had turned away from far too late, once already.

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London, East End, August 12th, 1996

“Mum! Mum! Where are you?”

The little girl was crying, tossing around, still affected by the nightmare that had woken her up.
Hermione Granger did her best to calm her down, holding her in her arms.

“Shhh. Shhhh. It’s OK. We’ll find your mum tomorrow,” she whispered, and hoped that she wasn’t
lying.

“Mum!” The girl sobbed.

Hermione held her and gently rocked her back and forth on her lap, until the small witch had stopped
crying, stopped trembling, and had finally fallen asleep again. She carefully laid her down in the bed
and pulled the blankets up.

Outside, she leaned against the door and took a deep breath. That had been the second time the girl
had woken up screaming that night. She hoped there wouldn’t be a third time. And she wasn’t
looking forward to her own nightmares.

“We could have dropped her off in front of the Leaky Cauldron. She’s not a muggleborn - she would
Hermione turned her head and saw Allan was standing near the stairs. The former Ravenclaw had his arms folded, and was looking almost reproachfully at her.

She frowned. Allan had been saying that before. As soon as he had realised that the girl had to be a half-blood, since a muggleborn child her age wouldn’t have been in the Alley and wouldn’t even have known about magic yet. Not that it mattered - Hermione doubted that the wizard who had been about to kill the girl had known her ancestry.

She stared at Allan. “She was in danger from those bigots, and we saved her. That makes her our responsibility. We’re not about to dump her on the streets and hope someone takes care of her.”

He held up his hands. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” He smiled, though it looked a bit forced in her opinion. “I’m just concerned about the risk to our security.”

“What risk to our security? We’ll find her family and take her to her grandparents.” They were muggles, so they’d be in the phone book. “We’ll even obliviate all knowledge of us from her memory, so she can’t be used against us.” She sighed. “Is this about the half-bloods again?”

He frowned, and she knew she was on the mark.

“I think it’s safer to focus on muggleborns. They are much less likely to betray us.”

“Like Beckett?” she asked. That traitor was the reason Hermione and Allan had been in Diagon Alley today, after all.

Allan ground his teeth, and for a moment Hermione wondered if she’d see him lose his temper for the first time. “After today, every muggleborn will know that they aren’t safe, not even if they cooperate with the Ministry.”

“The same goes for the half-bloods. Every one of them has at least one muggleborn parent,” Hermione pointed out, as she had done before. “The ‘blood traitors’ were attacked as well,” she added. Harry had told her that Ron had helped defend his brothers’ shop. If her friend had been hurt, or worse…

“The laws don’t discriminate against the half-bloods. They are not in the same position as we are. They usually have a pureblood parent as well.” Allan scoffed. “And they didn’t really show much support for us.”

“Today’s deaths will change that. That’s why we made the leaflets to distribute. Everyone, muggleborns and half-bloods and ‘blood traitors’, will know that they are not safe as long as the Ministry is controlled by bigots trying to appease the Dark Lord.” That’s why the leaflets were urging muggleborns to leave Wizarding Britain and hide in the muggle world.

Allan’s lips formed a thin line. She knew what he was about to say before he said it. “If they flee we’ll have trouble contacting them to recruit them.”

“We can contact them through their muggle families.” Some at least, Hermione thought. It would have been easier if there was a network for muggleborns - but British wizards tended to network in their Hogwarts houses, not according to blood. At least not the muggleborns.

“Not everyone. And not easily.”

“Yes. But if they stay they’ll be in danger of getting killed in the next attack.” And even if that would
“We’ve been through this before. Our first priority is to protect the other muggleborns.”

“We can’t do that if we’re too weak, too few to fight the purebloods,” Allan said.

“We’ll manage. There aren’t that many Death Eaters either - not after Malfoy Manor,” Hermione said.

“There are a lot more purebloods.”

“We’re not fighting all of the purebloods. We’re fighting the Death Eaters and their supporters.” She stared at him.

Allan stared back for a moment, then he sighed. “I’m just concerned. We need more people. And it’ll be very hard to find them if everyone is hiding by themselves.”

“I know.” She grimaced. They hadn’t made any progress with the two former Hit-Wizards. “We should have waited longer, prepared more before we did anything. But we can’t change that now, we can only move forward.” If only they had been able to stick to her schedule, follow the plans they had. “Besides, we’re not exactly ready to recruit an army anyway - we need more training. Or any new recruits will expect to take over instead of joining us.” Adults, at least - but they pretty much had recruited all muggleborn students already.

Allan nodded. On this, the whole group was in complete agreement: They wouldn’t let anyone order them around. Especially not those who had done nothing for them. No adult muggleborns had contacted them while they had still been at Hogwarts. Either they hadn’t realised what was coming, or they hadn’t thought of warning the students.

Hermione and the others had foreseen what would happen. They had taken steps to protect their families, and themselves. And they had bombed Malfoy Manor and had killed more Death Eaters and their supporters with one attack than anyone else had managed in the last war.

They had no need to join anyone else.

“We better get some sleep. We need to be up early to distribute the leaflets,” Hermione said.

“Dean and Seamus can do that,” Allan said.

Hermione hesitated, then nodded. She didn’t like to let others take risks instead of her, but Allan was right. And Hermione still had to prepare for the meeting with the mercenaries they had contacted.

“Good night.”

“Good night,” Hermione said. She entered her room and hoped she wouldn’t have the same nightmares the young girl had.

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London, Ministry of Magic, August 13th, 1996

“How could this happen? A riot, no, a massacre, in Diagon Alley?”

Cornelius was pacing again while Albus Dumbledore was calmly sitting in front of the Minister’s desk, next to Amelia.

“It happened because we have inadequate numbers for our Aurors and Hit-Wizards,” Amelia said. “I
told you we needed to recruit more, and train them harder. You didn’t listen.”

“You received increased funds,” the Minister defended himself.

“Far too late. Anyone we hired is still in training. And will be in training for months still, even if we rush them through the Academy.” Amelia adjusted her monocle and glared at Cornelius.

Albus cleared his throat. “Even if you had double the number of Aurors, they would not have been able to prevent this. This was planned. Orchestrated. The Dark Lord has started his campaign, just as I predicted.”

“What?” Cornelius stared at him.

“You have read the reports. You know that this was an organised attack. Anti-Apparition Jinxes covered the entire aAley. The Floo Network was sabotaged - selectively. Shops owned by muggleborns as well as by ‘blood traitors’ were attacked. Who else do you think was behind this but the Dark Lord?” Albus didn’t raise his voice, but Cornelius cringed under his glare. “Do you remember the last war? It is happening again. Saboteurs in the Ministry. Attacks aimed to sow terror, and make people lose their trust in the Ministry’s ability to protect them. Imperiused people forced to attack their neighbours.”

He knew he was laying it on a bit thick - he was certain a lot of the wizards and witches forming the mob had not been forced to attack muggleborns - but he had to make Cornelius see that their enemy was Voldemort, not a group of scared, desperate students.

“But… why would he do this? We haven’t attacked him!”

“He wants to rule Britain, Cornelius. I know him very well. He is not interested in compromises as anything other than a means to facilitate his goal of taking over the Ministry.”

“And he knows how weak we are. He has spies in the Ministry and sympathisers in the Wizengamot,” Amelia added.

“But why would he attack now? With our Aurors hunting the muggleborn terrorists, wouldn’t it be better for him to wait?” Cornelius asked.

The Minister was right, Albus knew. The smart thing for Voldemort was to wait until the Ministry had weakened itself further by fighting the muggleborns, which would also cause more people to join his cause. That was why Tom had been so angry with Nott. He wouldn’t admit that, of course. Instead he said: “Some of his most powerful followers have been killed in the attack on Malfoy Manor. If he does not retaliate, if he does not avenge them, then he will lose the trust of those who have joined him.” It was true, to an extent. But the Dark Lord could afford it.

“If he’s fighting the muggleborn terrorists, then we can stay back and wait until both sides are weakened.”

“That may be difficult.” Amelia handed a sheet of parchment to the Minister. “Those were found all over Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, as well as Hogsmeade.”

Cornelius read the leaflet, and his eyes widened. “This ‘Muggleborn Resistance’ is telling the muggleborns to leave Wizarding Britain? To protect themselves since the Aurors won’t lift their wands against the Death Eaters?” He looked at them. “That’s a lie! Our Aurors ended that riot!”

“They did,” Amelia said. “But by the time they had ended it, too many muggleborns had already been killed. And since the Aurors started at the upper end of the Alley, many will believe that they
were mostly concerned about protecting the pureblood businesses first.”

Albus nodded. Miss Granger had a way with words. He had no doubt that the majority of the muggleborns would believe the leaflet. And act accordingly. Today’s Prophet wouldn’t help calm their fears either.

“But… would they really leave? Abandon magic?” Cornelius was shaking his head. He couldn’t fathom that idea, Albus knew.

“They will not abandon magic. They will abandon Wizarding Britain,” Albus said. “Which will leave the Dark Lord without his targets of choice.”

“But…” Cornelius was ashen-faced now. “What will we do? We can’t stop hunting the muggleborn terrorists, the Wizengamot will never tolerate that. Not after the massacre at Malfoy Manor!”

Albus wished it wasn’t so, but the Minister was correct. It would take more atrocities by the Dark Lord to sway the opinion in the Wizengamot.

“We’ll keep hunting this ‘Resistance’, and we’ll hunt those who were behind the riot,” Amelia said. “But we need more wands.”

“I think we can persuade the Wizengamot to increase the DMLE’s budget further, after this,” Albus said, smiling politely. “How to use the increased funds would of course be up to you, Amelia.”

Hopefully, she’d focus on the real threat to Britain. Amelia was devoted to upholding the law and not susceptible to bribes. It made her a very good choice as the Head of the DMLE, but it also meant that she wouldn’t be able to let the muggleborns go.

That was a problem he’d have to tackle at a later date, though. For now, he had to focus on opposing Voldemort. Miss Granger and her friends would be fine for the time being.

Or so he hoped, at least - he had been wrong about her far too often lately. But there wasn’t much he could do but soldier on. Too much was at stake.

*****

Harwich, Essex, August 13th, 1996

“That’s my grandparents’ home! I’ve been here before!” Lydia Baker said excitedly.

Hermione Granger smiled at the girl. She had to force herself to keep smiling when she heard Lydia’s next words though.

“Maybe Mum’s there as well?”

“Maybe.” She didn’t think so. Today’s Daily Prophet had been quite clear about the number of deaths in the riot. Several dozens. Not quite as many as those who had died in the bombing of Malfoy Manor, she reminded herself, but enough to shock Britain. And Lydia had been in the middle of it, running for her life, and her mother had been ‘right behind me’, as she had told them.

“Let’s go ring the doorbell,” she said. She had checked the area, and she had Justin as a backup, even though it was very unlikely any Aurors would be watching a muggle house.

Lydia eagerly rang the doorbell. An elderly women opened. “Hello, can I… Lydia!”

“Gran!” Lydia hugged the woman’s legs. “Is Mum here?”
“No, she isn’t… did she say she was meeting you here?”

“Good afternoon, Mrs Brown,” Hermione said, extending her hand.

Lydia’s grandmother shook it reflexively. She was looking around, probably wondering where either her daughter or son-in-law were — and why a stranger brought her granddaughter to her. “Good afternoon, Miss…?”

Hermione kept a polite smile on her face and handed a copy of the Daily Prophet over to the woman. “There was a riot in Diagon Alley. Do you have a way to contact your daughter? When I saw Lydia, she was alone in the street, and in danger. I took her home with me when I fled myself since I didn’t see her parents anywhere.”

The woman paled, obviously understanding what Hermione was hinting at.

“There was a bad man chasing me. She hexed him good!” Lydia said. The girl’s memories had been modified. She wouldn’t remember where the Resistance was currently based, nor where exactly they had met her - it wouldn’t do to tip off an Auror that they were hunting Beckett.

“I see. I can write to her. What’s your name, Miss?”

Hermione smiled and shook her head. “I’m a muggleborn, like your daughter. You know about the troubles we’re facing?”

Mrs Brown nodded.

“We’re fighting back. We won’t let another Germany happen.”

“What happened in Germany, Gran?” Lydia wanted to know.

“Bad things, dear,” her grandmother said. “Go on and see if you can wake up your grandfather, he’s still taking a nap.”

When the little girl ran into the house, the old woman met Hermione’s eyes, and nodded. “Thank you for saving her, Miss.”

She had to have lived through the war, the witch thought. She’d understood what they were facing. Mrs Brown took a look at the Prophet, and pressed her lips together.

“They wouldn’t expect Lydia to be with you, so they will still be searching for her.” If they were still alive, Hermione silently added. “We didn’t want to let the authorities get hold of her.”

Mrs Brown nodded. “Daria told us about the Ministry’s new laws. But… she didn’t tell us that it had become like this…” She gestured at the newspaper. “You’re fighting those… purebloods?”

Hermione nodded. They were fighting the Death Eaters and bigots, not every pureblood, but, unfortunately, it was close enough.

“I wish you good luck then.”

“Thank you, Mrs Brown. Good afternoon.”

Hermione took a deep breath after turning away. The smell reminded her of the small ports at the Côte d’Azur. Where, if things were different, she’d be right now still, with her parents, enjoying the holidays. She glanced at Justin as she passed him on the street.
A short walk and an Apparition later, the two of them were back in the East End. Back in the war, she thought.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, August 13th, 1996

Harry Potter winced when he saw the burning figure on the front page of the Daily Prophet stumble and fall down on the street. Again and again. To think that the wizard who had taken the picture had watched the man die… then again, the mob had been there. Right outside the Daily Prophet’s office, if Harry had placed the background of the picture correctly. He squinted, trying to take a closer look at the figures in the mob.

“It won’t change even if you look at it a dozen times.”

The voice of his godfather interrupted him. He hadn’t noticed that Sirius had entered the drawing room.

“I was trying to see if I could recognise any of the people in that mob,” Harry said.

“Good idea.” Sirius nodded in apparent approval.

Harry shrugged. “I’m certain the DMLE did it already.” He knew from Tonks that at least some of the Aurors were competent. And a few scarily so.

“I doubt they’ll bother. The scum will claim to have been imperiused anyway, should they ever get arrested.” Sirius scoffed.

“The Prophet claims they arrested a dozen people,” Harry said, pointing at the article.

“And half of them or more will have been muggleborns who defended themselves.” His godfather sneered at the article.

“What? Why would they do that?” Harry couldn’t believe that. They only defended themselves, didn’t they?

“Because they hurt or even killed purebloods. It’s like in the last war. They only care if a pureblood gets hurt, no matter what the pureblood did.” Sirius snorted.

“Not everyone is like that,” Harry protested. “Tonks said there are a lot of good people in the DMLE.”

“And those good people will still dutifully hunt down muggleborns like Hermione. Because the law says she’s a criminal.” The wizard sat down on the armchair next to Harry, propping his feet up on the table.

Harry couldn’t say much against that. “It’s the system that’s at fault.”

“And the system is propped up by ‘good people’ following orders. As long as scum like Fudge and the Wizengamot is obeyed, it’ll never change.” Sirius summoned a bottle with an amber liquid in it from the cabinet. “The rot goes too deep.” He summoned a glass and filled it with the Firewhisky. “They didn’t even clean up the damned bigots after you blew up the Dark Lord in 1981. Instead all the Death Eaters who had a tiny bit of cunning went free, and I was chucked into Azkaban without a trial.” He slammed the shot back. “What Britain needs is a revolution!”
“Is that why you’re supporting Hermione?” Harry asked. “Do you hope she’ll not just fight the Dark Lord, but the Ministry as well?”

Sirius stared at the window for a moment. When he spoke, his tone was flat. “She won’t have a choice. The Ministry will not let a muggleborn who has done what she did go. They can’t. It would give the rest of them ‘ideas’.” He turned his head to look at Harry. “The idea that they have the same rights as everyone else. And, more importantly, the idea that if they don’t have the same rights as everyone else, that they can do something about it.”

“But if Hermione is fighting both Voldemort and the Ministry… the Resistance are less than a dozen!” They couldn’t win that war. Harry shook his head.

“They’re less than a dozen now, but I bet that what they did already inspired more,” Sirius said. “They know they can fight now. And they don’t have much left to lose. Not after this.” He pointed at the newspaper. Then he closed his eyes, sighing. “Merlin, I wish Lily could see this. She had predicted that unless the system changed, it’d end like this.”

“But Dad did?” Harry leaned forward. Sirius was the only one who told him about this side of his mother. Everyone else only talked about how talented, pretty and brave she had been.

“Oh, yes! She knew just how many traitors were in the Ministry. We all did. That was why we had joined Dumbledore, after all. To fight without worrying about being cursed in the back. Of course, no one thought Wormtail would betray us…” He closed his eyes, muttering a curse under his breath.

Harry knew that unless he distracted his godfather, Sirius would go on about Pettigrew for a while, and drink even more. He quickly said: “But Dumbledore isn’t fighting now.”

“But he will. Just like in the last war,” Sirius said. “I just hope that this time, he’ll not stop with the Death Eaters.”

Sirius’s smile reminded Harry very much of Padfoot baring his teeth.

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**London, Diagon Alley, August 13th, 1996**

“We really need to find a better place for them,” Ron Weasley said, pointing at the silence-charmed boxes that he and Harry had just returned to their old spot.

“Your brothers haven’t yet enlarged the range of their ears,” his best friend said. “At least it’s not suspicious to visit them each day.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ron said, “you’re not the one faking a part-time job.” Which, in his case, included actually working - the twins had insisted that this would help covering up his real activity. At Harry’s confused expression, he added: “I’m officially a product tester.”

“But… oh.”

Ron nodded. “That kind of tester. I had hoped to be spared this, after they moved out of the Burrow.”

Harry winced. “If it is any consolation, I’m living with Sirius.”

Ron snorted. He honestly doubted Sirius was even half as annoying to Harry as his brothers were to him. Or, since they were two, a quarter. The man loved his godson, after all.
He twirled his wand. “All done now. We just need to turn the Dictaquills back on.”

Soon the scrolls of parchment were growing again, covered with - mostly useless - conversations from the Auror pub. The two stood there for a bit, watching and reading.

“How was it? Fighting the rioters, I mean,” Harry suddenly asked.

Ron jerked, then took a deep breath. “I was afraid at first, but then… I couldn’t really think much when the attack started. I just cast, and threw stuff from the shop at them, until the Aurors arrived, and the Death Eaters fled.” He didn’t mention that he had first been afraid that this was an attack by Hermione’s group.

“Did you kill anyone?”

Ron sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe.” He remembered the wizard not getting up after he had cast a Blasting Curse at him. He hadn’t really paid attention to what happened to the man. Not with others sending curses at him, and at his brothers. But between the swamps, and the blast curses… he probably had killed people.

Harry looked like he guessed that. He didn’t say anything about that, though. “You said they were Death Eaters.”

“Well… I reckon anyone attacking muggleborns like that is a Death Eater, mask or no mask.”

“Sirius said they’ll claim to be imperiused.”

Ron snorted. “Probably.”

“Some might have been imperiused.”

Ron didn’t want to think that some he might have killed had been victims themselves. “Most didn’t look like they were under a spell. You are not exactly forced to scream ‘Death to Mudbloods!’ if you’re imperiused to attack them, right?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t think so. Remember the lesson in fourth year?”

Ron did. That had been embarrassing. Very embarrassing. “You resisted it.”

“Yes. But I still felt the effect. I was feeling really good. I had no worries at all. I was… happy even.”

Ron knew what he meant. He remembered the same. “Exactly. I doubt you can even hate anyone, under that effect.”

“So, those people screaming death threats were not forced.”

Ron shook his head. “No. They simply hate muggleborns. And blood traitors.”

“There was an awful lot of them, according to the Daily Prophet’s pictures.”

“Yes.” Ron conjured an armchair and sat down. “Bloody big mob.”

Harry joined him in an armchair of his own. “Sirius said that the Ministry was riddled with spies and Death Eaters.”

“That’s true. Dad said the same,” Ron said.
“And we know the Wizengamot is dominated by blood purists too.”

“Yes.” The laws they had passed, and had refused to repeal, had made that clear. They both knew that. Ron wondered where Harry was going with this.

“And now we saw that a lot of the normal wizards and witches share that attitude.”

Ah. Ron understood. “Well, they follow the examples of the Ministry, and the Dark Lord. If the Dark Lord dies, the Ministry and Wizengamot will follow Dumbledore again, and things will return to normal. Like after you defeated him for the first time.” Both his parents were hoping for this, Ron knew.

Harry winced, and Ron felt guilty for reminding his friend of the day his parents had died.

“But,” Harry said, “even if things go back to normal - would that be a good thing? We now know just how rotten things were. So many purebloods were ready to attack the muggleborns.”

“Don’t forget the half-bloods who joined them,” Ron added. “Too eager to forget their roots.” He couldn’t understand those people. One of their parents had to be a muggleborn. How could they go against their family like that?

“There aren’t too many of them around,” Harry said, slightly defensive in Ron’s opinion. His friend was a half-blood himself, after all.

“Enough to matter. And as long as things don’t change, their number will increase as many will want to suck up to the purebloods in charge.”

“You’re probably right,” his friend admitted. “But… I’m just wondering: Is the whole thing worth it if we’re just going back to how things were?”

“You mean…” Ron pointed at the boxes.

“The war.” Harry nodded. “Our parents fought one war already, and now we’re in another.” He scoffed. “Shouldn’t things be better at the end?”

“I hope so,” Ron said. He hadn’t really thought about that, so far. If the Death Eaters were gone and the war was won, wouldn’t things be OK again?

But then, who were the Death Eaters they needed to… defeat? The ones sworn to Voldemort, or the ones he had seen in the mob attacking him and his brothers?

Ron didn’t know. And he wasn’t certain if he wanted to know, right then.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, August 13th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass was torn. When she had first seen the headline of today’s Daily Prophet about dozens dying she had been afraid of another attack by the mudbloods. For a moment, she had been back at Malfoy Manor, seeing it burn, knowing her parents had been killed. Then she had read the article, and found out that the dead had been mudbloods. She had been relieved. And satisfied, somewhat. With so many mudbloods dead, she had thought, maybe those who had murdered my parents would now be suffering the same loss and pain as Astoria and I were suffering.

The small article about the missing girl, Lydia Baker, had changed that. That the girl had been a half-
blood hadn’t mattered much, but the picture of her, and of her dead mother… Daphne had realised that yes, others were suffering the same pain as she was feeling, but they were not those who had wronged her.

And yet… the mudbloods had started this. If they hadn’t murdered her parents and their friends, there wouldn’t have been a riot. All those deaths were on their heads. Heads she hoped she would see kissed by Dementors soon.

Someone knocked on her door, and she jerked. For an instant, she thought it was her mother, coming to fetch her for dinner. Then she remembered her mother was dead. Murdered. “Yes?”

“Daphne? Can I come in?” It was her uncle.

“Yes,” she said, sitting up on her bed and smoothing her black robe out.

Eric Greengrass entered. He was wearing mourning colours as well, of course. He glanced at the Daily Prophet, then sat down on her bed, next to her. “You’ve been in your room all day.”

She looked at him. Yes, she hadn’t felt like going out, or doing anything. “I’ve been doing homework.” She hadn’t done much, actually. But it was a good excuse.

He nodded. “Astoria has been in her room as well.”

Daphne felt ashamed for having forgotten about her sister in her own grief. Astoria was two years younger, and the loss of their parents had to be hurting her even worse.

“She hasn’t taken the news well,” Eric said, nodding at the newspaper.

Daphne understood. If she had been reminded of their parents’ death by this, then her sister… she stood up. “I’ll go to her!”

She didn’t know what exactly she could do, other than be with her sister, but it was better than staying in her room and doing nothing.

“Do you want me to buy your school supplies?” her uncle asked.

Daphne stopped, halfway to the door. She shook her head. “No. We’ll visit the Alley as usual.”

Their parents hadn’t died there. And it would be good to see the Alley, buy some new robes, maybe get a scoop of ice cream… she remembered that Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour had been destroyed. Another thing the mudbloods who had started this war were responsible for.

“Daphne?”

Eric must have noticed her reaction, Daphne realised. She sighed. “I just remembered that my favourite Ice Cream Parlour was destroyed.”

“Yes, Fortescue’s. I remember when it opened,” her uncle smiled faintly. “Hopefully whoever takes over will continue it.”

Daphne hoped so as well. The sooner things were back to normal, the better.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, August 14th, 1996

“Good evening, Sirius,” Albus Dumbledore said as he stepped out of the Floo connection in Sirius’s
“Good evening, Albus,” the other wizard said. He sounded a tad suspicious, or so Albus thought. The Headmaster doubted that Sirius had completely forgiven him for his failure to ensure he had a trial. Or for placing Harry with the Dursleys. But there was nothing he could do about his past mistakes, other than strive to do better in the future.

“Are Harry and Mister Weasley here?” he asked.

“You asked to talk to them,” Sirius said. “They’re in the drawing room.”

Albus nodded and followed him. The two boys were indeed there, and a bit nervous. He smiled gently at them. “Good evening, Harry, Mister Weasley.”

“Good evening, Headmaster,” they chorused.

He sat down on a chair opposite the two boys while Sirius chose the couch, placing an arm on the backrest.

“I trust you are well?”

“Fine,” Harry said.

Mister Weasley shrugged. “I’m doing alright.”

Both seemed nervous, or maybe even a bit guilty - and they were not making eye contact. That sign of distrust hurt a bit, but it was not unexpected. It was only natural that Harry would look up to his godfather, and Sirius had always been opinionated. And Mister Weasley was Harry’s best friend.

He decided to skip further smalltalk and cleared his throat. “You might be wondering about the reason for my visit.”

They nodded.

“I need your help,” he said. That caught their attention. “I need you to pass a message to your mutual friend.”

The mood in the room grew tense at once. Albus refrained from chuckling at their reaction. He held up his hand instead. “I am not spying on you. But I do think I know you two well enough to dismiss the possibility of you cutting off your best friend. I do not need to know how you keep in contact. All I need you to do is pass a message to her.” For now, at least.

The two exchanged a glance. They hadn’t relaxed. Neither had Sirius.

“Well, should she make contact, I suppose we can tell her your message,” Harry said.

“Not that we know if she’ll contact us, or when, or how,” Mister Weasley added. Albus could see the influence of the twins there.

He smiled. “Please tell her that she should refrain from further actions until the Ministry is committed against Voldemort. It is imperative that the public realises who their real enemy is.” And having both the muggleborns and the Ministry fighting the Death Eaters would not only hurt Tom’s forces greatly, but would also pave the way to a future reconciliation. As long as no other group of muggleborns did something rash in the meantime.

“And when will that be?” Harry asked. “For a year, the Ministry has been appeasing Voldemort.
Why should they suddenly turn around and attack him?"

The boy was not quite accusing him of lying, but his suspicion was evident in his expression. Albus kept smiling. "The recent riot has shown just how dangerous the blood purists are. The DMLE is well aware that it was planned and orchestrated by Voldemort’s forces. And I have good reasons to suspect that Tom will launch another attack soon. It will be enough to turn the tide in the Wizengamot."

"Will they stop hunting her then?" Mister Weasley asked.

He shook his head. "I am afraid they will not. Not right away. But I think I will be able to exert some influence, and be able to make them suspend that particular case, provided there are no further incidents.” In time.

Once again the two boys exchanged glances, then they nodded. "We can pass that on, if she contacts us. But that’s all. How she will react…” Harry shrugged.

Albus smiled. He wasn’t worried. Miss Granger was a brilliant witch. She would understand that another attack would be counter-productive for her goals.

If she trusted him, at least.

“And what have you been doing, Albus? Other than trying to get the only ones who are actually doing something about Voldemort and his scum to stop?” Sirius said, glaring at him.

“I have been trying to prevent a war between the Ministry and the muggleborns,” Albus said.

“Doesn’t look like you had much success, does it? Or is it already a success that this Wizengamot hasn’t legalised hunting muggleborns for sport?” Sirius scoffed. “We’re already at war, Albus. Against the Death Eaters. And against anyone who helps them. And so far, the Ministry is helping them.”

“The Ministry doesn’t see this as a war. Not yet. Once they do, they might see certain actions in a different light.” At least the Minister might. Amelia… the very stubbornness and tenacity that made her such a good head of the DMLE meant she was not very inclined to let anything she saw as a crime slide.

“And if you fail? If the Ministry sides with Voldemort? What will you do then, Albus?” Sirius leaned forward, staring at him. Harry and Mister Weasley were silent, listening with rapt attention.

Albus met the man’s eyes. “If the Ministry sides with Voldemort I’ll do my best to destroy them.” Just as he had done in the war against Gellert.

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London, Knockturn Alley, August 15th, 1996

Hermione Granger didn’t want to be in Knockturn Alley. Even here there were too many Aurors around. And while her and Allan’s Polyjuice disguises shouldn’t look suspicious - they had taken hairs from muggles this time, so there was no chance of encountering anyone who knew their current forms - there was always the risk of an Auror simply deciding to harass them, maybe even arrest them. That sort of thing was not uncommon in the kind of country Wizarding Britain had become.

Of course, any Auror trying to vent some frustration on them would be in for a surprise. Both Allan and she had trained hard every day.
“The shop’s still closed,” Allan muttered. “He might have bolted for good, after the riot.”

“Maybe.” Hermione was not quite as disappointed as she sounded. Harry had passed on Dumbledore’s message, and while catching a muggleborn traitor wasn’t quite in the same league as blowing up Malfoy Manor, it was a far cry from doing nothing. Especially since they couldn’t simply make Beckett disappear. If they wanted to scare others off betraying them, he had to be made into an example.

Hermione hadn’t been looking forward to that, even before Dumbledore’s message. To kill someone in cold blood - execute, she told herself - who was at her mercy, unable to defend himself… she knew it was needed, and she wasn’t the kind of witch to let others do her dirty work, but still. And to think Seamus had wanted to torture the man to death! She wouldn’t let that happen! They were better than that!

Honesty compelled her to add: “I think his greed is stronger than his fear. He’ll not abandon his shop without taking everything he can carry.” That was her impression of the traitor, at least.

Allan nodded, after a moment. “We will return then.”

“We will.”

Hopefully, after the Ministry had declared war on Voldemort. If that ever happened.

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Azkaban, August 24th, 1996

Azkaban was hell on earth, in the opinion of Ivor Branberry. Cold, wet, and surrounded by inhuman monsters that sucked hope and joy out of everyone in the vicinity, and their souls as well, if given the opportunity. Not that anyone asked for his opinion - he was but a half-blood rookie Hit-Wizard who had failed to make friends with the right people during his time at Hogwarts. Which was the reason he was spending his first tour guarding Azkaban, instead of Diagon Alley or the Ministry.

At least he had but four more months to go until he could apply for a transfer. And if he didn’t mess up, he’d be off this rock for good then, and another stupid rookie would take his place. Ah… guarding the Ministry would be perfect. He would be able to go back home each day, could go out to Diagon Alley in the evening whenever he wanted, and would be improving his chances to be assigned to a security detail for someone important.

Until then he had to endure this place. He shuddered, feeling both cold and sad suddenly, despite the warm fire kept going in the fireplace. A Dementor had to have been passing right outside. It happened from time to time. He stepped closer to the fire.

He shuddered again. Another Dementor? Or the same one? Why wasn’t that monster off to torture some of the prisoners? They deserved it, after all. Well, with the exception of Sirius Black, but that had been before Ivor’s time.

“There! Go check what those idiot Dementors are doing, it’s getting cold here!”

That was Sergeant Shafiq, the current commander of the rock. Rumours had it that he had messed up as a Hit-Wizard so badly, not even his family had managed to save his career. But no one had been able or willing to tell Ivor what Shafiq had done. He was one hard and unpleasant man though, who knew exactly how to make a Hit-Wizard’s stay at Azkaban even worse.

“Yes, sir,” Ivor said. That was usually the best response to Shafiq, even if it meant stepping into the
cold and wet night outside their tower, to see what the Dementors were up to. He checked that he was wearing his amulet that told the fiends he was off-limits, something every new guard here was taught to do without thinking, and headed towards the door.

It was close to the full moon, so he didn’t need a lantern to spot the floating monsters. His wand would do. Ivor opened the door, and quickly stepped through - rookies learned not to let the cold into the tower right after they learned to never take off their amulets.

He gasped. Dozens of Dementor were surrounding the tower. No wonder it was growing so damn cold inside - he was almost freezing where he stood. “Hey! Go away, go back to the cells!” he shouted.

They didn’t react. Cursing, he rubbed his arms, then raised his wand.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Silver mist appeared near the tip of his wand. Being able to cast a Patronus had netted him a good grade at the Academy, and was probably partially responsible for his current post as well. Usually, the Dementors retreated from the spell. Not tonight though.

They gave way, but didn’t flee. It made no sense.

“Go away! Go back to the cells! Torture the prisoners, not us!” he yelled again.

What was wrong with those monsters? He was freezing here! Snarling, he took another step forward. A flash to his side made him turn his head. Right in time to see a red curse strike him.

He fell to the ground with his arms snapped to his side and his legs pressed together. Full Body-Bind Curse, he realised. Also known as the Body Freezing Spell. Given that he was in danger of literally freezing, should the Dementors not move away and no one come for him, a rather ominous thing to think about.

He caught something moving near him. Someone was walking towards him. His attacker! He couldn’t see them yet though. But… there! Black robes… could be anyone, given how many people had died recently. And… he wanted to scream when he saw the white mask. A Death Eater!

He expected to be killed any second while the Death Eater stepped closer. When the wizard knelt down next to him and ripped his amulet off, Ivor wished he had been killed.

But he couldn’t do anything, not even cry, while the Death Eater walked away and the Dementors swarmed him.

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Chapter 6: Recruiting

‘While Malfoy Manor was arguably an attack on Death Eaters, it’s widely acknowledged that the rioters in Diagon Alley were not targeting any Muggleborn Resistance members, but simply wanted to kill every muggleborn they could. However, despite some claims to the contrary, the attacks had not been spontaneous, but planned and coordinated, at least at the start. The fact that the mob specifically targeted law-abiding, economically successful muggleborns, such as the widely-known Florean Fortescue, who had managed to keep his ice cream parlour prospering despite the discrimination, as well as prominent ‘blood traitors’ strongly hints at this conclusion. Even more telling is that the entire alley had been covered by Anti-Apparition Jinxes and that the Floo connections of the targeted shops had been sabotaged, delaying a response by the Aurors as well as keeping the muggleborns from escaping. As a result of the riot, the muggleborns were driven out of Diagon Alley, and many left Wizarding Britain altogether.’
- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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“Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Ambrosius Mulciber, Horatio Travers, Hieronymus Yaxley, Tarquin Rosier and Crispin Flint.”

Albus Dumbledore looked up from the parchment he had been quoting. The Minister for Magic wasn’t meeting his eyes.

“Ten Death Eaters, Cornelius. All of them members of the Dark Lord’s inner circle. Hardened veterans of dozens of battles.” And after ten years spent in Azkaban, more than a bit unhinged and likely full of hatred towards the Ministry, if Sirius’s state was any indication.

“I know, Albus. Merlin’s beard, I know!” Cornelius finally exclaimed, yelling with frustration: “I’ve read the report myself!”

“The Dark Lord has attacked Azkaban, massacred the guards there, and freed his most fervent followers. He has made his intentions clear.” The old wizard leaned forward. “He intends to fight the Ministry.”

“He already has fought us. A dozen Hit-Wizards were killed. Kissed by Dementors in many cases, as far as the Aurors investigating the breakout can tell,” Amelia said. “As were a dozen other prisoners.”

Albus nodded at her. It was a horrible tragedy. If only those monsters had been dealt with in the past. “Indeed. We are at war with him and his forces now. He has cast the first curse.”

“First the muggleborns, and now the Dark Lord!” Cornelius rubbed his forehead. “How could this have happened?”

Albus shook his head. “You know why this has happened: Because you persecuted the muggleborns in a futile attempt to placate the Dark Lord. And now, instead of a united Britain facing a recently returned and still weak Dark Lord, we are divided among ourselves. The muggleborns have the
strongest reason to fight the Death Eaters, having the most to lose, and yet they are being hunted by the Ministry and driven into hiding.”

“They are hunted because they murdered dozens of people, Albus!” Amelia exclaimed.

Cornelius nodded eagerly. Albus hid his annoyance. “I trust you mean those suspected to have been behind the attack on Malfoy Manor, and not all muggleborns. Given recent events, it is sometimes hard to tell whether or not the Ministry knows the difference.”

“We’re not hunting law-abiding people, no matter their blood status!” Amelia said, clearly indignant at his accusation. “We’re hunting those who broke the law! Those who killed more people in one attack than the Dark Lord ever managed!”

“And why did they feel they had no choice but to strike at Death Eaters in that manner? Because the Wizengamot and the Ministry have been taking away their rights piece by piece for over a year while doing nothing against the Dark Lord - who has, if I might remind you, fought a war against Wizarding Britain in the past which was so bloody, people still fear to say his name.” Albus was not quite raising his voice, but he made it clear how strongly he felt about this.

“Are you proposing we pardon those criminals?” Amelia asked, her scowl showing just how little she thought of such a proposal.

He actually was planning to have them pardoned, though he knew it wouldn’t be possible yet. So he said: “I am proposing we repeal the laws that were passed on the Dark Lord’s behalf over the last year. We cannot fight both the muggleborns and the Death Eaters at the same time, and unlike the muggleborns, the Dark Lord has directly attacked the Ministry and killed Ministry employees. Repealing those laws would be a powerful gesture, and might very well be enough to regain some trust from the muggleborns.”

“The muggleborns have killed Aurors too!” Amelia said.

“I have looked into the incident concerning Miss Granger, Amelia. The Auror she killed had been trying to kill her first.” At least that was a reasonable assumption given the results of the investigation. “And he has been known to have views of muggleborns that would not be out of place among the Dark Lord’s followers. If she had truly meant to kill them, why did she spare the other Auror?”

“Murder is murder, Albus,” Amelia said, her jaw set.

Albus wanted to sigh. Her passion to uphold the law would be admirable, if it did not extend to unjust laws as well, and if she understood and was flexible enough to accept that in times of war, politics and strategy took priority.

“And those laws won’t be repealed. The Wizengamot won’t do it, you know that.” Cornelius shook his head. “There are just too many members who lost family in that attack.”

“There are also families who lost members in the attack on Azkaban. Or to those the Dark Lord just freed, in the last war,” Albus pointed out. Augusta would certainly do all she could to oppose the Death Eaters.

“It won’t be enough.”

Not yet, in any case. But if Tom continued on his course of action, subtly prompted by Severus, the number of Wizengamot members who had lost family to Death Eaters could only increase.
“Leaving this matter aside, it is obvious that Britain can no longer afford to send so many Aurors after the muggleborns. Not with ten of the most dangerous criminals ever now free and ready to take up wands again, and the Dark Lord openly attacking the Ministry.” He looked at Amelia. “Not with a dozen Hit-Wizards killed in the line of duty by the Dark Lord.”

“Yes, yes. Such a blatant attack cannot be ignored.” Cornelius wiped sweat from his forehead.

Amelia nodded. “The Aurors will do their best to find those fugitives, and whoever helped break them out. And the Hit-Wizards will be on alert, to respond to further attacks.”

It was less than he had hoped for, but the most important step had - finally! - been taken: The Ministry was moving against Tom. The Headmaster had considered openly defying the Ministry and Wizengamot. Declaring that Hogwarts would welcome any muggleborn, no matter their age or test results, would certainly draw a line in the sand. Alas, Cornelius was correct - the Wizengamot and the Ministry were not willing to go that far. If he did this, he might even end up pushing them into the Dark Lord’s camp.

But things would not stay like this. He just had to be a bit more patient. He could only hope that the muggleborns would be as patient.

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London, Bexley, August 27th, 1996

Walking through the park where they would meet the mercenaries, Hermione Granger felt slightly uncomfortable in the clothes she was wearing. They were just a bit too posh for her taste. And she was certain that she lacked the nonchalance that Justin, who was dressed in similarly expensive garb, was showing. Anyone would be able to tell that she usually didn’t dress up that much, or so she thought. At least their cover took this into account - she was supposed to be Justin’s girlfriend, of not quite as rich parents as his.

On the other hand, their cover didn’t take into account that she had not much experience as a girlfriend. She had dated, if she could call it that, Viktor Krum for a few months, and that was it. Not exactly a stellar resumé. Not that she had time for a boyfriend right now anyway. There was so much to do, so much to organise and learn and train. She had not even enough time for her friends, especially Harry and Ron. Allan was kind and understanding, and a fellow Resistance member, but he hadn’t spent the last few years at Hogwarts with her. Damn, she missed them! Far more than she had missed Viktor, when he had returned to Bulgaria. She wondered...

“Something wrong?” Justin asked.

“Just thinking about the breakout from Azkaban,” she answered. Justin didn’t need to know about her missing Harry and Ron. Or other speculation. He needed the Hermione who was on top of things and had all the answers anyone needed.

“Ah, yes. Quite a mess, that.”

“More so for the Ministry. They can’t afford to hunt us now, not with the Death Eaters finally revealing their true colours.” Hermione snorted, though without any humour. As if anyone with half a brain would have been fooled anyway.

“That’s good for us. On the other hand, the Dark Lord just replaced the Death Eaters he has lost.”

“He did, but those he freed were the most fanatical ones.” She had read the transcripts of their trials, once. “They tortured and killed as many purebloods as muggleborns. If they continue that, it’ll help
turning more purebloods against them.”

Justin nodded. He didn’t comment on how cynical her statement was. Maybe he didn’t care as long as purebloods died - but then, he wasn’t as bad as Seamus and Dean. Maybe he was just too focused on their upcoming meeting.

Hermione hoped he was.

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“You want to hire us to secure a ranch in Rhodesia?”

Major James Kolen sounded doubtful. Hermione resisted the urge to correct him about the name of the country. That would have been taken as a political statement they could do without. The Major - if that was his correct rank - and Sergeant Mick Boones pretty much ignored her anyway, other than briefly checking out her legs. Unlike the Magical World, the muggle world was overall still a man’s world. Especially in the mercenary scene.

“We primarily want you to train us and a few others, before any operation,” Justin said. “We’re not about to try to hold a ranch against Mugabe’s goons, but we’d like to be able to hold our own against bandits.”

“Training a bunch of kids?” Boones chuckled.

“Essentially, yes.” Justin kept his cool. Hermione had to sip from her tea to hide her frown. “We can discuss the operation once the training is done.” He took out a bag and placed it on the table. “You will be paid generously for your effort. Gold or cash, whatever you prefer.”

Kolen took the bag and opened it. The gold pieces inside made him raise his eyebrows. “We will be paid in full, even if you break off the training.”

“That is acceptable, provided you do not try to make us quit. No more than you’d try to make a recruit quit,” Justin added. Then he looked straight at the man. “We’ll know if you do.”

Boones chuckled again, clearly not taking them seriously, but Kolen shrugged. “Do you have a suitable training ground?”

Justin nodded. “Yes.”

It was an old forest area, in Northern England, owned by his family as a hunting ground. Very off the path, and hardly used any more. A few charms, and no one would hear any shots.

“How many will we be training?” the major asked.

“About a dozen. For four weeks.”

“You’ll not be soldiers after that. You’ll be able to shoot and probably not get killed at once in the bush.”

“That’s all we want,” Justin said, smiling.

It was clear that Kolen didn’t believe, or didn’t understand what they wanted, but the way he was eyeing the bag on the table showed it wouldn’t matter.

“We want to be paid half in gold, half in dollars. Half in advance. And you’ll cover any costs for the camp.”
“Then we have a deal, Major.” Justin held out his hand, and the two shook.

Hermione had a feeling those four weeks would be tough. But it would also mean the Resistance wouldn’t be doing much else, other than some recruiting, and the essential training and preparation. Dumbledore should be happy about that.

*****

**London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, August 27th, 1996**

“... and there was a task force created to hunt down the escaped Death Eaters. Dawlish leads it and Scrimgeour allocated a dozen of the most experienced Aurors to it.”

Harry Potter had already known what Tonks just told him and Sirius over dinner thanks to the Wireless Ears, but he nodded anyway. The young Auror hadn’t talked to them in a while, and not only because she was very busy. Everyone was, actually - Sirius was spending a lot of time enchanting another communication mirror, so they could keep in contact once Harry was back at Hogwarts.

“Are you in the task force?” Sirius asked, cutting his entrecôte with goblin-made silverware. “They might want a metamorphmagus despite your inexperience.”

She shook her head. “Not permanently. I’m still in the ‘assist whoever wants you’ pool of rookies.” Scowling, she added: “And since everyone can use a metamorphmagus sometimes, I’m unlikely to get assigned to a partner.”

Sirius shrugged. “It means you’ll be in a better position to spy on the Aurors.”

“Did they stop the hunt for Hermione?” Harry asked.

He saw Tonks wince. “She’s a suspect in the attack on Malfoy Manor.”

Harry had already been aware of that, but he didn’t want to let Tonks know. “I bet that for the Death Eaters among the Aurors, all muggleborns are suspects just so they can kill them when they ‘resist arrest’.”

Tonks stiffened. “I don’t know any Death Eaters among the Aurors.”

Sirius scoffed. “Or pureblood bigots. Same difference.”

“They executed Martin Cokes for ‘resisting arrest’.” Harry stared at Tonks.

“He was executed for trying to kill an Auror,” the metamorphmagus answered, not meeting his eyes. She knew as well as he did that Hermione had killed an Auror.

“What would have happened if he had let them arrest him?” Harry sneered. “He’d probably have been sent to Azkaban for not complying with the Ministry’s Nazi laws. If they hadn’t executed him just to be seen doing something. Fudge is like that.”

Tonks ground her teeth. Since her father was a muggleborn, she’d know about the Nazis. “Dumbledore’s working on repealing those laws.”

“He’s been trying to do that for a year now,” Sirius said, a bit too casually. “But our dear Wizengamot is quite fond of those laws. Too many Death Eaters among its members.”

“The Corps doesn’t like those laws either,” Tonks said.
“And yet the Aurors still enforce them.” Sirius snorted. “With great eagerness.”

“We’re hunting criminals. Mass-murderers,” Tonks bit out.

“And muggleborns,” Harry added. “What will you do if you’re sent to arrest Hermione?”

Tonks stared at him. “I’m not part of the group hunting her.”

Harry shrugged, hiding his urge to show how angry he was with some effort. “If you ever get assigned to that group, I hope you’ll remember that hunting muggleborns is what Death Eaters are doing.”

“We’re just doing our duty. It doesn’t matter if you’re a muggleborn or a pureblood, a murderer is a murderer.” Tonks sounded as if she was quoting someone. Probably Bones, Harry thought.

“Killing Death Eaters is not murder. It’s self-defence if you’re a muggleborn or a ‘blood traitor’,” Sirius said.

“That’s a matter for the DMLE to decide.”

“The same DMLE that enforces laws taken straight from Nazi Germany?” Harry scoffed. “After the war, the Nazis tried to claim that they had just been doing their duty as well.”

“Are you saying that we’re Nazis?” Tonks glared at him.

“The laws are the same, the excuses are the same… maybe you should think a bit more about what exactly your duty is,” Harry said, standing up. “I’m full. I’ll skip dessert.”

Just before he left, he heard Sirius say: “And you should ask Dumbledore just what he thinks about enforcing laws that he spends so much time trying to repeal. And you should ask yourself just where your loyalties lie.”

*****

London, Diagon Alley, August 28th, 1996

Ron Weasley wondered sometimes if his family was not, in their own way, as tradition-bound as the Old Families. The annual school supply shopping trip was one such tradition. He knew the schedule by heart now. Travelling by Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, getting gold from Gringotts, buying the books - second hand, if possible - then the other supplies, and finally robes and other clothes. They were currently in Flourish and Blotts, looking for the new Defence books.

As expected, they had a new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Unexpectedly, and unfortunately, it was Snape. That meant a new Potions Master too, but Ron was mostly concerned that one of his favourite subjects would be unbearable this year. Harry had been livid when he had heard that. They both hoped that the curse would get Snape. Or Sirius - Harry’s godfather had warned Albus that Snape would die should Harry come to harm.

On the other hand, they could learn Defence more easily on the side than Potions, especially with Hermione not coming back to Hogwarts. He ground his teeth. Hogwarts without Hermione was wrong. They were supposed to finish school together, all three of them. Maybe even get a flat together, after Hogwarts, until they had families of their own. Hermione had had plans...

“What’s wrong, Weasley? Realised you can’t afford new books?”
The hated voice of Malfoy interrupted his thoughts. The Slytherin was standing near the next shelf, wearing mourning robes. Silk, of course. Ron scoffed. He wanted to turn away, but he didn’t trust Malfoy at his back. Not that letting the scum get so close without realising he was there was a good thing either. He needed to be more aware of such threats. More vigilant.

Malfoy sneered at him. His hair was styled as usual, and his clothes impeccably clean, though he seemed to be a bit thinner. Almost haggard, even. “Not that you should bother anyway - without the mudblood, you’ll fail all subjects anyway.”

For a moment, Ron wanted to curse the git. End him and his evil family right then and there. He controlled himself though. Malfoy wasn’t worth it. At least not when there were witnesses around. Instead of attacking the scum, he sneered back. “Shouldn’t you be worried instead? With your father finally dead, you’ll be forced to deal with your troubles by yourself.”

Malfoy flinched and went pale, trembling with rage. Ron even thought he saw some tears in the git’s eyes. “You… you…”

“Yes, me.” Ron knew that he should feel guilty about his cruel barb - Malfoy had lost his parents, after all - but he didn’t care. That foul arse had started this. “Or will you be running to your aunt? You know, the one who just escaped from Azkaban?”

Malfoy was still trembling, but he managed to talk again. “Will you be visiting your mudblood when she’s in Azkaban for murdering an Auror? Oh, wait - she’ll be executed. I’ll have my proxy in the Wizengamot vote for the Kiss, too.”

“I wouldn’t worry about what you’ll never see happen,” Ron shot back.

He saw Malfoy was briefly confused, until he understood the threat. Before the snake could say anything, or start hexing - Ron was ready, his wand at his side - a voice interrupted them.

“Draco! What are you tarrying f… oh.”

That had to be Augustus Malfoy. Another Death Eater, marked or not. He stared at Ron, who stared right back. The older wizard sniffed. “You shouldn’t bother with blood traitors, Draco. They are beneath you.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Draco nodded, sneered at Ron, and the two walked away.

Ron didn’t relax until he had seen them leave the store. He had known Hogwarts wouldn’t be fun this year, but it might be even worse than he had feared. He almost wished he could leave and join Hermione’s group. But that would leave Harry alone at school.

And his mum would kill him for abandoning his education, if Hermione didn’t kill him first.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, September 1st, 1996

“I’m suffering from flashbacks to ‘Full Metal Jacket’,” Dean whispered. Hermione Granger knew what he meant - the whole Resistance was standing in a line, in a small clearing in the forest owned by Justin’s family, dressed in camouflaged fatigues from an Army Surplus shop. And Sergeant Boones was walking up and down, glaring and cursing at them. Verbally, that was.

“You’re the sorriest lot of recruits I’ve ever seen! A bunch of pampered students who have never done anything more strenuous than spending daddy’s money! And you want to be soldiers?”
“Yes, Sergeant!” Dean and Seamus yelled, with the rest joining in. Hermione didn’t quite scream as loud as the rest, but she managed not to roll her eyes. They had expected this attitude. Hermione liked to think Major Kolen was trying to scare them off their apparent wish to become soldiers and die in Africa. Allan thought that the mercenaries simply wanted to scare them into quitting so they would be paid in full without doing the full four weeks.

Boones looked surprised for a moment, then he scoffed and glared at them again, focusing on Sally-Anne. “You, there, girlie! You think you have what it takes to learn how to fight? You think you can stand the training? Grown men have been broken by this!”

Hermione thought the act was more than a bit overdone. She didn’t show it, though. After Umbridge, and after being hunted by Aurors for being muggleborns, this was not really impressive. Unsurprisingly, Sally-Anne glared right back, pushed her chin forward and yelled into the man’s face: “Yes, Sarge!”

Once more taken aback, he just grunted, and turned to Hermione. “What about you? Can you stand not sleeping in a comfy bed, wearing posh clothes, or taking a bath each day?”

“Yes, Sarge!” She didn’t yell. But she didn’t flinch either. And of course, knowing that she could actually have a daily bath if she wanted one helped. A few of them would be apparating to London each day, to check if there had been any news from the families of older muggleborns they knew from Hogwarts. Hopefully, the request to respond by e-mail would be enough to convince the potential recruits that this was not an elaborate trap by the Ministry. At least, Hermione hoped, they’d be able to communicate with the muggleborns a few years above them. The rest would follow.

“What was that? I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, Sarge!” she yelled. He grunted, then walked along their line again.

“Drop and give me twenty!” Dean whispered, and Hermione almost giggled. The sergeant glared at them, then bellowed: “Now run on the course I’ve prepared! Two laps! Make that three - if you can whisper you can run one more!”

Hermione did roll her eyes as soon as she was past the man. She could have done without this. All she wanted was to learn how to use modern weapons. But she knew better than to tell the experts how to do their job.

And when she ran after Justin through the forest, she couldn’t help but think of the irony that on the same day she was entering boot camp, Harry and Ron were returning to Hogwarts. Hopefully, they had a better time there than she had here.

*****

Hogwarts Express, September 1st, 1996

“Look, I’m sorry for not attending your party. Gran said I shouldn’t be seen with you.”

Harry Potter glared at Neville, and the other Gryffindor winced.

“But you’re now in with us in the same compartment, mate,” Ron pointed out.

“Well, yes…”

“I guess after Voldemort broke out the Lestranges, your gran decided that muggleborns are the lesser evil?” Harry knew he was being unfair, but he was frustrated and angry. Hermione should be here,
with them. Not out there, hiding. And he really wasn’t fond of Augusta Longbottom.

Neville pressed his lips together. He looked angry now as well, but didn’t say anything right then.

“Look, Neville,” Ron said, leaning forward, “it’s rather simple: Lucius Malfoy was a bloody Death Eater. Remember our second year? Malfoy tried to murder all the muggleborns using Slytherin’s monster. Ginny almost died.”

Harry saw that the youngest Weasley shivered and rubbed her arms, and smiled at her in an attempt to console the girl. She smiled back, if a bit weakly.

Ron didn’t seem to have noticed, focusing on Neville. “And once the Dark Lord came back - after murdering Cedric, and a few more people - who spoke for him? Who passed on his demands? Malfoy.”

“But they didn’t just blow up Death Eaters! They killed everyone who was at the ball! That’s how Death Eaters acted in the war!”

Harry ground his teeth. “Oh really?” he spat out. “You think they should have waited until Malfoy was alone?”

Neville swallowed, but nodded. “Yes!”

Harry scoffed. “You’re stupid! Everyone knew Malfoy was a Death Eater. That’s why your gran and you didn’t attend. Everyone who was at the ball was either a Death Eater, or a sympathiser.” He bared his teeth. “The kind of scum who made all those laws to persecute muggleborns!”

“Good riddance to them!” Ron added.

Neville stared at them. “But… they killed students like us!”

“So? The Ministry tried to kill Hermione, a student like us!” Ron answered.

“No, not like us, Ron. Did you forget? She’s a mudblood. And those are different - according to the Ministry,” Harry said, sneering. “That’s why they passed all those laws.”

“Hermione killed an Auror though.” Neville was trembling now.

“In self-defence,” Ron said,

“You don’t know that!”

“We know Hermione. You know her as well. Or you should. You spent five years with her,” Harry said. “And with Sally-Anne, Dean and Seamus. All of them are not here with us. All of them hunted by the Ministry, just because they are ‘mudbloods’.”

“Sod the Ministry!” Ron said.

“Your father works at the Ministry!” Neville was not giving up. He was a Gryffindor, Harry knew. It was too bad that he didn’t understand just how bad things were at the Ministry, and in Britain.

“I don’t know how much longer he will be working there,” Ron said. “The Ministry’s riddled with Death Eaters and their supporters. They still haven’t repealed the laws that caused all of this. They want to push the muggleborns until they fight back, so they have an excuse to kill all of them.”

“No, that’s not true!”
“Really?” Harry scoffed. “Just think about this: How would your gran have reacted if those laws had been aimed at purebloods? If you had to pass a rigged muggle studies exam to be allowed to return to Hogwarts? If you had been tortured for a year? Would you still smile and nod, and let them do to you what they want?”

“Fortescue did,” Ron added. “He’s dead now.”

Neville didn’t say anything for a while, looking at the floor. When he spoke, it was in a whisper.

“That’s what Gran’s afraid of.”

*****

Daphne Greengrass, sitting in a compartment with Astoria and Tracey, looked up when the door was opened. Draco Malfoy was standing there, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

“Hello Daphne, Astoria. Davis.” He nodded at them, almost bowing. “Can I have a word?”

Daphne gestured to the free seats. “Please.”

“Thank you.” He took a seat and his two friends closed the door, remaining outside. “Are you looking forward to Hogwarts?”

Daphne almost scoffed. Why wouldn’t she be looking forward to returning to Hogwarts, to a place where she wasn’t all the time reminded of her dead parents. “Yes, we are.” At least the Greengrasses, unlike other families, hadn’t moved out of their manors to avoid a similar fate as the Malfoys. Their manor had been unplottable ever since they had fought a feud with the Bones family in the 16th century.

Astoria shot her a glare. She hated it when Daphne spoke for both of them. But with their parents gone, Daphne had to take care of her little sister.

“It’ll be good to be back in school, instead of…” Tracey waved her hand “... out there, where Death Eaters and mudbloods roam.”

If Draco was annoyed about the comment equaling Death Eaters and mudbloods, he didn’t show it. “There are mudbloods at Hogwarts still.”

“Lower years,” Tracey said. “They’re not a problem.”

Daphne nodded. They had been taught their place last year. They wouldn’t dare attack purebloods.

“But there are blood traitors too. Among the upper years as well.” Draco folded his hands in front of him.

“What about them?” Daphne asked.

“They’re protecting the mudbloods. And if they are protecting those cowards who murdered our parents, what else will they do?” Draco hissed. “Can we be safe, knowing that next to us are people who think killing us a good thing?”

Daphne gasped. She hadn’t thought about that.

Draco smiled cynically. “And the biggest blood traitor of them is the Headmaster. He’s doing all he can to support the mudbloods. He wants them back at Hogwarts, and he almost had his way.”
Astoria leaned into Daphne. She wrapped her arm around her little sister and felt her trembling.

“Snape will protect us. He always does,” Tracey said, but Daphne could tell that her best friend wasn’t that convinced.

“He’ll try. But he can’t be everywhere. We need to protect ourselves. By any means necessary.” Draco leaned forward. “I have a plan.”

*****

Cumbria, Britain, September 1st, 1996

“This is an SG 550. It’s a very precise and very expensive and quite finicky assault rifle,” Major Kolen said, presenting the rifle. “It uses what the Swiss call the GP90, which is essentially a heavier 5.56 mm NATO cartridge.” The man frowned slightly. “It’s a very good weapon, but it requires quite the care.”

Hermione Granger knew this already - she had read up on the weapon when the group had decided which one to acquire. Seamus had wanted an AK-74 or even an AK-47, but the Swiss rifle was far more precise. The Resistance didn’t need an especially rugged rifle anyway - not with repair and cleaning spells available, if they didn’t simply duplicate the ‘master copy’ instead. The weapon was very precise out to three hundred yards, and easy to handle.

More importantly, though, was the fact that it was very easy to acquire - for a wizard. Practically every second Swiss man over twenty had one at home. There was no need to risk the black market for a Russian rifle of dubious origin and quality if you could simply confound a guy you met in a Swiss disco instead, and relieve him of the rifle at his home.

They would be getting more weapons, of course. Pistols, long range rifles, machine guns and RPGs even. Maybe SMGs and shotguns. The mercenaries could help there. But training would focus on the assault rifle, then on pistols. Seamus had plans to enchant the weapons too - or rather, he had ideas Hermione was supposed to implement.

The Major hadn’t been too happy with the choice either. He had mentioned more than once that it wasn’t exactly common in Africa. That it hadn’t been tested in battle. That it had been a compromise between the Swiss military and the Swiss target shooters. Hermione couldn’t tell him that most of his concerns didn’t matter to the Resistance, but he had to suspect something.

Then the Major demonstrated how the weapon was used, with all three firing modes. More tactical advice followed, which Hermione committed to memory. They were paying quite a lot for this training, and she was determined to get her - or rather, Sirius’s - gold’s worth.

Finally, after the physical training in the morning, and the theory, they were about to test the range they had created in advance. Hermione wasn’t quite as eager as others, but she was looking forward to learning how to shoot.

*****

“What’s your game, Miss?”

Hermione stopped cleaning her rifle on a spread out shelter half and looked at the Major. “Pardon?”

“With the money you have, you’d be training in the desert or the tropics if you were planning to head to Africa. You’re planning to fight in Europe. Or Britain.”
“We’re not going to do any fighting in Britain.” Not unless the Death Eaters forced them to.

“You’re too diverse as well. All kind of backgrounds - gutter rat, immigrant, upper class - but you’re a very tight group. It doesn’t make sense.”

“We’re school mates.” Hermione smiled at him.

He snorted. “There ain’t any school in Britain where you’d find all of you.”

She shrugged.

“You’re too bloody intense. This is personal, for all of you.” He shook his head. “Not my problem, in the end.”

He left, headed to his own tent. The mercenaries were camped a bit away from the Resistance, to give everyone some privacy. Hermione checked if either was watching, then cleaned the rifle with a spell and reassembled it.

“Isn’t that cheating?”

She frowned at the amused tone and turned her head slowly. Allan was leaning against a tree, arms folded. It looked casual, but somehow… rehearsed too. Or she was a bit too tired after all the training.

“It’s not cheating. The Major said we should train as we plan to fight.”

“That he did. Even if he planned to scare us off training with them.”

Hermione snorted. “They don’t know what we already went through. He suspects something is off, though.”

“Should I obliviate him?”

She shook her head. “No. He’s just wondering.”

“He could try to sell us out.”

“We’ll check for that, later.” They had some Veritaserum. Not exactly honourable, but they couldn’t really afford to get into trouble with the muggle authorities.

Allan walked over to her and sat down on the same shelter half she was kneeling on. “I wish I had done more sports,” he said, rubbing his legs.

“I did say we needed to be fitter.” And she’d worked out a nice training schedule too. Not many had taken her offer though.

“I didn’t think it’d be that bad. It’s so… un-Ravenclaw.”

Hermione giggled at that. “Don’t let your Quidditch team hear that.”

“They never trained as hard as Wood’s maniacs.” He looked at her. “You didn’t strike me as the athletic type either.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t have to be athletic, back then.” She was thinking of Hogwarts as part of her past. She didn’t like that. She didn’t want to think of her friends the same way.
“Things have really changed for all of us.”

“Yes.” And not for the better. Even if she was fitter now than she had ever been. If Harry and Ron could see her train… she wondered if they would notice, next time they met. Which wouldn’t happen for some time, sadly. They had to settle in at Hogwarts first.

“Thinking of Potter and Weasley? You’ve got that look in your eyes again.”

“What look?” She frowned slightly. She didn’t like to be easy to read.

“Nostalgia. Regret.”

Her frown deepened. That wasn’t what she was feeling. Not really.

He sighed. “They’re at Hogwarts now. Safe. While we’re being hunted by purebloods and learning how to fight. We’re living in different worlds.”

“For now. The war won’t last forever.”

“And once the war is over? Do you think that we’ll be able to simply forget what we did, and return to our former classmates? Do you think that they’ll be able to forget what we did?” He shook his head. “I’m not saying our friends will stop being our friends, but we’ll never be as close as we were before all this. That’s just the way it is.”

She shook her head. “I know my friends.” They had gone through so much together...

She noticed that Allan was frowning, but before she could say anything, he sighed and smiled. “I’m jealous, you know. I wouldn’t trust my pureblood friends like you do. They’re just too different.”

“Well, Harry and Ron are special.” She smiled, looking into the dark forest surrounding the camp. “They’re the best.”

Allan nodded and headed back to his tent. She sighed, then checked her watch. It was close to ‘mirror time’, as Ron called it. She entered her tent with a smile on her face.

*****

Hogwarts, September 1st, 1996

Harry Potter stood next to Ron in the Gryffindor common room. It was shortly before curfew, but none of the students, not even the first years, seemed to be heading to bed yet. Perfect.

“Everyone, listen up!”

They did. He cleared his throat. “We’re back for another year - or here for the first time,” he added. “You all know who’s missing. And why.”

Mumbling and whispering rose briefly among the assembled Gryffindors.

“You know what happened over the summer. The Dark Lord has finally shown his true face and broke his Death Eaters out of prison.”

“And the Death Eaters were blown up!” Basil, a sixth-year half-blood, yelled. He had lost his mother in the last war.

“As were a lot of innocents!” McLaggen yelled back. As most of the room stared at him, he hunched
his shoulders, then stood straight. “What? It’s true! The muggleborns blew up a ball! My cousin was there as well, and he wasn’t a Death Eater!”

“Shut up, McLaggen!” Ron yelled. “We all know what you think about muggleborns. You showed it last year!”

“Yes. Have you forgotten your lesson already?” Katie Bell scoffed.

McLaggen probably had hoped that with more than half of the Quidditch team gone, and most muggleborns not returning, he could spread his filthy views again. They had to nip that in the bud, Harry knew. He stared at the other Gryffindor. “If your cousin attended a ball thrown by Malfoy, then he wasn’t an innocent. Have you forgotten what Malfoy did? He was a Death Eater! He followed the Dark Lord! In my second year, he tried to get us all killed by the basilisk!” Several of the older students shuddered. “You don’t go to balls or parties of such scum! Not unless you share their views.”

He stepped closer to McLaggen, until he was standing right in front of him. “Is that what you want, McLaggen? Join the Dark Lord? Kill muggleborns?” Harry looked at a frightened first year, a muggleborn. “Do you want to kill her? Hm?”

McLaggen swallowed, then cringed when the little girl began to cry. Lavender quickly hugged her to calm her down. “I don’t want to kill anyone!” he said.

“Then don’t support the Dark Lord.” Harry stared at him until the other student looked away.

Ron nodded. “We’re at war now, mates. You know the Slytherins. You know Malfoy. He never hid his views. He supports the Dark Lord. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was marked already - he always followed his father, after all. He’ll try to hurt us. Or worse. Don’t go out alone. Don’t leave anyone alone. Keep an eye out for Slytherins at all times.”

“Not just Slytherins,” Harry added. “There are Death Eater sympathisers in the other houses too. Stay together, protect each other. We need to work together.”

They had failed the muggleborns last year. They wouldn’t fail them this year, Harry vowed. Trying to obey the rules hadn’t worked. This year, they’d do what they needed to keep everyone safe.

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Hogwarts, September 1st, 1996

Like any other student in her house, Daphne Greengrass stopped what she was doing - reading in her case - and paid attention when Potions master, no, Professor Snape now, entered. He was their Defence teacher this year, she reminded herself.

The wizard didn’t bother with a greeting. He simply stood there, staring at the common room, until everyone was quiet and paying attention. Which took just a moment.

“My condolences to those among you who have lost family members this summer,” he said. Daphne didn’t know if he meant it - he didn’t let any emotion show. She nodded anyway in response. Too many others did the same. The mudbloods had caused so much pain to so many families…

“I know some of you desire vengeance.”

Daphne felt as if the teacher was addressing her personally. Did he know about her talk with Malfoy? She glanced at her fellow student, but Malfoy was staring at the professor.
“Some of you might even blame fellow students for your loss, or think hurting them will make the murderers suffer.”

Daphne was now certain that their talk had been overheard. Or someone had told the teacher. But who? Who would betray them?

“Should you act on this foolish notion, you will regret it. The Headmaster has been quite clear that he will not let Hogwarts become a battleground.” He glanced at Malfoy. “Some might have dismissed his words. Some might think that things will continue as they have in the past. That they can strike at other students with clever pranks and carefully cast hexes.”

More than a few students exchanged glances. Daphne saw some smirk even.

“They are wrong. Things have changed. The staff has been informed that such antics will no longer be treated as students fooling around, no matter who started it.”

He let his gaze wander. “And I do not have to remind you that the Headmaster has made his political views very clear. The Wizengamot’s influence on Hogwarts is not what it was last year either.”

Daphne had realised that when she had seen the new teacher for Wizarding Customs. Claudius Abbot was from an Old Family, but he had let his son marry a mudblood. She slowly nodded. She had understood the warning. Snape wouldn’t risk his position to keep them out of trouble. Not against the Headmaster.

She glanced over at Draco, who was frowning, and wondered if he had understood the warning as well.

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Cumbria, Britain, September 4th, 1996

When she heard the cracking noise, Hermione Granger dropped to the muddy ground and rolled to the side, under the closest bush. She didn’t stay there, of course, but crawled away at once, under a fallen tree, until she was behind a rock. Trees didn’t offer cover. Not against heavy weapons. And a Blasting Curse would turn a tree into a cloud of deadly splinters.

No one had shot at her, but she couldn’t be certain that no one was there. The two mercenaries were tricky and wily. Bruises on her body proved that. They knew how to hide, and how to move through the woods. If she cast a Human-presence-revealing Spell, she’d be able to spot them, but… that would defeat the goal of the training. And make the Major ask more questions.

And she really wanted to beat them at their own game. It was a matter of pride now. She gripped her paintball marker and peered around the rock. Nothing. Licking her lips, she adjusted her protective goggles - she was already planning to enchant those, when they’d fight for real - and crawled forward. The ‘enemy camp’ was somewhere ahead, and as long as she was careful, and didn’t expose herself…

She heard the dull thuds right before she was hit, painfully, in the back and the leg by two paintballs.

“Gotcha, girlie.”

Looking up, she spotted the Sergeant in the tree above her.

“You need to remember to look up, girlie. Snipers like to hide in the canopies.” The mercenary raised his marker in a mocking salute, and started to climb down.
Hermione got up, rubbing her aching kidney, and made her way back to the camp. The rest of her group was already there. Dean smirked at her when he saw her limping. “Letting us draw their fire so you could sneak up on them didn’t work, hm?”

“I almost had them,” she muttered, before sitting down at the fire and grabbing the teapot.

“Of course,” Seamus said, grinning.

“How did they get you?” Justin asked.

“Sergeant was up in the tree.”

“Death from above!” Dean chuckled.

Allan nodded. “It’s a good tactic. Purebloods wouldn’t expect that.”

“But they can blow up trees easily, and they’re used to brooms,” Hermione mentioned. “Though they wouldn’t use brooms in a forest, I think.”

“They might try it - they haven’t seen Return of the Jedi,” Dean said.

“And some of them might even pull it off. Harry could do it,” Colin chimed in.

Hermione took a sip of tea and winced when the movement made her back hurt again. She’d need more ointment in the evening. Even if the major had already commented that the group was quite quick to recover from a beatdown. But even if they were willing to suffer without magical help, they had four weeks, and would have to make the most of it.

When Sally-Anne stepped out of her tent, everyone turned to look at her. She had gone to London an hour ago. The girl was smiling widely.

“You look like you have good news,” Justin said.

Sally-Anne nodded happily. “We’ve got a response from Clifton.”

“Louise Clifton, the former Hit-Wizard?” Hermione asked.

Sally-Anne nodded. “That’s the one.”

“Or someone using her name. E-mail?” Allan said.

Sally-Anne’s face fell. “Yes… but what pureblood could use e-mail?”

“A pureblood imperiusing someone,” Hermione pointed out. “But it’s unlikely. We still have to be careful.”

“I just mailed her our prepared message.”

“Good.” They would need to mail back and forth a bit, sound her out and let her build up trust. And then check thoroughly if she was compromised, before meeting her. But if they could recruit her, a former Hit-Wizard, then the Resistance would gain a very valuable member.

The arrival of the major and the sergeant interrupted further talk about recruiting.

“Alright, lads and ladies! Gather up for the debriefing. Let’s take a look at why you were killed today!”
Most of the Resistance stood up groaning, but Hermione was smiling and grabbed her notebook. While embarrassing and sometimes humiliating, those debriefings were always informative. And the lessons learned would help keep them alive.

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London, Ministry of Magic, September 5th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle rolled up the report she had just finished and tossed it into the ‘out’ basket in her office. Just in time for the daily meeting, or, as she liked to call it, the daily waste of time. “Come on, Martin. Time for a break.”

“Already?” Her partner looked, up, then grimaced. “Oh.”

The two went to Scrimgeour’s office. On the way, Malcolm Parkinson joined them. “Hey, Brenda. Still didn’t catch that mudblood bitch?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Still didn’t catch those fugitives?”

“I’m hunting veteran Death Eaters hiding with the Dark Lord, not some mudblood youths,” he said.

Brenda doubted that he was doing much to hunt the escaped prisoners. Why the Head Auror had assigned Parkinson to that case was a mystery to her. The other Auror would be much more motivated to hunt down muggleborns. “You’re not the only one doing that though,” she retorted, “while our task force has been gutted.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Parkinson said, right before he opened the door to Scrimgeour’s office.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath.

They were among the last to arrive, but the loud talk among the assembled Aurors told Brenda that Scrimgeour wasn’t there yet. “Pointless assembly,” she scoffed. “What are we, Hit-Wizards?”

Martin chuckled.

Even Parkinson snorted. “Some of the rookies don’t amount to anything more but guard duty. Could send them to the Hit-Wizards, they’d still be better than most of the grey robes.”

“Shut up, Parkinson,” Tonks said. “They lost a dozen in Azkaban.”

“So?” Parkinson sneered at the young witch. “The Wizengamot lost dozens to the mudbloods. We should focus on them, not on the Dark Lord. If those twelve dumb Hit-Wizards had fled or opened the cells, they wouldn’t have been killed. They should have known they can’t fight the Dark Lord and live.”

Brenda saw a number of Aurors nod at those words. She wasn’t quite certain how to react to that.

“That’s what you would like, huh?” Tonks stared at the veteran Auror. “You want everyone to roll over for the Dark Lord, so he can take over, hm? Are you actually doing anything to find the escaped Death Eaters?”

“I’m doing my duty, rookie!” Parkinson spat out.

“Your duty to whom?” Tonks wasn’t giving any ground. The rookie had guts, but not much sense, Brenda thought. It was hard to believe that she had been in Hufflepuff instead of Gryffindor.
“To Britain of course!” He hadn’t drawn his wand, yet.

“And whose Britain?” Tonks snarled.

“Scrimgeour’s coming,” Martin suddenly said, and the room fell silent. At least one of them had the sense to keep an eye out, Brenda thought as Parkinson and Tonks stepped away from each other.

The Head Auror entered his office. “I was delayed by Bones,” he said, then looked at the group of Aurors, narrowing his eyes. “Did anything happen I should know about?”

All shook their heads and Scrimgeour didn’t pry further. Brenda was relieved - the Aurors still took care of each other, first.

“Alright. Now, what’s the status of your cases? Dawlish?”

While Dawlish took five minutes to say that he had made no progress in the hunt for the escaped Death Eaters, Brenda silently sighed. Such a waste of time!

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Hogwarts, September 7th, 1996

The mood in the Great Hall was tense. Ron Weasley had thought the welcoming feast had been bad, but things had grown worse since. Not only was there almost no talk between the house tables, something not too unusual, but the tables themselves were divided.

Ravenclaw was split into three groups doing their best to ignore each other. Parvati had told them that the house had pretty much fragmented into those who supported the Dark Lord, those who hated the Dark Lord, and those who wanted to avoid the whole conflict and focus on studying. He saw Luna Lovegood sitting by herself, and wondered what was up with her.

Meanwhile, Hufflepuff was pretty much split into two parts, and from what Ron had heard, they were ready to go at each other, to the point that Professor Sprout had taken to sleeping in the dorm. When he had told that to Hermione over the mirror she had said that it was understandable - loyalty like a Hufflepuff’s, betrayed, made for the worst enmity.

Slytherin presented a united front, but Ron and Harry had noticed that they had internal divisions as well. Malfoy was in the thick of it, which was bad news, but expected. They were not quite as visible, though, since the house had lost almost no students, unlike the other three.

Like Gryffindor. Too many seats were empty where muggleborns should have been sitting. Especially the one next to him. Hermione’s. And the numerous empty seats allowed their trouble cases to gain some distance from the rest of the house as well, to some degree. McLaggen was sitting with Berley and Mickle, all three purebloods, of rich families.

A murmur went through the hall, and he noticed that Dumbledore was standing. The Headmaster cleared his throat, the sound amplified so everyone could hear him clearly.

“I have an announcement to make. Due to the urgent concerns about your safety, there will be no Hogsmeade weekends until further notice.”

What? Ron stared at the old wizard. No Hogsmeade weekends? But… he and Harry had been counting on meeting Hermione during those! Sneak away and apparate to London. While everyone seemed to voice their outrage, he leaned towards Harry, lowering his voice. “Does he expect an attack by the Death Eaters on Hogsmeade?”
His friend frowned. “Maybe. Or he fears that Malfoy might try something in Hogsmeade, away from the teachers.”

Ron scoffed. “If he tries something we’ll end him.” He blinked. “Do you think Dumbledore fears that?”

“Could be. We’ll need to reschedule our plans though.” Harry winced. Ron knew Hermione didn’t like it when schedules had to be adjusted.

“Not necessarily,” Ron said. They could still sneak out, and apparate away. But they’d need a way to be warned if the teachers went looking for them.

Harry nodded. “I doubt the Headmaster would be against it.”

Ron agreed - Dumbledore wanted them to stay in contact with Hermione. Maybe he’d even cover for them. If not… they had done worse than sneaking out, and could always claim they had wanted to go shopping or such. It was a good excuse. Just two boys out for a stroll, instead of two boys meeting with a wanted witch.

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**Hogwarts, September 7th, 1996**

“No Hogsmeade weekends? Is this a prison instead of a school now?”

Daphne Greengrass shook her head when she heard Zabini complain loudly in the Slytherin common room. She didn’t care enough to correct him though. Tracey on the other hand rolled her eyes and spoke up. “Merlin’s beard, Zabini! Are you so eager to leave Hogwarts and risk getting killed by mudbloods or blood traitors?”

“There are Aurors stationed there. And the mudbloods wouldn’t blow up their own,” the boy retorted.

“Do you think so?” Malfoy cut in. “They killed their own just to murder my parents.”

“Not that Aurors in Hogsmeade matter much when we have dozens of blood traitors at Hogwarts, ready to attack us!” Malfoy’s voice had grown louder, and more students were listening. And many of them were nodding in agreement. “We need to be on our guard at all times, outside our dorm!”

“Snape has warned us,” a younger Slytherin said.

“He said he wouldn’t tolerate us starting anything. He never forbade us from protecting ourselves.” Malfoy sneered. “Do you honestly think we’d be punished for defending ourselves? Not even the mudblood-loving Headmaster will go that far!”

“And even if we’re punished, I’d rather be in detention than dead!” Nott added.

Daphne agreed with that sentiment. She didn’t care much about hurting the blood traitors at school - they were not the ones who had killed her parents. She wanted the mudbloods to suffer. But she didn’t want to get hurt either. And if any of the blood traitors dared to harm Astoria…

Malfoy let his gaze wander through the room. “I’ve spoken to you before, I’ll tell you again: We
need to protect ourselves from those blood traitors. They’ve been emboldened by the mudbloods murdering our parents, and if we’re not ready to defend ourselves, we’ll suffer.”

“Big words.” Zabini scoffed. “But what do you plan to do? Hex a few Gryffindors and make their teeth grow?”

“Of course not. The time for such pranks is past. If they attack us, we’ll use real spells against them. They’ll need to learn that attacking their betters will not be tolerated!” He raised his chin. “We need to train together!”

Daphne had heard that proposal before. It sounded good, but she knew that Malfoy had planned to provoke the blood traitors so they’d attack first. He had done that numerous times in the past, after all, and it had usually worked.

But that had been in the past. Before people had been murdered. Things were different now. She had hoped that with the older mudbloods gone, Hogwarts would be safe, but it wasn’t. The blood traitors were almost as bad.

And yet, if they were not ready, then the mudblood lovers would hurt them, instead of getting hurt. They didn’t care about who they hurt either. If she wanted to protect her sister and herself, then she had no choice than to go along with Malfoy’s proposal. At least as far as the training went. If Malfoy hadn’t given up on his former plan, even after Snape’s warning, then she wanted no part in it.

Hogwarts, September 8th, 1996

“And I’m certain that Parkinson is not lifting a finger, much less his wand, to catch Death Eaters. If he’s not a Death Eater, he’ll soon be one.”

Albus Dumbledore nodded as Nymphadora finished her report. “Thank you.” He rubbed his chin. “So the influence of the Dark Lord among the Aurors has not been reduced so far.”

Nymphadora shook her head. “He has killed a dozen Hit-Wizards, but the muggleborns have killed far more people.” She grimaced. “Many of the older Aurors are firmly set against the Death Eaters, though.”

“They would be, having survived the last war.” Albus knew though that even among their ranks traitors could and would lurk.

“Headmaster?” Nymphadora sounded hesitant.

“Yes?” He looked at her over his reading glasses.

“Bones says that a murderer is a murderer, no matter their blood.” The young Auror fidgeted on her seat.

Ah. Albus nodded. “She would say that. An admirable stance, in theory.”

“In theory?” Nymphadora looked puzzled.

“Amelia is very rigid. She feels that upholding the law is her duty, but she doesn’t question the law itself.” Albus sighed. “She also does not understand that we’re at war now. She still tries to treat this conflict as a criminal case.”
“Did the Wizengamot really take the laws from Nazi Germany?” Nymphadora looked younger than she was when she asked this. Insecure and worried.

“I do not think any of the Wizengamot members paid enough attention to the muggles to even know of those laws. Many of them do not even know anything about the Second World War. They think the ‘Troubles of the Muggles’ in the first half of the 40s were the result of the war against Grindelwald spilling into the muggle world.” Albus snorted. “Their ignorance would be amusing, if not for its consequences.”

“What?” Nymphadora was gaping. “They don’t…”

“Indeed. But while they did not know about those laws, the actual laws the Wizengamot passed are quite close.” He smiled gently. “I think you already were aware of that, though.”

She nodded. “I looked it up, after Harry and Sirius… told me off.” She paused for a moment. “They said that if I helped hunt muggleborns, then I’d be no better than a Death Eater. But I swore an oath to uphold the law.”

“But when you joined, the law was different.” Albus smiled. “Would you still uphold the law if Voldemort had taken over the Ministry by force and passed new laws?”

“Of course not!” she said at once.

“Then does it matter if he is trying to do so through the Wizengamot?”

“But it’s the Wizengamot’s place to set laws, as well as judge people, and ours to enforce their laws and sentences. What if we start to ignore any law we don’t like? If everyone does it, then the entire system would collapse and there would be no justice any more!”

He could almost hear Amelia’s voice. Albus shook his head. “But there already is no justice any more. The muggleborns did not deserve to be excluded and persecuted. The system you worry about has already failed.” He would remind her that her father, muggleborn himself, was being spared so far because she was an Auror, but that might drive her to feel pressured to obey Amelia’s orders even more, to protect him.

“But if that’s so, why are you still working within it?” She wasn’t quite crying, but the young metamorphmagus was very upset.

He smiled. “I am doing that because I am trying to prevent the Ministry from committing even worse mistakes and crimes. If they continue to hound the muggleborns, far more people will be killed on all sides than if they focus on Voldemort. In politics, as in war, one often has to choose the lesser evil, and make compromises. But there are lines I will not cross. If I am forced to choose between my conscience and the law, then I will choose my conscience, even if it means I will be forced to fight the Ministry.” Though he had been hard-pressed not to act when that poor boy had been executed. If he had seen any chance to prevent that… but he hadn’t. He nodded slowly. “But there are more ways to fight something than with your wand. You know this, or you would not be spying for the Order.”

“The Order hasn’t blown up dozens of people,” she muttered

“Not in this war at least. Or rather, not yet.”

Nymphadora stared at him with wide eyes. He almost chuckled at the sight. “If I knew where the Dark Lord is hiding, or the bulk of his followers, I would arrange such a bombing myself.”
London, Greenwich, September 9th, 1996

Hermione Granger finished typing her answer to Clifton’s latest mail, then sent it and left the Internet Café. Things were progressing nicely, in her opinion, if slowly. But Clifton was in contact with Chadwick, another former Hit-Wizard, so that meant two potential recruits.

She bought a few newspapers at the newsstand, then turned into a side alley and apparated to the safe house. Allan was already waiting for her. He was smiling widely, but coldly, and before she could ask what had happened, he spoke.

“Beckett’s shop has reopened!”
Training

Chapter 7: Training

‘Opinions differ whether or not the attack on Azkaban ultimately helped the Dark Lord. He did gain the services of ten utterly loyal Death Eaters, most of them very skilled fighters, veterans of the last war. On the other hand, after spending over ten years in the worst prison of the Western World they required a lot of care to recover until they could fight. More importantly, this open aggression against the Ministry convinced the Minister that Voldemort was an enemy who could not be appeased. After Azkaban, the Ministry, however reluctantly in some parts, was at war with the Dark Lord.

Many have speculated how the war would have turned out, had the Ministry abandoned its hunt for the Muggleborn Resistance at the same time, but as has been said before, after the bombing of Malfoy Manor, that was simply impossible.’
- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, East End, September 9th, 1996

Beckett’s Potions was open again. The traitor was back. Hermione Granger had expected the man to run, but now he was reopening his shop? Did he honestly expect no retaliation? It was possible, but she didn’t think so.

“It’s probably a trap,” she said.

“Probably,” Allan agreed. “Unless Beckett’s a bigger fool than we thought, he wouldn’t have reopened his shop without some form of protection.”

“Odds are that the Aurors are using him as bait, but he might have struck a deal with some of the other residents in the Alley.” Some gangs might offer protection. Some might even try to deliver. She didn’t know enough to know what was going on in Wizarding Britain’s underworld. “We don’t know yet if it’s really him running the shop.”

“It doesn’t really matter. Anyone who helps him is an enemy. When we blow up his shop, they’ll die as well.” Allan was smiling.

“You’d have to destroy the entire building to be certain that he dies, instead of just the shop,” Hermione said. “That would cause far too much collateral damage, and anyone planning to ambush us could be hiding in another building anyway.” She’d do that, in their place. “And we don’t know if there are innocents in the house either. What if he has rented out the upper floors? Some of the families who had lost their homes in the riots would be glad for such accommodations.”

“We told them to leave Wizarding Britain.”

“Not everyone will listen. And some will be half-bloods, who don’t want to move to the muggle world.” She saw him sneer for an instant, then he was smiling thinly again.

“If we investigate too much, we’ll be at risk from getting ambushed.” Allan shook his head. “We should simply blow the shop up. If we calculate the explosives correctly, nothing else will be destroyed.”

That wouldn’t be easy, Hermione knew. Though they knew how much space the shop filled, and the
walls were plaster and wood… She stopped herself. No one knew what kind of potions and ingredients were in the shop, and how they would react to an explosion. “And what if it’s not a trap? Just someone who took the shop over?” Hermione shook her head, the ponytail she had her hair in whipping around.

“They would have changed the name, at least.” He sighed. “We can’t let this betrayal go unpunished. Martin died because of Beckett!”

“We need to know more, first.” She put her hand on his shoulder and forced herself to smile. “I’ll check with my sources.”

Allan didn’t look like he expected much to come from that, but he nodded, although rather reluctantly. She couldn’t blame him. He just knew that she was in contact with Harry and Ron, but not what they were doing. Had been doing, now that they couldn’t check with their spying operation each day any more, although Ron’s brothers had stepped in. Ultimately, Sirius was supposed to take over monitoring.

Not that a trap laid by the Ministry was likely to be discussed in a pub, even among Aurors. But Sirius had other sources. Then again, if he had heard about this, he’d have already informed Harry, and her friend would have warned her at once.

She looked at Allan, who was frowning, no, scowling. He didn’t seem to take well to training and preparing, she thought. It couldn’t be helped though - the Resistance was not ready for a war.

“Let’s head back to camp.”

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Cumbria, Britain, September 9th, 1996

“Sorry, Sirius didn’t hear anything about an ambush being planned by the Aurors,” Harry said. Hermione Granger could see that he was very worried.

She smiled. “We’re not going to go near the shop until we know more.”

Ron pushed his head into view, shoving Harry’s to the side. “Just be careful. Very careful. Dad told me they haven’t given up on hunting you, they just reduced the number of Aurors on it. More Aurors are hunting the Death Eaters though.”

“Don’t worry,” she said again. “We’re not about to do anything foolish.” She hoped so, at least. “How is Hogwarts?” She couldn’t hide the longing in her voice. For years, the school had been the place she had been the happiest. She had found her best friends there, and her calling. Not even the year suffering under Umbridge had been able to change that.

Harry grimaced. “It’s tense. Very tense. Everyone is ready to hex the others. So far, nothing has happened, but… it won’t take much.”

“Parvati said that the Ravenclaws almost started a fight among themselves over a book from the library. If Flitwick had not been present…” Ron winced.

She could understand that. Books were very important. Even more so now. She hated not being able to check with the Hogwarts library. She felt crippled.

“We’ve started training too. Defence. Snape is training the Slytherins, so we need to keep up,” Harry said. Ron mumbled something about ‘training Death Eaters’. “And his lessons… he’s not a good
teacher, as you know.”

She knew that. Snape was a very good source of information, but he wasn’t a good teacher. Hermione hadn’t had trouble learning potions, but most students needed more help.

“Potions is great though. The new professor, Slughorn, is good,” Ron said, smiling. “I got an EE in the first lesson!”

Hermione suppressed the jealousy welling up inside her. She wanted to be back at Hogwarts, learning magic, instead of learning how to wage a war and piecing together magic lessons from what books she had managed to acquire. “That’s great,” she said. “We’re training too, of course.”

“Oh, Sirius said he’ll have your second mirror ready sooner than expected. Remus is helping him now.” Harry smiled.

“Good!” Hermione smiled widely. That would help a lot. Communicating through Harry was cumbersome and prone to losing important details. She felt guilty at thinking so at once - it would also mean less contact with Harry and Ron. “So, how are the others in the house doing?” she asked, more to keep talking, than because she really wanted to know.

Harry and Ron soon had her up to date about the latest house news, though mostly focused on the Quidditch team tryouts. Ginny was a Chaser now, together with Demelza Robins - Hermione barely remembered that girl - and of course Katie Bell. Jimmy Peakes and Ritchie Coote were the Beaters, and Ron had stayed Keeper.

“McLaggen tried out for Keeper, but the berk couldn’t do much.” He grinned, then his face fell. “But we’re at a disadvantage. We’ve lost most of our best players.”

Hermione hadn’t expected ever to like talking about Quidditch, but right then, she loved hearing about normal, carefree things. Even though it tore her heart hearing about Hogwarts while she was a hunted fugitive who, she had come to realise, wouldn’t ever return to school.

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When she stepped out of her tent after chatting with her friends, she found the others sitting around the campfire. They fell silent when she approached, and Allan addressed her: “Did you find out if the shop’s reopening is a trap?”

She grabbed a sandwich from the tray next to the fire and shook her head. “No. If it’s a new development, I might hear about it in the next few days though.”

“We should just blow the damn shop up. Teach them to betray us!” Seamus said. Hermione refrained from asking who the Irish wizard meant with ‘they’.

“Yes!” Dean nodded emphatically. He wasn’t the only one.

Hermione glanced at Allan. The older former Ravenclaw was smiling. She sighed, closed her eyes for a moment to gather her thoughts, then started to speak. “We can’t just blow up a building without better information.”

“We did it to Malfoy!” Seamus said, grinning.

“Malfoy Manor was a free-standing, isolated building full of Death Eaters.” And some idiots who supported them, she added to herself, as well as two poor captured muggleborns. “Beckett’s Potions is in the middle of a street, with many other houses nearby. A poor section of the Alley, where
muggleborns and poorer half-bloods live.” And the kind of creatures not tolerated in Diagon Alley.
“If we hurt them, we harm ourselves.”

“Bollocks!” Seamus said.

She glared at him. “It’s not bollocks! We need the support of the population, of the muggleborns and half-bloods. Killing them will drive them into the arms of the Ministry. It’s one thing to kill a traitor who sold Martin out, it’s another to hurt and kill people who simply have the misfortune to live in a house nearby, or pass through at the wrong time.” She sniffed. “And you can bet that the relatives of those we killed will be more willing to sell us out next time.”

She saw Justin and Sally-Anne nod. Colin and Dennis looked like they understood that as well. Tania and Mary looked at least torn. Allan was frowning. Couldn’t he see that killing the traitor no matter the cost was wrong, not just morally, but strategically as well?

“We will need to find out if Beckett is in the shop. If he is, we’ll find a way to kidnap him or kill him that won’t alienate half the Alley. But we need to be cautious above all - if this is a trap, which is likely, then they’ll be waiting for us. We have to be smarter than them.”

She saw Dean and Seamus look at Allan, who slowly nodded. Hermione didn’t let out a relieved sigh, but she felt like it.

In a way the situation reminded her of trying to keep Harry and Ron from getting into trouble. But the stakes were now much higher, and her friends were not with her. She ate her sandwich while Justin started to talk about today’s training, and tried not to feel too lonely.

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London, Knockturn Alley, September 12th, 1996

“I’m telling you, the Grim was in the alley! Beckett’s marked by death himself!”

Zacharias Fawley was shaking his head wildly in the small flat across ‘Beckett’s Potions’. Brenda Brocktuckle ground her teeth so she wouldn’t lose her temper. She closed her eyes, and listed the ingredients for a Calming Draught in her head, then addressed her fellow Auror: “The Grim does not exist!”

Martin Runcorn coughed, which she hoped was masking his laughter, and not an attempt to correct her. Her rookie partner had grown quite cheeky lately.

“But I saw it! A giant dog, black as the darkest night, with teeth of moonlight, and red glowing eyes!” Fawley looked to his partner, Irina Selwyn, who avoided meeting his eyes - and everyone else’s. So, she hadn’t seen anything, probably because she hadn’t been awake. Sloppy, but they only needed one Auror awake and paying attention to call in the ready team. One Auror covering the front and side, and another covering the back of the building.

“You saw a stray mutt looking for food, that’s what you saw! If you had taken Care of Magical Creatures, you’d know that the Grim doesn’t exist.” Brenda shook her head.

“If a Grim existed, Hagrid would have had one as a pet,” Martin added, grinning. Cheeky indeed.

“I wasn’t the only one who saw it!” Fawley was insisting. “Two hags fled screaming, and the Grim was laughing at them.”

Brenda rolled her eyes. “It was the middle of the night, and they made the same mistake as you did.
There is no Grim.”

“There is! Mark my words: Beckett is doomed, and anyone who stays around is doomed as well!” Fawley raised his chin.

“Wouldn’t you be doomed too then? You saw it, didn’t you?” Martin asked.

Fawley gaped at him, and started to shake like a leaf. Brenda glared at her partner. “Nice work,” she whispered, “that’s one less Auror we can use on the night shift.”

The rookie had the grace to wince. He’d still take Fawley’s place this night, Brenda decided. She glared at the other Auror. “Go home, Fawley. And take Selwyn with you.”

The two apparated away, and Brenda sighed. “Merlin’s arse! How are we supposed to catch those mudbloods if we have to work with such idiots?”

“Because the task force hunting down the Death Eaters received priority?” Martin asked.

“I bet they could do with expendable curse fodder too,” Brenda muttered. When she saw his reaction, she sighed. “I’m kidding.” Lose one partner and they never let you forget it…

“Well, I have to check up on our bait. If Fawley is in such a state, then Beckett must be close to dying from fear.” She pulled out a vial of Polyjuice to disguise herself as the witch who lived in the flat, and was currently enjoying a stay in a Ministry-owned cottage up north.

“He’s a mudblood,” Martin pointed out. “He might not even know about the Grim.”

“That would be great. This operation has been too much of a pain already.” Brenda grimaced, then took a sip from the vial. She closed her eyes while her body changed.

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Beckett was nervous, Brenda saw that at once. But no more than he had been yesterday, when she had visited. Playing her role, she slowly walked over to the counter. “Hello, Mister. I need the usual.”

He recognised her disguise, and nodded. “One mild Pepper-Up Potion, right?”

“Yes, please.” Her changed voice sounded alien to her. She knew some people had no issues with using Polyjuice, and of course there was Tonks, but Brenda hated wearing another’s body. At least it was a witch’s body - she hadn’t asked Martin how he felt changing forms.

Beckett went to the shelf and grabbed a vial. “Here.”

“Thank you.” She coughed. “How are you doing? Your mother’s doing well?”

“Ah, yes. Yes,” Beckett quickly said, answering her coded question. Nothing unusual had happened then, and no suspicious people had been seen.

Brenda decided not to ask if he had seen a big dog - no need to spread rumours. She paid him for the potion and walked out. While she made her way back to the flat, she thought there were fewer of the scum around than usual. She smiled. The criminals might be scared of the Grim as well, and if they avoided the area, it would make spotting the mudbloods easier. Maybe she should put out some food, to keep the dog coming back.

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Hermione Granger had her wand ready and was wearing a wig and oversized glasses as well as a rather daring robe - for purebloods - when she apparated to Sirius’s and Harry’s home. Sirius was expecting her, and he wouldn’t be having guests over, but it was better to be prepared.

“Hello, darling. You look irresistible tonight!” Sirius greeted her with a leer. “I must say I have good taste in mistresses!”

She rolled her eyes at the older wizard greeting her. “You don’t need to keep my cover if no one else is around.”

He grinned. “But wouldn’t it be safer if I did? Just to get into the habit?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “I can guarantee you that it’s far more dangerous to try and treat me as you treat your real mistresses. For you, that is.”

He winced, though quite theatrically. “You’re scary if you try, do you know?”

She smiled. “So I’ve been told.” Several times, by Ron.

“Ah.” He grinned at her, wriggling his eyebrows even.

She didn’t take the bait. “So… you told Harry you had something for me?”

“Right!” He pulled out a small package. “Here, a way for two lovers to keep in contact even when life and circumstances cruelly keep them apart.”

“The mirror! Finally!” She opened the package to check.

“I knew you had fallen for me!” Sirius grinned and pulled out his own. “Lover,” he said, and the mirror in her hands buzzed softly.

“Lover?” She asked, and her mirror activated. She almost added ‘Seriously?’, but controlled herself.

He grinned. “It’s a good cover.”

Hermione blinked. “That’s actually true.” At least for him. “Did you charm the mirror to show a disguise for me?”

He nodded. “The new and improved Marauder’s Mirror!”

“Do I want to know how I’ll be appearing in your mirror?” She raised her eyebrow.

“Err… no?” His grin slipped a bit.

“I see.”

“In other news, I confirmed that your traitor is back in his shop. At least someone looking like him - it could be Polyjuice,” he said, suddenly serious.

She nodded. “Thank you. That helped us a great deal.”

“I don’t have to tell you that this is likely a trap by the Aurors, do I?” he asked, pulling out a stack of parchment from his pocket. “There’s been talk about some boring assignment for the Auror leading the hunt for you, some Brocktuckle. No details though.”
“We suspect a trap,” she said, taking the parchment.

“But you’ll kill him anyway.”

“We can’t let that kind of betrayal go.” She looked at him, her expression grim.

Sirius nodded. “I understand.” His lips moved into a smile that looked more like his animagus form baring his teeth. “Are you going to torture him to death?”

His expression reminded her that Sirius had been living for two years with a Kiss on Sight order hanging over him, and of his family’s reputation. And the dungeons she had seen when she had visited Harry and Ron. She shook her head. “He has to die, but I don’t think we’ll go that far.” There was a line she didn’t want to cross. And didn’t want to see her friends cross.

He nodded. “As long as he pays.”

“That he will.”

“I guess I should not visit the place again, should I?”

She shook her head. “We won’t go overboard, but the shop’s likely to be destroyed.” She sighed. “I think it’s too dangerous to try to kidnap him.”

“Good.” He smiled at her. “Just be careful.”

She snorted. “First Harry and Ron, now you. Has everyone forgotten who the reckless wizards are, and who’s the responsible witch?”

“Who’s the Most Wanted of Wizarding Britain?” He grinned. “I have some experience with that position, as you might recall.”

She chuckled. “Point taken. But trust me, I will be as cautious as possible.”

“You better be. If something happens to you…” he trailed off.

“I know.”

Harry and Ron’s reaction wouldn’t be pretty. But then, neither would hers, should anything happen to her friends.

As Beckett would soon find out.

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London, Ministry of Magic, September 13th, 1996

“Are you out of your mind, Cornelius?” Albus Dumbledore asked in a clipped tone. The Minister flinched at his question - it didn’t happen often that the Headmaster grew angry, but when he did, it was impressive as those who’d earned his ire could attest to.

“Albus…” The man swallowed. “We have to do something to protect the Ministry! The Department of Mysteries has informed me that should we be attacked with the same thing that destroyed Malfoy Manor, not even our wards would protect us!”

“It’s a bomb, Cornelius. A muggle device.” Amelia narrowed her eyes at Albus. “Some of my Aurors informed me of that a while ago, but I wanted to have it confirmed by experts.”
Meaning, Albus thought, she wanted to have a source the Wizengamot would trust confirm it. The Unspeakables had taken their time to confirm this, though - he had to thank Saul Croaker later.

“Although I believe you realised what had been used there as soon as you saw the devastation, Albus.” Amelia stared at him.

He met her eyes. “I had my suspicions, but I did not want to speculate.” He knew that she didn’t believe him, but he didn’t care. He was not about to play stupid games when faced with such a travesty as he had just been told of. He turned to Cornelius. “And you want to protect yourself by taking hostages? Children?”

The Minister for Magic paled and wiped some sweat from his forehead. “We’re not taking hostages. With the Dark Lord obviously not interested in keeping the peace, the muggleborns are in danger. You know how many were murdered in their muggle homes in the last war! Moving them to the Ministry for the duration of this… crisis… is just fulfilling our responsibility towards the future of Wizarding Britain.”

Albus glared at the man and the weak smile that had grown during the explanation disappeared at once. “Do you think I am a fool, Cornelius?” He leaned forward. “Who proposed this plan? Petra Rowle? Augustus Malfoy?” Cornelius flinched. Albus had to control himself. “You intend to follow a plan proposed by a cousin of Lucius?”

“The Ministry has to abide by the decisions of the Wizengamot, Albus. That is the law,” Amelia said.

He turned his head towards the Head of the DMLE. “This was not decided by the Wizengamot. Unless someone broke the law and held a session without the Chief Warlock.”

“It’s a proposal that will be submitted in the next session. Out of courtesy, Mister Malfoy has informed the Minister in advance, so he will be prepared, should the Wizengamot accept it.” Amelia’s mouth formed a thin line.

“And you both expect it to pass.” Albus scoffed. They had good reasons to think so - the proposal was, on the surface, offering to protect muggleborn children from Death Eaters. A number of the Wizengamot members opposing Voldemort would vote for it just for that reason. And those sympathetic to the Death Eaters’ cause would know its real purpose. Of course, he could work on the members, persuade them of the folly of this proposal. But to convince a majority, he would have to threaten to withhold his support against the Dark Lord. And if he did that, he risked to push the Wizengamot and with it, the Ministry into Voldemort’s camp.

“It’s a sensible proposal, Albus!” Cornelius exclaimed.

“It is hostage-taking! You are planning to take muggleborn children hostage, so the older children you are hunting will not lash out at you! Not even Grindelwald went that far!”

“Do you want the Ministry to be destroyed by murderous muggleborns, Albus?” Amelia had stood up. “While we are talking, they are preparing another attack. And we are the most vulnerable target. You’ve been saying for months that we need to focus on the Dark Lord; we cannot do so if we have to expect a muggleborn bomb!”

“I have been saying for a year that persecuting the muggleborns is wrong!” Albus said. He didn’t raise his voice, but he came close. “I have been telling you to stop hunting them for months. Did you listen?” He shook his head. “And yet, instead of listening now, you propose to antagonise them even further by taking them hostage!”
“We are not hunting children, Albus, but murderers. Mass-murderers!” Amelia was not giving an inch. “Do you wish to see a repeat of Malfoy Manor? Our wards will not protect us. We cannot defend against those bombs. We are exposed, in the middle of muggle London. We cannot hide. How can we do nothing, faced with such a threat?” She glared at him. “Or do you know something we do not? Do you have any reason to believe they will not attack the Ministry?”

“Are you insinuating that I would know and influence whoever destroyed Malfoy Manor?” Albus asked, tensing up. If Amelia accused him of this - which was, technically, true - and enough people believed it...

“You said that. I’m just wondering why you do not seem to care about the safety of the Wizengamot and the Ministry.”

“I believe that as long as there are good people in both the Wizengamot and the Ministry who strive to mend fences and end this pointless persecution of the muggleborn, they will not strike at us.” Miss Granger was smart; she would know that attacking them would be counter-productive. And she would not want to kill Harry’s and Mister Weasley’s family.

“You put a lot of faith in murderers, Albus,” Amelia spat.

“Murderers we created, Amelia. The Ministry has spent a year pushing them, hurting them, hunting them, until, finally, they pushed back. And yet they have not struck against the Wizengamot, which passed those unjust laws, nor against the Ministry, which enforced them. No, they struck at those responsible for the persecution instead, when they gathered at Malfoy Manor.” He looked at the two. “Yes, I do think that such people will not attack the Ministry.”

“Then there shouldn’t be any problem with protecting the muggleborn children in the Ministry,” Cornelius quickly said.

“If you believe that, then you are a fool, Cornelius.” He stood up, glaring at the Minister for Magic. “If you pursue this plan, you will ultimately doom yourself, Cornelius.” And he would deserve his fate. “Good day.”

Before he reached the door, Amelia spoke up again. “You cannot protect murderers forever, Albus.”

He turned to look at her. “Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus, eh, Amelia?” Albus scoffed. She would see ‘justice’ done, even if it doomed everyone. “There are higher laws than the Wizengamot’s, Amelia. And a higher court as well.”

He left without a further word. It took more effort than usual to smile politely at the people he met on his way to the Floo connection, but he managed it. Once back in his office at Hogwarts, he dropped his facade though, and sank in his seat, wearier than he had felt in years while Fawkes flew over to land on his shoulder, butting his head against Albus’s.

The Wizengamot would pass this insane law. It might even achieve its goal, and keep the Muggleborn Resistance from bombing the Ministry.

If they managed to ‘secure’ the children. The Ministry had the log of every incident involving accidental magic. They could find the muggleborn children with that. But they were not the only ones with this information. Hogwarts’ vaults held the book of future students, and their addresses.

He stood up. He had to inform Sirius.

*****
London, Docklands, September 13th, 1996

Harry Potter looked at One Canada Square, the tallest building in the United Kingdom. The massive skyscraper was a very impressive sight.

“Blimey!”

Harry glanced at his best friend, Ron. The redhead wasn’t quite gaping, but he came close. “You know… each time I think I know them, the muggles pull something else. What do they need such a huge tower for? You could probably fit all of Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade and the Ministry in there, and still have room left over!” Ron said, shaking his head.

“I believe that the building was meant to house offices, mostly, not residents, though as far as I know, the owner had some difficulty finding enough tenants,” Dumbledore said. “Although I confess I did not pay much attention to muggle economics; it was mostly the reports about a navigational obstacle for brooms and some concern about the tower disturbing post owls that made me remember it.”

“Ah.” Harry looked around their small group. Where was she?

“I believe Miss Granger is being cautious, Harry. She trusts you with her life, but you two could be under the control of another wizard, and we could be polyjuiced impostors,” Dumbledore said, sounding as if he was at complete peace.

Which was quite a feat, in Harry’s opinion. The Headmaster had sounded very urgent in the note Fawkes dropped on Harry - literally - earlier today, telling them to see him at once. He had taken them to London, after asking them to contact Hermione as soon as possible. The Headmaster had even made the rest of the school think they had a long talk with him, or detention while they traveled to London. And yet he now sounded as if he was just taking a stroll without any care.

“I still can’t believe they’d do that,” Harry muttered. The depths the Ministry would plunge to...

“I can,” Ron said. “It’s just logical.” He shrugged. “They don’t know what destroyed Malfoy Manor, not really. And they can’t defend well against what they don’t know. So, what else would they come up with? Hostages are a traditional means to deter an enemy from attacking you. And the Ministry’s full of people who just love tradition.”

Harry blinked. That sounded very unusual for Ron.

His friend rolled his eyes at his reaction. “Hey, I have been training too. And not just spellcasting.”

Harry grinned. “Sorry… if Hermione could hear that…”

Ron smirked. “She’d think I’m an imposter?”

“Well…” Harry chuckled. Or she’d be very happy that Ron was studying seriously. Harry wondered if he should broaden his training as well.

“I believe you will be able to ask her yourself,” Dumbledore said. “She has just arrived, unless I am mistaken.” He flicked his wand, briefly, and Harry heard the sound from the city change some.

He looked at who the Headmaster was nodding at, but all he saw was a blonde girl in tight, stone-washed jeans and a leather jacket wearing oversized mirror shades.

“Hello. I’m Jean.”
Her disguise was very good. The voice gave her away though. Harry coughed. “Hello.”

Ron stared, then nodded. “Wow, I mean, hi.”

Hermione grinned, though only for a moment. Then she grew serious again. “You requested an urgent meeting?”

“Indeed, Miss Jean,” Dumbledore said. “Were you informed about the latest proposal to the Wizengamot?”

“The despicable plan to abuse children as hostages?”

“Yes.” Dumbledore sighed. “I tried to dissuade the Minister from this foolish course of action, and I will do my utmost to sway the Wizengamot into not committing such a crime, but given its current composition, I do not expect to convince enough of the members. Hence my intention to provide them with a fait accompli, and deprive them at least of the youngest hostages.”

“What about those at Hogwarts?” Hermione asked.

The Headmaster chuckled, but Harry didn’t think there was any real mirth behind it. “Since the pretext is to protect the muggleborn children from attacks by Death Eaters, I do not think anyone will be as foolish as to claim Hogwarts is not safe enough. Should things escalate to that point though…”

he sighed. “I will not let them drag children from my school.”

“But you let them execute Martin Cokes.” Hermione stared at the old wizard.

“To my eternal regret. They rushed the trial, and I was left with no legal recourse, nor time enough to plan a clandestine rescue. I would have had to openly raise my wand against the Ministry, a course of action that would have driven it into Voldemort’s waiting arms.” Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment. “I am deeply sorry for your loss.”

“And how many more will you sacrifice, in the vain hope that the Ministry will stop turning Britain over to Voldemort?”

“I have now taken measures to prepare for a similar occurrence.”

Hermione met his eyes, then nodded.

The Headmaster pulled out a roll of parchment. “I copied the addresses for the future muggleborn students from our records. There are ninety-one in total. Do you have the facilities to provide them and their families with new homes, temporary ones at least?”

Hermione nodded. “We can have them live in hotels, until we find enough safe houses. For those who don’t have alternatives, at least.”

“Merlin’s beard, that must be expensive!” Ron exclaimed.

“Sirius has deep pockets,” Harry said. His godfather was rich, after all.

“The Ministry lacks our records, but they have records of accidental magic. While not very likely, they might already be observing at least some of them. I would think it best if I and my colleagues contact the families, under the pretext of informing them about Hogwarts. Should you be seen, the consequences could be fatal,” Dumbledore said. “They can contact you for further help and advice, I hope?”
Hermione blinked. “That is possible. But…” she bit her lower lip. “As far as I know, the Ministry cannot detect magic, outside the trace?”

“That is true. But the Obliviators monitor all threats to the Statute of Secrecy, which a child’s accidental magic falls under,” Dumbledore explained.

“But how can they do that, without being able to detect magic?” Hermione asked, and for a moment, she sounded as if she was back in Hogwarts, at least to Harry.

“While I am not privy to their exact methods, I do know that they employ most of Britain’s seers.”

“Oh.” Hermione gasped.

“But do not worry - the Obliviators answer only to the ICW. In conflicts between wizards, they stay neutral, unless someone threatens the Statute of Secrecy.” Dumbledore looked at Hermione over his reading glasses. “I trust no one you know will be as foolish as to contemplate doing that?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, sir.”

Harry winced. Going up against seers… he was no fan of Trelawney, but her prophecies had come true, so far.

“Do you have a phone number for us to pass out?”

Hermione nodded, and handed a note to the Headmaster. “It’s a mobile phone, we can be reached during the times I noted.”

“Thank you, Miss Jean.” Dumbledore smiled. “I’ll take my leave now. I assume you’d like to pass a bit more time together, so you can return to my office through Sirius’s Floo connection.”

Of course he knew about their Apparition training, Harry thought. But he appreciated the gesture - they hadn’t seen Hermione for too long.

Judging by her smile, she shared that opinion.

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London, Docklands, September 13th, 1996

The Headmaster disapparated with a small popping sound. Ron Weasley looked around, then at Hermione. “Wow. You look really different like that.”

“That’s the idea of a disguise,” Hermione answered, but she looked pleased, or so he thought.

“You look good as well though!” He blinked, realising just how that could be taken, then added hastily: “Not that you didn’t look good before…” He trailed off, wincing.

Fortunately, his best female friend chuckled, then hugged him. “I missed you.”

He closed his eyes, enjoying the closeness. “I missed you too. The mirror’s just not the same.”

“The school’s not the same without you,” Harry added.

“And without the rest of the muggleborns.” Hermione released Ron and hugged Harry. Ron felt a little bit of annoyance at his moment with her having been cut short. Then he was ashamed for being so petty.
“Yes.” Harry sighed.

“How long can you stay?” Hermione asked, after separating from Harry.

“The Headmaster told McGonagall that we might be away for the entire afternoon,” Harry answered. “So… I guess we will be.” He smiled. “If you can stay that long.”

She nodded, then bit her lower lip. Ron had to smile at that familiar sight. “I can, but… I’m not alone here. I’ll have to tell my backup,” she said.

“Backup?” Ron asked. He didn’t like that; he and Harry hadn’t seen - the mirror didn’t count - their friend for weeks, and he didn’t feel like sharing her with the ones who could see her each day.

“Justin and Allan. Allan Baker.” Hermione looked around. “Let’s head over to that small park. We can meet them there.”

Ron didn’t really want to meet them - though Justin was an alright bloke for protecting Hermione, Ron didn’t know Allan at all - and a glance to Harry told him his friend felt the same. Both nodded, though, and followed their friend.

Hermione walked straight up to one man standing beneath a tree. Another man joined them from the edge of a small pond. Ron recognised the bloke as Justin, which meant the other had to be Baker.

Hermione introduced them to Baker. They already knew Justin, of course, though Ron hadn’t seen him in those kind of muggle clothes. He didn’t know why, but the Hufflepuff reminded him a bit of Malfoy. And his smile was just a bit too friendly. Even for a Hufflepuff. Baker though… that bloke was too old, Ron thought, and too cold. At least to Harry and himself.

“The Headmaster and a few other teachers will contact the parents of the children at risk, and have them contact us. They’ll move to hotels first, then we can set them up with safe houses or flats,” Hermione explained - or rather, told her two muggleborn friends. She hadn’t lost her bossy ways in her exile, Ron was glad to notice.

Baker frowned. “We don’t have that many safe houses.” The wizard glanced at Ron and Harry as if he didn’t want to talk with them there. Too bad for him, Ron thought. “And we might need them for us,” Baker said.

“We can prepare more for us. Those people need help now. We can’t let the Ministry take hostages. Especially not children!”

Hermione would have raised her voice, Ron knew, if not for them being in public. Baker should have known better, he noticed with some glee, than to suggest that they’d need the houses more than children. That had to be worse than ordering elves around in her presence.

Baker pressed his lips together and didn’t say anything any more. Justin nodded. “Let’s go then.”

“Ah…” Hermione hesitated. For a moment, Ron feared she’d leave them. He’d understand, and yet… surely, her friends could prepare this without her? “I’ll join you later. I have a few more things to talk about with my friends.”

Baker suddenly smiled. “Of course. We’ll handle it.”

Justin grinned. “We still get out of doing pushups.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.”
The two muggleborns walked away, and she turned back to Ron and Harry. “So…”

“So. Can we get up on that building?” Ron pointed at the tower near them.

She shook her head. “No. It has a public area, but in the basement. There’s no viewing area on top.”

“Damn.” Ron sighed. When she didn’t call him on his language he blinked.

She must have noticed, since she chuckled. “Ah… I’ve gotten somewhat used to coarse language.”

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. If they found out who was corrupting their best female friend… it couldn’t be Justin. The guy talked far too posh or whatever.

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Harry Potter sipped from his soda in the café Ron, Hermione and he had gone to and smiled contentedly. Coca Cola was something he missed at Hogwarts. He looked at Hermione. He missed her more, of course.

“I can’t believe the Ministry would do this,” Ron said, after staring at his own Cola. “Dad would never go for that. At least Dumbledore is on the ball.”

“This time,” Harry said. The Headmaster hadn’t managed to achieve much good at the Ministry, in his opinion. “And he doesn’t think he can stop this in the Wizengamot either, or we wouldn’t be doing this.”

Hermione nodded. “I think he still hopes he can turn the Ministry against Voldemort.”

“You don’t think he can do it?” Ron asked.

She shook her head. “Not with the current Wizengamot. There are too many bigots among its members.”

“Well, that could change,” Harry said.

His friends knew what he meant, and for a moment, no one said anything. Then Ron spoke up. “Even if the current members leave, their replacements won’t be any different.”

“That’s a consequence of a parliament that’s composed of inherited seats,” Hermione said. “And it influences the Ministry, of course.”

“Not everyone at the Ministry shares the Wizengamot’s views,” Ron said. “Dad has a number of friends who think like him.”

“Enough enforce the Wizengamot’s laws though - blindly, or eagerly.” Hermione shook her head.

“At least the Headmaster is doing something,” Ron said. He sounded a bit peeved. Harry hoped the two wouldn’t get into a row.

“I know he’s doing something. I just fear it won’t be enough.” Hermione looked down, and Harry wanted to hug her. He knew Sirius shared that view. If anything, his godfather was even more pessimistic.

He didn’t say that, though. “At least every Auror and Wizengamot member he reaches is one less bent on hunting you.”
“There’s that.” Hermione smiled. “Still…”

“Just give us time to get the good people out before you blow the Ministry up,” Ron said. He laughed, but Harry didn’t think he was entirely joking.

Hermione winced. “We’re not blowing up the Ministry. That would kill too many innocents, and alienate too many people who might support us.”

Namely Dumbledore, Harry thought. He noted though that she had said ‘too many innocents’, not simply ‘innocents’. He didn’t pursue the thought.

“Well, the Ministry’s newest folly will be foiled,” Ron said. “Do they serve food here too?” He rubbed his stomach. “We kind of skipped lunch. Not that meeting you wasn’t worth it, but…”

Harry laughed, quickly joined by Hermione and Ron.

The café served sandwiches, but not much more. They ordered some, and Hermione sighed. “I’ve been eating too many of those, lately.”

“Oh?” Ron looked at her.

“We’ve been camping, mostly muggle style. We can’t exactly cook well there. And the rations…” she grimaced.

“Boot camp?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded, and then both had to explain what that was to their friend.

“Blimey!” Ron commented. “Do you really think it’ll be worth it?”

Hermione nodded. “We’ll have to adapt it, of course, but it’s teaching us a lot.”

“We might have to do something like it at Hogwarts then, mate,” Ron said. “That might give us an edge once the Slytherins do something.”

“Is it that bad?” Hermione asked. She sounded concerned.

Harry shrugged. “The teachers are keeping a close eye on everyone. Even Snape.” He sighed. “But… it can’t last. You know Malfoy. Sooner or later he’ll do something stupid.”

“Too bad he survived the bomb,” Ron said.

Hermione winced.

Harry didn’t know if she felt bad about blowing up the manor, or missing Malfoy. And he didn’t know if he wanted Malfoy dead, or not.

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London, Ministry of Magic, September 17th, 1996

“The chair recognises Mister Malfoy.”

Albus Dumbledore watched closely as the proxy for Draco Malfoy stood up. Augustus was dressed in the finest robes, and cut a dashing figure, even if he was not quite as handsome as Lucius had been.
“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! Three weeks ago, ten of the most dangerous prisoners escaped from Azkaban. None of them have been caught since. Our Aurors have been unable to find even a trace of them.” The wizard paused dramatically for a glance at Amelia, who frowned at the theatrics. “But while some efforts have been made to find them, no efforts have been made to protect those in danger from them. The weakest, most vulnerable victims they could choose: The muggleborn children.”

That sent some of the more gullible members murmuring. Albus paid particular attention to those who were not surprised - they would have been informed in advance. He didn’t spot anyone he not already suspected of supporting Voldemort.

“Their parents are ignorant, they do not know about magic, and they certainly could not protect the children, should a wizard attack them. And we cannot station an Auror next to them, much less give them a way to call for help in an emergency, the risk to the Statute of Secrecy would be too great. And yet what country would we be if we left children in danger?”

Malfoy paused once again. Albus shook his head at the hypocrisy.

“For this reason I have prepared a bill: the ‘Muggleborn Infant Protection Bill.’ It will mandate the Ministry to evacuate the muggleborn children who are not yet attending Hogwarts from their unsafe muggle homes, and place them in safe quarters in the Ministry itself.”

“You just want to have hostages at the Ministry because you fear an attack!” Amos shouted. “Shame on you!”

Albus smiled, though with some regret. Amos had grown very bold and radical in the last two years. Sadly, it was because he didn’t think he had anything left to lose after his son had been murdered.

Malfoy sneered. “I reject this accusation. The Ministry does not need hostages, it is among the safest places in Britain. Or do you know of a planned attack on this building? A traitor among our ranks would endanger us, of course.”

Amos gasped at that accusation. “You are accusing me of betraying the Ministry? While you work for the Dark Lord?”

“This is a ridiculous accusation. If I was working for the Dark Lord, would I wish to see the escaped prisoners caught and the muggleborn children protected?”

Albus shook his head as more members shouted accusations back and forth. Decorum had suffered since so many old members had been replaced. Before things degenerated further, he raised his wand.

“The chair recognises the Chief Warlock.”

He stood up, and nodded at the Wizengamot. “Mister Malfoy claims that there are muggleborn children at risk. This is not true.”

He patiently waited for the murmuring that caused to die down. Malfoy was staring at him, surprise slowly giving way to anger.

“Their parents have been warned of the danger they are in, and they have taken steps to protect themselves. I can confidently state that the youngest muggleborn children are as safe as they can be, given the circumstances.” Safer than if the Ministry knew where they were.

The Chief Warlock smiled. “Trust me. I have personally checked if there are any muggleborn children in danger who are not yet attending Hogwarts. There are none. The proposed bill is therefore unnecessary.”

“We only have your claim that they are safe,” Malfoy said.

Albus glared at him. “Do you suggest that I would be lying about this?”

“There will be more muggleborn children born. Many more. The bill is still needed for them!”

“There is no need for that. The existing structures can handle them as well.” Albus let his gaze sweep over the assembly. He wasn’t certain it would be enough to defeat the proposal. But at least the Ministry wouldn’t be able to kidnap any children. His staff had worked hard to visit every family, and convince them to leave. A few times with questionable methods, maybe - but needs must. He’d rather scare the parents into leaving their home than have them lose their child to the Ministry’s thugs.

“Existing structures? What are those?” Cornelius asked.

Albus smiled at the Minister. “Elaborating on them would endanger them.”

The man huffed as if he had been insulted. “Do you suggest that there are traitors among our ranks?”

“I think that would be an astute observation,” Albus said.

That caused the whole assembly to start talking and even shouting. He shook his head. Not for the first time he wondered if playing these games was worth it. His influence had waned, and Tom’s had grown. He could delay it, curb excesses, but he couldn’t turn the tide. It was tempting to stop playing by the rules that favored the Dark Lord’s sycophants. To cut loose, cut down Voldemort’s allies in this chamber.

But such an act would paint him as a Dark Lord himself, and alienate a lot of his support. He wouldn’t be able to control the Ministry, not with so many Death Eaters among the employees. He would be forced to either leave Hogwarts, or turn it into a fortress. Either choice would endanger the students too much.

And yet, he thought as the ruckus died down, he might have to do it anyway, if his plans failed.

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Cumbria, Britain, September 18th, 1996

An enemy appeared to her right, behind a bush, his weapon aimed. Hermione dropped into a crouch and shot him, twice, then rolled to the side, tucking her assault rifle in to keep the muzzle from slamming into the soft soil and getting clogged. The target flipped down, signaling at least one hit.

Next to her, Justin was crawling to the trunk of a tree that had fallen years ago. Her partner for this live-fire exercise was covered from head to toe in mud; only his weapon was clean. She didn’t look any better - that trip through the muddy creek had left her soaking wet. She told herself that it improved her camouflage. If only she could clean herself - or at least dry herself - with magic without exposing herself to their instructors!

She followed Justin to the trunk. Up ahead she spotted two more targets behind a tree and another bush. He looked at her. “I’ll cover you.”
Hermione nodded, and moved forward to the end of the trunk. When Justin stood up and started firing, she dashed to a boulder about ten yards ahead and to the side. She slammed into the rock, wincing, then rose to shoot at the targets. Target - Justin had hit one. She nailed the other with her second or third shot and changed her magazine while Justin moved forward.

Both were breathing heavily now. That would make them less precise when shooting. After exchanging a glance, they continued forward until they were in a creek at the edge of a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a foxhole, as the Major had called it. Inside was another target.

“Grenade,” Justin said next to her, pulling out an egg-shaped hand-grenade from his web pouch.

“I’ll cover you,” she answered, moving up so she could start firing. Rapid semi-automatic fire, she reminded herself as she started shooting, sending round after round at the foxhole. She might have hit the target even, but that wasn’t the point of the exercise.

Next to her, Justin rose and threw the grenade. “Fire in the hole!” he shouted, ducking back. Hermione slid down as well, a second before the grenade went off.

Mud rained down on the two of them, and Hermione ground her teeth when she realised that the foxhole had been filled with muddy water. At this point, the instructors were no longer trying to push some teenagers playing soldiers into abandoning the exercise with such ‘pranks’, she knew that, but it had become a sort of tradition. Which she hated.

“That looked almost like a soldier’s exercise, if you squint and glare and are drunk.”

Hermione exchanged a glance with Justin, and both jumped up and turned to face the Sergeant behind them. “Yes, Sarge!” they yelled together, grinning widely.

The mercenary glared at them. “Collect the targets and head back to base. We’ve got a debriefing to start!”

“Yes, Sarge!” They were still grinning, not letting him see how exhausted they were.

That had become a tradition as well. One Hermione rather liked.

*****

“He has to die. We can’t let him live. Not after his betrayal of Martin.”

Allan folded his arms and stared at her. Hermione Granger suppressed the urge to sigh. They had gone over this before, and she was really tired of it. “I agree. I’m not arguing to let him live. I’m arguing not to be hasty. We don’t know if it’s a trap, although we have to assume that. If Aurors are waiting for us then we can’t just charge in.” She had wanted to say something nastier, but controlled herself. Even if Allan was testing her patience, she had to keep a lid on her temper. Her standing in the group would suffer otherwise.

“Who said anything about charging in? We don’t need to. We can just blow the shop up,” Allan said. Dean and Seamus were nodding. Hermione had expected that.

“We don’t know what potions are in that shop, and how they would react to an explosion.” She had said that already. Several times. “Imagine if he had an Erumpent Horn there?”

“He’d be a fool to store that kind of ingredient without some safety measures,” Allan countered. “Besides, they are very rare.”
“The fluid is a rather common ingredient of a few potions,” Hermione said. “And the explosion would need to be powerful enough to overcome such protections anyway, or he might survive.” She shook her head. Before he could mention sniping, she said: “Shooting him would reveal what our guns can do the Ministry, and through their spies to the Death Eaters. We’ve gone over this before. Why are you bringing this up again?”

She knew some of them were eager to ‘go back into action’, as Dean had put it. They had been training for almost three weeks now, and were at the point where they were getting a bit too confident, in her opinion. She looked at Justin and Sally-Anne, and at Mary and Tania. She needed their support. “I’m simply saying that we shouldn’t act in haste. We’re still training here for another week. We don’t need to rush off half-cocked.”

Dean chuckled at the expression and she rolled her eyes.

“If we don’t do anything we’ll have trouble recruiting more people. Especially older people.” Allan shook his head. “They’ll not take us seriously.”

“We blew up Malfoy Manor,” Justin cut in. “If people won’t take us seriously after that, then they are hopeless.”

“They might not believe us.” Allan stared at Justin now. Hermione felt slightly irked. Allan could be so considerate, so smart, and yet sometimes he seemed obsessed with killing Aurors and Death Eaters, and looked at anyone who disagreed as if they were the enemy.

“That’s another reason to wait and prepare this thoroughly. That way, we can demonstrate what we can do to a new recruit,” she said.

“We have to have a new recruit first,” Seamus muttered.

“We’re in contact with Clifton,” Mary pointed out. “But we can’t exactly rush that either. There’s always the possibility of a trap.”

“What we need is patience. Rushing into things when we don’t have to is not a good idea. We had to scramble to help the children, but we don’t need to kill Beckett right now.” Hermione wondered what her parents would say, hearing her discuss when, not if she’d kill a man.

She saw that Allan was nodding, if grudgingly. He was a tad impatient, she knew now. Dean shrugged, and Seamus sighed. Hermione smiled, though she tried not to show her relief. She wished she could simply order people around. Having to convince them was getting tedious, and they would not always be able to afford the time for a discussion.

But at least she would have some peace for a week or so. Time to work and prepare. And train.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, September 19th, 1996

“Merlin’s arse!”

Brenda Brocktuckle jumped up from the cot she had been resting on when she heard Martin Runcorn curse. “What did you see?” she asked as she stepped up next to him at the window.

“More of those leaflets,” he said, pointing at half a dozen sheets of parchment littering the street below.
“Damn mudbloods,” she muttered. “That’ll stir up trouble again.” She grabbed the vial of Polyjuice. “I’ll grab one so we know what it’s about.”

“I can summon one,” Martin offered.

Brenda shook her head. “Too risky. We need to play this by the book.” She grinned. “But thanks for the offer. If you really want to be nice, you can take a sip and fetch it.”

Martin shook his head. “No, no. It’s your turn.”

Brenda snorted, and drank the potion, grimacing while she changed.

A few minutes later, she was back with the leaflet. As she had expected, it was another work from the so-called ‘Muggleborn Resistance’. They were the main suspects for the Malfoy Manor attack, mainly because they were the only muggleborn group known that was opposing the Ministry.

“Check this out: ‘The Ministry is trying to take hostages. They tried to kidnap children, to take them from their muggle parents and imprison them in the Ministry. They failed, but they are looking for other hostages now. Muggleborns, don’t let them catch you!’.” She shook her head. “Bunch of bubotuber pus!”

Martin looked the leaflet over as well. “But they’ll believe it. It fits what they think the Ministry is doing.”

“Well, of course. But it’s a lie. Hostages wouldn’t work. Malfoy Manor proved that - they killed two of their own.” Brenda shook her head. “Bloody mudbloods try to paint us as worse than Death Eaters.”

Martin shrugged. “I just hope those who believe that propaganda leave Britain, instead of attacking us.”

Brenda snorted. “You think we’ll be that lucky?” She shook her head. “We’ll be lucky if the Ministry won’t get blown up in this war. That’s why we need to find those mudbloods. We can deal with the Death Eaters, we know what they can do. But we haven’t yet found a way to deal with whatever the mudbloods are using.”

She looked down at the street.

“And the longer they do nothing, the worse it’ll be once they finally do something again.”

*****

Hogwarts, September 21st, 1996

Daphne Greengrass sighed. If Hogsmeade weekends had not been canceled, she’d be shopping, instead of watching the Slytherin Quidditch team practise. But it beat staying in the dorms. And it let her keep an eye on Astoria. Her little sister seemed to have a crush on Draco, still. She was doing better, she didn’t cry every night any more, but she was far from well, and Daphne would not let her by herself, especially not near a boy. That’s why she was sitting with her on the stands.

And, if she was honest, watching the practise was kind of entertaining - Urquhart had a temper and a loud voice. He was currently reaming out the team in very colorful language. Tracey, sitting on the other side of her, giggled at a particularly rude string of words. Daphne would have laughed as well, if not for the need to serve as an example for Astoria. Who was laughing.
She sighed. It was better if her sister was laughing rather than crying, so she’d have to let that slide. On the pitch, the team was mounting their brooms and lifting off. They were working on their individual parts - the Seeker and the Beaters practised together, and the Chasers tested the Keeper. Draco almost got hit by a bludger a few times, when Crabbe and Goyle missed their mark, but his new broom - a Firebolt, of course - was fast enough to easily outpace a training bludger.

We have the Quidditch Cup in the bag!” Astoria grinned. “The Gryffs lost most of their team.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain,” Tracey said. “We had to replace two players as well.”

“Not as many as the Gryffs!” Astoria insisted.

“Experience isn’t every… Did you hear that?” Daphne blinked. That had sounded like some wood breaking. Not a noise you wanted to hear on a stand propped up by wood.

Tracey blinked. “Something broke?” She looked up. “The brooms look fine.”

“Not the brooms… it came from behind us. And below.” Daphne heard another crack. Louder this time.

Astoria jerked. “I heard it too.” She looked nervous now, even afraid.

“I think we better get down,” Tracey said.

Daphne nodded and stood up.

Right then the stands collapsed.

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Chapter 8: Outbreak

'It is obvious that at the time it was proposed, the majority of the members of the Wizengamot realised just what the true purpose of the so-called ‘Muggleborn Infant Protection Bill’ was - those who voted for it on behalf of the Dark Lord, and those following Dumbledore’s lead. Significantly fewer would have been able to predict the consequences of passing that bill. The realisation that the Wizengamot was trying to take the weakest muggleborns, the children not yet old enough to attend Hogwarts, hostage, outraged and radicalised many who had been holding out hope for a reconciliation. It is quite clear that the mere act of passing that bill, even though Albus Dumbledore had already taken action to remove the children from the reach of the Ministry, caused the opposite effect of what many of its, in hindsight naive, supporters in the Ministry had hoped for. Instead of less violence it caused more. Worthy of special attention is that while many historians correctly assume that the events at Hogwarts that followed had been inevitable from the start, it is evident that the ‘Muggleborn Infant Protection Bill’ certainly hastened those events along by a great deal.'
- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Hogwarts, September 21st, 1996

Daphne Greengrass screamed when she felt the boards she was standing on tilting and almost lost her balance. She grabbed her sister and tried to drag her forward, to the lowest row of the stands, while behind and to their side more students screamed in terror as they started to slip and fall down. The entire row of seats Daphne had been on broke up as if a giant had snapped it - one part dropping down, the other snapping up. Next to her, Tracey cried out and Astoria shrieked, but all Daphne could think of was to reach that lowest row, two yards away, before everything broke down.

She reached it and grabbed the railing with one hand, just as the bottom started to break away. Tracey had disappeared, but she still held Astoria’s hand as they started to fall. For a moment, she managed to stop their descent, holding on to the railing and to her sister, then Astoria’s hand was ripped out of her grip, and Daphne could just scream in horror as her sister fell, landing on a crumpled row of seats.

“Astoria!”

Her sister didn’t answer. Daphne spotted more students nearby, some half-buried under the remains of the stands, many of them screaming for help. Pansy was screeching like a banshee, her leg impaled on a broken piece of wood, blood flowing between her hands.

“Astoria!”

Was that blood beneath her sister’s body? Daphne was trying to pull herself up, so she could use her wand, but she was too weak. She felt her grip weaken; she couldn’t hold on much longer, and her feet couldn’t find any purchase to climb down.

“Daphne!”

She looked up. Draco was flying towards her, his hand reaching for her. He grabbed her around the waist before she lost her grip, and then steered his broom down.
“Astoria! She fell!”

“Hold on!” Draco yelled, landing next to the mass of wood and canvas.

Daphne saw that the entire Quidditch team was above them. Urquhart yelled: “Malfoy! Fly to the castle and alert the teachers and Pomfrey! Go!”

Draco hesitated for a moment, then cursed and mounted his broom, racing towards the school. Daphne stumbled on, climbing through broken beams and poles, crawling over scattered seats and under ripped canvas, until she reached her sister. Astoria wasn’t moving. And there was blood dripping from the board she was lying on! But she was breathing! Daphne hugged her, crying, and simply held her.

Soon afterwards, help arrived. The teachers - and other students. She yelled: “Astoria here needs help! She’s bleeding!”, repeating herself until McGonagall, riding a broom, landed next to her.

With a flick of her wand, the old witch transfigured the broken stands around them into a bed for Astoria, then ran her wand over the Slytherin.

“Professor! She’s bleeding!” Daphne panted, tears running down her cheeks.

“Calm down, Miss Greengrass!” McGonagall said. “She’s not too badly hurt. I’ve stopped the bleeding, and Madam Pomfrey will fix her up as soon as she can.”

“As soon as she can?” Daphne was about to protest, then she remembered the other students. Tracey! She looked up, and gaped. All around her, people were moving wounded students on floating stretchers or beds. The remains of the stands had all but disappeared - vanished or transfigured, probably. She saw Pansy floating by, her leg immobilised. The witch was unconscious, probably stunned. Millicent, bleeding from a cut on her face, was carrying a crying fourth year.

Then she saw Tracey, unconscious as well, on a stretcher, next to a grim looking Professor Snape, stashing an empty vial on his robe.

“Tracey!” she yelled, torn between staying with her sister and checking up on her friend.

Snape turned around, saw her and came over to her. “She will live, Miss Greengrass. Take this!” He pushed a vial into her hand.

“I’m not hurt,” she protested. “They are!” Though her wrist was starting to hurt, now that she thought about it. She probably had it sprained.

“You’re under shock. Drink this!”

“Oh.” She blinked, uncorked the vial and drank its contents. She barely registered how the teacher conjured a stretcher for her while the potion took effect. Much calmer now, she sat down and watched as McGonagall levitated her sister and Tracey away, towards the Infirmary.

Under the influence of the Calming Draught, she didn’t react much when Draco started shouting.

“What are you doing here? Trying to finish off those who have survived your attack?”

He was shouting at an older Gryffindor, she realised. A prefect who had come with the teachers, together with other students. Draco had his wand out, too. Aimed at the other.

“Malfoy! Granville!” Snape shouted. “Stash your wands! If I see anyone casting at another student,
they’ll wish they were dead!” He turned to the Gryffindor. “You can’t help here, take the rest of your house back to your dorm and stay there! Everyone! The situation is handled. Go back to your dorms, you can visit the wounded later!”

While her stretcher was floating towards the school, Daphne watched the Gryffindors walk back. And she wondered who among them had done this. Had hurt her sister and her best friend like this.

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Hogwarts, September 21st, 1996

Albus Dumbledore watched as Pomona entered his office, the last of the Head of Houses to arrive. The Herbology teacher looked as grim as he felt. This incident - he hoped it was an accident, but knew that it didn’t really matter given the circumstances - was a catastrophe, and all teachers were aware of that.

“The students are confined to their dorms,” Minerva reported. “The staff is patrolling, to ensure that no one is sneaking out. I’ve impressed upon the prefects the importance to keep a headcount, and immediately alert us should anyone be missing.”

“Thank you, Minerva.” Albus sighed. He hoped it would be enough. “I’ve spoken with Poppy. Of the thirteen students who were injured, nine will be back in their dorm tomorrow. The rest will have to stay a few days longer, mostly for observation.”

“And who did this? Who tried to murder my students?” Severus asked in a clipped tone. The wizard was barely keeping control of his temper, Albus knew.

“Their injuries were hardly more serious than what happens in a normal Quidditch match, or so you claimed when Flint put one of my players in the infirmary,” Minerva snapped. “I hope you didn’t talk like that where your students could overhear you.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Severus snapped back. “But this wasn’t some contact sport. Someone sabotaged the stands!”

“It could have been an accident,” Filius said. “What did you find out, Albus, while we kept the students under control?”

The Headmaster sighed. “I have investigated the remains of the stands.” Those who hadn’t been vanished in the rush to save the wounded students. “I found that the foundations of the support struts have rotted away.” He took a deep breath. “We checked the other stands. Those are in a much better condition.”

“Sabotage then,” Severus hissed. “This was planned.”

“If it was planned, then it was remarkably poorly done. The first Quidditch match is scheduled for November 2nd,” Albus said. “If the stands had collapsed then…”

Pomona gasped. “It would have been a catastrophe!”

“How was this done?” Filius asked.

“Wood-rotting potion,” Albus said.

“There is such a potion?”
“Not exactly. But a mistake while brewing the Cure for Boils can result in that,” the former Potions master explained.

“And that’s something first years learn,” Minerva said. “It could have been anyone then.”

“It would take an effort to create such a potion, and there’s still the lack of opportunity. Someone had to sneak there and apply it.” Severus shook his head.

“I’ll be looking further into this, rest assured,” Albus said. He had a suspect already, although mentioning this would not be opportune right now. “But for now we have to be even more vigilant, to prevent this incident from starting a war in Hogwarts.”

Albus knew he wasn’t talking figuratively, or using hyperbole. Things were much worse than he had feared but a few months ago.

But then, he had been thinking that exact thought each day ever since Cornelius had started his attempt to appease the Dark Lord.

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Hogwarts, September 22nd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore smiled gently at the young wizard entering his office. “Please take a seat, Mister Banks.”

The Gryffindor 3rd year nodded, obviously nervous, and sat down on the edge of the chair in front of the Headmaster’s desk.

“Do you know why you have been called to my office?”

“N-No, sir.” The boy shook his head several times. “If it’s about the broken pot in Herbology… It wasn’t my fault.”

“It is not about that,” Albus said. “You are a good student. Best Gryffindor in your year in Potions for two years, and Professor Slughorn has said you might be the best student in your year.” Severus obviously hadn’t graded the boy fairly.

“T-thank you, sir.” The boy swallowed. Sweatdrops were already visible on his forehead.

Albus didn’t like what he was doing, but he had no choice. “Almost as good as Miss Granger was, I believe. Did she tutor you?” He slid his wand out of his sleeve, under his desk, and aimed it at the boy.

That made Banks flinch. “She did tutor all of us, in Potions, in our first year.”

“You gave us quite a scare, last week. Disappearing for an hour on your way back from Herbology.” Albus shook his head. “We feared the worst, but apparently you simply tried to find Bowtruckles at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.”

Banks looked down at his lap, where he was wringing his hands. “I’m sorry, sir. I know I shouldn’t have gone into the Forest.”

“You shouldn’t have. But you didn’t go into the forest, did you?”

The boy gasped, and looked at him with wide open eyes, shock written all over his face.
“Legimimens,” Albus whispered under his breath. He entered the boy’s mind without any problem. He didn’t like to violate a student’s privacy like that, but he had to know.

“Our kind killed my uncle,” whispered Selwyn while the two of them were fetching Doxy Wings from the ingredients cabinet. “I hope all you mudbloods die!” The Slytherin’s face showed his hatred.

“Remember: Don’t go anywhere alone. The Slytherins are just waiting to catch any of us,” Ron Weasley said. “Half of them are just waiting until they are old enough to join the Dark Lord.”

“Just wait until we have duels,” Rowle whispered when they entered the Defence classroom, “I’ll show you a real curse!”

“No, Hermione won’t be returning to Hogwarts. The Aurors tried to kill her, and she defended herself, so now she has to hide.” Harry Potter shook his head. “It’s a bloody shame.” He flinched, looking around, and then looked sad.

“I tripped right when I was on top of the stairs!” Anna said, crying and holding her shin. “Must have been a Tripping Hex,” Ginny Weasley said. “Were Slytherins nearby?”

“The Wizengamot wants to kidnap the muggleborn children and send them to prison!” Brown said. “They passed a bill!” “They’ll obliterate the parents, so they forget about having had a child,” Patil added.

“Bloody mudblood. We’ll get you one day!” Selwyn whispered.

Sally-Anne was shaking, trembling, crying without a sound. The other girls of her year were leading her upstairs. One of them, Brown, muttered ‘Umbridge’.

“Mudbloods should all be killed, before they murder more of us!” Runcorn said loudly to the other Slytherins while he walked past the Gryffindors on the way to the Greenhouses.

“Draco wanted all of us to die in our second year. When the Basilisk started hunting us, he was cheering,” Ron Weasley said. “And he’s grown worse since.”

“Bloody Goyle almost took my head off with his Beater bat last match we played them,” Bell said. “I’m not looking forward to playing them this year, they’re all blaming us for the Malfoy Manor attack.”

“We need to train and study Defence by ourselves. Snape will favor his own students, just like in Potions last year,” Harry Potter said.

He added the lacewings, then overheated the potion. This time, he got it right. The dark liquid didn’t look like a Cure for Boils at all. He dunked a wooden spoon into it, to test it. It didn’t take long for it to rot.

“You were busy pouring a wood-rotting potion you managed to brew on the Slytherin stands at the Quidditch pitch, weren’t you?” Albus said while he skimmed the boy’s memories.

Banks started to pant. Tears appeared in his eyes.

“There is no point in lying, Mister Banks. You had the means, and the opportunity. What remains is your motive. What were you hoping to achieve with your act of sabotage?” Albus asked, gently.

“I… I wanted to hurt the Slytherins!” The boy started to cry, but kept talking. “They lorded it over us
all last year, took every opportunity to hurt us! And this year, they were even worse. Always telling me to die, to leave, to get away! Always calling me a mudblood! And sneering at us! Everyone knows they want to kill us all!” He sobbed for a few moments. “And their Quidditch team is the worst! They use the game to attack our players, and they are all Death Eaters, like Malfoy!”

“Why did you not wait to use your potion until shortly before the first match?”

He blinked. “I… I just wanted to do something right now. I just wanted to strike back. We’ve had to take it and take it all the time, especially last year. I couldn’t take it any more!”

He looked down at his lap again, and his shoulders shook as he cried.

Albus sighed. He had found the culprit. His suspicions had been correct. But now he had to decide what to do about it. If he informed the DMLE, the boy would be arrested and put on trial in front of the Wizengamot. They wouldn’t see a young boy, they’d see a muggleborn who had attacked purebloods. And in the current climate, he’d be either sent to Azkaban for years, or executed. Not for the first time, Albus wished Wizarding Britain had special provisions for underage criminals, like the muggles. But the closest they had were the rules for underage magic. And that was a special crime only children could commit.

The boy hadn’t wanted to kill the Slytherins. He had wanted to hurt them, but he certainly didn’t deserve death for this. No, he couldn’t deliver the child to the Ministry. Albus shook his head.

But he couldn’t cover up the crime either. It hadn’t been that hard to find Banks. Severus and Horace would be able to come to the same conclusion, once they remembered the missing Gryffindor from last week. And when the DMLE started investigating, they’d probably use Veritaserum on every muggleborn, glad for the occasion. Or, worse, on Harry and Ron Weasley. Amelia wasn’t a fool; she’d suspect those two to be in contact with Miss Granger.

For a brief, horrible moment he contemplated sacrificing the boy anyway. One life against many. One life against the lives of those crucial for Voldemort’s defeat. He was ashamed of himself for thinking that.

But he had to find a way to keep the DMLE from interrogating the other students. Amelia was no fool, she’d suspect… that might be the solution! He thought it through a bit longer, while Banks still cried, then nodded.

“Mister Banks.”

The boy looked up. “Y-Yes, sir?”

“Obliviate.”

*****

“Mister Banks has been obliviated?”

“Yes, Minerva,” Albus said. “Quite clumsily, actually.” Or so it would seem to anyone checking the boy’s memories.

“The brat probably did it himself!” Severus said. “The same happened to that Ravenclaw they executed.”

“I assure you, this is quite different. Mister Coke’s Obliviation was the result of a sophisticated conditional curse. This here looks like the hasty work of a student. Coupled with the fact that as far
as attacks go, this was rather ineffective, I think that the true culprit was a student who did not really wish to harm the Slytherins.”

“Wha… are you insinuating that this was done by one of my students?” Severus snarled.

Albus spread his hands. “Not necessarily. Although I cannot help noticing that you jumped to that conclusion right away, instead of assuming that this was the work of someone who wanted to harm your house, but did not wish to seriously hurt anyone.” He shook his head. “I’ll be taking Mister Banks to the DMLE, so they can check how much of his memories have been wiped.”

And so they could find the traces he had left, pointing to Slytherin. Once Severus found the cauldron the potion had been brewed in near the dungeons, clumsily cleaned by Banks himself, that should be enough to redirect the DMLE away from Gryffindor and Harry. And should they insist on questioning the muggleborns or Gryffindors anyway, he’d be able to insist on doing the same to the Slytherins. Which should lead to the investigation being buried instead.

It might even keep the Slytherins from lashing out in anger at the muggleborns and Gryffindors, if they started to suspect that this attack had been the work of one of their own.

*****

Hogwarts, September 23rd, 1996

“They try to kill us, and the teachers protect them! Over a dozen of us almost died!”

Daphne Greengrass rubbed her wrist while she listened to Draco. It wasn’t supposed to hurt any more, and it didn’t, not really. But sometimes she thought it did. The wizard was pacing in the middle of the Slytherin common room, gesturing with both hands.

She nodded slowly. Astoria had just returned from the infirmary. Her little sister had woken up the day before, as had Tracey, but both had had to stay there a day longer, in case there were ‘complications’. Daphne had wanted to stay with Astoria, but Pomfrey had sent her away. Forced her to leave her little sister alone!

“The Headmaster said that the Gryffindor had been obliviated, and that it wasn’t a real attack,” Zabini said.

Daphne knew what the wizard was hinting at - rumours claimed that the real culprit behind the sabotage of the stands was a Slytherin wishing to frame the Gryffindors.

Draco knew it as well. “A baseless rumour meant to divide us. Are you actually believing such slander?”

Zabini shrugged. “As far as assassinations go, it was rather pathetic. Spectacular, yes, but not really that dangerous.”

Daphne hissed while Astoria whimpered. Tracey glared at the boy. “Not really that dangerous? Over a dozen of us were in the infirmary! I had to stay several days there! Pansy was bleeding like a stuck pig!”

“Hey!” Pansy huffed at that comparison.

“I’ve seen worse in Quidditch matches. Or training.” Zabini looked at Draco. “That doesn’t keep anyone down, unless they want to manipulate the cup.”
Draco sneered at the boy. “Are you accusing me of attacking our own house? Of hurting my fellow Slytherins? Harming the Greengrass sisters, who were at my side when my home was destroyed and our families slain?”

Zabini stood his ground. “I’m not accusing anyone. I’m just saying that for the mudbloods who killed so many purebloods, this was a rather tame attack.”

Daphne knew that Draco wasn’t behind this - he wasn’t a good enough actor to fool her. It wasn’t his style either. He’d have hexed one of his rivals, maybe Zabini, and framed the Gryffindors for it. She stood up. “Tame? Let me tell you, Zabini, it was anything but tame for those who were up on the stands when they collapsed! You wouldn’t spew such drivel if you had been there, falling down on broken beams and struts!” She sat down again and hugged her sister.

Tracey snarled at Zabini. “I’d like to see you fall down a few yards and break your legs or arms. Not your head, of course, that’s too thick to get damaged by such a fall!”

A few students laughed, though most were glaring at Zabini. The wizard frowned, but didn’t retort. Instead he turned around and went to his room.

Draco nodded at Daphne, smiling faintly, then addressed the room again. “We were lucky no one was hurt worse. Or killed. But we won’t be lucky forever. We have to do something!”

“You said you had a plan!” Nott said. “Nothing came of it, did it?”

“Do you take me for a Gryffindor, to rush things without planning?” Draco scoffed. Daphne knew many thought exactly that of him, but he had changed after his parents’ death. “We’ve been training, and we’ve been preparing. But this incident has shown us that if we don’t do anything, they’ll attack us again.”

“But who’s ‘them’? Do you think a third year Gryffindor is responsible?” Tracey asked.

“The mudbloods. Who else would do this?” Draco spat. “They murdered our parents, and now they want to murder us!”

He looked around, at the gathered students.

“We won’t let them!”

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Hogwarts, September 24th, 1996

Ron Weasley was in the common room, waiting for everyone to gather so they could head down to the Great Hall for lunch, when Lavender and Parvati entered, out of breath.

“There’s a big group of Slytherins in the Great Hall,” Lavender said, “making a ruckus! They are demanding to talk to the professors.”

“We saw them when we were returning from Divination,” Parvati added.

Ron nodded. “Good. Don’t let anyone leave, I’ll be right back!” He ran up the stairs to his room, taking two steps at a time. “Harry!”

His friend was on his bed, sorting his trunk’s contents. “What?”

“Check the map - the Slytherins are shouting for the professors in the Great Hall,” Ron said.
Harry pulled out the piece of parchment. “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

Ron craned his neck as the map formed. Lots of names were in the Great Hall. “There’s Malfoy… Crabbe and Goyle… Parkinson, Davis, Zabini is back there…”

“There’s Greengrass, alone,” Harry said. “No, it’s her sister. Astoria.”

“Alone? She’s a fourth year… “ Ron blinked. Slytherins never left their dorm by themselves.

“Where’s she going?”

Harry looked at the map. “She’s headed to the… side entrance.” He looked up. “Our third years are returning from Herbology.”

Ron looked at the list of names moving towards the castle. “If they hex her we’ll have trouble. The Slytherins are just waiting for that.”

“They won’t. They know how stupid that would be,” Harry said. “Look, Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall are in the Great Hall now. Talking to Malfoy it seems.”

“I wonder what this is about,” Ron said. “Should we head down? The teachers are there.” Which meant the Snakes wouldn’t try anything.

“I guess so,” Harry said. “We should…”

Ron heard a faint explosion. “What was that?”

“Merlin’s Arse! The third years!” Harry exclaimed, staring at the map.

Ron looked down. The Gryffindor third years who had been walking towards the castle, with the fifth year prefects escorting them, were now spread out, and only a few were moving. And Greengrass was running back towards the dungeons.

“Accio Firebolt!” Harry yelled, and his broom flew towards his outstretched hand.

Ron summoned his own broom, while Harry yelled down to the common room “Ginny! Inform the teachers! Something happened to our third years! Outside!”

Ron was already opening the window.

*****

Hogwarts, September 24th, 1996

“It was Greengrass, sir. Astoria Greengrass,” Harry Potter said in the Headmaster’s office. “She was the only one on the map near them.”

Ron, standing next to him, nodded. “I saw it as well.”

Harry didn’t think either of them would forget the scene they had seen today anytime soon.

He had bent low on his broom as he had flown around the Ravenclaw tower and dived towards the Greenhouses. Almost there…

“Merlin!” He had gasped and slowed down when he had seen the small crater in the middle of the grass, and the students scattered around it. A number had been getting up. The two prefects had been moving already, Dunn kneeling down next to a still body on the ground, Layton running
towards one screaming child near the crater.

“Damn!” Ron had caught up to him.

The two had exchanged a glance, then had descended rapidly. Harry had spotted Professor Sprout rushing out of her greenhouse, wand in hand.

“What happened?” the teacher had asked, panting.

“Someone banished a vial at us from the castle. I cast a Shield Charm and it exploded when it hit,” Dunn had said. He had looked bruised himself.

Harry and Ron had split up, checking on the third years. Harry had helped up a girl who had looked dazed but hadn’t been bleeding. Next to her had been a boy, bleeding from his head, not moving. He had been breathing though.

“Those two need to be carried to the infirmary, at once!” Sprout had yelled, pointing at two bodies, two boys, next to her. Harry and Ron had jumped to it, levitating one each, and straddling their brooms. Then they had flown towards the castle, carefully staying low. Blood dripping from the boy floating next to Harry had left a trail of red spots on the stone floor inside the castle.

Harry shook his head, but the image of the trail of blood stayed with him.

Dumbledore sighed. “I see. I would ask if you are certain, or if the map was working correctly, but I know better.” He closed his eyes and Harry was struck by how tired and old the wizard suddenly looked.

“What did the Slytherins in the Great Hall do?” Ron asked.

“They demanded to be able to eat in their dorms, ‘separated from those dangerous muggleborns and those students who supported them’,” Dumbledore said. “Quite vocally, and maybe a bit too loudly and vehemently. A diversion, I believe.”

“Malfoy’s plan!” Ron spat. Harry agreed with him - that sounded like a plan Malfoy would try.

“Probably, yes,” Dumbledore said. “But it will be hard to prove it to the satisfaction of the DMLE. And nigh-impossible to get the Wizengamot to condemn him.”

“What about Greengrass?” Harry asked. She had been the one to actually hurt the students.

The Headmaster frowned. “While I am confident I could talk her into confessing, though I’d have to hint at an ability to track students, I do not think she would be punished either. An orphaned young pureblood witch lashing out at a student that had attacked and hurt her sister and herself?” He shook his head. “While I am loathe to see her avoid the consequences of her actions, I fear that having her accused and then acquitted, would have disastrous repercussions for Hogwarts.”

“The Slytherins would see it as permission to attack us,” Ron said.

His friend was correct, Harry knew. He ground his teeth. “And we would attack them.”

Dumbledore nodded. “The school would be turned into a battleground. We have been fortunate, very fortunate, so far that no one has died. But that will change should things escalate further.” He stared at Harry and Ron. “I implore you: Do not strike back. Do not let your friends and housemates strike back.”
Harry could understand that request, but at the same time, it galled him. “We can’t let them attack us with impunity. Malfoy won’t stop. If he gets away with this, he’ll do it again.”

“I will take steps to stop him and his friends. Trust me.”

“How? They managed this, despite your precautions!” Ron leaned forward, his hands digging in his thighs.

“It is better you do not know, Mister Weasley.” The Headmaster wryly smiled. “But consider this: The worse things grow, the harder it becomes to keep the DMLE from intervening. Imagine if they interrogated you with Veritaserum. Think of your family and friends.”

Harry felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. Hermione! “They would use this to make us betray her?”

“Blimey!” Ron said.

Dumbledore nodded. “Indeed. The DMLE almost certainly suspects that you have not abandoned your friend, though they lack the leverage and proof to move against you.”

“We can leave Hogwarts,” Harry said. They could hide. Join Hermione. Fight the Death Eaters.

“That is a last resort, Harry. Things are not yet so dire. I remain confident that I can prevent a catastrophe. At least at Hogwarts. But I need your help.”

Harry exchanged a look with Ron. His friend ground his teeth, but slowly nodded.

“Alright, Headmaster.”

It didn’t look like they had a choice. But they’d prepare to flee Hogwarts anyway. Just in case.

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Hogwarts, September 24th, 1996

“What happened?”

Ron Weasley winced when the mass of Gryffindor students almost mobbed Harry and him right when they entered the dorms.

Harry shook his head and took a deep breath. “Someone attacked our third years. Threw something at them that exploded.”

“What?”

“Are they hurt?”

“Who did it?”

“Cursed Slytherins!”

Harry held up his hands. “Wait, wait! We took them to the infirmary. No one died. The teachers are investigating.”

Ron nodded. Though some had looked as if they were dead. Still, and silent. “Until they have found the culprit, we’ll have to stay in our dorms.”
“What? They’re locking us up?”

Ron didn’t catch who said this; too many echoed the sentiment. Harry shook his head. “They don’t want this to escalate.”

“It already escalated!” Neville said.

“They attacked us because Banks sabotaged the stands,” McLaggen cut in.

“Shut up, McLaggen!” Katie said. “Banks was obliviated by the real culprit. It was a Slytherin ploy so they could do this to us and claim innocence!”

McLaggen sneered at her. “Of course you’d say that!”

Harry stepped in. “Calm down, everyone! We need to focus on staying safe, not on blaming each other. Dumbledore has the situation in hand.”

“Doesn’t look like it to me,” McLaggen said, scoffing. “Almost thirty students in the infirmary within a few days? Dumbledore’s losing it.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Katie said. “You’d like the Dark Lord to take over, huh?”

“Do you want us to attack the Slytherins so the Ministry can sack Dumbledore?” Harry said. “Is that your plan?”

“What?” McLaggen stared at him as the rest of the students started whispering and muttering. “No!”

No one was listening to him though, and with a curse, he pushed his way through the throng of students and all but fled to his room. Ron watched him go while Harry once again told the students to stay in their dorms and not attack anyone.

A tug on his sleeve made him turn around. Ginny was there. “Do you think McLaggen is working for the Dark Lord?” she whispered.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. A bit far-fetched, I reckon, but it got the rest to stand down. We’ll have to watch him, though.”

His little sister nodded. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the map. All students are inside their dorms. If they leave, we’ll know.”

“Good. We’ll need to have someone watch the map all the time. There’s more though.” He looked around. Harry still had the attention of most of their house, but Lavender was looking at Ron. “We’ll need to talk about that privately.”

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An hour later, Ron, Harry and Ginny were sitting together in a corner. Things had finally calmed down to the point where there was no chance of the house storming out to attack the Slytherin dungeons, or to lynch suspected traitors in their midsts. Lavender was still watching them, or Ron – he couldn’t tell – but they had been given space enough to cast a privacy spell.

“So… what did you want to talk about?” Ginny asked, looking from Harry to him and back.

“We might have to flee Hogwarts, should the DMLE come down on Dumbledore,” Harry said.

“What?” Ginny gasped.
“They might use any pretext to interrogate us with Veritaserum. We can’t risk that,” Harry said.

“But…” Ginny trailed off and Ron knew she had understood they couldn’t risk anyone finding out about the meetings with Hermione. “Oh.”

He nodded at his sister. “We’ll need to be prepared to flee at a moment’s notice.”

“Does that include me?” Ginny said. She sounded almost afraid, but Ron couldn’t tell if she wanted to come with them, or wanted to stay. She was supposed to have gotten over her crush on Harry, hadn’t she?

“You don’t know what we know.” Ron shook his head. His sister wouldn’t come with them. Mum would flip, and she was too young for this. ”And someone needs to stay at Hogwarts. With the map.”

“I can’t do much by myself,” she countered.

“That’s why we need more people. People we can trust not to betray us,” Harry said. “But apart from Katie and you, we’re a bit stuck.”

“Last year, I’d have picked the Quidditch team,” Ron said, “but other than us and Katie, all of them are new this year.” He looked at Ginny. “Do you trust your dorm mates?”

Ginny hesitated, and Ron winced. Then he glanced at Lavender again. The girl was chatting with Parvati now.

“I think it’s best to pick a few students we can trust not to betray our house, but don’t tell them about the rest,” Harry said.

Ron nodded. That sounded like a good idea. “The prefects. We need them anyway to protect the rest.” And to keep them from going out of control.

Harry and Ginny nodded. Ron’s sister then took a deep breath. “Do you really think you’ll have to flee?”

Harry sighed. Ron shrugged. “I hope we’ll not have to, but… things haven’t been going well for over a year now, have they?”

“Will you be joining…” She looked around.

“Don’t know,” Ron said. When she looked at him, flinching, he added. “I really don’t know.”

But if they did join Hermione, should they flee, he wouldn’t tell her either. For her and their safety.

Harry stood up. “Let’s go and talk to Katie, and the prefects.”

*****

Hogwarts, September 24th, 1996

“I’m telling you, next time I see the twins, I’ll give them a piece of my mind!” Katie said, shaking her head. “Claiming they were just that sneaky, while they had this to help them!” Most of the prefects agreed with her, chuckling. Jokes about not having to check all cupboards any more had already made the round. Hopefully, they’d keep the map a secret, but even if they didn’t - keeping the school safe was more important than keeping the map secret.
Ron himself was headed to his room. With everyone confined to the dorms, and lessons suspended until further notice, there wasn’t much to do, no prefects patrols either, and he could use the opportunity to pack a bag, just in case he had to leave in a hurry.

He was halfway up the stairs when he heard someone running behind him. He whirled around, drawing his wand, and almost cursed a gasping Lavender.

He lowered his wand. “Why’d you run up the stairs?” To the boys’ rooms, even.

She was slightly out of breath. “I need to talk to you. Privately.”

Ron hesitated for a moment, wondering why she hadn’t asked him in the common room, then nodded. “Alright. We can use the third years’ room.”

The room was messy, and empty - all of the occupants were in the infirmary still. He closed the door and cast a privacy spell, then turned back to the witch, who was standing in the middle of the room, shifting her weight from one foot to the other and back.

“Why did you tell us of this map?” she suddenly asked.

He was briefly confused. “The twins kept it a secret so they could pull off their pranks more easily. We kind of kept it a secret after they handed it to Harry. You know the things that happened to him at Hogwarts.” And to Ron and Hermione.

“I know that. But I’m asking why you told us the secret now.” Lavender stared at him. “You could have kept it a secret among you, Harry, and Ginny. Maybe Katie too.”

She was right, of course. He shrugged. “It’s better if more people can keep watch. We’re all in this together.”

“Do you trust us that much then?”

“We wouldn’t have shown you the map otherwise.” Ron told himself he wasn’t lying. If they truly didn’t trust the prefects, they would have looked for others to help out.

Lavender smiled faintly. “You know, I had a crush on you last year.”

Ron nodded. Even he had noticed that.

“You turned me down, though.”

He hadn’t turned her down, technically. Not out loud. Just… ignored her hints. He still nodded in agreement.

“Because you had a crush on Hermione.” She was looking straight into his eyes.

Ron could claim that just because he hadn’t wanted to start something with her didn’t mean he had a crush on someone else. But she was right. He had a crush on his best female friend. “Yes.”

“Did she turn you down?”

He winced. He hadn’t told her. Hadn’t realised, really, until she had gone home, had to go into hiding.

Lavender must have misread his expression since she smiled and moved closer to him. “Well, I still have a crush on you.” She reached out with her hand to his chest.
Ron shook his head. “I never told her.”

The witch stopped, her arm dropping. Then she straightened. “Are you still carrying a torch for her? She’s gone.” She didn’t add ‘And I’m still here’, but her stance and expression said enough.

Ron sighed. He couldn’t tell her that he saw her each day in the enchanted mirror. “I’m still… you know. Sorry.”

Lavender pouted, then slowly nodded. “Alright. But if you ever get over her…” she nodded again, turned around and left.

Ron wasn’t certain if she had had tears in her eyes or if that had been a trick of the light. He felt bad anyway.

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**Cumbria, Britain, September 25th, 1996**

Hermione Granger struggled and sweated despite the cool weather. Running through the forest, loaded down with her rifle and an RPG-7 weighing fifteen pounds by itself was exhausting. Though after almost four weeks of intensive training, she was in the best shape of her life. Which, sadly, didn’t mean that much given that she had never been that interested in sports.

“Come on, Missy! There’s an APC barrelling down this road, and if you can’t set up an ambush in time, all your friends will be killed!” the Sergeant shouted at her.

Snarling, she sped up, jumping over a root and almost losing her footing when the ground was softer than she had expected. She ran on, though, pushing herself until she felt like puking when she dropped in the ditch near the old logging road that cut through the forest. Despite that she managed to prepare the RPG-7 for firing.

“There’s the target! Fire!”

She got on her knees, the launcher on her shoulder, sighted down the road, and sent the training grenade flying at the canvas target raised there. As she had been told to, she didn’t stay and watch if she hit, but dropped into the ditch and started to crawl away as fast as possible.

“That’s a hit. Barely, but you did hit it.” The Sergeant’s tone carried some grudging respect, or so Hermione liked to think while she lay there, panting, on the ground, once again covered with mud.

“Alright. Head back to the camp before you die here, and send the next one up.”

“Yes, Sarge!” she said, a far cry from her usual yell, and shambled off.

She felt better when she reached the camp and handed the RPG-7 to Seamus. “Here! Your turn to blow a vehicle up.”

Seamus grinned. “It’s not fun unless it’s a real explosion.”

She waved him off and walked to the ‘fridge’ with the drinks, grabbing two sodas and a sandwich, then fell more than sat down next to the camp fire, though still ensuring that her rifle wasn’t stuck in the ground. Such habits all of them had picked up quickly.

“You look like you could use a break for a week.”

Hermione looked up from her meal at Allan. After swallowing the bite in her mouth, she answered:
“I’m OK. How are you doing?”

He shrugged. “So far ‘sniper training’ is just long-range target shooting. I do well, though.” He grinned. “I don’t have to run as much as the others either.”

She nodded, bit off and swallowed another chunk of ham and bread, then asked: “How’s Justin doing?”

Allan frowned for a second. “He’s doing well. He has some prior experience with hunting, I think.”

Hermione knew that already. She shrugged, dropping her empty bottle in the container with the rest. “That won’t help with sniping. Or so I understand, from what I read. I guess I’ll find out in the afternoon.” She’d have her own shot at sniper training then. Or what kind of training you could get in an afternoon. Even a week was far too short to become a real sniper. But… the boys had insisted on it. She knew that the same was true for their entire training - they barely knew enough to use the weapons, but they were far from being really competent.

“I’ve been wondering… you’re the only one who doesn’t focus on something. You’ve been trying out every weapon they brought to us. Why?” Allan sat down next to her.

She snorted. “I could say that I don’t want to miss out on anything, but the truth is that I can’t really make good plans if I don’t have an idea about the different weapons and tactics.” In the middle of a battle, she wouldn’t be able to ask for advice from an expert.

“I see.” He sounded angry for a moment, but when she turned her head to look at him, he was smiling. “I should have known you’d think like this.”

Grinning at him, she nodded. “Yes, you should have.” Rubbing her thighs, she added: “I’ll be glad when we’re back in London. Normal clothes are starting to feel weird.”

He laughed. “I felt that way after my first year at Hogwarts. Wearing jeans was weird after a year in robes.”

She smirked. “I just wore dresses more than trousers. But I know what you mean.”

Allan jerked when the staccato sound of a light machine gun broke the brief silence. Hermione shook her head. “Dean’s still not firing short bursts. Too many damn movies, as the Major would say. He will be shouting at him, right now.”

As if on cue, the sound stopped. Hermione stood up. “Time to head to the range.”

“Have fun,” Allan said, waving at her.

She snorted, then realised, walking to the improvised range, that she was having fun. Shaking her head, she muttered: “If I don’t pay attention, I’ll start to prefer the gym over the library!”

And that was a horrible thought.

*****

Hogwarts, September 28th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass knew something terrible had happened as soon as she saw Draco’s expression when he entered the Slytherin common room. When the wizard made a beeline to her and cast a privacy spell, she felt her stomach drop.
“Daphne, we’ve got a problem,” Draco said, without preamble.

“What happened?” Hadn’t he simply gone to meet their Head of House? Crabbe and Goyle had remained behind - at the entrance, guarding it, she noted. “Did they find out about Astoria?”

“They know it’s her.”

Daphne gasped, and stood up. She needed to obliviate her sister to protect her.

Draco grabbed her hand. “Wait! That’s not the thing I’m worried about.”

“What?”

“The Wizengamot would never punish her for striking back against those mudbloods and blood traitors who tried to kill her,” Draco said. “And Dumbledore can’t punish her past a slap on the wrist without the Ministry getting involved.” He shook his head. “No, the problem is that the Gryffindors have a way to track everyone of us! Even inside our dorms!”

She froze. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s not. I have heard this from a trusted source, and I have been able to validate it from another.” Draco shook his head. “But it gets worse. Someone is trying to frame us for sabotaging our own stands. They found some ‘evidence’ of brewing a rotting potion near our dorms. One of them tries to kill us, and Dumbledore blames us!”

“Does Dumbledore actually believe that?” The Headmaster couldn’t be that gullible, Daphne thought. That was a ploy that anyone should have seen through.

“Of course not! He knows it’s a lie, but it allows him to protect his precious Gryffindors. They can do anything to us now, between the tracking and Dumbledore’s protection!”

Daphne swallowed. If they wanted revenge… if the Headmaster let them attack Astoria, knowing he couldn’t punish her… They could track them, plan ambushes with overwhelming force. “But… it’s Dumbledore! He wouldn’t let them do that!”

“He’s been trying to get the Ministry to declare war on the Dark Lord for over a year, despite the Lord’s attempts to make peace. And he knows the Wizengamot won’t condemn any of us.” Draco sounded grim.

“Merlin’s ghost!” Daphne was shaking now.

“He tried to make the Minister pardon the mudbloods! Even Granger, who murdered an Auror!” Draco shook his head. “Hogwarts is not safe any more. I was a fool to come here in the first place. If I had known all of this beforehand...”

And she had been a fool to listen to him, and let Astoria attack the Gryffindors, Daphne thought. But that couldn’t be changed any more. “You plan to leave then.”

He nodded. “And you and Astoria should come with us. The blood traitors will attack you.”

“Us?” she asked.

“Me, Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy, Theo. A few others.” He looked around, scowling when he saw Zabini. That student wouldn’t be coming with them, Daphne knew.

But should she join Draco? He had made a compelling case. Dumbledore was protecting murderers
like Granger, her uncle had told her about the Headmaster’s statements in the Wizengamot. And he was protecting the Gryffindor who had hurt her sister and so many others. No, she couldn’t stay. She couldn’t protect Astoria if they remained at Hogwarts.

“I’ll talk to Tracey and my sister. When do you leave?”

“There’s a staff meeting after dinner. We’ll leave the dorms together and fly away on brooms, until we can apparate or reach a Floo connection. The Gryffindors won’t be able to catch us if we’re quick enough.”

Daphne nodded. Snape was helping them, obviously, by passing this information to Draco. They could do it.

“We’ll be ready.”

She nodded at him, then went to find her sister, and her best friend. They didn’t have much time.

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London, Knockturn Alley, September 28th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle almost wished she was back on ‘punishment detail’ and patrolling Knockturn Alley. Waiting day after day in this flat for the mudbloods to attack Beckett was tiresome. Boring. Frustrating.

“Pointless,” she muttered.


“Nothing. Just commenting on the sense of our mission here.” Brenda sighed and returned her attention to the potions shop.

“You don’t think the muggleborns will come?” her partner asked.

“I think they won’t do anything as long as we’re ready for them,” Brenda said, cynically. “They have the advantage - they can choose where they will strike. We have to defend an entire country.”

“We have more people to do it though,” Martin said.

“We’ll see how long they’ll last when the first ambushes happen.” Brenda scoffed. “That was how it was in the last war. Aurors were getting ambushed when they reacted to a call for help. The mudbloods will do the same. And with their ‘bombs’... we’ll have to be very careful when apparating in response to an alert.”

Martin winced. “That’s true.”

Brenda snorted. “Some are already deserting. Have you heard of Smith?”

“Smith?”

“Vanished during a patrol in Diagon Alley. His partner had to go, and when he returned, Smith had vanished. Witnesses claim he stepped into a side alley, but they didn’t find any trace there.” Brenda shook her head. “Bloody coward.”

“He could have been attacked and kidnapped,” Martin said.
She snorted. “If he was, then we’d have heard of demands made by the kidnappers, or found his body parts strewn over an alley or field. No, the guy was too afraid to face mudbloods and Death Eaters, and ran.”

Martin didn’t sound convinced. “I know him. I was with him in training. He didn’t strike me as a coward or deserter.”

Brenda grinned, without a trace of humour though. “Training is training. You don’t really know a wizard or witch until they’ve been in a fight. Or faced one, and ran.”

“Maybe.”

The rookie was still too inexperienced, Brenda knew. But he wouldn’t run or desert. “Maybe we should take Beckett in. Arrest him for the shady ingredients in his storage room,” she mused. That would end the mission. Beckett would be safe in a Ministry cell, even.

“That would be a poor repayment for his loyalty,” Martin cut in.

“Not if it serves to protect him from the mudbloods.” She glanced back and saw his expression. “You don’t like taking mudbloods in for their own protection?”

“Taking them in against their will is a bit much.”

“You’ve got a talent for diplomacy. Of course it’s for our own protection as much as theirs.” Brenda certainly didn’t want to end up like Lucius Malfoy, bombed to death by mudbloods.

“Beckett wouldn’t work out though - they want him dead.” Martin shook his head.

“Spoil my perfect ‘please everyone’ solution, will you?” She chuckled. “Just for that, you can take your turn at the window early.”

Martin grumbled and took her place at the window while Brenda sat down on the couch. At least they were not out there, trying to arrest more muggleborns for the Ministry. That could be dangerous - a few Aurors had ended up in St Mungo’s so far. No fatalities. Yet.

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Hogwarts, September 28th, 1996

“Harry! Come quickly!”

Harry Potter shot up from his seat in the common room when Ginny called him. She had been with Katie, watching the map. That meant something was up.

He rushed to her, casting a privacy spell. “What’s happening?

She pointed at the map on the table. “Look! The Slytherins are moving, a lot of them!”

“Half their house, I think,” Katie said. “Mostly the older students. And most of the teachers are in that meeting.”

Harry cursed. If they were attacking now… “Get the lower years in their dorms, and call the older years down. We’ll be ready.” He had to alert Dumbledore too.

“They’re running. Up the stairs… They’re not headed towards us. They’re headed towards the gate!” Katie said, looking at him.
Ron arrived. “What’s going on?”

Harry nodded at the map. “It looks like the Slytherins are fleeing from Hogwarts.”

“Good riddance?” his friend asked.

Harry winced. He wasn’t quite certain this was a good thing.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, September 29th, 1996

“Hermione? Are you still awake?”

That sounded like Allan. Hermione stood up from her bed and walked to the door of her room. Allan was indeed standing in the entrance of the Wizarding tent, in front of her door.

She opened the door, and waved him inside. “Come in.”

He stepped inside, raising an eyebrow when he saw her. “Were you already asleep?” he asked, gesturing to her tank top and shorts. He was still in fatigues, clean ones.

Hermione shook her head. “I was in bed, but reading.” She grinned. “I wouldn’t have answered the door otherwise. So, what brings you to my room past midnight?” The group had spent an hour discussing the news that most of House Slytherin had left Hogwarts, after Harry and Ron had informed her. Allan had wanted to hunt down Malfoy right away.

He sat down on her bed. “We’ve had some differences lately, as you know.”

She made a sort-of-agreeing noise. His insistence on taking action prematurely had been irritating, if she was honest.

“I don’t want this to come between us,” he said. “We’re all on the same side.” Allan smiled at her.

She nodded and sat down next to him on the bed. “We are, yes. And I don’t want to argue with you either.” Or with anyone else. But she had to, to prevent potentially fatal mistakes. “Why are you so eager to attack anyway?” She quickly added: “I’m just wondering.”

He looked grim. “It’s for Martin. He was a good friend of mine, and he died because of that traitor. I can’t stand the thought of Martin being dead, and his killer walking around.” Allan ground his teeth. “I want to avenge him, and make certain that no one else will betray us again.” He sighed. “I’m sorry if I made you angry.”

Hermione smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m not angry. I understand what you’re feeling.” If Harry or Ron had been murdered, she’d feel the same. Or worse. “I’m just trying to keep us from being too hasty. We’re almost done with our training here. We’ll get Beckett, trust me.”

He put his hand on her hand, squeezing gently. “Thank you.” He smiled at her.

Hermione smiled back. “That’s what friends do.”

Allan nodded. He looked at her without saying anything for a moment. “Can I ask you something personal?”

Hermione nodded. “Of course.”
He leaned towards her, his eyes not leaving hers. “Are you in a relationship with Potter or Weasley?”

Hermione blinked. That was more personal than she had expected. And why would he ask that? Was he... suddenly, she was all too aware of their situation: Both sitting on her bed, their legs touching, and her in just a top and shorts... Had she unintentionally led him on? She shook her head, saw him starting to smile, and quickly said. “I’m not involved with anyone. I can’t, anyway. There is so much to do for the Resistance.” She smiled at him, hoping he’d understand.

He nodded, a bit stiffly. He had understood, then. “That’s true. I better let you get some rest. Good night, Hermione.”

“Good night, Allan.”

She waited until he had left before closing her eyes and sighing, laying down on her bed.

That could have gone better.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, September 29th, 1996

Auror Karen Blinings hated the midnight to morning shift. But as one of the youngest Aurors, she was guaranteed to be on it. An older Auror had told her that it was usually an easy shift - not much happened when everyone was in bed. A peaceful patrol almost every time.

That had been before the mudbloods and the Death Eaters started their wars against the Ministry. Nowadays, Karen dreaded that patrol. Every dark corner or alley could hide an enemy. At least she wasn’t alone, but had a partner. She looked at him. Jacob Parker had been in the same year as her at Hogwarts, but they hadn’t had much contact, not with him in Ravenclaw and her in Hufflepuff. They had become friends during training though, and had been on the same assignment since then.

“Imperio! Kill him!”

Jacob gasped, drawing his wand. He was too slow to stop her though - and he had been looking for the caster of the Imperius at first. Karen’s Reductor Curse blew his wand and hand up, splattering blood all over her and him. He opened his mouth, but she couldn’t hear him scream. Silenced, probably. It didn’t matter. Her next spell drilled a hole in his head and he dropped.

“Walk into that Alley and wait for me at the end!”

She nodded and started walking into the side alley the man had pointed out to her, ignoring the Vanishing Charms and other spells cast behind her. She had an order, and would obey.

She didn’t have to wait for long. The other wizard came and bound her with conjured ropes, then silenced her. Then he ended the Imperius.

Karen wanted to scream, but no sound left her mouth. She had killed her partner! Her friend! She panted, crying, and looked at the man who had forced her to do this. Her eyes widened when the wizard pulled his hood back. She knew that man! From Hogwarts. Had to be a Ravenclaw. What had been his name again?

“Hello there!” The wizard student smiled. “Shouldn’t have joined the Aurors. Now you’ve killed your partner. But don’t worry - he’ll get even.”

What was he talking about? Jacob was dead!
The man brandished a club to her. A club in the same color as her own robes. She stared at it, then at the man. The wizard nodded. “I transfigured his corpse into a club. You’ll be beaten to death with your murdered partner.”

The wizard’s smile widened as he lifted the club over his head. “But don’t worry - no one will ever find your bodies.”

Then the club came down, and once more Karen wanted to scream, but couldn’t. By the time she died, her throat was raw.

*****
Some of my colleagues claim that the flight of a substantial part of House Slytherin’s students from Hogwarts in September 1996 effectively removed hostages from Dumbledore’s control, allowing his opponents, both political and otherwise, to put more pressure on him without risking their children’s lives. This theory completely ignores the fact that those students had just returned to Hogwarts a few weeks before. Their families certainly wouldn’t have done that, had they feared that they would be hostages.

In marked contrast to this, the Ministry was at the same time still trying to acquire hostages. With their plan to take the youngest muggleborn hostages foiled, they went for those muggleborns who had not yet left Wizarding Britain - mostly the parents of half-blood Ministry employees because those still had some measure of trust in the Ministry. The claim of the Ministry that this was for the muggleborns’ own protection was not entirely wrong, since the Resistance started taking action against “traitors” and “collaborators” amongst the muggleborn population, but at the same time, it caused many half-bloods to reconsider their own position.

The Ministry’s policies had not directly touched half-bloods so far, and their parents had escaped the worst as well. That was all too understandable, since half-bloods had generally been raised in the Magical World and not many of the Dark Lord’s sympathisers in the Ministry would be as rash and reckless as to even contemplate persecuting Albus Dumbledore and a third of Britain’s population while they were already struggling to oppress a fifth of the British wizards and witches. But now, faced with either risking attacks by the Resistance or being used by an increasingly desperate Ministry, the half-bloods had a difficult choice to make.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Hogwarts, September 30th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his seat and looked at Amelia and Cornelius. It made for an interesting change to see them in his office, in front of his desk, like the students they had been years ago. Which was part of the reason he had not gone to the Ministry but had let them come to him, despite their Auror escorts.

“What is going on at Hogwarts, Albus?” Cornelius asked. He was trying to sound outraged, but his insecurity spoiled the effect.

“I suppose you are referring to the recent events,” the Headmaster said.

“Of course we’re talking about them!” Amelia said in a clipped tone. The witch was angry. That wasn’t unusual for her, but unfortunately her anger had lately been directed more, far more, at Albus than at the Dark Lord. “Almost thirty hospitalised children, Albus! On your watch!”

“Minor injuries, for the most part, and easily treated by Poppy. Calling them ‘hospitalised’ would be making light of those who suffer from dark curses or life-threatening injuries. Something I’d expect from a politician in the service of the Dark Lord.” Amelia gasped and stood up, outraged. Undaunted, he continued: “Incidentally, the Dark Lord’s machinations are at the heart of this whole matter, as I have managed to deduce.”

“What?” Cornelius asked.
Amelia stared at the Headmaster. “Are you claiming that this was the work of the Dark Lord?”

“One of his followers, at least.” Albus stood up. “You are aware of the collapse of the Quidditch stands of House Slytherin a week ago.”

“Yes. Sabotage, as you yourself found out!” Cornelius said.

Albus nodded. “Indeed. But as I also found out, sabotage done using a child as an unwitting, manipulated and obliviated tool. A ploy to make the Slytherins - a House without any muggleborn students - appear as the victims of muggleborn aggression while not truly endangering them.” He made a dismissive gesture. “A fall from a height much lower than a typical Quidditch accident, close to the school, and with the Slytherin Quidditch team ready to help - and coincidentally, look quite heroic at the same time.” He smiled without humour.

“Blaming the victims for the crime, Albus?” Amelia asked, glaring at him.

“Hardly. For a few days later, a Slytherin student threw a vial of Exploding Fluid at a group of children. Only the fact that the prefects leading them managed to cast Shield Charms in time saved their lives.” Albus knew he was exaggerating a bit here, of course. But that was needed in politics. And this confrontation was all about politics, even if Amelia would deny it if asked. In her own way, she was quite naive. “This happened at the same time as most of House Slytherin were creating a diversion for the staff in the Great Hall - led by Draco Malfoy, the son of the Dark Lord’s former right hand.”

The Minister winced at that reminder, but Amelia didn’t flinch. “Conjecture. A nice-sounding tale, Albus. Do you have proof for this?”

He smiled. “The cauldron the rotting potion was brewed in was found near the Slytherin dorms. Draco Malfoy was involved in both incidents, in central roles. But most importantly: As soon as he heard that I was aware of the culprit of this latest attack, he fled.” He leaned forward, folding his hands under his chin. “As you are fond of saying: Those who have nothing to hide do not need to flee from the authorities.”

Amelia’s glare intensified. Like many hypocrites, she didn’t like having her own words turned against her, Albus knew.

“He claims he was afraid for his life. That he feared Gryffindor aggression,” Cornelius said.

“Of course he would claim that. Even though he had not been attacked at all - despite his history of hostility and aggression.” Albus scoffed. “If he truly was afraid, why would he flee now, after an attack on the Gryffindor third years, and not after the collapse of the stands?”

“He says the Gryffindors have a way to track everyone in school,” Cornelius said. “Allowing them to strike at the purebloods with impunity.”

Albus almost rolled his eyes. Didn’t the Minister realise just how much like a puppet of Malfoy he was acting? A puppet of Draco Malfoy, a child, not even an experienced politician!

“He says a lot of things. If they had that, why didn’t they use it to do exactly that, strike at the Slytherins? And why did they not use this to hide the sabotage on the stands? That was discovered because the obliviated student went missing for an hour, something that could have been easily avoided.” Albus scoffed. “It is a fairly obvious attempt to shift the blame, and hide his own guilt.”

His two visitors exchanged glances. An uneasy one in Cornelius’s case, and a frustrated one in Amelia’s. Albus almost smiled. His plan had worked. Draco was no Lucius; he was more like
Narcissa - easily spooked, and not quite as cunning as he thought he was. He had run, just as Albus had known he would.

“That still leaves the fact that two dozen students were hurt at your school. And that you had to lock up the students to prevent more violence,” Amelia said.

It was a parting shot, nothing more. He shrugged. “No one was seriously hurt, as I said before, and the culprit has left the school. Lessons will resume tomorrow, though the staff will keep a close watch on everyone.”

And Albus and Filius would be analysing this map, so they could help Remus and Sirius duplicate it. With Draco and his cohorts gone from Hogwarts, the Dark Lord’s followers wouldn’t have to risk hurting their own children should they strike at the school. Additional security would be needed.

“The Board of Governors might not share your optimistic view,” Cornelius said. “They might consider your handling of this affair inadequate as the Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

Albus narrowed his eyes. “Should they do that I might consider their actions as proof of their allegiance with the Dark Lord.” Cornelius paled, and Albus glared at Amelia. “I am growing tired of struggling to protect the innocents while remaining within the bounds of laws passed by inept and corrupt people. I would suggest you stop pushing me, before you go too far.” Amelia was about to answer him, but he cut her off. “Neither of you know what a real war is like. Ask some of the few remaining British wizards and witches who fought at my side in Grindelwald’s War and you might understand why they and all of Europe scoff when you talk of the ‘Blood War’ twenty years ago that you fear so much. Ask, and then ask yourself if you truly wish to have me as your enemy. For if it comes to it, I will not merely fight you, I will wage war against you as I did against Grindelwald.”

He hadn’t raised his voice, not much, but Cornelius was cringing, and even Amelia looked shaken.

“Now go and take your Aurors with you, and do not bother me again when you are acting on Voldemort’s orders!”

Both left his office, not quite running, but looking remarkably like cowed first years. Albus leaned back in his seat, sighing. He had almost lost his temper, but if Cornelius and Amelia continued on their foolish path… The Headmaster shook his head. He doubted they would actually seek out a veteran of Grindelwald’s War. Or if they did, believe his tales. They didn’t want to believe just how bad things could become. Not that there were many such veterans left anyway. He imagined the two talking to Aberforth, and snorted. That would be a memorable conversation. To see Aberforth’s scorn turned on someone else… He closed his eyes, old pain filling him as images of a Prussian wizarding village filled his mind, body parts strewn around, Inferi shuffling through the ruins...

Albus shook his head. He had no time to waste reminiscing on the past. There was far too much to do. Even with most of the bigots of House Slytherin gone, Hogwarts was hardly as safe as it should be. Constant surveillance would be needed. Or constant vigilance, as another old friend of his would say.

But at least for now, this crisis had been handled.

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London, Ministry of Magic, September 30th, 1996

“Bones is on the warpath,” Auror Parkinson said to Brenda Brocktuckle as soon as she entered the office.
“And good afternoon to you as well,” Brenda answered, as sarcastically as she could - she had just gotten up, having had a late shift in Knockturn Alley. She was in no mood for Parkinson’s usual drivel.

The other Auror snorted. “It’s not a good afternoon at all. Two Aurors went missing last night, and Bones was all but thrown out of Hogwarts by Dumbledore. She’s livid.”

“What?” Brenda stared at her colleague. “Who’s missing?”

“Parker and Blinings. Didn’t return from a patrol in Diagon Alley.”

Rookies, both, but not the type to desert. Or so Brenda would have thought. “Both vanished?”

Parkinson nodded. “Neither was home when we checked. It didn’t look as if they had been preparing to leave either.”

“Were they a couple?” It was frowned upon, but it wasn’t exactly forbidden, nor that rare. That was about the only explanation Brenda could think of for two Aurors deserting together. The other explanations for their disappearance were far worse.

“Not to my knowledge.” Parkinson shook his head.

Brenda hissed. “Did you find any traces?”

Parkinson shook his head. “Nothing. No blood, no remains, no witnesses have come forward so far. I was actually hoping you might have noticed something.”

Brenda sighed. “Sorry. I didn’t spot anything out of the ordinary.” She was aware that while he didn’t know exactly where she was posted, or what she was doing, he knew the gist of it. You couldn’t keep such missions a secret, not for that long.

“I didn’t expect you to, not really.” Parkinson sighed. “My gold’s on mudbloods having kidnapped them. They’ve been quiet too long.”

“Damn.” Brenda wasn’t that certain, but it was the most probable explanation, given the lack of a Dark Mark floating above mutilated bodies. But that might have been a mercy, compared to being kidnapped by the mudbloods. “If they are attacking our patrols like that…”

Parkinson shrugged. “How’s the hunt going?” He didn’t outright state that he thought this might have been been avoided had Brenda managed to capture the mudbloods, but he might as well have.

She glared at him anyway. “They haven’t shown themselves so far.” Brenda was still hoping they would make a move on Beckett - Granger was supposedly good at holding grudges. But so was Brenda. The mudblood would pay for murdering her partner. All of them would pay. She ground her teeth in frustration before taking a deep breath to calm down. Somewhat. “What happened at Hogwarts?”

“Fudge took Bones with him to visit Hogwarts, to ‘investigate’ the reasons for half of House Slytherin fleeing the school two days ago.” Parkinson didn’t hide his disdain for the Minister. “Turns out Dumbledore is convinced that they ran away because they were behind both the sabotage of their own Quidditch stands and the attack on the Gryffindor Herbology class.”

“What?” Brenda stared at her colleague. Did the Slytherins really go that far? “And Bones accepted that?”
Parkinson chuckled. “That’s the interesting bit.” He looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “I’ve heard this straight from Smith, who is on Fudge’s protection detail: Dumbledore threatened the Minister and Bones, then threw them out, and told them not to bother him any more, or he’d deal with them like he dealt with Grindelwald.”

“Merlin’s arse!” If they had to fight the Dark Lord, the mudbloods, and Dumbledore… Brenda didn’t want to contemplate that.

“I guess the Headmaster finally lost his temper. Or his mind.” Parkinson smiled. “Apparently, Fudge ordered Bones to leave Hogwarts alone. You know how she reacted to that.”

Brenda nodded. Bones hated it when the Minister meddled with her department.

“So, what do you think? Is Dumbledore protecting the mudbloods while they kill off the pureblood students?” Parkinson leaned towards her, smiling.

Brenda shrugged. “I’ve investigated neither him nor Hogwarts, so I can’t say what happened. But the mudbloods who destroyed Malfoy Manor would have killed the kids, not sent them to the infirmary.”

“So you think the Slytherins did it?”

“I told you, I haven’t investigated the incidents. And it doesn’t look like I ever will. So, I’m not going to speculate.” Unlike him.

“You might get your chance. Fudge will change his opinion as soon as the next batch of kids get hurt and their parents call on him,” the other Auror said, grinning.

“Do you want to see more children hurt?” She stared at him.

“Of course not. I’m just being realistic.”

He had been a Slytherin as well, she remembered. Maybe Dumbledore had been correct. “Well, there’s paperwork waiting for me. Good day, Parkinson.”

“Catch a mudblood, Brocktuckle.”

She scoffed at him, and headed to her desk, where her partner was sitting. He had finished all his paperwork already, she knew that - the rookie still came in early.

“Hi, Martin.” She sat down and started to sort through the memos and scrolls.

“Hi, Brenda.”

She looked up. “You don’t sound as happy as a rookie should, having such an important assignment. What happened?”

“I knew Karen Blinings. We were in the same year.”

Damn. “I’m sorry.”

“They haven’t found a body yet.”

She nodded, though both of them knew though that the odds of his friend being still alive were very small.
“Damn mudbloods,” he said.

She nodded again. Damn mudbloods indeed.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, September 30th, 1996

“Well, you’re not the sorriest lot I ever had as recruits,” Sergeant Boones said, staring at the Muggleborn resistance lined up in the middle of their camp. “But don’t think for a moment that you’re soldiers! You barely know enough to not kill yourself with your weapons!”

“Yes, sarge!” the group yelled.

Hermione thought the dour mercenary was smiling, for an instant. At least his lips twitched. Then she turned her attention back to Major Kolen, who was sitting at the camp table with her. The man had realised that Justin wasn’t their leader about a week into their training.

“He’s right. You’ve learned a lot, but you haven’t any experience. You don’t know how you will react when the shooting starts for real. Whatever you’re planning, you need a few veterans to lead you,” the major said.

Hermione smiled. “Don’t worry. We know that.” She pulled out a bag and put it on the table. “The second part of your payment.”

He snorted while he started counting the money. “I don’t know what you’re planning. But you are up to something. I’d have pegged you for communists, but you lack their rhetoric, and you’d have hired Cubans or former Soviets to train you.”

“Whatsoever we will be doing, you won’t be affected.” It was eating him, she knew, to not understand what they were planning. She could understand that - she hated mysteries herself. It couldn’t be helped, though.

He snorted. “You keep saying that, and you sound like you even believe it, but it makes no sense. The gear, the training, the group - you’re not some stupid kids playing war. If you were, you’d have dropped out of training after the first week. The money you spent would have paid for professionals to solve whatever ‘problem’ you have, but you plan to deal with it yourself. Yet you’re not stupid.”

Kolen was grinding his teeth at the end. “It doesn’t add up. The only thing that makes a bit of sense is that you’re forming a guerilla group, but I haven’t yet met any political fanatic who didn’t start trying to convert me after a week or two working together.”

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to wipe your memory,” Hermione said. It wasn’t telling him anything. It was simply a joke, unless...

Kolen laughed, then suddenly stopped and stared at her, then at the tents of the group. Tents neither he nor the sergeant had ever entered, without ever wondering why. She could almost watch how he connected the dots. “I’ve seen things, in Africa.”

Hermione nodded.

“I would have never expected that. Not here.” He snorted. “I guess I don’t want to know what you’ll be fighting.”

She smiled. So, the tales of the African countries not being quite as strict with upholding the Statute as the rest of the world were true.
“Well, good luck, Miss. If you need some more help, you know how to contact me.” He stood up and offered his hand to her.

She shook it. “Thank you, Major.”

*****

“We should have obliviated them. We could have taken back most of the money too,” Allan said, after the two mercs had left the area. “They might betray us.”

“We’ll move the camp, and they know nothing else,” Hermione said. “Betraying people just because it’s convenient is not a habit we should develop.” She would have chosen sharper words, but she didn’t want to make things even more awkward between her and Allan - it wasn’t often she had to turn down a boy who was interested in her. Not that Allan looked as if he had taken the rejection that hard. He was acting as if nothing had happened.

“Besides, we can afford paying them,” Justin added.

Allan sighed. “I just worry. Martin trusted that traitor, and he died for it. I want us to be safe. Well, as safe as possible, now that we can start fighting back,” he added with a grin.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. We have to plan our next operation. And we need to meet Clifton and Chadwick.” They had finally convinced the former Hit-Wizards to meet them - which hopefully meant that they believed them that they were not purebloods trying to trap them. They would still take precautions, of course. But so would the Resistance.

“Our next mission is clear: Killing Beckett,” Allan said.

Most of the group nodded.

“We should also look into killing Malfoy,” Allan continued. “He tried to massacre children at Hogwarts.”

Once again, the muggleborns nodded. Hermione agreed as well, though she had some small misgivings. She shouldn’t, though, she told herself - For as long as she had known Malfoy, he had been a cruel bigot. She had no doubt that if he wasn’t already a Death Eater, he’d soon be one. And he had, as Harry and Ron had told her, tried to kill the Gryffindor third years. He deserved death.

She nodded. “He’ll be hard to find, though.” She’d ask Sirius if he could help - Harry’s godfather was related to the bigot, after all, and had enough gold to pay bribes and informants easily. “But we’ll deal with Beckett first.”

Everyone around her smiled.

*****

Hogwarts, October 1st, 1996

Hogwarts felt different with most of the Slytherins gone, Harry Potter thought while walking back to the Gryffindor Dorms. They were still confined to their dorms, but the lessons had resumed. The tension that had filled the school for the last month seemed to have lessened as well - but that might just be the absence of the worst bigot and his cronies.

“Don’t get lost in your thoughts,” Ron said. “There are still bigots around. Constant vigilance, remember?”
Harry snorted. “Just because I’m not jumping at shadows doesn’t mean I’m oblivious.”

Lavender giggled. “You’re a bit too handsome to be a younger Moody, Ron.”

Harry saw Ron frown before his friend answered: “You can’t be too paranoid, not with the Dark Lord out there.”

Harry nodded. “And with most of the Slytherins gone, Voldemort’s Death Eaters don’t have to be too careful about collateral damage, should they attack the school.”

That had been a bit harsh, he realised when he heard the others gasp. Neville said: “D-Do you think they’ll attack the school?”

“I don’t think so. They fear the Headmaster,” Harry said quickly. “But we should keep our guard up – there are still bigots around.”

“Yes,” Parvati said. “The Ravenclaws are still split, though their bigots are now more nervous, and don’t act as badly any more.”

“I wish all of them were gone!” Ron exclaimed. “And the muggleborns were back!”

Harry nodded. “I’d trade all of them for Hermione.”

Harry caught Neville glaring at him. He glared back. “She’s worth a dozen pureblood families full of bigots.”

Ron laughed. “A dozen, or more!”

Neville trembled, then pushed his chin up. “She’s wanted for murdering an Auror! What would you say if she had killed a relative of yours?”

Harry scoffed. “If they had tried to arrest her? I’d say ‘good riddance’! If you arrest muggleborns, you might as well wear your Death Eater mask openly.”

“You can’t take the law into your hands!” Neville said.

Ron snorted. “And why not? Because you should buy it instead, like Malfoy and the other rich bigots did? Dad’s in the Ministry, he knows all about how the Wizengamot handles the laws.”

Harry nodded. Sirius was very vocal about the corruption of the Ministry as well. “If you have enough gold, you can buy your acquittal. If you don’t… it’s Azkaban for you. Even if you’re innocent.” He looked Neville straight into the eyes. "You should ask your gran what she thought when your parents joined Dumbledore and took the law into their own hands."

Neville didn’t say anything after that and went straight up to his room once they reached their dorms.

*****

“You know, Lavender seems sweet on you,” Harry remarked half an hour later, sending a pawn to threaten Ron’s knight.

“I know,” his friend said, moving his bishop.

Harry blinked. Had Ron missed his threatened knight? But if he had, why wasn’t the figure protesting the lapse? He took it anyway. “You don’t seem to be sweet on her though.”
“She’s pretty enough, and she’s nice, and she’s in Gryffindor, so she’s brave, but…” Ron moved his rook. “Check.”

Harry stared at the board. If he moved his king, Ron’s queen would … and if he blocked the rook, then the bishop would… and his figures were glaring at him. Sighing, he tipped his protesting king over, conceding. “But?”

“She’s no Hermione,” Ron said. Harry glanced at him. His friend wasn’t looking at him.

“No, she isn’t. No one is,” Harry said. He didn’t know how to react to this. Hermione was their best friend. But if Ron felt something more for her… He imagined the two together, and felt jealous. And not just because he might be left out. He wanted to ask Ron if he fancied Hermione, but he wasn’t certain if he wanted to know the answer.

Ron looked at him, but didn’t say anything either. After about a minute, he gestured at the board. “Another game?”

“I’ve got map duty in a bit, but OK,” Harry said.

Neither of them mentioned girls for the rest of the evening.

*****

London, East End, October 1st, 1996

“Home sweet home!” Seamus declared when the Resistance sat down to eat at the table in their safe house.

“You know, we didn’t exactly rough it in the camp,” Sally-Anne remarked, shaking her head slightly at his antics while she put down a big bowl of spaghetti.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Seamus said, grinning. “It’s what you say when you get home from camping.”

Hermione almost said that they were in a safe house, not home, but snorted instead. She didn’t know where her home was, any more. She had had to leave Hogwarts, her family had had to leave their house… this safe house might as well be her new home, even though she knew it should be temporary, and that they might be forced to evacuate it should the Ministry or the Death Eaters discover it. That was why all her books and important belongings were in her enchanted bag, ready to be picked up in a second.

“The armoury’s finished,” Justin said as he arrived. He took a seat next to Sally-Anne, and Hermione noticed the witch smiling a bit too much. Had they become a couple? Had she missed that? First Allan approaching her, then this - what did that mean for their group, if people started to pair up?

Seamus was already heaping pasta on his plate while Dean brought the sauces, causing Mary to berate him for not waiting until everyone was seated.

“Yes, mum,” Seamus said, flippantly, then winced. “Sorry.”

No one liked to be reminded that they all had left their families. Some had visited them during their trips back to London while they were at boot camp. Hermione hadn’t. There had been too much to do, she had told herself. But she would visit them, properly, soon. As soon as she had the time.

The rest of the meal was spent chatting about the latest news from muggle Britain. After observing
Justin and Sally-Anne, Hermione was certain they were a couple. She felt a brief flash of jealousy. Justin had been the one she had been closest to too, among the Resistance. It wasn’t that she was interested in him, not like that, but him being with Sally-Anne just made her feel even more lonely, without her best friends. She told herself she could have returned Allan’s ‘offer’, if she had really wanted a boyfriend, but… they simply lacked chemistry. There was no spark, some of the heroines in those books she didn’t want anyone to know she read would say. Which was weird - Allan was smart, mature, and dedicated. She would have thought she’d fall for such a man. And yet…

After the table was cleared and the dishes were done - magic made both easy - Allan spoke up.

“Now that we’re back, and have moved the camp in the woods to a different location,” Allan started, “What do we do about Beckett?”

“We could blow his shop up!” Seamus said. “Everyone would know it was us. And they’d know we did Malfoy Manor too.”

That would help their reputation with the former Hit-Wizards they hoped to recruit, Hermione knew. But the Ministry would also know they were the ones responsible, and would focus their efforts on them. Hermione would prefer to leave the Aurors guessing. It would make it easier to fight the Death Eaters without having to fight the Ministry too. On the other hand, the Ministry was still hunting them, even though all they had done was defending themselves and hiding, as far as the Aurors knew. And they had murdered Martin.

“Blowing up the shop risks collateral damage, but I do not think sniping is a better option. And a fly-by shooting has to deal with the wards too,” she added, with a smirk at the image that conjured in her mind.

“Machine gunner on a broom?” Dean grinned. “That sounds wonderful!”

“Apart from the wards Hermione mentioned, it’s also dangerous,” Justin said. “If there are Aurors waiting for us, not even Disillusionment Charms will protect us that well.”

“The wards are the real problem. A blast powerful enough to go through them will lay waste to half the street if we use the same bomb that we used before.” Hermione had done the math and arithmancy. “That’s not an acceptable price to pay; we’d risk alienating those half-bloods and purebloods who support us or at least are neutral towards us.”

“Most of the half-bloods are no better than purebloods, and many are worse,” Allan said. “We all knew them at Hogwarts - you couldn’t tell who was a half-blood and who was a pureblood, most of the time.”

“Unless you saw who the Slytherins were sneering at more,” Dean cut in, grinning.

“That’s because most half-bloods are raised in the Magical World,” Hermione said. “They can’t exactly spend too much time in the muggle world until they understand how to keep magic a secret. It’s natural that they would identify with Wizarding Britain.”

“We can’t let Beckett live just because we are worried about how people who did nothing when the Aurors started persecuting us and hunting us might react,” Allan said.

“We won’t,” Hermione said. “But we need to take the wards into account. And I think I have a way to do that.”

She leaned forward and started to explain her plan.
Hermione Granger made a mental note to have the Resistance get some tunnel combat training when she, Allan, Justin, Seamus and Dean entered the maze of old, abandoned sewers and tunnels that criss-crossed beneath London’s magical alleys. The assault rifles they were carrying were not exactly ideal for this. Though if all went well, they wouldn’t have to fight.

Stopping at the first intersection, she pulled out the map she had acquired from the muggle offices yesterday, and checked their position. “We’re on the right track. We’ll take the left for about a hundred yards. If the map is correct.” Which, given the age of some of those tunnels, and the fact that the map didn’t show the magically concealed area, was not given.


“We’re at the boundary then,” Hermione said, marking the position on her map, then stuck a small spool of yarn down on the ground with a Sticking Charm before she grabbed the thread sticking out from the spool.

“Here there be dragons, deep dragons!” Seamus said.

Justin shook his head, even though he was chuckling. Hermione refrained from glaring at the boys’ D&D reference. “There is a possibility that we’ll encounter magical pests here. Creatures that won’t flee from us like the rats we saw.”

“Not all of those rats fled from us. A few were so big, they were eyeing us as if we were their food,” Dean said.

“What are the kind of creatures we could encounter here anyway?” Allan asked.

“Vampires come to mind,” Hermione said. “Most creatures would not find enough prey here, and those who did wouldn’t be dangerous to humans.”

“Great. We should have taken a flamethrower,” Seamus complained.

“We’re not giving you a flamethrower,” Dean said. “You can set them on fire with your wand.”

“They might not be hostile,” Hermione said. “Though most of them joined Voldemort in the 70s,” she added.

“Fry first, ask questions later, got it,” Dean said.

Hermione nodded. She didn’t like it, but the odds of a vampire that wasn’t a criminal hiding in such a place were low. And those vampires who were criminals were likely to prey on humans - muggles - at least from time to time. “Keep your eyes open and on your sectors,” she said.

Allan nodded, and took point. Seamus was behind him, keeping an eye on the ceiling. Hermione, who was casting the Four-Point Spell she had invented for Harry in their fourth year, and Justin followed, with Dean bringing up the rear. Fortunately, they were not in a sewer that was actually in use, so they didn’t have to keep an eye on murky water.

They saw more rats - bigger ones, the size of cats - flee when the flashlights mounted on their weapons and headbands caught them, but didn’t encounter any magical creature until they passed the ward again. Hermione checked the map, marked it, and checked how much yarn she had dragged with her. She smiled at the group. “It fits my estimate, and corresponds to our map of the Alleys.”
It took another half an hour and two more tunnels to map out the entire area enough to pinpoint the location of Beckett’s shop from the aerial picture they had taken two days ago. If not for Cleaning Charms they’d all have been covered with dust and dirt and rather wet. And complaining more than they already were. If Hermione didn’t know better, she’d think some of them would prefer to bomb all of Knockturn Alley just to avoid the effort of finding the right spot. At least Seamus stopped complaining as soon as they took out the Semtex.

While the former Gryffindor prepared the bomb, Hermione transfigured the stone and earth above them into air, creating a vertical shaft until she hit the shop’s warded basement. A quick Levitation spell later the Semtex with the timer running was in place and a few conjuration spells filled the shaft with stone.

“Let’s move it,” Hermione said. “We don’t want to be here when the bomb goes off.”

“I thought you had calculated the blast’s power,” Seamus said.

“For the effect on the building and ward,” she answered. “I couldn’t really calculate how the underground will take it.”

With that, she apparated away to their rallying spot.

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London, Knockturn Alley, October 4th, 1996

‘Don’t buy from Beckett’s Potions! He’s a traitor to muggleborns! And he’ll pay for his crimes!’

Brenda Brocktuckle shook her head, skimming over the latest propaganda leaflet. The mudbloods had almost filled the Alley with them.

“Do you think that’s a warning, or a threat?” Martin Runcorn asked.

“I don’t know if this means they will try something. But we know now that the mudbloods haven’t forgotten nor forgiven Beckett.” Brenda dropped the parchment and looked through the window in their flat.

“Or they simply want us to think so, and want Beckett to flee so he can be killed without us protecting him.” Martin joined her at the window.

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“That’s a bit too clever for the mudbloods - they’re all too young to have enough experience to think like that. They’d also need inside information and surveillance to track Beckett should we move him,” Brenda said. “No, I think this is a cheap attempt to hurt Beckett’s business because they can’t get to him. Unless they are actually as foolish as trying to attack Beckett with us ready for them.”

“Unless they drop a bomb from the air that takes out the Alley.” Martin said what Brenda and anyone with any brains in the corps feared.

“I doubt that.” If the mudbloods went that far, no one would be safe in public.

“Well…”

Martin was cut off by a massive explosion that shook the building they were in.

“Merlin’s arse!” Brenda cursed, casting a Shield Charm. Where Beckett’s Potions had stood a giant dust cloud had been thrown up, shrouding half the Alley. She quickly cast a Bubble-Head Charm as
well and ran towards the stairs.

The street was covered with debris, some on fire. Next to the door she saw the remains of a witch, smashed to pulp by parts of the front of the shop. She gasped, then saw it wasn’t a witch, but a hag when the cowl hiding the ugly face of the creature fell off. Then she heard the screaming. A wizard in a torn robe was staring at the bleeding stump of a leg, cut off above the knee. Probably by glass, she thought. A spell later, he wasn’t bleeding any more.

Nearby, more Aurors were coming out from the other flat. Martin, next to her, was guiding two coughing, stumbling elderly witches out of the slowly settling dust cloud. Brenda spotted another wizard, on the ground, coughing. She cast a Bubble-Head Charm on him. He kept coughing though. Then she saw blood dripping from his lips. A quick spell didn’t show any injury though. But why...

“Damn!” She grabbed one of the bezoars she kept on her, and stuffed it down the man’s throat. “Martin!” she yelled, “The dust cloud is poisonous as well!” And it had spread over half of Knockturn Alley, and part of Diagon Alley!

Martin cursed, and pulled out his bezoars to help the two old witches with him. Brenda floated the still coughing, but also still breathing wizard towards him as well, then checked on the one missing a leg. He was coughing, but maybe just from the dust. She stuffed another bezoar into his mouth.

The Auror didn’t see many other survivors. Whoever had been closer to the shop had been killed. And Beckett… he had been inside his shop. She doubted they’d find any of his body parts.

Wiping dust from her face with a quick spell, she stared at the destruction. There was but a crater left where the building had been standing. Most of the alleys around it had been destroyed as well, and the rest were covered with debris, some of it on fire, or contaminated with ingredients. She saw more people moving through the still settling cloud, and from the looks of it, none of them were smart or skilled enough to cast a Bubble-Head Charm. St Mungo’s would be packed with people needing treatment. At least the wards on the neighbouring buildings had held, if barely.

She ground her teeth and vowed that she would bring the monsters responsible for this to justice.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, October 5th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass winced when she saw the headline of the Daily Prophet: ‘Knockturn Alley blown up and poisoned!’ She quickly skimmed the article. Apparently, the mudbloods had destroyed half of Knockturn Alley with explosions and poisoned dust, just to kill one mudblood who had betrayed them.

“Monsters! They are monsters!” Astoria was shaking her head. “Mad beasts we need to take down before they kill us all!”

Daphne nodded. All that destruction, all those deaths, just to kill one traitor? They had to do something. “But you’re too young for this.”

“What? I blew up the Gryffindors!” Astoria stood up.

“That was an exception.” Daphne stared at her sister, then slapped her hand down on the newspaper, scaring some of the wizards in the pictures away. “The mudbloods who did this are experienced, not some third year students.”

“Potter won the tournament and faced the Dark Lord as a fourth year!”
“You’re not Potter!” Daphne snapped. When she saw the hurt look on her sister’s face, she took a deep breath to calm down. “Astoria… I don’t want you to get hurt. The Gryffindors already want to attack you. What do you think would happen if you were caught outside our Wards by this mudblood ‘resistance’?” She stood up as well, and moved around the table, to hug her sister, but Astoria turned on her heel and ran away.

The witch sighed. That could have gone better. She’d have to tell their uncle to keep an eye on Astoria. And she’d have to call Tracey. And Draco.

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London, East End, October 5th, 1996

Hermione Granger had miscalculated the explosion’s effect. That much was obvious after reading the Daily Prophet and seeing the pictures Mary had taken. She hadn’t considered the effect of a shop full of potions ingredients getting spread over half of Knockturn Alley. And probably overestimated the wards on the shop.

“Wow! Better than I hoped!” Seamus said, spreading his own copy out on the breakfast table. “Look at the crater!”

“People think we deliberately poisoned half the Alley,” Hermione pointed out. “That’s not exactly good for our reputation.” She shook her head. “We’ll need to counter that with another leaflet. Knockturn Alley is filled with people and creatures unhappy with the current Ministry. Many of them would be natural allies for us.” And many would side with Voldemort, but that was better than everyone siding with Voldemort.

“Blame the Ministry for laying a trap?” Justin asked.

Hermione nodded. “I somehow doubt that number of poisoned people too. There weren’t that many ingredients in the shop, and a lot of it would have burned. Unless the Aurors prepared something, I think the article is lying.”

“The Daily Prophet, spewing Ministry lies - how shocking!” Allan said, with exaggerated expressions.

Hermione chuckled, then grew serious. “Too bad there was collateral damage.” Four passers-by or customers of Beckett dead.

“We warned them.” Allan shrugged. “And we didn’t use another bomb to kill the Aurors investigating the bombing.”

Hermione looked at him, and just knew he’d have liked that. At least Seamus and Dean seemed satisfied with having blown up Beckett. She pursed her lips. “We need to focus on the Death Eaters and their supporters. And for that, we need to find the their manors and hideouts. And for that, we need information only they can give us.”

“We need them to find them? That’s a dilemma,” Allan said.

“Not all of them will be hiding in their hidden houses. And even those will want some contact with others. Or services. We’ll have to gather information carefully. Probably kidnap a few people to interrogate. If we obliviate them and release them quickly enough, they won’t even know they spilled their secrets,” Hermione explained. They would need a way to infiltrate the Ministry as well - if they could get access to the Floo Network…
“That’s a drawback of the Slytherins leaving Hogwarts. We could have tracked them to their homes,” Justin said.

Hermione nodded. “If the Headmaster had let us.” She didn’t say that Dumbledore might have some of the information the Resistance needed to strike at the Death Eaters. She’d have Harry and Ron ask him.

“We could blow up the Ministry next!” Seamus said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “No, we can’t. It’s in the middle of muggle London. Any explosion powerful enough to wreck the Ministry with its old wards would lay waste to a big part of London as well. And,” she added with a glare, ”if we did that, we’d have to deal with getting hunted by the muggle authorities as terrorists.”

“It’s not that bad. I’ve got relatives who are wanted,” Seamus claimed.

Hermione scoffed. “And how well do you think we could fight, hunted in both worlds?”

No one answered her, though Seamus looked mulish.

“What about Clifton and Chadwick?” Sally-Anne said.

“We’ve got a meeting tomorrow, it’s still on schedule,” Hermione said. They’d need to be very careful, of course, but they could finally recruit experienced hit-wizards. If all went well.

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Hogwarts, October 5th, 1996

“How fares the Ministry?” Albus Dumbledore asked, sitting behind his desk in his office.

“They’re running around like a headless chicken. Bones is convinced you’re close to declaring war on the Ministry. And that second bomb spooked most of the employees.” Nymphadora scowled.

“They now fear getting poisoned as well. I’ve heard that the Aurors who had helped the first victims couldn’t replace all the bezoars they had used, because everyone in the Ministry grabbed as many of them from storage as they could.”

Albus chuckled. “All for naught. This was not an organised poisoning.”

“It wasn’t? But the reports from St Mungo’s…”

“They reported the symptoms of poison, but the Healers did not investigate the circumstances. Nor did they, after the first few cases, check everyone thoroughly.” He had studied the reports, just to check if Miss Granger had actually used poison on that scale. That was a line he sincerely hoped no one would cross.

“But…” Nymphadora looked thoughtful - or confused. Her hair colour flickered between shocking pink and pitch black.

“The ‘poison’ was likely ingredients of the shop that were not completely destroyed. Or simply dust thrown up that caused coughing.” He smiled. “I am rather certain that, should the muggleborns start to use poison, they wouldn’t pick one that is easily countered.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring,” the young metamorphmagus mumbled. Then she looked at him again. “The Ministry’s making another effort to get muggleborns to stay inside the building ‘for their
own protection’. They are asking the parents of half-bloods working for the Ministry now.”

“Such as your father.”

Nymphadora nodded. “But moving to the Ministry might make the Resistance mark Dad as a traitor. And if they’re killing traitors without a care for others…”

“I honestly doubt Ted Tonks will seek the dubious safety of the Ministry.” Albus couldn’t imagine the man brave enough to risk retaliation from the Black family for ‘seducing’ their daughter choosing to serve as a hostage. Unless someone threatened his daughter - but that would enrage Andromeda. He was a bit worried about the means used to kill this Beckett, but there had been an effort to spare innocents. Still, it was more ruthless than he had expected.

“My parents won’t, no. They’re not happy with the Ministry and Mum doesn’t trust them. And they’re not the only ones. Many of the half-bloods in the corps have parents with similar views.” Nymphadora sighed. “But going into hiding is a big step. The Ministry might consider that treason. More than enough Aurors think if a muggleborn flees from them, it’s proof that they are guilty.”

“An attitude Amelia shares, sadly.” The Head of the DMLE would have made a great ally against Voldemort, if things had gone differently. As it was, she was too fixated on hunting down muggleborns. That would make working together with them nigh-impossible.

“So, is it true? Will you fight the Ministry?” the young Auror asked. Once again her hair color flashed between different shades.

“If they continue with their present course, I fear this will happen. I cannot let them target children, even if I could stomach their actions against muggleborns.” Albus spread his hands. “Despite my efforts, they do not want to accept that Voldemort is their true enemy, and that their own folly has brought the Muggleborn Resistance down upon them. And the worse this war gets, the less people will care about individuals. Only which side you have taken will matter.”

Judging by her expression, Nymphadora understood what Albus was saying. He didn’t feel guilty about his implications either - it would be useful if Nymphadora decided to stay in the Auror Corps and continue spying, but she had to know the risks.

Dorset, Britain, October 5th, 1996

Draco’s living arrangements had certainly changed, Daphne Greengrass thought upon stepping out of the Fireplace. If that was his current home, and not a temporary meeting spot that Tracey and she had just entered.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Draco was smiling at them. “Despite the circumstances, I’m glad you chose to visit.”

“There’s not much choice. Someone has to do something.” They had had to flee Hogwarts, they couldn’t let the mudbloods drive them from Diagon Alley as well.

“I’ve been saying that for a long time, but few, too few have listened.”

He led them in an expanded living room. Crabbe and Goyle were there already, as was Nott and of course Pansy. Most of the Quidditch team, but not the former captain were present as well. No surprise there - Draco didn’t tolerate any other leader. With one obvious exception.
Draco stood in the centre of the room, smiling widely before growing serious. He was happy, she realised. Daphne almost turned around and left again. Then she told herself that there was no choice. If she wanted to do something against the monsters that had taken her parents, Draco was the best choice. And, she added, he probably was just happy that he could do the same - avenge his parents.

“You’ve all heard the news from Knockturn Alley. Another explosion, like the one that took our parents and relatives from us. Another blow from the mudbloods. So much destruction wrought, even on their own, to kill a single mudblood who had had the sense to remain loyal to the Ministry. If they will do this, what else will they be doing next, left unchecked?” Draco scoffed. “The Ministry’s useless, worse than useless even, trying to hunt down those who had seen and fought the mudblood threat twenty years ago already while ignoring the real danger to Wizarding Britain! The blood traitors do their utmost to protect the murderers waiting in the shadows to strike at us! My family’s manor was just the start, after Knockturn Alley, Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade are at risk as well - if we let the mudbloods and blood traitors act as they please. Will we do that?”

“No!” shouted Pansy at once, and the rest of the room joined her, including Daphne. She wanted to strike back at those mudbloods, the ones responsible for the murder of her parents.

“We have to be smart and cunning, though. Blindly lashing out would make us no better than Gryffindors. Fortunately, we’re not alone. You know who else is fighting for Britain.”

This time, not one answered verbally, and even the nods were a bit shaky. The Dark Lord. Daphne had heard stories about the Blood War from her parents that had given her nightmares as a child. But then, the Dark Lord hadn’t killed her family. Mudbloods had, and blood traitors were helping them.

Draco smiled widely. “We might not be able to strike at the mudbloods themselves until they have been found, but allies have provided me with a list of blood traitors.”
Chapter 10: Meetings

‘With most of House Slytherin fled from Hogwarts, one might have expected the Ministry to put more pressure on Albus Dumbledore in response, since many of those students were relatives to influential Wizengamot members - some, like Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass, had even inherited seats but were not yet of age to exercise their rights. And yet, if such attempts were made in the wake of the flight of the Slytherins - records differ - they came to naught. They might even be responsible for the increasingly stiff resistance Dumbledore showed towards the policies of the Wizengamot and the Ministry.

However, the Second Blood War entering a very active phase at around the same time makes it hard to determine just what influence the events at Hogwarts had on this - other than the obvious consequences, of course.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Southwark, October 6th, 1996

A meeting on the Tower Bridge sounded like something straight out of a spy novel, Hermione Granger thought. On the other hand, it offered more ways to spot and escape an ambush than a building or a crowded area. And given its prominence in muggle London, the chance of a pureblood attack was very low, especially if you considered the threat to the Statute of Secrecy any magical battle in such a public spot would be. So, she could understand Clifton’s choice.

She still felt very exposed, waiting on the pavement, acting as if she was watching the river below and feeding the seagulls and pigeons while she was keeping an eye out for threats and the Hit-Wizard she was meeting. Justin was on top of the tower, disillusioned and with a broom and rifle. Allan was watching from the Southwark approach, Seamus was on the other side of the river, and Dean was a bit away, peddling religious literature as a cover. And if the worst happened, she could pull out a broom of her own and fly away. Or splash into the river and swim away, courtesy of a Bubble-Head and Cushioning Charm.

But there shouldn’t be a problem. She had spent weeks on this meeting, asking and answering questions, until finally both her and Clifton had agreed on meeting face to face. She was even in disguise, though given that she was wearing a jacket with the logo of the ‘Arsenal Gunners’ on the back as a recognition sign, her disguise wouldn’t be of much use. And the wig itched.

“Disillusioned person approaching on the other side of the bridge,” Dean told her and the rest through their radios.

“Covering the area. If you mark him, I’ll shoot him,” Justin answered. He could easily shoot the person from his vantage point, as soon as Dean either dispelled the Disillusionment or simply marked the person with a hex - a flock of birds attacking them would provide a decent enough target.

Just one? That wasn’t enough for an ambush, she thought. Although you never knew with the Ministry - they could surprise you with their stupidity. Then she saw an older woman slowly walk towards her, carrying a bag with a flower pot in it - the agreed recognition sign. When the woman stopped next to her, Hermione mumbled “Louise Clifton?”

“Yes.” The woman pulled out a loaf of bread and started to feed the birds as well.
“Is that Chadwick disillusioned on the other side of the road? Or does my backup have to shoot him?” Hermione asked, throwing a bigger piece of bread into the air, which was attacked by two seagulls at the same time in a loud and violent struggle.

“That’s him, yes,” came the answer. “Shoot him?”

“Sniper’s covering us. We spotted Chadwick on the approach already. As the Ministry’s most wanted muggleborns, we have to be cautious.” Hermione turned around and leaned on the railing. “And that’s why you wanted to meet here; to see how we’d approach the situation. Right?” There was not much of a point otherwise for this - if this was a Ministry trap, they’d wait until they had a location for a safe house to spring it.

Up close she could see that the other witch’s disguise wasn’t the best. Thick makeup, and a rather obvious wig. Probably padded clothes as well, unless the fitness standards for Hit-Wizards were worse than she thought.

“Well, we wanted to see how you’d approach such a situation. Anyone can claim anything on the internet, after all.” The slightly sheepish tone was replaced with a more confident one. “And you wouldn’t lead us to your headquarters straight away either, would you?”

“We’ve safeguards against betrayal,” Hermione said. “And no, they aren’t Legilimency, nor an Unbreakable Vow.”

That surprised the other witch. “Who’s backing you? That’s not the kind of resources teenagers have.”

“We’re no one’s tools,” Hermione said. “No one tells us what to do.” She stared at Clifton. “I’ve been fighting Voldemort and his ilk since I started at Hogwarts, together with Harry Potter. I’ve organised this group. We moved our families to safety before the Ministry could catch us. Malfoy Manor? We did that because we had a chance at the Dark Lord himself, but we were still preparing for this war back then. Now we’ve finished the first stage of our preparations, and we’re ready to start waging war.”

She saw that the other witch was surprised, and taken aback. As planned - Hermione wouldn’t let anyone waltz in and take over. Especially not some adults who had done far, far less than she had done to battle the Dark Lord.

She smiled widely. “Now, let’s collect your friend, and move to a slightly less public space, so we can check if you’re trustworthy.”

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London, Bexley, October 6th, 1996

The two former Hit-Wizards were taken to another safe house - the upper two floors of a defunct radio and television business the Resistance had appropriated. Conjured furniture provided some comforts, but Hermione knew that no one would be fooled into thinking the muggleborns were staying there.

Neither Clifton nor Chadwick said anything about it, though they were looking around and assessing the other Resistance members present, or so it looked like to Hermione. Mary and Tania met their gazes with some of their own. The two witches, as well as Allan and Justin, were holding assault rifles. Just in case.

“Here’s the contract,” Hermione said, putting the parchment down on the table. “It’ll ensure you
can’t betray us.” Most of the questions they had had been answered through e-mail already. But the Resistance hadn’t revealed their security measure.

“What exactly does it do?” Clifton asked, eyeing the document with some wariness.

“Wipes your mind of all our information,” Hermione said. “Anything you will have learned since joining us.”

“Don’t think that it will save you if the Ministry catches you - Martin lost his memory, and they executed him anyway,” Allan added.

“It’s to protect the rest of us,” Hermione said, hiding her annoyance at the interruption - she would have covered that in the next sentence.

“I’d have expected something more drastic,” Chadwick said, “after what you did to Beckett.”

“Beckett sold one of us out. He paid for it,” Hermione said. “But we can be put under the Imperius Curse, or dosed with Veritaserum. We don’t kill victims.”

The wizard exchanged a glance with Clifton and nodded. “Fair enough.” He reached out for the pen, but his friend was faster and signed first.

“Welcome to the Resistance,” Hermione said, smiling and shaking hands.

“Glad to be here.” Clifton smiled. “Call me Louise then.”

“And I’m Jeremy,” Chadwick added. “So… what’s with the guns? I haven’t heard of any wizards getting shot.”

“We haven’t used them yet. There was no need to,” Hermione explained. “We prefer not to give the Death Eaters advance warning of what we can do. But we’ve access to a wide range of firearms.”

“And you’ll get to be trained in their use as well!” Sally-Anne said, grinning. “Boot camp!”

“Boot camp?” Jeremy asked.

Hermione grinned. “Not a real boot camp, but if you want to use a firearm, you’ll have to get the necessary training.” She grew serious. “We don’t fool around with weapons.”

“We don’t fool around, period,” Allan said.

Hermione wasn’t certain if that was a dig at her refusing his advances. Sally-Anne winced though, and so the witch added: “Not in combat or ‘on the job’.” They weren’t some order of chaste knights. She really wished she could do all the talking. At least Dean and Seamus were providing security outside, instead of quipping inside. “You know our enemy is Voldemort. He and his Death Eaters are behind this whole war. We blew up Malfoy Manor, and while we managed to kill a lot of the Dark Lord’s supporters, the rest became very cautious. So, our priority is finding the Death Eaters. They are hiding, but their supporters are still interacting with wizarding society. Even though the more intelligent of them stick to the Floo Network for travel, and live in secret manors as well, they are not untouchable. We will need to reach them when they are visiting public or semi-public areas.”

She grinned. “And I think your experience as Hit-Wizards should be useful there.”

Louise grinned back. “Oh, yes. We’ve guarded those spots often enough.”

Jeremy nodded. “I think the Ministry might soon regret that they kept us on security detail.”
Hermione smiled. She had a feeling that these two would fit in nicely with the group.

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London, Ministry of Magic, October 6th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle entered the Auror offices and didn’t flinch when, for a moment, everyone seemed to stare at her. She’d gone through this before, when that mudblood bitch had stunned her and murdered her partner. Everyone had blamed her. And now everyone was blaming her for getting Beckett killed on her watch. Literally.

She held her head high and met their eyes. It hadn’t been her fault back then, and it wasn’t her fault this time either. Nor her partner’s, or the fault of the other Aurors with her. The only one at fault was the mudblood bitch. She pulled out a leaflet and slapped it on the desk of Martin Runcorn. “Check this!”

Her partner picked the sheet of parchment up and read it. “The Muggleborn Resistance claims responsibility for the attack on Beckett, in retaliation for his ‘betrayal of Martin Cokes to the blood-robed thugs in service of the Ministry’s oppressive and inhuman policies’. Well, that’s a new moniker for us…” He chuckled, but then frowned when he read the next part. “They’re blaming ‘a Ministry plan to poison muggleborns’ for the disaster?”

Brenda nodded. “Hogwash, all of it, but the Alley trash is eating it up. I caught glares galore when I visited earlier.” The scum shouldn’t be that daring.

Martin muttered a curse. Then he smiled cynically. “At least the case’s solved thanks to the leaflet. It’s as good as a confession.”

Brenda scoffed. “No case is solved until the guilty are caught or dead.”

“That might be a problem,” her partner agreed. “The mudbloods are too good at hiding. Can we ambush them when they drop the leaflets?”

Brenda shrugged. “If they’re smart they’ll portkey them in, or banish them at the street from high above while disillusioned.”

“We could block Portkeys, and then cover the air above the alley with ambushers,” Martin said.

She snorted. Her partner was no longer a rookie, but he hadn’t yet fully understood just how the Ministry worked. “No chance of that. After our stake-out blew up in our face, we won’t get the approval for another attempt. Even if it might be a good plan.”

“Might?”

“If we can spot them, they can spot us,” Brenda quoted her old instructor. “According to our latest estimates, there are about a dozen members of that mudblood group. If they all come at us at once…”

“They’re mudbloods, they won’t be that good on brooms. And they don’t have our training; most are students.” Martin wasn’t easily deterred. Another good quality for an Auror - sometimes you had to be too stubborn for your own good to solve a case.

“Soaking up curses is what Hit-Wizards are for. We’re Aurors.” Brenda shook her head.

“We could get Hit-Wizards for this. They are trained for that.”
This time Brenda laughed out loud. “Hit-Wizards on an unsanctioned Auror mission? They barely ever cooperate when Bones makes them work with us at wand-point!” And the Ministry kept most of them around the Ministry building anyway.

“They’ve lost a number of their own. They are bound to be looking for some payback.”

“That’s true, but most of them want to avenge Azkaban,” Brenda said.

“Most, not all,” Martin said, in a lower voice.

Brenda knew what he was hinting at. Or who, to be precise. “Taking that kind of help means you might find yourself blackmailed into joining later.” And she didn’t want to end up a traitor, or an expendable wand.

Her partner frowned, but slowly nodded. “But what can we do then? We have to do something about the mudbloods!”

She had thought about that, a lot - even before Beckett had been killed. “I know. What we need is a spy.”

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London, East End, October 7th, 1996

Louise and Jeremy had been impressed, or at least had acted impressed, by the real safe house of the Resistance - mostly the armoury. But to Hermione Granger’s delight they not only understood the need to keep the Resistance hidden and safe in the muggle world, but also that Voldemort was the real enemy. Even though, the girl admitted to herself, the ex-Hit-Wizards might also prefer not to fight all of their former colleagues at the Ministry.

She glanced at Allan, who was frowning a bit more than usual, before she continued their planning session. “Now, I’ll be looking into Death Eater info later today. The list of pureblood bigots you have compiled will be a great help,” she added with a smile to Louise. “But now that we have finished boot camp and have dealt with the traitor, we need to step up our propaganda.” She stood at the head of the table. “The key to winning this war is the half-bloods. So far, the Death Eaters and their sympathisers haven’t as much as sneered at them in public.”

“That’s because most of the half-bloods act more pureblood than the purebloods,” Allan said, scoffing.

“Some might. Others might play along, hoping to get overlooked while the bigots go after us. But every half-blood has muggleborn family. They may be raised in the Magical World, and they don’t know the muggle world as well as they could;” - Hermione had heard enough stories about Nymphadora Tonks’s forays into muggle London’s clubbing scene from Sirius to know that - “but the main reason the bigots have not gone after them - yet - is that there are so many of them, and that Dumbledore is among them.” She met Allan’s eyes. “If we can make them see that the Ministry’s policies will sooner or later cause harm to their families, then we’ll gain not just allies for us, but will force the Ministry to either change, or lose the support of a third of the population.”

“They didn’t exactly care about muggleborns when the Nazi laws were passed last year,” Dean said.

“They didn’t. But a lot of people wanted to avoid war back then. Now that the Dark Lord’s openly fighting the Ministry, things will have changed.”

Allan snorted. “Such cowards won’t do us much good.”
“Even cowards can fight when backed into a corner,” Hermione said.

“But as you said: The Death Eaters are not attacking them. They won’t, as long as we’re there to fight,” Justin said.

“There were a number of half-bloods among the Hit-Wizards killed at Azkaban,” Louise said.

“But they were killed because they were guards there, not for their blood status,” Allan said.

Hermione cleared her throat. “We just need to make half-bloods think - realise - that their families are in danger as well, and that they themselves will be next if the muggleborns are dealt with. Playing up the half-blood victims of the Death Eaters will help there.”

“It would be more helpful if some Death Eaters would attack half-bloods. Torch a shop or two,” Allan said.

Hermione knew what he meant, and scowled. “Trying to fake attacks by the Death Eaters is too risky. One mistake, and they’ll be able to blame their real attacks on us. We can’t afford to lose our credibility.”

Allan shrugged. “If we’re careful enough, no one will be able to prove we did it.”

“We’re not attacking innocents while acting as Death Eaters,” Hermione said through clenched teeth. “We’re better than that.”

“Having the moral high ground won’t help us if we lose this war,” Seamus shot back.

“Having the moral high ground is the best way to win this war,” Hermione replied. “We need the support of the population; that’s how civil wars are won.” She stared at Allan, then went on: “And for that, we need to step up our propaganda. Leaflets are an easy and effective way to spread our message, but we’ll need to reach more people - especially those who left the magical world.”

“That’s hard. They’ll be hiding.”

“I know. But many of them will be keeping some contact with Wizarding Britain. Newspapers, or the Wizarding Wireless.” Hermione leaned forward. “We need to be able to interfere with those two channels, and set up our own.” She smiled. "I've a few thoughts for that."

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Hogwarts, October 7th, 1996

The office of the Headmaster hadn’t changed in the years since his first visit, as far as Harry Potter could tell. Of course he didn’t have a photographic memory, but the weird and exotic knickknacks on the shelves looked the same. And the office smelled the same as well. The Headmaster, though, looked different, somewhat. More tired, or more serious.

Or maybe that was Harry projecting. Keeping an eye on the map at all times meant taking shifts, and Harry and Ron had taken more than their fair share of late night vigils. Mostly because they tended to share their shifts so they could talk and keep each other awake.

“I suppose you are wondering why I have called you to my office,” the Headmaster started.

“Yes, sir,” Ron said. He looked as anxious as Harry felt, even though both knew that if there had been an emergency with either their family or friends, then Dumbledore would have called them at
once, and not asked them to visit him after dinner. At least they were reasonably certain he’d do that. Hence the slight anxiety.

The old wizard sighed, then smiled. “You’ve shown remarkable ingenuity, courage and moral fibre during your time at Hogwarts. Always ready to do what’s right, not what’s easy - or legal, even. True Gryffindors, if I do say so as a member of that house myself.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Harry said. “We’ve just done what we thought was needed.”

Dumbledore winced at that. “I know, and I am sorry that such a duty fell to you so often. I have failed you in the past. You and your friends.”

Harry knew which friends the Headmaster was talking about. And which friend in particular. He would have said something about nobody being perfect, but it felt too cliched. Ron snorted, but didn’t say anything.

“You both have learned Occlumency,” Dumbledore continued.

Harry scowled. “Thanks to Hermione. Snape’s lessons were useless.” He wondered if the Headmaster had spied on him or tested his Occlumency himself. On the other hand, Sirius might have told the man.

“That was not his fault. I told him to choose the quickest method to teach you, knowing it was both painful and had a smaller chance of succeeding than other methods.” Dumbledore sighed. “It was a gamble, which did not pay off.”

“And caused a lot of pain to Harry,” Ron said.

“I am sorry for that, but I deemed it more important to protect his mind from Voldemort. Another plan that did not succeed. The last year has not been a good year. If I hadn’t checked, I would think I had been cursed.” The old wizard chuckled without humour. “On the other hand, others have had more success with their endeavours. Your friend has formed a resistance group and dealt the Dark Lord a heavy blow. You two have helped her, and protected your house, and I dare say, the school as well.” He leaned back and glanced at Fawkes, who was preening himself. “You know about the Order of the Phoenix.”

“Yes,” Ron said.

Harry nodded. He hadn’t expected that to come up.

“I suppose you also are aware of what we do.”

“Somewhat,” Harry replied. Sirius had been at times more vocal about what the Order wasn’t doing.

“Most of what the Order members do is kept secret. Even from most of the other members.” Dumbledore frowned. “A lesson learned in the last war, at great cost.”

“Pettigrew,” Harry growled. The traitor who was responsible for the murder of his parents.

“Secrets you do not know you cannot betray - willingly, or under duress.” Dumbledore looked at Harry. “Even Occlumency only goes so far.”

“I’d rather die than betray my friends!” Ron spat.

“I do not doubt you. But sometimes, you are not given that choice, and sometimes, it is not your own
life that is on the line. But I digress.” The Headmaster folded his hands over his stomach. “I would like to recruit you for the Order of the Phoenix.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected that. He glanced at Ron, who seemed just as surprised.

“Blimey!” Ron’s smile didn’t last long though, turning into a scowl. “Mum’s never going to allow that. She threw a fit when Charlie and Bill joined.”

“Molly lost her brothers in the last war. She is understandably unwilling to see her children risk their lives, even though she did not hesitate to do so herself when I called the Order up again,” the Headmaster said. “In any case, I do not think she should be told about this, nor should anyone else but Sirius, and maybe a few others, should their help become necessary.”

Harry stared at the old wizard. Ron was gaping.

Dumbledore nodded. “Secrecy is safety.”

“Yes. Mum would kill us all if she knew,” Ron said, wincing. “But what do you need us for, sir? We’re already watching Hogwarts through the map, so you wouldn’t need us in the Order for that.”

Harry nodded. And once Sirius and Remus had the map copied, Dumbledore wouldn’t need them for that either. Not that he truly needed them, Harry knew - if the Headmaster asked, they’d give him the map.

“You are correct. And while you have proven your resourcefulness and dedication, and would make very valued additions to our ranks just for that, there is another reason you are needed.” He looked at Harry. “You know that you and Voldemort have a link. What you do not know is that your fates are tied together far tighter than you could imagine. There is a prophecy about you and the Dark Lord.”

Ron cursed while Harry clenched his teeth. He just knew he would hate what the Headmaster was about to tell him.

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Hogwarts, October 7th, 1996

“... born as the seventh month ends.”

Albus Dumbledore looked at the two boys sitting in front of his desk. Harry was rigid, clenching his jaw together, and staring at the wall behind the Headmaster. Mister Weasley was glancing at his friend, biting his lower lip, and fidgeting.

“Blimey…” he muttered, shaking his head.

Harry took a deep breath. “So… that’s why my parents died? Why he is so fixated on me? Why he needed my blood to revive himself?”

Albus smiled gently, and nodded. “To be precise, Tom’s belief in the prophecy is what drove him to attack your family. He didn’t need your blood to be resurrected; he chose it so he would be immune to the protection your mother had granted you.”

“The blood protection,” Harry said.

Albus nodded. He didn’t know what Lily Potter had done to protect Harry. All her notes had been lost - or deliberately destroyed. He had his suspicions, of course. Harry thought, like most of Britain,
that it was his mother’s love that had protected him. From a certain point of view, that was correct. Lily’s love for Harry had driven her to take such measures. And it wouldn’t do to let Britain know that the Boy-Who-Lived had most likely been protected by highly-illegal blood magic.

“So… I’ll have to face him.” Harry took a deep breath. He was being brave.

His friend put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Not alone, mate. We’ll be with you all the way.”

Albus smiled. “Actually, you have the power to vanquish him. That does not mean that you have to face him like I faced Grindelwald. Or even meet him on the battlefield.”

“But…” Harry trailed off.

Mister Weasley blinked. “Oh! You mean it’s something more abstract. Like his fame, or influence.”

He nodded at the boy. “Prophecies are notoriously vague. ‘Power’ has a lot of meanings. We can but hope that Tom will keep thinking it is the kind of power he knows best - the power from spells and curses.”

“It’s not that then,” Harry said.

Albus shook his head. “No, it is not. I do think I know what it is, but to be certain, I need to do more research. Assuming instead of knowing could be a fatal in this case.”

“So… that’s what you need me for.” Harry looked resigned.

“Not entirely.” Albus sighed. “The Dark Lord has taken measures to cheat death. To cling to life even after his body died.”

“As a shade.” Harry shivered, no doubt remembering his past encounters with the Dark Lord.

“That is the result, not the cause of his unnatural existence.” Albus paused. He had the full attention of the two boys now. “He has created Horcruxes. Anchors, of sorts, for his soul. Creations of the darkest arts that keep his soul from passing on after death.”

“The diary!” Harry exclaimed.

Dumbledore nodded. “That was one of them. His first, and somewhat different, if I am correct. I will not tell you how he created them; suffice to know that the very act of creating a Horcrux irrevocably stains your soul. Even with his Horcruxes gone, Tom will be doomed to never pass on. To never find peace. To suffer a half-existence in the realms between life and death for eternity. A fate worse than death.”

The two boys shivered. Ron swallowed. “And we’ll have to hunt them down?”

Albus nodded. “Harry’s link to him will help there.”

Harry nodded slowly.

“You will need training. Horcruxes corrupt people. They attack your mind and soul, inserting doubts, weakening your resolve, and encouraging selfish desires. You have learned Occlumency, but you will have to master it to hunt Horcruxes. I will train you, but I have to warn you: It will be painful, exhausting and frustrating. More so than you can imagine.”

“Can’t be worse than Snape’s lessons,” Harry muttered.
Albus suppressed a wince at hearing that. If the boy knew why Severus had taught him like that… Out loud, he said: “It is time for you to retire to your dorm, and think about this. Discuss it. Even with your friend, though in person, with no one able to listen in.”

That surprised the two, but it pleased them as well. As Albus had known it would. They left his office in higher spirits than they had entered, or so he assumed. His own smile vanished as soon as the door closed behind them, and he closed his eyes as he fought his guilt.

If they knew the full prophecy… he remembered it, as clearly as the day he’d first heard it.

... and he and the Dark Lord will be one, and either will crush the other, for neither can let the other survive or they will lose what they hold most dear. The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month ends.

Albus sighed. He was certain that he knew what the prophecy meant. What Harry would have to do. But to tell the boy could ruin it. And if the Dark Lord found out… no, it was better to let everyone think that the Horcruxes were the key to Tom’s defeat.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 8th, 1996

Hermione Granger apparated straight to the entrance hall of Sirius’s house. She had contacted him beforehand to check that he had no visitors, but she was still tense. Between the Imperius and Polyjuice, a trap remained a possibility. But if she didn’t take any risk at all, she’d never be able to win this war.

Sirius was waiting for her, leaning against the wall opposite the door. She checked her sides and the ceiling at once for a possible ambush before smiling at him. “Good afternoon.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are we getting paranoid?”

She snorted. “A month dodging ambushes in the woods leaves an impression.” It had also left her behind on her personal studying schedule, but that she could make up. Even though she doubted she would take exams or tests any time soon, she tried to study as if she could return to Hogwarts any day. She wouldn’t abandon her education completely. She wouldn’t grant the pureblood bigots that victory.

Sirius shook his head. “The things you kids get up to…” He gestured to the door leading to the living room. “I assume you’re not here hours before Harry and Ron can sneak out of Hogwarts because you’ve got designs on my body.” He leered at her and added. “Though if you have I will, of course, do my utmost to accommodate you!”

She chuckled. “You’re correct. I need information and help.”

They sat down on old, soft armchairs, and Kreacher arrived with the tea and snacks. The house-elf glanced at her briefly and vanished quickly. He hadn’t forgotten the lesson she had taught him.

“So… what do you need?” Sirius asked, his cup in hand.

“Information about Death Eater sympathisers. We need to interrogate them to find where the Death Eaters are hiding,” Hermione said, putting her own cup down. She didn’t need to tell him what they would do to those Death Eaters they found.

Sirius nodded. “Their sympathisers in the Wizengamot are well-guarded. They’re scared of sharing
Malfoy’s fate, and would apparate directly into their seats for a session, if they could.”

“I expected that. But they’ll have younger relatives in the Ministry. Aurors. Hit-Wizards. People who can’t stay behind wards all day.” Hermione bit into a small cucumber sandwich.

“That they do. Though their elders might not share many of their secrets with them.” Sirius sipped from his cup. “And with the recent disappearance of a few Aurors, they have increased their own security as well.”

Hermione frowned. Another unexpected wrench in their plans. She told herself that the Aurors deserting was a good thing. And even if they were killed it would mean that someone else was fighting them. “That can’t be helped. We will be careful and quick, so no one will be the wiser. If needed we can create a distraction. But we need names and a way to identify them.” She didn’t have access to the patrol schedules of the Aurors, but the Wireless Ears Harry and Ron had placed in The Thin Red Line gave them enough information about patrols - it was amazing how often Aurors complained about their shifts.

“I’ll see what I can do. Nymphadora might be able to help there, but I’d rather not risk her.” Sirius refilled his cup. “You’re going on the offensive then.”

Hermione nodded. “We’re still not as prepared as I’d like, but some of the boys are getting restless.” She frowned. If only Allan, Dean and Seamus had more patience!

Sirius grinned. “The boys not listening to you?” He ignored her glare. “Not like Harry and Ron then.”

She scoffed. “Harry and Ron would push for action as well.”

“But you wouldn’t give in.”

“I’m not their mum.”

Sirius chuckled. “Definitely not. Although you might be as scary as Molly. Maybe even scarier.”

She blinked, then scowled. “What do you mean?” She wasn’t that much of a nag.

“Molly doesn’t like to talk about it, but she was a right terror in the last war. After her brothers were murdered by Death Eaters, she paid them back. With interest, if you get my meaning. Of course she might be rusty after all these years, and she has gained some pounds on her hips, but she’s not a witch many want to cross.”

Hermione wasn’t certain if Sirius was pulling her leg or not. To imagine Ron’s mum on the battlefield… on the other hand, she was an impressive witch, with a temper to match. She’d ask Ron later, to confirm the story. “There’s another thing. We need information about the Wizarding Wireless Network. Preferably from a maintenance wizard or witch.”

“What are you planning? It’s based in Hogsmeade.”

Did he think they’d blow up the village? “We want to create our own wireless broadcasting station.”

Sirius whistled. “That’s ambitious. But to imagine their propaganda shows getting hijacked…” He grinned widely. “You’ll need some specialised equipment too.”

“Yes. That could be tracked if purchased legally. We plan to steal it from the Network, or purchase it abroad.” She finished her cup. “But we need to understand how it works first. Hence the need to
interrogate a maintenance wizard.”

Sirius nodded. “Shouldn’t be too hard. They won’t be expecting to be kidnapped.”

“It’s still Hogsmeade. Lots of patrols there,” Hermione answered.

“They might be watching out for Dumbledore more than for muggleborns, these days.” Sirius chuckled.

“Oh?”

“Our dear Headmaster is losing his patience. He all but told Fudge and Bones that if the Ministry kept trying to push Voldemort’s agenda, he’ll react accordingly.” Sirius grinned. “Took him long enough.”

Hermione frowned. On one hand, Dumbledore opposing the Ministry was a good thing, on the other hand… “If he fights the Ministry, Hogwarts will suffer. They’ll try to take it over, and he can either let them, or turn the school into a fortress.”

Sirius scoffed. “That’ll happen anyway. The Ministry won’t change. The purebloods have too much power, and they are too afraid. Dumbledore can only delay the inevitable. And Hogwarts is too important to be abandoned to the enemy.”

Hermione hissed. If Hogwarts was turned into a battleground, then Harry and Ron…

“You know they’ll fight anyway, don’t you?” Sirius asked, smiling sadly.

The young witch frowned. She didn’t like that she was so easy to read.

“You can’t keep them safe. And it would be hypocritical to risk your own life, but not let them risk theirs.” Sirius took another sip, then put his cup down.

She glared at him. He held up his hands. “I don’t like it either. But do you honestly expect them to stay of the fighting? It’s a miracle they didn’t found their own resistance group months ago. And if they hadn’t been able to spy on the Aurors, they’d probably have run off to join yours.” He grinned. “They might still do that.”

Hermione smiled, imagining it, then frowned. She didn’t think the other Resistance members would like that. Allan would be insufferable, Dean and Seamus probably as well. They’d see her friends as interlopers, trying to take over. And the others… She shook her head. “That wouldn’t work out.”

Sirius looked at her, then nodded. She didn’t know what he thought, and didn’t want to ask.

She grabbed another sandwich. “So… I’ve got a few things I’d like to check your library for.”

The wizard chuckled. “Ah, that’s why you came so early!” He stood up. “I’m not about to get between you and books - as everyone tells me, that’s far too dangerous.”

She scowled, but he just laughed. Then she smiled. The banter felt almost like when she had visited the house for the first time. Before Wizarding Britain had decided to persecute her and the other muggleborns.

Then she remembered what she was researching, and her smile faded.  

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 8th, 1996

Harry Potter stumbled out of the fireplace and barely managed to avoid falling down. As far as Floo travel went, it was one of his better trips, even if Sirius was shaking his head at him. Ron stepped out of the fireplace as if he was walking through a door.

“Harry!”

Hermione was chuckling at his wobbly entrance. He felt a brief spark of anger at his problems with magical travel, and some jealousy at others’ mastery of it. Then he took a closer look at his best female friend. She looked different. Not just because she had cut her hair short. She looked a bit leaner too, in jeans and a t-shirt. And when she hugged him, she felt… fitter, kind of.

“Blimey, Hermione! You’ve cut your hair!” Ron said. “Looks good though.”

She released Harry and hugged Ron, smiling. She didn’t blush, as far as Harry could tell. “It’s more manageable that way. And I can wear wigs more easily.”

Harry grinned. Of course Hermione would have practical reasons for the change. He embraced Sirius.

Ron shook his head. “You kept your hair long while you were living in the woods, and now you cut it when you’re back in London? Mental!”

Hermione pouted. “It was a matter of pride. Our instructors wanted me to cut my hair. Said I couldn’t manage.”

“Well, charms don’t care how long your hair is. Although yours might have given them pause.” Ron grinned, then held up his hands when Hermione glared at him.

“We missed you,” Harry said, before his two friends could start a row, or something else. “How are you doing?”

The witch sighed as they walked towards Sirius’s living room. “I’m behind my study schedule. I want to keep pace with the material for sixth year, but I didn’t get much studying done last month.”

“Which means you’re just a month ahead, not two?” Ron snorted.

Hermione didn’t answer that, so his best mate was probably correct. “I’ve been reading up on counter-curses in the library here. There are a number of dark curses that normal healing spells won’t work on.” Her expression left no doubt that she thought Harry and Ron should do the same.

Harry nodded. She was right, of course. “I guess between Bellatrix and Malfoy’s mother, the Death Eaters are bound to have learned some of those curses.”

“Exactly.” Hermione smiled at him.

“I doubt that they have taught the more exotic spells in our library to everyone. They were raised very traditionally, as you know. But they’d have taught them to family members, like the Lestranges, and of course Draco,” Sirius said.

“And Malfoy’s probably planning another attack right now,” Ron added. “Not on Hogwarts though.”

“Voldemort might not let him do as he pleases. And there haven’t been many attacks by Death
Eaters,” Harry said.

“Not many that we know of,” Hermione corrected him as she sat down on the couch. Harry sat down next to her, grabbing a sandwich from the plate on the low table, while Sirius and Ron took the seats across from them.

“They might be behind the vanished Aurors,” Sirius said. “At least some Aurors suspect that.”

“Well, it wasn’t us,” Hermione said. “But some other muggleborns could have done it. We’re not the only ones hiding. We’re focusing on Death Eaters anyway.”

“Aurors are easier to find than Death Eaters,” Sirius said.

“The Ministry’s not the real enemy. Once Voldemort has been killed and his followers dealt with, the Ministry will fall in line. We can’t waste our efforts on spineless worms when there are murderers to deal with.” Hermione’s expression made Harry suspect that if the Ministry didn’t change rapidly after the Dark Lord’s defeat, then there would be hell to pay.

He didn’t care. The Ministry hadn’t done anything for him, and the Aurors had tried to kill his godfather and his best friend. Though there were some people in the Ministry he did care for, he added to himself with a glance at Ron.

“Shouldn’t underestimate them. Dad says the Ministry can be very stubborn and even more stupid.” Ron grabbed a sandwich himself, and opened a butterbeer.

“I know. But if we start attacking the Aurors, we play into Voldemort’s hands. He can just wait and build his forces up while we weaken each other.” Hermione scowled. “And we’d push more people into his camp.”

Harry patted her shoulder. “They’re hunting you though.”

“I know.” The witch sighed. For a moment, she looked tired and very vulnerable to Harry. He wanted to hug her. Pull her into his lap. “And I know there’s a lot of Death Eater sympathisers in the Ministry. And more in the Wizengamot. But the real enemy is Voldemort.” She pushed her chin up. “And we’ll go after him and his. It’s too bad the Slytherins fled from Hogwarts. If we had found a way to tag them with trackers…”

“That would have been nice. I’m certain Fred and George could have whipped something up.” Ron smiled.

“We can still use such things. Electronic trackers don’t work correctly. And the spells I’ve found are well-known,” Hermione said. “Their counters will be common as well.”

“I’ll ask the twins,” Ron said. “It’ll have a silly name, and it’ll look silly as well, but it’ll work. Probably.”

“Thank you Ron.” The witch smiled at him. Harry felt some jealousy again, and fought it down. Both were his best friends. And Hermione wasn’t flirting with Ron.

“Be very careful. If your tracking method gets discovered, you’re bound to run into an ambush. Voldemort’s smart,” Sirius pointed out.

“Speaking of Voldemort…” Harry took a deep breath. “There’s something Dumbledore told us that we didn’t want to tell you through the mirrors.”
When Harry had finished telling them what he had learned, Sirius was pacing in the living room, cursing loudly in several languages, and Hermione looked like she wanted to jump up and scour the library for every bit of information about Horcruxes.

“The Headmaster’s working on it already,” Harry said, trying to make them feel better.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t work on it as well,” Hermione said.

“Of course not… but you’ve other plans as well. The Resistance is counting on you, right?” Ron asked. “Wouldn’t do anyone any good if we fixate on the Horcruxes while Voldemort takes over Britain. In fact, if we could kill him again, finding ways to deal with the things might be easier since he’d be busy trying to come back again.”

That was a good point, Harry thought. Even his godfather and their best female friend agreed, if slightly reluctantly and after a while. At least neither had issues with Harry and Ron getting recruited into a secret Order cell, as Hermione called it.

“Your parents don’t know about that, do they?” she asked, with a grin.

Ron winced. “No, they don’t. Mum’s going to explode once she finds out.”

“If she finds out,” Harry said.

“She will,” Ron said. “She always caught the twins. And you know how sneaky they are.”

“That’s hard to prove. If she didn’t catch them, you wouldn’t know about it,” Hermione pointed out. “Although judging by what Sirius told me, she might have caught them every time.”

Harry looked to Sirius, and a quick glance told him that Ron looked as confused as he felt. “What do you mean?”

“Molly went on a rampage after Ron’s uncles were murdered,” Harry’s godfather said. “Killed her fair share of Death Eaters.”

“You’re kidding!” Ron said. “Mum did that?”

“You didn’t know?” Sirius looked surprised.

“You didn’t know?” Sirius looked surprised.

“Of course not! She never told us anything about the war. Neither did Dad.”

“Ah… I better not spill the beans then. No more than I already did. Wouldn’t want to get her mad at me,” Sirius said with a grin, and Harry couldn’t tell how serious he was. To think of the witch who had taken him in as a…

“We’re dead then. Dumbledore, and us,” Ron said, staring at the floor. “Mum’s going to kill us all.”

“We’ll blame Dumbledore,” Harry said. Though he hoped that they wouldn’t have to do that until after the war.

“Well… he did recruit you,” Hermione said.

“We just don’t have to mention that we were already helping you months ago,” Harry said.

“Do you already know what you’ll be doing?”
“Just that we’ll be hunting the Horcruxes.” Harry shrugged. “Nothing more than that, yet.”

“I’ll have a word with Dumbledore about that,” Sirius said. Before Harry could protest, he continued. “Not to make him change his mind. But I want to be informed, and I want to help.” Sighing, he added: “It’s not as if I expect you to sit this war out. James and I were the same. Well, almost the same. James was chasing desperately after Lily in our sixth year and I was playing the field, so to speak.” Harry’s godfather chuckled.

The discussion was moving into areas Harry would rather not talk about. At least not right now. He glanced to his side. Hermione was pursing her lips.

Sirius must have noticed as well. “What’s wrong, Hermione? Boyfriend trouble?” he added with a grin.

“No,” the witch said, maybe a shade too quickly. “I just had to turn a boy down recently, and imagined how awkward that would have been if he hadn’t accepted that I was not interested.”

“Who was it?” Ron blurted out what Harry was wondering. “I mean… you don’t have to tell us, of course.”

It had to be one of the muggleborns, Harry was certain. Justin, or that Allan, maybe. Or Seamus or Dean.

“That’s right. I don’t ask you about which girls you turned down, do I?” Hermione said.

“Lavender.” Ron said, then winced. “Err...”

“You…” Hermione started, then shut up.

This time she was blushing, and Harry felt another bout of jealousy. Was she blushing because of Ron? He wasn’t certain what he should say.

Fortunately, Sirius came to his rescue. “Well, in my time, we didn’t talk about who we had turned down, but who we had kissed, you know!” The older wizard shook his head. “Kids these days.”

That broke the awkward mood.

Hogwarts, October 8th, 1996

Ron Weasley knew something was up with his best friend before the two apparated back to Hogwarts, or rather, to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry had been acting a bit odd during the evening, moody despite visiting his godfather and Hermione. But the forest, even if you were not that far in, was no place for a discussion. So he waited until they were back in their dorm and sitting on Harry’s bed, protected by a privacy spell in case Neville wasn’t asleep yet, before he asked.

“Mate, what’s eating you?”

“I’m fine.”

Ron had expected that answer. Harry said that every time he was asked how he was doing, no matter if he was actually fine, or lying in the infirmary. “And I’m Malfoy.”

That made Harry chuckle. Once.
“Seriously, mate. What are you brooding about?” Ron had an inkling, and a feeling he wasn’t going to like it, but he was certain that letting such stuff fester was the worst thing he could do. He had learned that himself, in fourth year.

“Do you really want to know?” Harry asked.

He didn’t. “Yes.”

“Hermione.” Harry stared at him with that expression that dared Ron to make an issue about of it.

Ron winced. Just as he had suspected. Known. Sighing, he let himself fall back on the bed and stared at the canopy over them. “You fancy her.”

“Like you.”

“She’d tell us that the middle of a war was no place for fancying anyone.” Ron thought so at least. Though she had been… not flirting, he couldn’t call it that. But a bit more open, maybe. Or he was just seeing things he wanted to see.

“She doesn’t exactly know much about that, though.” Harry snorted. “I’m certain there are books about it, but…”

“Yes.” Ron snorted. Books didn’t help much with feelings, in his experience. Although he wasn’t Hermione. Maybe they’d work for her. He doubted that, though.

“Someone already asked her to become his girlfriend,” Harry said. “Probably that Allan.”

“He looked rather annoyed at us, when we met him,” Ron agreed. “Though I think Dean or Seamus could have asked her out as well.” Those two had bragged about girls for years. Mostly, but not entirely, hot air.

“She knows what they are like, and would have told us with a grin,” Harry said. “Probably said something about how they are getting desperate.”

Ron closed his eyes. That would have been like her. He could see her joke about it, but he knew she was rather insecure about her looks. Fourth year had taught him that. “So… Allan or Justin.” Justin was rich, for muggles, and Allan was a Ravenclaw and older. Like Krum.

“She turned whoever it was down.” Harry didn’t sound that reassured.

“He had the guts to ask though.” Which meant they might well ask again. Wear her down. That was, according to Sirius, how Harry’s father had won his mother over. Ron winced. He shouldn’t think about such things as winning. Hermione had commented about that once.

“He isn’t her best friend,” Harry said. Less to lose, in other words.

“Things were awkward today, for a while,” Ron said. He didn’t want to imagine every meeting feeling like that.

“Yes.” Harry agreed, or so Ron thought.

They stayed silent for a while.

“Let’s focus on beating Voldemort and his scum,” Ron said.

“Alright, let’s.”
Ron wasn’t expecting that to work for long. But it might be long enough.

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Hogsmeade, October 11th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore didn’t like visiting his brother’s inn. Or his brother. Too much bad blood. Too many bad memories of past rows. Angry words. Painful wounds. He had resigned himself long ago to the fact that they would never reconcile. But needs must - there were more important things than pride, and past pain. Or not so past pain, he amended mentally, remembering his meeting with Aberforth a day ago. Or rather, the fight. Not an actual duel, of course - neither of them, not even at their worst, would use curses on each other. Not after Ariana had died to one. But it had been a spectacular blow-up, until his brother had seen reason, in private. For all the pain it had caused, it was also a good cover. No one would expect the headmaster to calmly sit in the inn but a day later, disguised with Polyjuice.

No one would expect the Muggleborn Resistance to be present, disguised by muggle means either. At least Albus was reasonably certain of that. He was here in case he turned out to have been wrong - with him involved, a fight between Aurors and the Resistance would be quickly over, and hopefully without loss of life. It was the least he could do for the young muggleborns, even if it would not absolve him of his guilt for failing to save Mister Coke.

He glanced at the witch at the bar. Tania Dennel. Gryffindor. She would have had her N.E.W.T.s now, if not for the Ministry’s folly, and would probably be working in Diagon Alley, or at the Ministry - she was skilled in Charms, and in Defence. And the Hit-Wizards, as well as, if slightly less so, the Aurors, had been good places for muggleborns to start working. Or so he had thought. He might have been wrong about that, in hindsight.

Now she was wearing a rather risqué robe, a very blonde wig, and a face that looked too old for her while talking to Cory Briston, a half-blood employee of the Wizarding Wireless Network who was a regular of Aberforth’s pub. Talking and touching, or letting herself be touched.

Albus didn’t like seeing that, but it wasn’t his plan. The Resistance had devised this. A ‘honey trap’, Miss Granger had called it. At least it was an actual trap. Miss Granger and Mister Emmet were waiting in one of the rooms upstairs. Mister Briston wouldn’t be enjoying the night he obviously hoped for. Even though he’d have the memories.

Miss Dennel’s hand had been on the wizard’s arm for minutes now. And his on her thigh. Aberforth grumbled something, and the two jerked, Briston was even blushing. Then the witch took hold of his arm again, dropped a few coins on the bartop, and guided her mark upstairs. To her waiting friends.

Quite fortuitous timing, Albus thought, since a few minutes later two Aurors entered the pub. Or maybe the witch had received a notice from her friends keeping watch on the streets outside. The Aurors didn’t seem to have noticed that they had passed under the wands of the very muggleborns they were hunting outside. The Headmaster wondered what they would do if they actually found a wanted muggleborn inside the inn. Aberforth and most of his regulars had despised the Ministry long before the recent events, and while his brother was not quite as talented as Albus himself, he was head and shoulders above the Ministry’s finest. Although that was not well-known outside Albus’s own constantly shrinking generation.

The two Aurors didn’t look too closely at the guests though, and ignored the hostile stares they received before they left. He relaxed a bit. Now all he had to do was wait until Miss Granger and her friends were done and gone, and he could return to Hogwarts.
London, Diagon Alley, October 12th, 1996

Hardy’s Hardy Hats was a traditional business in Diagon Alley. Hyacinth Hardy was the fourth Hardy to run the shop and craft hats with various enchantments. The first half-blood too, though that hadn’t seem to matter when she had taken over the shop a decade ago from her pureblood father. These days, it mattered very much. Her shop was located in the midst of pureblood businesses, and there had been a few comments by passers-by that she hadn’t liked at all.

But her neighbours knew her. Most of them had known her since she had been a little girl, sitting on her father’s knee and trying to mould a hat by herself. Some of her childish attempts her parents still brought out for family gatherings. And one hung directly over her bed, in the flat above her shop. The first hat she had created that she had been able to wear.

And the first thing she grabbed when she was woken up by the alert from her wards that someone was trying to tear them down - after she had frozen for a moment, filled with fear. She was no Gryffindor. She was a hatter! She wasn’t about to confront whoever was breaking into her shop.

A few shaky wand movements had her clothes and other belongings stuffed in her old school trunk, expanded since her Hogwarts days, and after two tries - the wards were falling - she managed to shrink it down as well. Then she ran down the stairs. Her fireplace was on the ground floor, and she didn’t trust herself to apparate right now.

She was grabbing a handful of Floo powder when the wards fell, and shrieked when the door was blown open and a dark figure appeared in the entrance. A robed figure with a white mask! She almost missed the fire when she threw the powder, she was shaking so much.

“H-Hardy’s Home!” she yelled, stepping inside. The wards on her parents’ home would keep the Death Eaters from pursuing her.

Behind her, her shop went up in flames.

Outside Buxton, Derbyshire, United Kingdom, October 12th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass didn’t like muggles. They dressed either like scarecrows, or indecently. None of them wore proper robes. And they walked or rode everywhere, instead of apparating or using the Floo Network. And they were everywhere. Even out here, far from the next muggle town, two women were running in far too tight clothes on the street.

“Have you seen them? Silly muggles,” Tracey said next to her. Both were disillusioned, sitting near a thick, old tree, studying the house of Nigel Nye, a blood traitor member of the Wizengamot, across the street. The man had proposed a motion to pardon mudblood criminals, ‘to focus on the real enemy of Britain’. He had limited his proposal to those mudbloods who had run from the Aurors, but Daphne knew that was just the beginning. They always started small, and then built up.

He would be stopped, though. As soon as they found a way to get past his wards. Which was the reason the two witches were out here, observing the blood traitor’s house. Studying the wards. Looking for a weakness.

“Look, Daphne!”

Tracey tugged on her arm. Daphne turned her head, and saw a muggle vehicle approach the house.
“He has no Anti-Muggle Wards?” Daphne couldn’t believe it. To go that far…

They saw the muggle get out of the vehicle, put down a basket on the doorstep, pick another basket up and leave. A minute later, the door opened, and Nye grabbed the basket.

“A delivery. By a muggle.”

They had found the house’s weakness.

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Chapter 11: Spies

‘Historians still debate if and which of the atrocities committed by the Dark Lord’s forces were actually so-called ‘false-flag’ operations by the Muggleborn Resistance or the Order of the Phoenix. The attacks that did not kill their targets are a particular point of contention. Those who suspect such subterfuge point to the fact that the attacks ultimately hindered the Dark Lord’s cause more than they helped it, serving to galvanise some of the flagging opposition to the Death Eaters into supporting Dumbledore out of fear for their own lives. Others are of the opinion that the Dark Lord had shown such short-sightedness before, which had arguably cost him the peaceful takeover of Wizarding Britain before the Second Blood War started.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

London, East End, October 13th, 1996

Hermione Granger frowned when she saw the headline of the latest Daily Prophet. ‘Death Eaters attack shop in Diagon Alley’. She quickly read the article below it. Death Eaters attacking a half-blood owned shop in Wizarding Britain’s shopping mile. That sounded very… convenient. Too convenient.

She glanced at Allan, who was reading over Seamus’s shoulder. The Ravenclaw was smiling, though that could just be his reaction to the news - Seamus was grinning wildly as well.

“That was a rather sloppy Death Eater attack,” Dean said. “The shop owner escaped with her life. The Dark Lord must be furious.”

“If it was a Death Eater attack,” Hermione said. “There wasn’t a Dark Mark floating in the sky.”

“Who else would be attacking half-blood shops?” Dean shrugged.

Hermione had a pretty good idea who would do such a thing. Someone who had proposed exactly that less than a week ago, for example. She stared at Allan. “There might be people who think that such attacks would drive the half-bloods into fighting Voldemort.”

Allan met her eyes. “My proposal was not accepted. Even though the results speak for themselves.” He pointed at the newspaper. “Besides, we were interrogating the Wireless maintenance wizard that night.”

“We finished and returned to London before this attack,” Hermione pointed out. “Someone could have snuck out to do this.” She saw Seamus frown at that.

Allan shook his head. “I didn’t do this.”

Hermione nodded. He sounded honest. And she shouldn’t suspect him. And yet… she couldn’t shake her suspicion. Not completely. “In any case, this attack makes it harder for us to kidnap an Auror patrol without being noticed. They’ll be more alert.”

That had Allan scowl in response. It might just be anger at a complication, or at a mistake of his. Hermione still couldn’t tell. She continued: “We might have to look for other targets who expose
themselves. Or wait until things have calmed down. Though that would mean we’d have to depend on the Dark Lord stopping those attacks.”

“We could sabotage a Floo connection in a shop or flat, then nab the maintenance wizard who arrives,” Justin proposed.

“We’d be vulnerable, waiting for quite a long time in a shop or flat,” Hermione replied. “The chance that others came by would be too great.”

“We should be able to easily overpower a patrol,” Allan said. “Especially if they are inexperienced Aurors.”

“But without anyone noticing? They’ll be on the lookout for that. Especially with other Aurors having gone missing.” Hermione shook her head. “We can do it, but we’ll have to be very cautious.”

Louise nodded. “They will be waiting for any sign of an attack, with a ready element and reserves. Even with all of us there, we could have trouble escaping.”

“You could ask your friends for the addresses of some likely targets,” Seamus said. His tone clearly indicated who he meant.

Hermione pursed her lips. “They’re not exactly on speaking terms with the kind of purebloods we want.” Which Seamus should have known. Sirius could give her some addresses, but that would run the risk of exposing him. She sighed. “I have a plan to get us the locations of some homes, but I need to ensure it can be done.”

And she might pick up something that would help her find out the truth about this attack on the hatter at the same time.

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Dorset, Britain, October 13th, 1996

Draco was very happy about the information they had brought back, Daphne Greengrass found out. “That’s exactly what we needed! That traitor will soon pay for his deeds!” The wizard was grinning widely.

“So, how do we do this?” Tracey asked. “Use Polyjuice and change into the muggle to get through the wards?”

Draco shook his head, shuddering. “There’s no need for such a disgusting tactic. I’ve just the thing to put into that basket.”

“Poison?” Daphne was curious. Draco was good with potions, even discounting the fact that Snape had been favouring him, but poison seemed to be a rather obvious attack.

The wizard shook his head. “No. I’ve acquired an object that will curse anyone who touches it. Nye will not suspect that.” He grinned. “His death will be slow and painful - just the fate he deserves.”

Daphne felt a shudder run down her spine at the sight of the glee Draco showed at this prospect. Then she remembered her parents’ corpses, shriveled, burned, looking anything but human, and nodded. Anyone who made common cause with the monsters responsible for that atrocity deserved the worst. “Good.”

Tracey nodded as well. “We can place it in the basket tomorrow.”
It would be easy to slip it in; a brief Confundus Charm would deal with the muggle, if that was even needed. A Compulsion Charm should be enough to make him stop the vehicle.

“No.” Draco’s refusal interrupted Daphne’s planning. “I’ll do it. I know how to handle the object. I would never forgive myself if you came to harm,” he added with a smile.

Daphne suspected Draco simply wanted to do it himself, but she agreed. Handling dark objects was dangerous, after all. There would be other occasions to take a more personal hand in avenging her parents.

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Hogwarts, October 14th, 1996

“Please have a seat, Severus.”

Albus Dumbledore had expected the visit from the Head of House Slytherin ever since he had heard from Nigel.

The Potions master nodded curtly, and sat down. He didn’t look comfortable, but then, Severus never did. “There are rumours going around that the Dark Lord struck at Nigel Nye.”

Albus nodded. Once again, the speed with which news spread, even to Hogwarts, without using official channels, was surprising. And worrying, should he ever have the need to keep something a secret. “He was attacked with a dark curse this morning.”

The younger wizard sneered. “And how did the fool fare?”

Albus knew what he was asking. “Your counter-curse worked as expected.” He sighed. “Nigel was hurt, yes, but he’ll make a full recovery.” It would take him a long time, of course. Longer than needed, actually, and spent at his home. “The Dark Lord should be pleased - a blood traitor was removed from the Wizengamot, even though he survived the attack.”

Severus scoffed. “Unless the counter-curse was applied too late, and he will end up suffering from long-term effects.”

“He knew the risk, and volunteered.” Albus inclined his head slightly.

“After you asked him to. I doubt he came to you and offered to serve as a target in your scheme.” The man narrowed his eyes.

Albus didn’t deny that. “Your position at the Dark Lord’s side will be strengthened by this, and your influence on Mister Malfoy will grow as well.”

“And how many more of your old friends will you risk for those goals?” Severus snarled. “Draco’s not a misguided young wizard. I have taught him for five years. The death of his parents has only served to radicalise him further. Mark my words: He will murder people.”

Albus nodded. The young Mister Malfoy was no James Potter, who had changed for the better after his parents’ death. “He will try. But your influence will make it more likely that he will fail. And, should the need for action arise, make it easier to deal with him.”

“That is a surprising answer from someone who went to great lengths to protect another student. A student who just failed to become a murderer, though not for any lack of effort on their part.” The accusation was clear in his voice.
Albus smiled gently. “If I thought that Mister Malfoy was merely acting out of fear for himself and others, I would not contemplate this course of action. But he is not, is he?”

The younger wizard sighed. “No, he isn’t.”

The Headmaster nodded. And his Occlumency was not quite as strong as the child believed. “Which is the difference between him and others in a similar position.”

“That and the fact that he’s a supporter of the Dark Lord and believes in pureblood superiority.”

Albus nodded once more, conceding the point. “It is easier to forgive people who are trying to do the right thing, and possibly going overboard, than to forgive those who support evil.”

“You were not that ruthless in the last war,” the Potions master said, shaking his head.

Albus chuckled, without humour. “I was more ruthless than you knew, but, in hindsight, not ruthless enough.”

Severus stiffened, then nodded and stood up. “I will keep you informed of any developments.”

“Of course,” Albus said. The man had more time now, as well, with over half his students gone from Hogwarts.

He sighed once the door had closed behind the younger wizard. This time, his plan had worked. But as this war had taught him so thoroughly, his plans wouldn’t work all the time. He was juggling too many balls, one might say. Unless the Ministry drastically changed soon, he would be faced with the choice of either having to abandon Hogwarts, leaving his students without his protection, or turning the school into a fortress for the Order, inviting attacks by the Ministry or the Dark Lord. Neither option would be beneficial for the children under his care.

And yet he couldn’t shake the thought that he should have made this choice long ago. But back then, he had still hoped to turn the Ministry around.

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Dorset, Britain, October 14th, 1996

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

To Daphne Greengrass’s surprise, Draco was in a good mood when she arrived at his home. He greeted her and Tracey with a smile, acting the perfect pureblood host.

Tracey apparently couldn’t help herself, and looked around. “Be it ever so humble,” the witch said, looking pointedly at the furniture of the room they had followed Draco to.

The chairs and couch looked decent, but Daphne could spot some imperfections that told her they were transfigured. She glared at her snarky friend, and saw that Draco frowned briefly.

The boy quickly smiled again though. “The necessities of war demand much of us. I would prefer to live in lodgings more appropriate for my standing, but that would needlessly endanger my remaining family.”

The blunt reminder of what had happened to their parents shut Tracey up. Daphne tried not to let the pain she felt at remembering her own loss show.

“I’m sorry,” Draco said. “I did not wish to bring up such painful memories.”
He sounded sincere, and he had lost his own parents, so Daphne nodded at him, believing and accepting his apology. “It’s why we are here,” she answered. “To prevent others from suffering the same fate.”

“Exactly!” Draco smiled again. “And we dealt the blood traitors a heavy blow!”

“The Daily Prophet claims that he survived,” Tracey said.

“He is alive… so far. He will succumb to the curse over the next few months, lingering in pain as his body slowly rots. The attempts to help him will only prolong his suffering.” Draco grinned widely. “A fitting fate indeed.”

Daphne shuddered at the thought, then remembered her dead family. And what would happen to her little sister if the mudbloods had their way. They and their traitorous helpers needed to be taught a lesson they’d never forget. “Good.”

“Did you see the curse strike him?” Tracey asked.

“No. The traitor took the basket inside. But we have friends at St Mungo’s.” Draco shook his head.

Daphne couldn’t tell if her friend was relieved or disappointed that Draco’s description of the curse’s effect was not from first-hand experience. “What do we do now? You mentioned a list of blood traitors.”

“I did. But our … ally… has yet to provide me with another cursed object. So, we will have to pick a target we can strike at more easily.” Draco smiled. “We can scout out the blood traitors, and prepare in the meantime.” He snarled. “There are a few blood traitors I want to personally deal with.”

“Potter?” Tracey asked. Everyone knew that Draco considered the Boy-Who-Lived his nemesis. Even if, as a half-blood, he was technically not a blood traitor.

“No.” Draco shook his head. “I’ve been told that to strike at Potter would anger the Dark Lord.” His expression clearly showed that he was unhappy about that. “And apparently, someone close to him wants to deal with my former aunt’s family herself. But the Weasley family has been a particular thorn in my family’s side for years. It is time they pay for that.”

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 14th, 1996

Harry Potter managed to avoid falling flat on his face when he exited the fireplace in his godfather’s home - in his home, he corrected himself. He still wasn’t entirely used to having a home. He landed on his knees, mostly. Progress!

“Harry!” Sirius beamed at him, using his wand to clean the dust and soot off.

Harry stood up and hugged his godfather. “Hello, Sirius.”

“Sneaking out of Hogwarts just to visit me? I’m flattered!” Sirius said, laughing, though he didn’t sound as if he was entirely joking.

“I didn’t exactly sneak out. Dumbledore knows I’m gone for the evening,” Harry said. “He’s been quite accommodating since Ron and I joined the Order of the Phoenix.” Though to be honest, Dumbledore had covered up worse than sneaking out of school in the past.
Sirius wrapped an arm around his shoulder and led him to the living room. “And I’m still not too happy about that. It’s too dangerous!”

Harry glared at him. “More dangerous than being Voldemort’s prophesied nemesis?” Sirius hadn’t opposed Harry being recruited when he had been told.

His godfather nodded sagely. “Hiding that her child joined from Molly… that’s more dangerous. Far more dangerous.”

Sirius was grinning, but once again, Harry had the impression he was a bit serious as well. And he should stop trying to make those awful puns in his head. “You already know we’ll blame Dumbledore,” he said.

“And rightly so!” Sirius chuckled.

Once sitting in the living room - which could really do with a telly, Harry thought - and Kreacher having served them some beer, real beer, not Butterbeer, Sirius leaned forward. “So… what made you seek out your old godfather?” At Harry’s look, he added: “If I wait until you get around to mentioning it, we’ll not have enough time to talk about it.”

Harry sighed. But he was a Gryffindor. And he needed advice. And while Sirius wasn’t exactly the best source of this kind of advice, he was the only one Harry could trust with this. For a certain definition of trust. Remus was too… well, the man had too many issues with this kind of problem himself, and if he couldn’t solve his own problems, how could he help Harry?

Sirius was looking at him, faintly smiling. Patiently waiting, but for that hint of eagerness and concern.

Harry sighed again. “I may have feelings for Hermione.”

“Yes.” Sirius said, taking a sip from his beer.

“What?”

“Yes, you have. Feelings for her.” Sirius grinned. “It was rather obvious last week.”

Harry groaned. “Can you be… “ he trailed off. He wouldn’t give his godfather that kind of opening.

Sirius chuckled. He had spotted Harry’s near-lapse. “Of course you have feelings for her. She’s a pretty witch and you’re a boy. I know how James and I were at your age.”

Harry glared at him. “It’s not like that!”

Sirius snorted. “I know,” he said, then went on with less levity. “She’s also your best friend, and you’ve gone through far more together and far worse than any children should have. Of course such feelings will develop under those circumstances.” His eyes seemed to lose their focus. “It happened to Order members too, of course, but we were older.”

Harry resisted the urge to ask for whom Sirius had developed such feelings. And he decided not to mention his first crushes. On Cho, for example. Or Fleur. He was past wanting a girl just for her looks.

“So, it’s perfectly normal to feel that way about her.” Sirius grinned. “Now, are you planning to ask her out?”
“Not exactly.” Harry drank from his own beer. “There’re some… complications.” He cleared his throat and took another sip. “I don’t know how she feels about me. If she doesn’t like me that way… I don’t want things to become awkward between us. Especially not now.” Not in the middle of a war, not when Hermione was hunted by the Ministry and the Death Eaters and they could only meet in secret and talk through a mirror. “And,” he added, “Ron fancies her.”

“Oh.” Sirius blinked. “I should have seen that.”

Harry waited, pushing his bottle around on the low table.

“Well… there was a girl James and I both had the hots for,” Sirius began.

“Mum?”

“Lily?” Sirius shook his head. “No, that was before James fell in love with her. We were crushing hard on Emily Frickerton. Prettiest witch in Hogwarts.”

Harry thought his mother had been the prettiest witch at Hogwarts, but didn’t comment on that. “What did you do?”

“We settled it like Gryffindors, of course!”

“What did you do?”

“We agreed to both ask her out, and let her choose,” Sirius said. “And we did!”

That sounded… well, Harry wasn’t certain how Hermione would react, but the open, honest approach should appeal to her. And it would avoid, well, some hard feelings. “How did that end?”

“She laughed at us both and told us she already had a boyfriend, and even if she hadn’t, she would be looking for a man, not a boy.” Sirius snorted, but he was smiling.

Harry gasped. “She sounds like…”

His godfather shrugged, grinning. “We were second years, and she was in sixth. In hindsight, it was a funny moment.”

Harry closed his eyes. Maybe that wasn’t such a good plan.

“Well, Hermione doesn’t have a boyfriend, unless she acquired one since last week. So, there’s that.”

Harry grumbled. “Unless Justin or that arrogant berk Allan ask her out again.”

“You know them?” Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. “Justin’s a Hufflepuff in our year.”

“No competition then,” Sirius said at once.

“He’s rich,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. Cedric had been a Hufflepuff as well, and he certainly had been ‘competition’.

“Hermione doesn’t strike me as the type of witch to look for gold. And as my godson, you’re richer anyway. I think.” Sirius frowned. “I don’t know much about muggle wealth.”

“No, you don’t,” Harry said, earning a pout from his godfather.
“And you don’t have a high opinion of Allan, I take it.”

“He didn’t impress me or Ron when we met him.” Harry frowned, remembering that day. “Looked jealous even then.”

“That’s a good sign,” Sirius said. “But your real competition is Ron, isn’t he?”

Harry sighed and nodded. “He’s my best friend. My other best friend. Best mate. I don’t want to hurt him, or Hermione.”

“I’d say you should settle things with him first. But if you do, Hermione might feel as if you’re trying to decide for her.” Sirius emptied his beer. “She’s the type to get prickly about that, no matter how groundless it would be.”

Harry didn’t want to, but he had to agree there. And he wondered just how well his godfather knew Hermione. “So… cursed if I do, cursed if I don’t?”

“Yes. Welcome to relationships, Harry!”

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London, East End, October 15th, 1996

Hermione Granger looked at the Wireless Ears she had acquired from the twins through Sirius. They were bigger than the muggle surveillance devices she knew about. But they would work even inside warded areas. Like their safe house.

She didn’t have to do this. Sirius would be placing more ears in various shops frequented by the kind of purebloods they knew to be supporters of Voldemort. Thanks to them, they would find out about planned appointments. Hear the addresses of those who travelled through the Floo Network. Know about special orders that could be tampered with. The Resistance would soon be able to strike at their real enemies, instead of at the Ministry and traitors among the muggleborns.

She didn’t have to use the ears herself. Against her comrades. Her friends. And yet she had to. This attack on a half-blood shop in Diagon Alley was just too convenient. Too close - no, identical - to what Allan had proposed. She had to know if Allan was behind it. And if he was planning more such attacks without the approval and knowledge of the Resistance.

She picked up one of the ears, studying the design. It would change colour to match wherever it was placed, which would make it very hard to spot. Or so Sirius had told her. She thought a disillusionment effect might be more effective. Maybe a Shrinking Charm, to reduce its size. Unless that was already implemented. Though she doubted that. It was more likely that the twins hadn’t thought of that. They were very creative, and good with charms and potions, but they were not that skilled at optimising their designs. They were artists more than craftsmen. She had enough to take one apart and study it, hadn’t she?

She forced herself to drop the ear on the table. She lacked the time to indulge her curiosity. She had to decide if she was going to spy on Allan. Violate the trust between two members of the Resistance. It was a step she didn’t want to take. But if she didn’t… she knew the doubts would only grow. She’d become more and more suspicious. She had to know. Even if she already felt guilty for planning this.

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was just another example of something she didn’t like to do, but which was needed. And, if she did it correctly, no one would know, or be hurt.
London, Knockturn Alley, October 15th, 1996

Inside the dinky thrift store half-way down the shady alley, Brenda Brocktuckle leaned on the wall, twirling her wand while her rookie partner spoke to the witch behind the counter. Neither of them was wearing their official red robes, of course. They weren’t officially here. Even if they hadn’t made a secret of their occupation as soon as they had entered the shop.

“Do you have all the permits you need to sell this kind of merchandise?” Martin Runcorn asked, holding up a slightly-dented broom. “It looks quite unsafe.”

“B-but… it’s a used broom. I’ve been selling used things for years,” the witch, Jane Mills, a half-blood, stammered.

“You’ve been flaunting the law for years then,” Martin said, scoffing. “Endangering the public. Probably selling stolen goods as well.”

“No! I only sell honestly obtained goods!” The witch shook her head, her dirty-blonde hair flying wildly, obscuring her face for a second.

Brenda snorted. In this part of the alley, half the merchandise, or more, was shady at best. The witch glanced at her, and the Auror grinned, showing her teeth.

“I think your shop should be shut down until you comply with the regulations,” Martin said.

Mills gasped. Then she closed her eyes, and seemed to gather herself. “Alright… how much do you want to let this slide?” she asked in a resigned voice.

Martin snarled. “Are you trying to bribe us? That’s a serious crime!”

The witch flinched. “No… I mean…”

“Don’t bloody lie to us!” Brenda’s partner yelled. “You just offered a bribe! Probably with stolen gold! That’s Azkaban for you!”

Mills paled. Martin was getting good at this, Brenda thought as she pushed off the wall and stepped up to the counter. “Well, we should arrest you. Open and shut case. But…”

“But?” The other witch asked, trembling. She had good reasons to be afraid, Brenda knew. Everyone had heard about the attack on Azkaban. Those prisoners not freed had been kissed when the Dementors ran rampant.

“We might let this slide, if you help us out.”

Mills shook her head. “Snitches die in the alley. Slowly. Might as well send me to Azkaban.”

She was crying now. Brenda almost felt pity for her. Then she reminded herself where they were. The middle of Knockturn Alley. No decent people would be living here, or doing business here. Mills was scum. But the weak kind of scum. The kind Brenda needed.

“We’re not interested in the regular kind of scum here. We want the mudbloods.”

Mills stared at her with wide eyes. “They’ll kill me! They’ll wreck the entire alley!”
“Only if they find out what you did. We won’t arrest anyone near you.” They wouldn’t make that mistake again. “No one will know.”

“Of course, if you don’t want to help us, we won’t help you,” Martin added. “And it looks like you want to protect mudbloods…”

“Helping mudblood murderers… that’s a capital crime,” Brenda whispered. “But helping to catch them… there’s a reward for that.”

“I don’t know any Resistance members! No one in the alley knows them!” Mills almost violently shook her head.

“But you know other mudbloods. Older ones. Those married to half-bloods.” Brenda smiled.

“They haven’t done anything! They are just hiding!” Mills was still crying. Pathetic.

“Then they shouldn’t have anything to fear, right? Like your father.” Brenda twirled her wand as if she was a cocky rookie again.

The witch froze, and glanced at the floor for a second. The Auror smiled.

“We don’t really care about every mudblood, you understand?”

Mills nodded, shoulders hunched.

“Good. If you see any other mudbloods, I want you to give us the memory. You don’t have to do anything else. Just conceal it as a potion.”

The broken witch nodded again.

“We’ll be in touch.”

The two Aurors threw up the hoods of their dark cloaks and left the shop. A few steps into a side alley, they apparated back to the Ministry.

Once in their office, Martin sat down, sighing.

Brenda looked at him. “You did good today. Played it perfectly.” Picture-perfect performance as a young, eager and by the book rookie.

“I know, but…” He made a vague gesture with his hand.

“Taking pity on Knockturn Alley scum?” Brenda sat down on her desk and summoned a cup of tea.

“No. But I still think we’d have done better by posing as sympathetic half-blood Aurors warning them of sweeps for mudbloods.” Martin frowned.

“That wouldn’t have worked. We don’t have the authority to do such sweeps. And if we did, some half-blood probably would have leaked it as well. Or even a pureblood.” Brenda scoffed. “The Department is riddled with traitors.”

“I know. But scaring the scum only works if they are more afraid of us than of the others.”

“That’s why we add some carrot to the stick. If she can protect her father and get a reward, she’s more likely to stick with us.” Brenda leaned forward. “And of course, once she delivers the first memory to us, she’s ours for good - we can let her name slip anytime we choose, and she’ll know
“Ah!” Martin grinned.

Brenda smiled. Her partner was getting better, but he still had some things to learn.

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London, East End, October 16th, 1996

Hermione read the transcript of the Wireless Ears she had placed near Allan’s room.

‘Off to see your sweetheart again?’

‘Yes. Can’t go for too long without, you know.’

‘Of course I know. I should get a muggle girlfriend as well. Mary’s being difficult and Sally’s with Justin.’

‘Nothing’s stopping you.’

‘You’re right. You’ll have to cover for me on the next supply run then.’

‘If you think you can find a bird who wants you in a few hours….’

‘Hey!’

‘Dean, we’re off!’

The witch bit her lower lip. That had to be Allan and Seamus. Both were off to buy muggle goods that evening. And spend some time in London to relax. So, Allan had a girlfriend. A muggle girlfriend. He had moved fast then, after she had turned him down two weeks ago. Unless… no. She shook her head. She wouldn’t assume that he had been looking to two-time his muggle girlfriend with her. But to meet a muggle girl, and start a relationship, with everything else they had been doing… Allan had been lucky then. And she had been wrong to suspect him of … burning down shops or vanishing Aurors.

She sighed. It was a bit of a blow to her pride, how fast she had been replaced, but they were fighting a war. She couldn’t begrudge Allan that kind of happiness. Even if she might be a bit jealous. Not of Allan’s girlfriend. But of him having a relationship.

Not that she had the time to commit to a relationship. Or was the kind of girl to casually sleep with someone. Though sometimes… She shook her head again. She had more parchment to sift through for information about Auror movements, and pureblood intel. This war wouldn’t be won if she slacked off.

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Hogsmeade, October 16th, 1996

Hogsmeade hadn’t seen much trouble so far, Axton Runcorn knew. Close to Hogwarts, with the Headmaster - Dumbledore, he reminded himself, he was no student any more - so close, you’d have to be a very ballsy wizard to try anything in it. But that didn’t mean that the town was safe, of course. Patrols like the one he and his partner were on were still needed.

But it was safer than Diagon Alley or - he shuddered at the thought - Knockturn Alley. The houses
Hogwarts, October 17th, 1996

Ron Weasley dropped to the ground when Harry cast, and the Stunning Spell passed over his head with a foot to spare. He rolled to the side, sending a pair of Slug-vomiting Charms at Harry, then followed it up with a Stunning Spell of his own. It splashed harmlessly against Harry’s Shield Charm, and Ron had to roll to the side once more, to escape his best mate’s retaliation. A Jelly-Legs Curse hit him, but he didn’t need his legs to cast. His Bludgeoning Curse dealt with Harry’s shield, and his next Stunning Spell would… be dodged by Harry at the last second. Ron dispelled the jinx on his legs, but Harry used the opportunity to hit him with a Disarming Charm.

“Good match,” Harry said, handing him his wand back.

“Yeah,” Ron said, standing up and dusting himself off.

“Why didn’t you cast a Shield Charm?” Neville asked, from where he was nursing a hand that had been stung a bit too often by Lavender in their bout.

“I wanted to practice dodging. A Shield Charm won’t do a thing against an Unforgivable.” Ron met the other boy’s eyes until Neville looked away.

Ron walked over to the basket with the refreshments the house-elves had prepared for the Gryffindor self-defence lesson and grabbed a Butterbeer for himself. He took a sip while Harry was showing
Ron glanced to his side. Lavender was filling a cup with tea. He shook his head. “No, he isn’t.”

“He’s been asking his gran, you know,” Lavender said in a low voice.

“Oh?” Ron remembered that comment from Harry.

“And his gran apparently told him that his parents would still be fine if they hadn’t joined Dumbledore.” The witch sighed. “I heard it from Fay.”

“Great,” Ron spat. “And she still thinks the Ministry’s going to beat Voldemort?”

Lavender shrugged. “I didn’t talk to him.”

Ron scoffed. “Well, I’m not going to talk to him either. I’ve better things to do.”

Lavender nodded. “Like training?”

“Yes.”

“All work and no play…” Lavender grinned, then patted his hand. “It doesn’t suit you, you know.”

“I wish I didn’t have to,” Ron answered. “But things being as they are, we better be ready. For anything.”

Lavender frowned, then sighed. “I guess so.”

Ron nodded at her, then rejoined Harry for another match.

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London, Ministry of Magic, October 17th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle knew something was wrong when she saw Martin’s face upon entering their office. So she swallowed her cheerful greeting, put down the box of cauldron cakes she had bought on the way in Diagon Alley, and sat down behind her desk. “Are you having second thoughts about the half-blood?” If he was, she might need to teach him the ropes for a bit longer than expected.

There were things Aurors had to do to do their duty that were not mentioned in training manuals, but were understood in the Corps.

Martin looked surprised, then shook his head. “No, no.” He took a deep breath. “My cousin, Axton, and his partner didn’t return from a patrol in Hogsmeade last night.”

Brenda hissed. “He wasn’t the kind to desert, was he?”

“Of course not. Eager to serve, even - though he was glad to get the Hogsmeade shift, instead of Knockturn Alley.” Martin sighed.

The Auror pursed her lips. That didn’t sound good. “Who’s on the case?” So far it had been treated as an internal affair, but now that would have to change.

“Parkinson.” Martin all but spat the name out.
Brenda closed her eyes. “He’s a good Auror.”

“But he’s a git too,” Martin said. “He’ll expect me to owe him one for sharing news.”

Brenda nodded. Parkinson was a mover and shaker. “We could try to get the case. If this was the work of the mudbloods.”

“Well, it could be,” Martin ventured. “Even mudbloods would be familiar with the village from the Hogsmeade weekends at Hogwarts.” Unlike other wizard settlements, he meant.

“Parkinson will claim otherwise, though. He likes having a case like that.” Brenda stood up and paced. “And Dawlish won’t want more work added to his case.” That Auror hadn’t made any progress as far as she knew. Or maybe he hadn’t wanted to make any progress in hunting down the escaped Death Eaters.

“It wasn’t the work of Death Eaters,” Martin said. “Axton and his partner were the right sort.”

“Oh.” Brenda nodded. Purebloods who, if not supported, then at least didn’t mind the blood purists. They were rather common, with the way the wind was blowing from the Wizengamot. “We still can say we have some inkling of a connection with our case. Just so we can look at the files and evidence.” Martin perked up, but she continued. “It’ll mean he’ll have access to our files though.”

Which meant they’d have to either sort through their files to remove the more delicate parts, or the intel would be spreading, and someone might leak it to the mudbloods.

Martin knew that as well, and cursed under his breath. “Is there nothing we can do?”

Brenda grinned. “Well… I think we have to look into the possible infiltration of Hogsmeade by the mudbloods. And we’ll have to ask a lot of questions.”

“They’ll buy that?”

Brenda shrugged, leaning against her desk. “Parkinson might grumble, but what can he do? We investigate our own leads, like he’s doing.” And it would annoy the git. A fine revenge for his comments after the ‘Beckett blunder’, as he had called it.

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London, Diagon Alley, October 17th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass hated Polyjuice. She had taken almost an hour just to learn how to walk without stumbling in her new body, to the amusement of her traitorous friend Tracey, who had managed the same feat in a few minutes. Daphne blamed the samples Draco had provided - hers was from a rather ‘top-heavy’ young woman, quite different from her own body. She was rather lithe, if she did say so herself. Tracey’s new body was closer to her real one, if also curvier.

But now, with another dose in their bellies, both girls were walking through Diagon Alley. They saw their destination from far away - the garish, ugly giant floating ‘WWW’ sign couldn’t be missed.

“Smile, dear,” Tracey said in a low voice. “We’re two witches out shopping. You’re not here to burn holes into people with your glare.”

Daphne scoffed, but put a fake smile on her face. “I wish I could do that. It would make things easier.”
The shop’s entrance was surrounded by lights flashing in different colours. “Where did they get the gold for the shop anyway?” Tracey asked in a whisper as they approached. “Everyone knows the Weasleys are dirt poor.”

“According to my uncle,” Daphne said, “Sirius Black is a silent partner in the business. Threw his weight around to smooth their applications for permits as well.”

“Blood traitor,” Tracey hissed. “He didn’t even show up to his cousin’s funeral.”

Daphne felt the wards when she passed through the entrance. Starting trouble would be a very bad idea. Those wards had to have cost a small fortune, if they were that strong. How much gold had Black spent on these two?

“Watch out!”

Tracey’s warning came too late. Daphne was hit in the face by something soft, and shrieked.

“Sorry!” came the shout from one of the Weasley twins. “That was a Pouncing Poultry.” He summoned a rubber chicken that struggled in the grasp of the spell. “Very popular item if you have an annoying little sibling. Release it in their bedroom, and watch the mayhem. The deluxe version comes with a camera built in, cushioned against impact of course!”

Tracey giggled, and Daphne glared, then forced herself to smile. At least her new cleavage easily distracted the blood traitor, and her scowl could be blamed on her face having been hit.

“I’ve a very annoying neighbour, very nosy, and I want to teach her a lesson about minding her own business. What products would you recommend?” Tracey asked, leaning forward in that familiar way that had the Slytherin wizards at Hogwarts adjusting their robes in short order. Daphne didn’t want to, but followed her friend’s example, putting her hand on the wizard’s arm, and letting him get a good look down the front of her robes when she stepped closer.

Dazzled, the stupid twin was easily taken advantage of, showing them around the whole shop while distracted by their borrowed bodies. Daphne even caught a few glimpses of the workshop in the back when the other twin came out to see who his brother was flirting with.

The two girls left the shop with a bag full of joke items, paid for with Draco’s gold, and detailed knowledge about the shop’s layout and defences - which, sadly, were very strong.

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Dorset, Britain, October 17th, 1996

“... and the wards of the shop are very strong. Strongest I’ve seen, outside those on old manors,” Daphne said. She wasn’t a Warder, or a Curse-Breaker, but she was familiar with the wards on her home. She didn’t mention that the wards were stronger than the ones of Draco’s new home, to which she and Tracey had travelled to report. That would have been gauche - their friend already knew that.

“Sirius Black must have paid a small fortune to protect his investment,” Tracey added.

Draco frowned. “Wasting my gold on blood traitors!”

“At least it’s a sound investment,” Tracey pointed out. “Business must be good judging by what we saw during our visit.”
Daphne scoffed. “Joke items for a joke family.” She had disposed of the items on the way back. To think that she had supported those blood traitors with gold, even for spying on them… It made her sick, knowing that this sham of a family prospered while so many proper families had been decimated.

That made Draco chuckle. Not for long though. “So, you’d say an attack would be unlikely to succeed.”

“Yes.” Daphne nodded. “The Aurors would be upon us before we took down the wards, and even torching the shops next to it would probably not be enough to affect them.”

Draco mumbled something about Aurors that Daphne didn’t catch, then leaned back in his seat. He folded his hands over his stomach, as if he was calm, but she saw his foot twitch.

“On the other hand, the two Weasleys were quite easily fooled by our disguises,” Tracey said. “That might be their weakness.” She grinned. “Typical young wizards.”

“Who exactly were we impersonating, Draco?” Daphne asked. “We might have to reuse those disguises, should we want to exploit this, and it wouldn’t do if someone who knows them saw us.”

Draco had assured them that was impossible, but you never knew.

“The hairs were taken from two French witches,” Draco said.

“French witches?” Daphne wondered for a moment if Draco had contacts at Beauxbatons.

“French Courtesans, more likely,” Tracey said, giggling. She stopped giggling though when Draco cleared his throat. “Seriously? We’ve been impersonating…” She shook her head.

“Whores,” Daphne said, glaring at Draco. “You made us look like whores!” How dare he do that to them!

Draco flinched. “It was the easiest and safest way to acquire hairs for disguises.”

“I bet you found it funny too!” Tracey spat.

The wizard shook his head. “I assure you, I chose them for ease of availability and security, nothing more. The chance of a Weasley being able to afford a French Courtesan is nil, after all.” He winced when Daphne glared at him, and added: “And even if someone recognised you, he wouldn’t be too surprised if those kinds of witches acted as if they didn’t know him, or used fake names in Britain.”

“You seem to know a lot about whores,” Daphne said.

“I bet you collected the hairs yourself!” Tracey exclaimed.

Draco blushed slightly, which was answer enough.

“So, you turned us into witches you had sex with!” Daphne’s friend shook her head. “That is… perverted!”

“It wasn’t like that!” Draco protested. “It was the safest option! I’m very sorry for not informing you, but let’s focus on the blood traitors. There are far more important things to worry about than this… misunderstanding.”

Daphne scowled. If Draco thought he would ever get anywhere with her, he was sorely mistaken. But she listened while he started to plan the next step of their operation.
Hogsmeade, October 18th, 1996

The Hog’s Head Inn hadn’t changed since Brenda Brocktuckle had visited it last. It was still a filthy dive catering to scum, run by the black sheep - or should that be ‘black goat’? - of the Dumbledore family. The Auror had hated to visit it back when she had been patrolling the village as a fresh Auror, and she wasn’t keen on repeating the experience. But the two missing Aurors had last been seen inside that pub.

Conversation inside the pub stopped as soon as Brenda and Martin entered. Everyone seemed to glare at them, some with such hatred that the Auror had to fight the urge to cast a Shield Charm. Scum indeed, kept at bay by their fear of the retribution the DMLE would visit upon them, should they attack Aurors.

Of course, when she met their eyes, the scum looked away. Martin was already halfway to the bar, though. Obviously, this was too personal for him to keep a cool head. She followed him as fast as she could without looking like she had to hurry.

“Good evening, Aurors,” Dumbledore’s brother said, in a tone that made it clear that he didn’t mean it at all.

Martin nodded at him, then glanced at her. It seemed her partner was not so worked up that he wanted to take the lead here.

That was fine by her. “Good evening, Mister Dumbledore.” She leaned against the bar, but tried to keep an eye on the rest of the room. Martin might not be as observant as he usually was. “Last night, two Aurors came by.”

“As every night,” Dumbledore said. The old wizard was even polishing glasses with his wand while talking to her, as if he was a character in a cliched novel.

“They disappeared shortly after leaving here,” Brenda said. “You’re the last ones to have seen them.”

“How did they disappear?” The owner of the pub shook his head. “I didn’t notice anything suspicious when they left here.”

She hadn’t even asked him a question yet, and he was already stalling her. “Did any of your guests pay special attention to them?”

The old man shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I respect the privacy of my guests. They come here to enjoy a pint or two in peace, not to be spied on.”

“And they certainly don’t have anything to hide,” Brenda said in the most sarcastic tone she could manage.

“How would I be able to tell a muggleborn from a pureblood? It’s not as if there’s a difference.” The old wizard shrugged. Before she could say anything, he went on, with an insolent grin: “Nor do I care about people’s parents. I’m breeding goats, not purebloods, you know.”
Martin hissed next to her, but her partner managed to control himself. Brenda let the implied insult wash over her. She stared at the man. “How many guests do you think will keep visiting if we start to pay close attention to them?”

To her annoyance, he snorted. “See, that’s the kind of threat and petty bullying that makes Aurors so popular among the people.” Dumbledore’s brother shook his head. “Maybe if you acted less like thugs, and more like Aurors should act, people would see and remember more when you ask for help.”

Brenda hissed through clenched teeth: “If you’re protecting the muggleborns doing this, then that will end badly for you. Very badly.”

“Is this another threat? Are trying to tell me that you’ll try to frame me for a crime if I don’t act as your snitch?” The old wizard stopped smiling, and Brenda found herself fighting the urge to take a step back when he glared at her.

“Do you think your brother will protect you?” She knew the two Dumbledore brothers were not on speaking terms.

He scoffed. “Do you think I need his protection? Girl, I may not be my brother, but I fought Grindelwald, and lived.” He glared at her, and Brenda shuddered, taking a step back from the sheer amount of hatred he displayed. “And I’m rather sick of this blood purity hogwash. Now get out of here! This inn is no place for Death Eaters, whether they wear black or red robes!”

That insult made Brenda angry enough to stand up to the old wizard. “Are you calling me a Death Eater?”

“That’s the wrong question, girl. The question you should ask is: What difference is there between an Auror and a Death Eater for a muggleborn?” The old wizard had stopped polishing glasses with his wand, but hadn’t put it away. A fact of which Brenda was very aware. And she noticed that the room had fallen silent once again. She didn’t need to glance around to know that there were more wands ready.

Lifting her chin, she turned around and headed to the door. This visit hadn’t gone as she had hoped.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 18th, 1996

“Welcome to my humble abode. How’s my favourite muggleborn mistress doing?”

Hermione Granger rolled her eyes at Sirius’s greeting. She was once more wearing a wig and a robe as a disguise, in case he had surprise visitors. A robe that might be a bit too revealing for her taste. No wonder, since Sirius had bought it. “I’m doing fine.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “You sound like Harry. So, what problem ails you?”

“That I’m one of the Ministry’s and Voldemort’s most wanted?”

The wizard waved that away with a snort. “That’s been the case for months now.”

“That’s personal.” Hermione said, pursing her lips.

“Oh.” Sirius managed to insinuate all sorts of lurid and lewd meanings with his tone. And her glare didn’t impress him at all. “I’ve prepared the first transcripts from the ears I placed,” he went on,
grinning. In a small box - expanded on the inside - a few dozen scrolls waited for her.

“Did you read them?”

The wizard nodded. “I did. A few Floo addresses - though they will likely be blocked for visitors - and some gossip by Aurors. Looks like another patrol went missing.”

“Another patrol? When was that?” Hermione had a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Let me get the scroll…” Sirius rummaged inside the box, then pulled out a few scrolls and sifted through them.

Hermione made a mental note to catalogue the scrolls better. And to consider who she trusted enough to screen the transcripts - she couldn’t spend too much time reading them all, but if they missed some crucial piece of information in the glut of transcripts that could be a catastrophe.

“Here!” Sirius handed her a scroll.

It was a transcript of two Aurors chatting about a patrol which had gone missing in Hogsmeade. During the time Allan had been visiting his girlfriend.

She must have not schooled her features enough, since Sirius asked: “I take it you consider this a bad thing.”

She nodded. There was no point in lying about that. Not to him. “I suspect that one of the Resistance members is waging his own war, in secret. Or maybe more than one member.”

“And that is a bad thing?” Harry’s godfather sounded honestly puzzled.

“It is, when things happen that we decided shouldn’t be done because the possible consequences are too dangerous.” Hermione put the scroll down. “Like torching half-bloods’ shops and framing the Death Eaters.”

Sirius nodded. “I see.”

“And if he’s vanishing Aurors, then that means the Ministry thugs will be more careful, which makes our plan to interrogate a few of them without anyone knowing much harder, if not impossible.”

Hermione scowled. “Short-sighted foolishness like that can cost us a lot.”

“Maybe they are interrogating them in secret?” Sirius offered.

“That’s even worse. How can we trust them if they do not share such information? That’s no way to wage war.” Hermione sat down, sighing.

“Well, they might want to keep it secret for security reasons.”

Hermione scoffed. “We’re one cell. We’re not big enough to split up.” She shook her head. “No. This is something else. Something more.”

“Are you certain this is not you taking offence at someone not following your lead?” Sirius asked in a rather careful tone, as far as Hermione could tell.

She narrowed her eyes. Was she like that? Offended that others were not following her plans? Disobeying her? Maybe a little. But she knew she was right about the risks. And the majority of the group had agreed with her. “You can’t fight a war without coordination. And you can’t trust your friends if they keep such secrets from you.”
Sirius winced, and Hermione wondered for a moment what he was thinking, before realising that he had to remember distrusting Remus Lupin, and hiding that they had switched the secret keeper from the werewolf. She didn’t say anything about it, though, and busied herself with the next scroll.

“So… “ Sirius trailed off.

“I have to find out if and why such things are being hidden from me and the others.” Hermione also wanted to know, but dreaded to find out, how many knew about this. The possibility of having been used, fooled, by the Resistance…

The wizard nodded. “More ears?”

She nodded. “More ears.” She hated it, but she had to know. She couldn’t fight a war without trust - theirs and hers. Sighing, she added: “I don’t know why they’d hide one of them having a girlfriend from me. Unless they think I’d act jealous even after turning Allan down.” And Allan couldn’t be that stupid, could he? Seamus… well, he and Dean had some rather peculiar notions about witches.

“The first thing that comes to mind is that they think you’ll not approve of the girl.”

She shook her head. “Why wouldn’t I? It’s not as if a pureblood would be able to find a muggle girl and then through her, Allan. Unless… it’s not a muggle girl.” But would they expect her to want to meet the girl? Certainly, they couldn’t think she would want to control their love lives… not all of them. She wasn’t that bad, was she?

Sirius frowned. “If he is in a relationship with a witch, then that’s a risk.”

“I need a way to track him.” She couldn’t really interrogate Allan with Veritaserum. That would be… it would be worse than spying on him. Even if not that much worse. “That’ll be difficult. Especially since we’re planning to track the purebloods through the shops.”

“If he’s as arrogant as I’ve heard, then he might not suspect that anyone would track him, least of all you,” Sirius said.

She wrinkled her forehead. “You’ve heard he is arrogant?” She hadn’t talked about Allan to Sirius, not describing him like that, and who else… She groaned. “Harry?”

Sirius winced.

“What did I miss?” Were even her best friends keeping things from her? Sirius’s reaction let her fear the worst. But… Harry and Ron were different. They wouldn’t hurt her. Not intentionally, at least.

“I can’t tell you that. You’ll have to ask Harry.” Sirius grimaced.

She huffed. “Oh, believe me, I will!”

*****
Chapter 12: Love Trouble

‘Many think of bombs and battles when they hear of the Second Blood War. The destruction of Malfoy Manor, or the riots in Diagon Alley certainly left a lasting impression, and they were followed by similar events throughout the war. Even some historians tend to focus on those incidents. All of them fail to see that the war was not decided by bombs or battles, but by intelligence and logistics. That you cannot attack an enemy you cannot find is something so basic, everyone should know it, yet many overlook how it applied to this war. The Muggleborn Resistance went underground at the start, hiding in muggle Britain. The Death Eaters had their safe houses, some dating back to the First Blood War. And the Old Families started to hide after Malfoy Manor, quite a few abandoning their ancestral homes for secret lodgings. In order to fight their enemies, everyone but those warring against the Ministry therefore had to find them first. And that meant spying, scouting, and subterfuge. Something at which the muggleborns, to the surprise of many Slytherins, excelled.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Hogwarts, October 19th, 1996

Ron Weasley recast the privacy spell surrounding Harry’s bed in their dorm. It was almost time for the scheduled call from Hermione. It wasn’t exactly scheduled, officially, but their friend almost always used the communication mirror at this time of the evening.

“You know… we still gather on your bed for a secret meeting, like in first year,” he commented.

“Without Hermione though,” Harry said, nodding.

“Well, she wouldn’t really fit. We’ve grown since.” Ron gestured at the bed, which had seemed very large, especially for him, when he had seen it for the first time, but now looked rather normal. The two boys took up most of the space it offered.

“Yes,” Harry said. He didn’t make a comment about how Hermione had grown in the right places, which is what Ron’s brothers would have done. Well, not Percy.

Ron was about to say something else to pass the time when the mirror vibrated. Harry whispered the activation word, and Hermione’s face appeared. Ron slid up a bit, next to Harry, so both could watch the mirror, and be seen by their friend.

“Hermione!” the two chorused.

“Harry! Ron!” Hermione smiled at them. “How are you doing? And don’t say ‘fine’,” she added with a mild glare.

Ron saw Harry close his mouth, and chuckled. “We’re doing well. Mostly training.”

The girl nodded. Her new haircut suited her, even though Ron was missing the wild mane she had sported for years. “We’re training as well.”

“We’ve heard rumours about Aurors going missing,” Harry said.
Hermione frowned. “That’s not the Resistance’s work. We have other plans.”

“So, someone else’s fighting the Ministry?” Ron asked.

“Probably. Might be someone acting on his own.” Hermione sounded not quite as happy as Ron would have expected about others taking the initiative.

“Do you think it’s the Death Eaters?” Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. “There’s no Dark Mark, and no mutilated corpses. That’s atypical for Death Eaters.”

“True. Did you get the transcripts from Sirius?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I did.” The witch nodded. “There are some promising leads, but we’ll need to be careful in going after them.”

Harry hesitated, then asked. “How dangerous is that?”

Hermione bit her lower lip. “We’re playing it as safe as we can.”

That didn’t sound very safe to Ron. He glanced at Harry, trying to be subtle, but he wasn’t subtle enough, as a familiar exasperated sigh from the mirror told him. “Honestly, we’re not taking unnecessary risks! You should be more concerned about Sirius.”

“What did he do?” Harry asked quickly.

“He’s been the one touring the shops and placing the ears.”

“Well, that’s done with now, right?” Harry asked.

“He might want to help us with the next step too,” Hermione said. “And we can use his help.”

“Padfoot’s?” Ron asked. The animagus form of Harry’s godfather was quite useful in many possible missions.

“Not just Padfoot.” Hermione took a bite from what looked like a muggle Mars bar. “He can visit places we cannot. Though his political views are well-known, so some might suspect him, even without any proof.” Ron heard Harry hiss under his breath. Hermione didn’t seem to have noticed though. “We’ll do our best to avoid that, of course.”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“We can help as well,” Ron cut in. “I’m a pureblood, and he’s Harry.”

“You’re the poster boys for Dumbledore’s Junior Order,” Hermione said in a flat voice.

“There is no such thing,” Ron said. They were full Order members, even if they kept that secret.

“You know what I mean,” Hermione sniffed.

Harry grumbled something about fame that would have earned Ron a Cleaning Charm to the mouth had he said it in the Burrow.

“Anyway, we’re still preparing. Training. Like you.”
Ron nodded. Safe then.

“Though…” Hermione frowned suddenly. “What exactly did you tell Sirius about Allan?”

“What?” Harry sounded as surprised as Ron felt.

“Sirius told me that he heard that Allan was arrogant,” Hermione looked from Harry to Ron. “And he didn’t want to tell me anything else. Just said I had to ask you, Harry.”

“Oh.” Harry was not quite as eloquent as he should have been, Ron thought.

“Oh? What do you mean?” Their friend was not letting this go. “Did something happen between you and Allan?”

“Why do you think that?” Ron asked.

Before she could answer, Harry said: “He was the one who asked you out, right?”

Hermione blinked, opened her mouth, then took a deep breath with closed eyes. “For your information, technically he didn’t ask me to be his girlfriend. He asked if I was in a relationship, and when I told him I had no time for a relationship, he accepted that.”

That wasn’t what Ron had wanted to hear. Not at all. Not only hadn’t she, technically, turned the guy down, but she also didn’t have time to be in a relationship? He hoped his face didn’t show his reaction.

“You’re working too hard!” Harry blurted out.

“Because I don’t have time for a relationship?” Hermione sounded incredulous.

Harry nodded. “If you’re working yourself too hard… you remember third year?”

Ron winced then. Reminding Hermione of that particular period wasn’t a good idea.

Hermione glared at them. “Now, did you talk to Allan or what?”

“No! Why would we want to talk to that git?” Ron said before Harry could make their friend even angrier.

“If you haven’t talked to him, and have met him but the one time…” Hermione blinked. “What’s going on?”

“He didn’t leave a good impression when we met,” Harry said.

Ron saw that their friend was close to blowing up. He cast in the dark. “Look… he seemed jealous. A bit possessive too.” He smiled at her.

Harry nodded. “He didn’t like us at all.”

Hermione sighed. “He probably was jealous of my friendship with you.”

Ron kept smiling with an effort. That didn’t sound like the kind of friendship he or Harry wanted. “That doesn’t sound good.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and he winced. “I’m just saying what I heard from Charlie. If a girl, or in this case, a bloke, wants you to stop hanging out with your friends, that’s a bad sign.”
To his surprise, Hermione didn’t contradict him. “Yes, I understand that.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just a bit stressed.”

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. “We should meet and hang out again then. Relax.”

Harry nodded. “We can sneak out of Hogwarts easily now, with Dumbledore covering for us.”

The girl was biting her lower lip again. Ron pushed on. “You know, no one can go on without relaxing.”

“I guess. Even professional soldiers need rest and recreation,” Hermione said.

“Great! So... when do you have time?”

“Well... tomorrow is Sunday...” Hermione turned away from the mirror and started to flip through her notes.

“Sunday afternoon? We don’t have to skip classes then. But we’re fine with that too!” Ron exclaimed.

Hermione turned back. “Honestly, Ron! You...” She broke off when she saw him grinning.

“Tomorrow then?” Harry asked.

“Alright, alright,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. “Tomorrow then,” she added with a smile.

Deciding where to meet took a few minutes. Ron didn’t really care, and neither did Harry from what he could tell, but Hermione didn’t seem to accept that without asking both of them several times for their preferences.

That was typical for their friend, of course. If she thought they had to do something, even if if it was just voicing their opinion, she’d nag them incessantly. And he wouldn’t want her to act any other way.

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After Hermione had switched the mirror off, Ron turned to Harry. “You talked to Sirius about her?”

Harry’s godfather was... Hermione would call him ‘opinionated’ when it came to witches. Or sexist.

His friend nodded. “Who else could I talk to?”

Ron had to agree with Harry. There were not many he could talk to about this, not with Hermione being a wanted witch. Usually he’d expect Harry to talk to him, but with both of them interested in the same witch... He nodded. “Right. So, what did he say?”

Harry hesitated, and for a moment, Ron wondered if Sirius had told him a secret way to charm witches. Then he told himself that Hermione was not likely to fall for that. His friend cleared his throat. “Well... he said that if we settled things between us, she might think we’re trying to decide for her.”

Ron nodded. That seemed to fit Hermione. She was very prickly when it came to anyone making decisions for her. When Harry didn’t go on, he asked: “And?”

His friend shrugged. “He didn’t have any really useful advice. He just said that she wouldn’t be the type to go for a rich wizard.”
Ron was torn between being happy about that statement, and wondering if that was a slight against him. “So, Justin’s not in the running.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s a Hufflepuff.”

Ron thought Hermione was likely to take offence at stereotyping, as she called it, but he didn’t think Justin was her type of wizard either. Too used to following instead of leading. Although he might have changed in the Resistance. War changed people, Ron knew that. “And Baker’a a Ravenclaw. And asked her out.” And he was older than her. Like Krum.

“And he’s jealous of us.” Harry grinned. “Hermione wouldn’t stomach anyone trying to tell her who she should be friends with.”

Ron nodded. “That still leaves us with the question of how to handle this.” The longer they waited, the bigger the chance that someone else, someone close to Hermione, would make a move. Maybe even someone who didn’t push all the wrong buttons of their friend. A braver Hufflepuff, maybe. Hermione liked it when they worked hard. And Hufflepuffs were all about working hard. Curse it! Justin was competition!

“I don’t think she’d like it if we simply told her we fancy her, and want her to choose.” Harry said.

Ron snorted. “No, that would not be a good idea.” he frowned. “On the other hand, asking her to a private talk is kind of…” ‘Unfair’ came to mind. At least for the one who didn’t get to go first. And if they did it right after each other, it wouldn’t be that much different from telling her together. He sighed. He really wished he could talk to someone, ask for advice, but… Sirius was Harry’s godfather, and the only ones who knew about them meeting Hermione were the twins, and Ron had learned long ago not to ask them for advice, much less follow it. Ginny knew as well, he was certain of that, but she hadn’t been told, and to ask his little sister for advice… he winced.

“What are you thinking of?” Harry asked.

Ron looked at him. “Just thinking about how it’s funny that Sirius is the best choice for advice.”

“He has been spending almost more time with Hermione than we have lately,” Harry said.

“And if that’s not wrong, then I don’t know what is,” Ron muttered.

“At least he’s not her type,” Harry said. “I’ve heard rumours that Tonks fancies Remus.”

Ron would have made a comment about Sirius not being mature enough for Hermione, but held his tongue. “She does?” That was news to him.

“Sirius told me.” Harry nodded.

“Remus is a lucky wizard.”

“He doesn’t fancy her. Or so he says, Sirius says. Claims he would be too old. Sirius disagrees, but hasn’t yet decided if Tonks is good enough for Remus. So he hasn’t said anything.” Harry shook his head.

“At least someone else has love trouble too,” Ron said.

Harry glared him for a moment, then reluctantly nodded. ****
Dorset, Britain, October 19th, 1996

“You want us to seduce the Weasleys?”

Daphne Greengrass crossed her arms and stared at Draco. Mainly so she wouldn’t hex him.

Draco coughed. “Not seduce. Just lure them out of their shop, into a trap.”

Tracey had her wand out and scoffed. “They’re not that stupid. How often did they get caught when they did something at Hogwarts? If we had to gain their trust, we’d have to do more than just flirt.”

“Well, they’re purebloods,” Draco said.

“Do you think that makes seducing them acceptable?” Daphne asked through clenched teeth.

“No, of course not.” Draco smiled, though it looked more than a bit forced to Daphne. Had he really expected them to spread their legs for the Weasley twins? Did he think Polyjuice would mean it didn’t count? Tracey didn’t look like she believed him either. “They’re Gryffindors.” Draco held a hand up. “I know they are cunning - for Gryffindors.” He sneered. “They are tending to a shop. Making joke items.” He shook his head with obvious disdain.

“They were involved in the riot,” Tracey added. “Stood their ground.”

“Yes. Typical for Gryffindors.” Draco’s smile grew. “So, if they think you’re friendly, if they like you, then they’d certainly rush out to help you, if you appeared to be in danger.”

Daphne hated to admit it, but Draco was on to something there. “That could work.”

Tracey nodded as well.

“But,” Draco said, “preparing an ambush in the middle of the day is dangerous. Too many witnesses, and Aurors might react quickly.”

Daphne nodded. “Or others might intervene.” Unlikely, but not impossible.

“Exactly.” Draco smiled. “It would be better if this happened in the evening.”

Daphne again had the urge to hex him.

*****

London, East End, October 20th, 1996

Hermione Granger checked her appearance in the mirror. Her short hair was hidden beneath a blonde wig, her wand was in a holster on her forearm, covered by her sweater, her mobile phone was clipped to the belt of her jeans. She looked just like any other muggle girl out to meet some friends. Or, she thought with a giggle, a girl out to meet her boyfriend. No one should suspect anything.

She left her room and walked down the stairs, passing the living room and the kitchen. “I’m off for a few hours, to Greenwich Park!” She would have preferred to leave without drawing attention, but no one left without informing the others where they were going, just in case. But if she had timed it right, then Allan, Dean and Seamus would still be in their rooms, sleeping in - Hermione’s proposal to train and exercise every morning had been shot down, and Sunday was now “R&R” day. She had exercised some anyway. But not that much either - the time could be used to study too. And she
hadn’t budged on having the others study too - they couldn’t neglect their education too much. If only Ewart hadn’t bailed on them...

“Hermione! Are you going on a date?”

Hermione turned around and saw Sally-Anne peeking out of the kitchen. The girl stepped out with a grin. “If you are you should wear tighter jeans and a sweater one size smaller. Or two.”

Hermione smiled. “I’m not going on a date. I’m meeting friends.”

“Oh!” Sally-Anne’s smile grew. “Harry and Ron?”

Hermione nodded, instead of asking the girl who else she could be talking about - it wasn’t as if she had a plethora of friends. And even if she had close muggle friends left, she couldn’t meet them for security reasons.

“Have fun!” Sally-Anne’s grin seemed to indicate something rather more lurid.

Hermione knew Sally-Anne was still walking on clouds in her relationship with Justin, and the girl saw romance everywhere. Though implying - however faintly - that Hermione had a romantic relationship with both Harry and Ron went a bit far. It would make for a funny anecdote to tell them, though. So she just shook her head, smiling wryly, and waved as she left the safe house.

Once more she pondered warding some spots with Muggle-Repelling Charms in convenient locations, so they could apparate in London without risking upsetting muggle witnesses, but decided against it. If a wizard stumbled over them, they would make prime ambush sites. Or traps.

Though the added security meant she had to travel for some time on the bus and tube to reach her goal. Maybe she should look into getting a provisional driving license - she was 17 now. Although that would leave tracks in the system, and given London’s traffic, she might not be that much faster. And in a pinch, she couldn’t take a car with her by portkey or apparition. A motorcycle on the other hand…

She sat down at the bus station and pulled out a book to read while waiting.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, October 20th, 1996

“Oh, Harry Potter graces us with his presence! And there’s Ron as well.”

“Oi, cut it out, you lot.” Ron Weasley rolled his eyes at the greeting by Fred or George while Harry smiled. Then he frowned. “Did you try out a new product on yourself?” His brother’s hair looked different.

His brother nodded. “Heavenly Hairstyles, for those among us who don’t know how to use styling charms. As our brother, and a person in dire need of it, you’ll get a rebate!”

“You’ll need to work on the name,” Ron said.

“And on the charms… unless that’s the prank product version,” Harry added, “and you have charmed it so the user doesn’t notice how ugly it looks.”

“Hey!” the twin exclaimed, in an indignant tone. “That’s… actually, that’s a great idea! Prank style products! We’ll call it ‘Harry Hair’!” He laughed while Harry gasped.
“Don’t give them ideas!” Ron said, shaking his head.

“But… what brings you to us, on a Sunday? Skipping out of Hogwarts too?”

Ron shrugged. He didn’t want to say that he missed his family, especially with the Death Eaters out there. “We left a bit too early, and decided to visit you.”

“Oh… too early for what? A secret mission? A date with a hot witch?”

Ron sighed. “We’re meeting Hermione.”

“Hm. Does that count as a date with a hot witch? Or would that be hit-witch?” His brother cocked his head to the side, tapping his lips with one finger.

“It’s not a date,” Harry said.

“Alright.” Ron’s brother nodded. “So… apart from giving us new ideas, what news do you have from Hogwarts?”

Ron was a tad suspicious at the sudden change of topic - usually, his brothers milked any joke or teasing opportunity far past the point it was funny - but obliged him. “Not much has changed. We’re focusing on training, and enjoying a safe school without the Slytherins.”

“Some Slytherins are left,” Harry added, “but they are the younger ones, and don’t dare to start trouble now. Not even with Snape looking over their shoulders.”

“Must gall the git something fierce. He’s been taking points left and right,” Ron said. “But who cares? Points are meaningless in a war.”

His brother gasped and pressed a hand on his chest, as if he had just been hexed. “Blasphemy! You don’t know how much pride we took in all the deductions we earned!”

“Yeah, right.” Ron sniffed. “Are you wearing perfume?”

“Eau de Cologne, you barbarian!”

“What?”

“That’s like perfume, but for men,” Harry said.

“I know that,” Ron said. He had looked into such things, recently. Just in case. “I’m wondering, though, why my brother would be wearing it. Unless… is there something you don’t want mum to know? Or someone?”

“Ah… I’ve met a lovely girl. A pair of girls, actually. Visions of beauty and grace.”

“Actually,” Ron’s other brother cut in, standing at the door, wearing the same haircut, “Two lovely witches endured his brutish attempts to charm them three days ago without fleeing in terror, and he’s been hoping for their return ever since.”

“You’re just jealous!”

The two twins glared at each other. Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. At least they were not the only ones with such troubles.

*****
Brenda Brocktuckle frowned when she saw a mudblood propaganda leaflet stuck to the wall near a side alley. It was bad enough when the things littered the street, but now those were displayed on the walls? She vanished it with a flick of her wand.

“They are getting bolder,” Martin remarked, “if they are spending the time to put them up. A night patrol might catch them.”

“Or they might walk into a trap,” Brenda said.

Martin hissed. “You mean…?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think they’d do this to ambush us. But night patrols are already very dangerous.” Doubly so since the youngest, most inexperienced Aurors were doing those.

They passed a defaced Ministry poster. Where the original text called on people to stay calm and cooperate with the Ministry, this one called on people to ‘rise up and overthrow the fascist government’.

“What does fascist mean?” Martin asked.

Brenda shrugged. “I’ve no idea. Some muggle insult, probably.” She didn’t care either. She aimed her wand at it and cast another Vanishing Spell.

They were close to Knockturn Alley now. Brenda noticed people moving out of her way, avoiding eye contact. And others glaring at her. “I don’t like this,” she muttered. “The attitude is getting worse.”

Martin nodded. “Sometimes I feel as if I’m walking down an alley populated by mudbloods.”

Brenda scoffed. “The sick thing is that we’re risking our lives for them. We’re all that stands between them and another massacre. And yet they hate us for that.”

Her partner agreed while he glared at a shady old wizard. “Remember Aberforth Dumbledore? Bloody prick.”


“He probably knows who murdered my cousin,” Martin muttered.

“He knows, or he strongly suspects. And yet he won’t tell us anything.” Brenda ground her teeth. She’d love to take that arrogant scumbag down. But without proof they couldn’t do anything. And, Brenda suspected, even with proof they would not be allowed to make a move. Lately, the Ministry had been stepping very lightly around Dumbledore.

“What’s that?” Martin said, interrupting her frustrated thoughts.

Brenda blinked. “Mud.” The street in front of them had been turned into mud.

Martin pointed his wand at it, but Brenda stopped him before he could cast. “Don’t!”

He looked at her. “What?”

“It could be a trap. Shield and Bubble-Head Charm, and then let’s get to a safe distance,” Brenda ordered.
Martin’s eyes widened, and he nodded. “Sorry… I wasn’t thinking.”

She waved it away. He was still young, and frustrated. The two Aurors retreated ten yards and cast the charms. “Everyone, get away from this patch of mud!” Brenda ordered the audience.

Then Martin aimed his wand again. “Finite Incantatem!”

The mud turned back into cobblestones. Brenda cast another charm to check. “It looks safe.”

“Oh… our brave Aurors are afraid of a bit of mud!”

That had come from behind them. Brenda turned around, but couldn’t spot who had said that. A number of people seemed to find this very funny though.

“They’re afraid of getting dirty!” Another voice called out. More laughter followed.

“You wouldn’t be laughing if this had blown up!” Martin exclaimed.

Scoffing sneers answered him.

“We should make them cancel those spells!” Martin said under his breath.

Brenda nodded, despite knowing that would never happen. “Let’s go on. We’re on the clock,” she said.

They encountered more mud on the way - a transfigured cart, and another part of the street. Someone was having fun, it seemed. Or someone was trying to make them complacent, so they’d slip up. Brenda shook her head. Patrols had just become even more dangerous and frustrating. Sooner or later, one of the rookies would not check carefully, and end up hurt, or worse.

*****

London, Greenwich, October 20th, 1996

Hermione was looking nice, Harry Potter thought when he saw his best friend - his best female friend - sitting in the café she had picked. But the blonde, straight hair didn’t fit her. In his opinion at least.

“Blimey,” Ron muttered next to him. “I’m still not used to her hair.” Apparently, his best mate had similar thoughts.

“Harry! Ron!” Hermione had stood up when she saw them enter the café, and went on to hug both with a beaming smile. Up close she looked happy, but tired. She didn’t feel too thin though, not like in third year.

“New hairstyle again?” Ron asked.

“Disguise,” the witch answered, sitting down. “I doubt any pureblood would be looking for a blonde.”

“I doubt any pureblood would be looking here,” Harry said. “Though we might have to disguise ourselves a bit more too.”

“Probably. I can get you wigs,” Hermione grinned. “You’d look good as a blond.”

“We could use Colour Change Charms,” Ron said. “And Hairstyling Charms.”
“You learned those?” Hermione blinked.

“Well… we could learn them,” Ron said.

“Not from Lavender, though,” Harry said. Ron glared at him and he quickly added: “She wouldn’t be able to keep it quiet.”

“She would,” Ron said. “But only if we told her it was an important secret. And then that would mean she’d know we’d plan to use them for disguises.”

Hermione snorted, but didn’t comment. Harry knew she was not that fond of Lavender. Or rather, she didn’t think much of the girl’s abilities.

Further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the waitress, who took their orders. Once she had left their table again, Ron spoke up. “She’s training as well. Most of the house is training. Not daily though.”

Hermione sighed. “Well, not even the Resistance is training daily.”

“Really?” Harry was surprised.

“They voted to take Sunday off.” Hermione sounded rather vexed.

“And do you train anyway?” Harry narrowed his eyes. He knew her, after all.

She smiled. “Just a bit of exercising, to keep in shape. I use the time to study.”

“And you look in great shape,” Ron said, flashing a smile at her. “Could be playing Quidditch now.”

Harry couldn’t tell if Hermione had been about to blush, since she sniffed at Ron’s joke. “I prefer to stay on the ground, thank you very much, unless it’s really necessary.”

“It’d be good training though, for when it’s needed. Dodging bludgers helps with learning how to dodge spells. Teaches you situational awareness too,” Ron explained.

“Someone’s been studying,” Hermione teased, though Harry thought she sounded pleased.

He quickly cut in. “We’ve been doing our best. Our focus is on Occlumency though - we need to master it, Dumbledore said.”

“And learning that is a pain,” Ron added. “You’ve mastered it?”

Hermione nodded. “I think so. I can’t really test it, though.”

“Dumbledore will want to test you, I reckon,” Harry said. “He knows we tell you everything.”

Their friend nodded.

“Dad said the Ministry’s been rather cautious lately. Dumbledore has them spooked. I’m not certain if that’s a good thing though.” Ron shrugged.

“Scared people tend to act rashly.” Hermione sighed. “Is Hogwarts still divided?”

Harry nodded. “The worst of the Slytherins are gone, but there are a number of bigots left in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. They keep their heads down though, at least outside their dorms. Like the gits in our house.” McLaggen, for one.
“Typical for the Slytherins - they save themselves and leave the rest to rot.” Ron scoffed, and grabbed a biscuit from the small basket on the table.

“So, it’s back to normal then. Like Wizarding Britain as a whole, it looks fine from the outside, but still rotten on the inside.” Hermione shook her head.

The mood started to get gloomy. “Let’s talk about something else,” Harry said.

“Yes. Apparently, Fred’s fallen in love with one or two girls that visited his shop a few days ago. He keeps hoping they’ll return.” Ron snickered. “He’s been changing his hairstyle and even wears perfume. And George has to match him, of course, even if he doesn’t want to. They’ve been arguing about it a lot.”

The witch shook her head. “Boys…”

Harry shrugged. “He’s in love, what do you expect?”

Hermione pursed her lips. “Love renders people foolish, it seems.” That wasn’t exactly what Harry wanted to hear. Nor Ron, he supposed. They exchanged a glance while Hermione continued. “Justin and Sally-Anne are acting like lovebirds. Drives Dean and Seamus wild, the two are jealous, but try to hide it.”

“Are they in love with Sally-Anne as well?” Ron asked.

Hermione snorted. “She’s a pretty girl. I don’t think you can call their feelings ‘love’.”

“Ah.” Ron nodded. “Did they ask you out too?”

Hermione grinned. “They know I’m not a foolish girl falling for their lines. But Sally-Anne is trying to play matchmaker.” The witch shook her head. “She sees couples everywhere. My parents told me that their friends acted the same when they were freshly in love. The friends. My parents were more sensible when they tied the knot.” She laughed. “Sally-Anne even implied I was dating you two.”

Harry forced himself to laugh at that, as did Ron, but he could tell by the way Hermione’s grin faded, replaced by a puzzled reaction, that they hadn’t fooled her.

“You don’t think that’s funny, do you?” their best friend asked after a brief pause.

Harry was shaking his head before he realised what he was doing. He glanced at Ron, who was wincing. The mood was suddenly very awkward.

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Hermione Granger stared at her two best friends. They didn’t think Sally-Anne’s teasing was funny… she blinked. Did they have love trouble? Both of them? She bit her lower lip, not certain what to say. She reached up to twist her hair, then remembered she was wearing a wig. The silence was becoming uncomfortable. None of them was saying anything. She could see Harry and Ron glance at each other. What was going on?

When their eyes flicked back to her, she realised she had said that out loud.

“Err…” Harry winced.

She knew that expression. They were keeping something from her. Something they thought might upset her. She glared at him, then at Ron. “What is going on?” she said, carefully pronouncing each
Ron sighed. “Blimey…” he said, with another glance to Harry. He returned his attention to her though, before she lost her temper. “It’s like this…” he trailed off, swallowing. Hermione almost snarled at him. What was he waiting for? Why couldn’t he just tell her? What were they hiding from her?

Ron cringed - her feelings on the matter must have been quite clearly visible on her face - and took a deep breath. “We, well, we both fancy you.”

What? Hermione blinked.

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“You… both?” She didn’t know what to think, much less what to say.

“We didn’t want to tell you like this, but…” Ron shrugged.

“You’re just too perceptive.” Harry smiled weakly.

“But… I mean… both?” They couldn’t mean… she tugged on a strand of hair, almost pulling her wig askance. Hadn’t she told them she had no time for a relationship? Was this why they had asked her to meet them?

Ron actually blushed. “Not like that!”

Harry nodded.

The relief that brought was short-lived. Her two best friends, wanting her… as a girlfriend. That was… there would be trouble. She knew it. Their friendship might not weather this. Love made people act like fools, and jealousy was worse. Hermione took a deep breath. She had come to meet her friends to relax, not to… get stressed. She had to be calm.

Ron muttered a curse. Even though she didn’t admonish him, he apologised. “Sorry.” He grinned, but it looked fake to her.

“What did you have planned then?” she asked, as much to gain time to think as out of a desire to know.

“We don’t know, actually,” Harry said. “Telling you privately… well, it would have been unfair, or worked out the same.” He shrugged. “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t, you know.”

“How long?” she asked. They stared at her. “How long have you… thought about this?”

“Two weeks? Three?” Ron looked at Harry, who nodded.

“After you turned Lavender down.”

“I turned her down, because well, she wasn’t you.” Ron sighed.

“But why now?” Why did they tell her now?

“We don’t know.” Harry shrugged. “We didn’t plan this.”

“It just happened?” It figured. All her plans lately seemed to suffer from coincidences and such. She came to relax with her friends, and found herself confronted with potential boyfriends. A love
triangle, with her in the middle? Ridiculous!

“Love usually just happens,” Ron said.

She almost snapped that this wasn’t love, just teenage hormones. But she didn’t. There were prettier witches at Hogwarts. Like Lavender. If it was just hormones, Ron would be dating her. She suppressed the small voice in her mind that whispered that Ron might date the witch anyway. He wouldn’t do that to her. And Harry wouldn’t let him do it either. She looked from one of them to the other and back. “What do you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know.” Harry winced. “We didn’t plan this.”

“Do you expect me to choose?”

“Well…” Harry trailed off.

“We wanted to avoid exactly this situation,” Ron said. “We didn’t want to pressure you. We hoped, well, I hoped, that… things would work themselves out. Somehow.”

Hermione chuckled, though she felt like crying. The expressions of her friends showed that they noticed. “What a bloody mess!” she muttered. She closed her eyes. She didn’t rub them. She wasn’t crying. A few deep breaths later she opened them again. Harry and Ron were looking at her. “Let’s deal with this like adults. You fancy me. You told me. You talked about this with each other before. I therefore assume you don’t want to see our friendship ruined.”

Both boys nodded.

“Good. Now this comes as a surprise to me.” Which should have been obvious to them, by her reaction. “I don’t know how to react.” She needed more time to consider this. Think this through. And their expressions, half-hopeful, half-dreading, didn’t help. “Let’s just talk about something else, and… just enjoy the day? Relax? Order some more tea?” She hated how uncertain she sounded.

And yet Harry and Ron nodded in response to her asinine proposals. She clenched her teeth. They needed to talk about something, anything. Anything but love. And the war. “What are you currently doing in Transfiguration?”

“We’re working towards Human Transfiguration. We’re still learning the basics though,” Harry said.

“No ferrets yet,” Ron added, with a slight grin.

“You’re using ‘A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration’, right?” Hermione knew they did; she had read the book list, after all, to get copies herself. And they knew she knew. This wasn’t working. She shook her head and stood up. “Sorry. I can’t… I think I better go home. This is too much right now.” She forced herself to smile. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s our fault. Sorry.” Ron’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. Harry didn’t even try, he simply nodded.

Hermione pulled out her purse, but Harry held his hand up. “We’ll cover it.” For once, she didn’t argue, just nodded at them and left.

She managed to walk normally until she could duck into a side alley. Then she leaned against the wall, and sighed. She didn’t want to return to the safe house yet. Not so soon. Sally-Anne would know at once that something had happened. Hermione didn’t want to deal with questions, or worse, help. She kicked the wall with her left heel. She had been looking forward to an afternoon with her friends, not this!
How could she deal with this? Pick one, pick none? She wanted to keep her friends. Both of them. And if she picked one, the other would be hurt. And jealous. Not that she even wanted to pick one. Not like this, at least. Love should happen naturally, she thought. Not mess up all her plans, and deny her even her most cherished friendships. The whole affair had messed her up, she couldn’t even think of things to talk about with them!

This time she did wipe her eyes.

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London, No. 12, Grimmauld Place, October 20th, 1996

“She didn’t take that well,” Ron Weasley said as soon as he and Harry had reached Sirius’s home.

“No she didn’t.” Harry looked at him. “We scared her away!”

Ron sighed. “We expected that.” Or feared that. “She didn’t reject us, at least.” Either of them.

“Because she was too shocked. She’s probably writing a letter now.” Harry sounded morose, leaving no doubt as to what he expected to read in that letter.

Ron shook his head. “I doubt that.” Hermione wouldn’t do that. “She just needs time to figure things out.”

“Figure things out?” Harry scoffed. “If she fancied either of us, she’d have said so, wouldn’t she?”

“If she fancied neither of us, she’d have said so,” Ron countered. “It would have been the easiest answer. She would have said she has no time for a relationship.” It would have kept both Harry and him from being jealous.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes.” He hoped so, at least.

“She doesn’t really go for the easy answers.” Harry sighed.


“We kind of told Hermione that we like her as more than just friends,” Harry said. “She pretty much fled.”

Sirius winced. “That’s a bit harsh.”

“She was surprised,” Ron came to to the defence of their friend.

“And she’s under a lot of pressure, with the war,” Harry said.

“That’d be a reason to have sex. It’s a very good way to relax.” Sirius nodded. “Trust me, I know!”

“She’s not like that!” Harry said.

Sirius shrugged. “You never know. I personally hoped she’d want a ménage à trois.”

“A what?” Ron didn’t speak French.
“You know, an arrangement between all three of you,” Sirius explained.

“Are you … do you really think that?” Harry had to be as surprised or shocked as Ron felt; he usually didn’t come that close to giving his godfather an opening for that awful pun.

“Always!” The wizard grinned. “More seriously though, the Quaffle is in her hands now. Let’s hope she doesn’t drop it.”

“She hates Quidditch,” Harry mumbled.

“We should get back to Hogwarts,” Ron said. They could train, or fly, or something. Anything to take their minds off this debacle.

Harry looked at Sirius, clearly torn for a moment, then nodded. “Yes.”

Sirius looked hurt for an instant, then smiled. “Don’t forget to tell me what Hermione decides! And consider the ménage à trois!”

Ron was still rolling his eyes when they apparated back to the Forbidden Forest.

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London, Diagon Alley, October 21th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass frowned when she saw yet another mudhole in the street. Couldn’t the shop owners deal with those puerile annoyances? She drew her wand and aimed it at the patch of mud. A simple Finite should be enough to...

“Stop!”

She jerked and whirled around, wand aimed at the shouter. Next to her, Tracey, once again wearing a French courtesan’s form, like herself, had done the same.

A middle-aged witch standing in front of a shop held up her hands. “Don’t curse me!” When neither of the two girls cast at her, she relaxed some. “You’re new here I take it?”

“We haven’t been here for a few days,” Daphne said in a cautious tone.

“The Aurors said not to touch the mud. It could be trapped,” the witch, probably the shop owner, explained.

“Trapped?” Tracey gaped at the mud. “Why hasn’t that been announced in the Prophet then?”

The older witch shrugged. “It started yesterday. It should be announced tomorrow, I reckon.”

That sounded quite fast for the Ministry, Daphne thought. She eyed the mudhole with some anxiety. “So… the mud will just be left?”

“No. The Aurors deal with it, but… they deal with the bigger mudholes first. Those that block traffic.” The witch shrugged. “The smaller patches…”

“How many of these mudholes are there?” Daphne asked.

“A few dozen last I heard. It’s hard to tell.”

“ Bloody mudbloods making fun of us!” Daphne muttered. The other witch frowned for a second,
then nodded, and stepped back into the shop.

“Do you think that’s the work of the mudbloods?” Tracey asked as they continued towards the Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

“Who else? Purebloods and half-bloods certainly wouldn’t do this to Diagon Alley, they’d harm their own businesses and make shopping a chore!” It had to be mudbloods. Which meant…

“So, at least some of them will be trapped.” Tracey said what Daphne had just thought.

“Yes.”

The two carefully kept their distance from every mudhole they saw from then on.

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This time, Daphne ducked when she entered the joke shop, and the ugly rubber thing missed her. She was tempted to blow it up with a Reductor Curse, but that would not have fit her role.

“Mary! That was a good reaction! And hello Cassandra!”

Daphne forced herself to smile when she saw one of the twins - with a hideous haircut that made Potter’s hairstyle look great - bear down on her and Tracey. “Hello… George?”

“It’s Fred!” the twin smiled. “I’m the handsome twin.”

“Ah!” Tracey twittered.

“Says he.” The other twin, by exclusion, George, cut in, shaking his head at them from a few yards away. He had the same haircut.

“He’s just jealous,” Fred said, smiling brightly at the two witches. “So, how did your families like our products?”

Jealous? That could be exploited, Daphne thought. She flashed a smile of her own. “They didn’t quite appreciate them as much as we did. It was very entertaining.”

“Yes. We’d like to buy a few other products,” Tracey said, sounding eager.

“We have a shop full to choose from. Now… how did the Galloping Glasses work out? How long did they chase them? Did the anti-tampering enchantments hold up?” Fred rapid-fired questions at them while guiding them through the shop.

They might have to use some of the products they bought today, Daphne thought while making up answers. Just to keep their cover, of course. Draco would certainly volunteer for the cause.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 22nd, 1996

“The plan worked then,” Hermione Granger said, looking at the map Sirius had just handed her.

“It did.” Sirius grinned. “I sneaked the tracker into Petra Rowle’s order, and the family’s own owl came to fetch it. I could follow it easily - I wouldn’t even have had to use the tracker.”

“Will anyone be able to connect you to this?” Sirius sounded confident, but the wizard was
sometimes more than a bit overconfident.

He shook his head. “I borrowed Harry’s cloak. No one saw me, inside the shop or outside.”

“Good.” Hermione smiled, remembering the things she and her friends had been up to with that cloak. Harry and Ron… she frowned, and suppressed the memories. She had no time for a relationship.

“Love trouble?”

She glared at the older wizard. “They told you.”

“Of course. I’m Harry’s godfather. Who else could he ask for advice?” Sirius shrugged in an almost French way. “All of you are being silly about this, by the way.”

“What?” She wasn’t silly. She was responsible. She was leading a resistance group in a civil war against a genocidal group of terrorists and their ignorant but willing helpers in the Ministry. “I have no time for a relationship.”

“Which is what you told them.”

Technically, she had told them so. Just in another talk, a few weeks ago, and relating to another wizard. She looked away and clenched her teeth.

Sirius’s chuckle just oozed with amusement. “I knew it.”

“And pray, how exactly am I being silly?” She glared at him again, hands on her hips.

“Not just you, all three of you.” Sirius conjured an armchair and sat down. If he hadn’t been a pureblood, Hermione would have thought the similarity of the chair to ones many psychiatrists were depicted on was no coincidence. “All that drama, all that angst, over such a small matter!”

“Small matter?” Hermione scoffed. “This threatens our entire friendship!”

“Only if you mishandle it. Besides, it’s not the romance that you have issues with, but the choosing, right?”

“What?” What was he hinting at?

“If only Ron or Harry would have asked you out, with the support of the other, would you have reacted like this?” Sirius rubbed his chin as he looked at her. “If one hadn’t shown any romantic interest in you?”

She blinked. That would have been different, probably. “It still would change our friendship. Teenage relationships rarely last long, and if we break up, things could be difficult.” Like after a divorce.

“You’re afraid of the relationship - whatever relationship you choose - ending.” Sirius said in a softer tone. She didn’t detect any trace of amusement in his tone. “Being afraid of failure is not a good way to start anything, much less a relationship.”

“Being prepared for the consequences of failure is just being smart,” Hermione snapped. “I’d rather have friends than a boyfriend.” It wasn’t as if she had too many friends.

Sirius shrugged. “Then you just have to tell them that you don’t love them like that.”
“Yes.” She’d do it.

“And things will stay the same. Until they pick other witches as girlfriends. And spend time with them. And not with you. Witches are often rather jealous of female friends of their boyfriends.”

Hermione pressed her lips together. She wasn’t jealous of whatever witch picked Harry or Ron. Unless it was Lavender. Or that slut Romilda. Or the Patil twins - they had had their chance at the Yule Ball, and dumped her friends.

Dear Lord, she was jealous!

“Anyway,” Sirius continued. “Think it through. And look up ménage à trois!”

She knew what a ménage à trois was! And it was something best left for the kind of romance novels she didn’t read! She changed the topic. “We’ll need to take down their wards without killing everyone.”

“You think they’ll know more Death Eaters?” Sirius asked.

“Possibly. You said that Rowle has been proposing to shift Aurors from hunting escaped Death Eaters to hunting muggleborns multiple times.”

“She did, as proxy for Parkinson. That doesn’t mean she’s in contact with the Dark Lord.”

Hermione knew that. She shrugged. “It’s a possible lead. That witch wants muggleborns hunted down like animals, and more freedom for the Death Eaters. That makes her a valid target in my opinion.”

“No argument here. Her brother was a Death Eater in the last war. He was killed attacking Molly’s brothers.” Sirius frowned.

Hermione nodded. Focusing on the war was easier than trying to deal with her friends’ romantic interest. “We’ll deal with her.” She just had to calculate the blast well enough to leave part of the house standing, but wreck the wards.

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London, East End, October 22nd, 1996

“... and that’s the location of Petra Rowle’s home. We’ll have to recon the area, find good positions to observe the house and study the wards, so I can calculate the exact bomb load to wreck the house without killing everyone inside.” Hermione looked at the other Resistance members assembled around the table.

“No big loss if we use too much,” Seamus said.

“We need information about Death Eaters. Given her family’s past and her political leanings, she’s likely to know more of them.” Hermione saw Louise and Jeremy nod at her words. Justin too.

“We can now use our camouflage training!” Sally-Anne said, grinning. “Those hours spent covered with mud will not have been wasted!”

“Speaking of mud…” John raised the latest issue of the Daily Prophet. “What’s up with those mudholes in Diagon Alley?”

“Someone’s making a statement,” Hermione said. “Non-violently too. It’s a good way to annoy the
Ministry, and tie up their Aurors as well.”

“Indeed. But we should trap some of those patches with curses, or they might grow complacent, and stop treating them with all that caution,” Allan said.

He was correct there, Hermione knew, and yet… “It also means that whoever is doing those transfigurations will be blamed for it. That could be fatal if they’re caught.” Especially if it was a kid.

Allan shrugged. “The Ministry will execute them anyway if they catch them. Just like they executed Martin.”

He was, unfortunately, likely correct there as well, Hermione knew. Many among the Resistance, especially Seamus and Dean, nodded and their expressions told her that they considered Martin’s death still not avenged. And yet… “Let’s wait a bit. We can trap a patch of mud, or curse a mudhole, when the Aurors start ignoring them. Until then it’s a waste of time. Time better spent on preparing our attack on Rowle.”

That proposal received general approval at the table, as she had known it would. The Major had been right - idle soldiers were trouble makers, it was always best to keep them busy.

And if she was busy, she had an excuse not to deal with the trouble in her private life. As much as she still had a private life.

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Hogwarts, October 23rd, 1996

While the rest of the Gryffindors who had been training Defence with them filed out of the room, headed back to the dorm, Ron Weasley stayed back. So did Harry. Ginny glanced at both of them, but followed the others out when Ron started casting Cleaning and Mending Charms on the floor.

Harry joined him, restoring the room to how it had been before the training session. “We should train a bit harder.”

“Not everyone will be able to keep up,” Ron answered, fixing a small crater in the floor.

“So we just take the ones who can.”

Ron nodded. “Recruiting?” He erased a Butterbeer stain on the wall.

“More like creating reserves,” Harry explained.

“Ah.” Both knew that without mastering Occlumency, none of their housemates would be able to help with their missions.

“She still hasn’t talked about us,” Harry said after a pause.

He didn’t have to say who he was talking about. Ron nodded. Since Sunday, Hermione had avoided talking about relationships, though she was still calling them each day.

“Do you still think that’s a good sign?” Ron’s friend asked.

“It’s not a bad sign.” Ron thought so. Had to. “If she didn’t feel anything more than friendship, she’d have said so.”

They fixed the rest of the room in silence. Before they left for the dorm though, Harry spoke up
again: “Did you ever think about this ‘ménage à trois’ thing?”

“You’ve been talking to Sirius,” Ron said.

His mate nodded.

Ron sighed and leaned against the wall. “I don’t really think such a thing could work. Hermione would probably make a schedule to split the time spent with each of us.” His elder brothers had been quite clear - well, Charlie and Bill - that spontaneity was needed in a relationship. Though neither had yet dated a girl like Hermione.

Harry chuckled, though it sounded a bit hollow. “Oh, yes.”

Ron didn’t say why he didn’t think it’d work. At least not for him. He didn’t want pity, he wanted to be loved for his own sake. And next to Harry, what could he offer? To think Hermione would, out of her own sense of fairness, force herself to spend time with him, instead of Harry… “No,” he muttered.

“What?” Harry looked at him.

“Nothing, mate. Just remembered some homework.”

Harry nodded. His mate had to know he was lying, but didn’t pry.

Ron knew things would be easier if he gave up and dated Lavender, who wanted him. But he didn’t want to lose Hermione either.

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Hogsmeade, October 25th, 1996

Hermione Granger stopped feeling guilty for spying on Allan when the spell tracking the coin she had slipped into his pocket showed that he had apparated north from London. A few apparitions and spells later, she knew he was in Hogsmeade, or nearby.

He could be visiting a wizard girlfriend, of course. But Hogsmeade was patrolled by Aurors, and they had become quite vigilant since the disappearance of two of them. Meeting anyone there was a risk the Resistance should have been informed of.

Of course, she shouldn’t be heading into the village herself, if she was following her own advice. On the other hand, she was wearing the single best invisibility cloak she had ever heard of. The usual spells wouldn’t reveal her presence.

And she really needed to know, to see with her own eyes, what Allan was doing.

Silently recasting her tracking spell several times, she soon found the wizard, hiding in a side alley between two shops. The former Ravenclaw was not using magical means to hide - which would have been worthless in the face of the standard precautions the Aurors were likely to take these days - but had colour-charmed his clothes to fade in the shadows.

He hadn’t noticed her - her stealth training had taught her well - and was obviously waiting for something. Probably the night patrol to pass. She shook her head under the cloak. If they were diligent and checked the side alley properly, they would spot him. On the other hand, their patrol would take them hours. And as the Sergeant had told them, the later at night, the less careful were the soldiers.
True to her prediction, the four Aurors passed the side alley with the barest glance. No wonder they hadn’t caught any Death Eaters!

Allan remained still for another ten minutes, before carefully moving to the front of the alley. And now she realised he hadn’t charmed his clothes - he was wearing black robes. And putting on a white mask.

She controlled herself, didn’t cry out, didn’t hex him. But she wanted to. The damn fool was doing what she had feared and forbidden - framing the Death Eaters for atrocities. And if he was as careful doing that as he was in obeying orders, the Aurors would be back soon, in force. And Apparition would be blocked.

She had to head back to the safe house, right away. And consider how to deal with Allan.

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Offensive Action

Chapter 13: Offensive Action

‘Despite a few claims to the contrary, the so-called ‘Mud Attack’ was, at the start, a non-violent way of protesting the Ministry’s policies. That mud was used may not have been intended simply as irony, but might also have been an attempt to turn an insult - ‘mudblood’ - into a term used by the minority in question for themselves, though we lack the sources to prove or disprove this hypothesis. Its effects, though, were clear: With a simple spell, daily life in Diagon Alley was greatly hindered, and the Ministry was forced to delegate many Aurors to deal with what was, at this point, a nuisance on the level of a childish prank. Although, owing to the pressure put on the DMLE by the Wizengamot to deliver results, it was also clear from the start that no matter how non-violent the ‘attack’ was, the Aurors would deal with it using harsh measures.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, East End, October 25th, 1996

Hermione Granger apparated back to her room in the safe house and quickly checked the telltales she had left at the door and on her desk. Neither seemed disturbed. It looked like her own excursion had not been detected as yet. She pulled off the cloak and sat down on her bed.

She was in a quandary. A quandary of her own making, at least in part. She now knew that Allan was acting not only against orders - the decision of the group - but also against the people the Resistance had been formed to protect. At least indirectly, though she couldn’t be certain now that Allan wouldn’t attack muggleborns either, should he think that would result in increased support and recruitment; he certainly knew as well as she did that atrocities by the government generally strengthened resistance movements.

She froze for a moment, wondering if he had arranged Martin’s capture, then shook her head at herself. Allan wouldn’t go that far. Or he wouldn’t have gone that far, back then. But now?

She pressed her lips together. She could understand - if not excuse - his attacks on shops in the guise of a Death Eater, but if he was also attacking Aurors, and she thought he was, then what was his plan? His actions were hindering, harming the Resistance’s efforts. With the Aurors using four-wizard patrols, there would be no practical opportunities to kidnap and interrogate one of them in secret. Which had been the core objective of their strategy.

Allan had to be stopped before he ruined even more of Hermione’s plans. But how? If she confronted him in public, she’d have to reveal that she had spied on him. Planted a tracker on him. Even if he didn’t exploit that - and he would - many members would wonder if she was spying on them as well. At best, those who supported Allan’s plans would split off with him, at worst, Hermione would lose her leadership of the Resistance. Reduced to a supporter and researcher, so they wouldn’t lose her contacts to Sirius and Hogwarts. Unless they lost all reason, and went even further than that.

She bit her lower lip, hard. She couldn’t let Allan keep doing this. But she couldn’t confront him either. Even in private, he could use her own actions - no matter how necessary they had been to find out the truth about him - against her. And even if she managed to turn the group against Allan, neutralise his support - Seamus and Dean, mostly, but he had known Louise and Jeremy, at least
enough to contact them - what then? Punish him? How? Confinement to quarters? She snorted. The Major had told her some stories about the need for discipline, and they had made sense. In theory. But now, confronted with an actual problem, she found that the solutions presented were far harder to choose. Execution was not an option.

Could she cut him loose? He wouldn’t stop, she was certain of that. And he’d do even more damage to the Resistance’s plans. At least he couldn’t betray them, not without losing his memory. That was an option, she supposed. Remove his memory. But he’d know it had been done to him, and she doubted he’d forgive, much less forget that. And he’d be smart enough to figure out who had done it. She, and the Resistance, would have made an enemy. An enemy who could live and fight in the muggle world, who knew them, knew how they fought, where they trained, where they lived, and was more than willing to kill innocents. In theory, her contract would prevent betrayal, but if it wasn’t a betrayal if she dealt with Allan, then Allan might not be affected if he went against her, or others, as long as he thought it was for the best of the group.

She sighed, and let herself fall back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. What could she do? How could she solve this? No matter what she did, she’d compromise her morals, and probably hurt the Resistance. But to leave things as they were would be worse. Would be the worst decision she could make.

Allan dying in combat would be the perfect solution. The Major had mentioned that as well. But to arrange that… it would be the worst betrayal of trust. And even if it remained a secret, it would likely damage the trust of the group in her decisions, if they led to his death.

She closed her eyes. There was an alternative, of course. Without those ‘drawbacks’. Not one she liked to contemplate. But there was more to consider than her own morals.

Hogwarts, October 25th, 1996

“Ah, Severus. Thank you for coming.” Albus Dumbledore smiled. “Please have a seat.”

The Potions master sat down.

“Did you find out anything more about the Dark Lord’s plans?”

The younger wizard stiffened at the small reminder that Albus was aware of his excursion last night. “He is still undecided whether or not he should bind his supporters closer to him. He seems flattered that there are some who will do his work unbidden, but he also seems annoyed at their lack of obedience.”

“Tom was always focused on control.” The robes and masks he had chosen for his followers made that clear - he did not tolerate any rivals near him; everyone had to be a faceless minion at his side. The only exception was Bellatrix Lestrange, but the dark witch was a special case - her loyalty was unquestionable. She might even be his mistress as well.

“He’s also concerned that some of those supporters might be traitors.”

Albus nodded. Tom, being willing to betray anyone at any time it served him, obviously expected the same of everyone else. “Any concrete plans?”

“The Death Eaters he broke out from Azkaban have received new wands. They have also mostly recovered from their time spent there,” Severus said.
“Which means they will be available, and eager, for attacks.” Albus leaned back. And the obvious targets, with the muggleborns in hiding, were half-bloods and ‘blood traitors’.

Severus shrugged. His feigned indifference was betrayed by the tension in his body though.

“And what of Mister Malfoy? What are he and his cohorts up to?” Albus studied Severus’s reaction while he picked up a lemon drop.

“He hasn’t asked me for any support or information so far. I assume he’s keeping his ‘followers’ busy with meaningless tasks.” The younger wizard sneered.

“What does the Dark Lord think of their efforts?”

“He is pleased, but does not consider them worthy of important missions, yet. Their monetary and political support, however, is most welcome,” the Potions master said.

“And most bothersome for us.” Albus frowned. Cornelius being the Minister had one advantage: The man was obsessed with remaining Minister, and could be counted on to oppose the Dark Lord, as long as he remained convinced that his office was in jeopardy.

“Maybe the muggleborns will blow up a few more mansions, send the rest fleeing from Britain.”

Albus raised an eyebrow at the other wizard. That was a very unlikely outcome, given the pride and power of the Old Families. “Did the Dark Lord mention his intentions towards the muggleborns?”

“Apart from decrying their cowardice, no.”

Albus chuckled. “I assume he considers his own hiding as a cunning move worthy of House Slytherin, and not as cowardice.” He didn’t miss the faint stiffening of his Potions master posture at the dig against his own house’s hypocrisy. Severus was a Master Occlumens, but there were still telltales. Hopefully, the Dark Lord was not familiar with them. Of course, the Death Eaters’ own masks helped with concealing their feelings.

“He isn’t in the habit of questioning his own actions,” Severus said.

“A habit he hopefully will keep.” The Headmaster smiled. “Is there anything else?”

The wizard shook his head. “Nothing of consequence.”

Albus nodded. “Good evening then.”

“Good evening, Headmaster.”

Once his spy had left the Headmaster’s office, Albus rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had hoped for more time to prepare for this. The Order of the Phoenix was divided into several cells, to protect them against treachery. But that meant they couldn’t be gathered together to counter a major attack by the Death Eaters without losing that security. For a moment, he considered having them wear masks of their own, then chuckled at the thought. That would bring problems of its own.

But it meant that either he had to take a more active role in the field - which would mean that the Dark Lord could lure him away more easily, to strike when he was engaged - or hope that the Ministry’s Aurors and Hit-Wizards could serve to counter the Death Eaters. Which was a very faint hope, given the political leanings of so many of them. And with the Ministry still hunting her, Miss Granger’s Muggleborn Resistance was not an option either.
That left the most difficult option of them all. At least for Albus.

His brother.

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**London, East End, October 26th, 1996**

‘Family dies in Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade!’

When Hermione Granger read the headline of the Daily Prophet, she felt as if someone had hit her in the guts with a Bludgeoning Curse. A quick skimming of the article confirmed what she already knew - a half-blood owned shop had been burned down in the village. The Dark Mark had floated above the scene of the crime. Allan had killed three people, including a child one year from attending Hogwarts. And it was her fault - she could have stopped him, that night. Should have stopped him. She ground her teeth in anger and guilt.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned her head. Sally-Anne. The other girl looked angry as well. “We’ll avenge them, Hermione! Those damn Death Eaters will pay!”

The muggleborn witch nodded, aware that her reaction had been obvious to others, but fortunately they didn’t know the real reason. “We will.”

“Burned alive… we’ll make those bastards pay!” Seamus muttered, bent over the issue.

Hermione risked a glance at Allan. The former Ravenclaw - the murderer - nodded.

“We will avenge those poor people.”

He was a very good actor, she realised. Anyone, even those who knew him - or thought they knew him - would think he was barely controlling his anger. And this threw yet more doubts onto all his actions.

She looked around. Everyone, even Louise and Jeremy, was angry, and determined to avenge the dead family. Some, especially Seamus, were too angry to think rationally. She spoke up before Allan could exploit this. “That’s one more reason to proceed with our plans. We need to find those murderers so we can end them. And the key to that is information from pureblood supporters of the Dark Lord. We can’t waste our time and efforts striking at random targets.” She looked at Seamus. “The scum who did this want us to be angry, enraged, so we make a mistake. They want us to strike at some random pureblood family, so they can get more support. But we’ll not make that mistake. We’ll hit them where it hurts them!”

She brushed some hair away from her face, and used the gesture to sneak another glance at Allan. He nodded, together with the rest of the group, but she thought the anger he showed was aimed at her words.

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**East Suffolk, Britain, October 26th, 1996**

The home of Petra Rowle was smaller than Hermione Granger had expected. Of course, it probably used Extension Charms, and the fenced-in area around it was large, but still - the proxy of Pansy Parkinson, living in such a modest house?

She lowered the binoculars and turned to Justin, who was lying next to her under the bush they had
chosen. “What do you make of this?”

The muggleborn wizard hadn’t lowered his own binoculars. “Small house. Probably four rooms in total on two floors. Two entrances. Small windows, curtains prevent looking inside. Well-tended garden, fence is no real obstacle.” He looked at her. “Do you think it’s just a decoy? A place the witch passes through when travelling to her real home?”

Hermione bit her lower lip. “It’s possible, but it would require her to set up a private Floo connection.” Arthur Weasley had done that for Harry, once. “Those are some strong wards though,” Hermione said. “Very strong, in fact.”

“If it’s a choke point, then we’ll have to reconsider our plans.”

Hermione agreed. If it was a choke point, then they would have to take down the wards and lay an ambush. But if it wasn’t, such an attempt would alert the inhabitants. Which wasn’t exactly a bad thing. She smiled. “I think I have the solution. We’ll need to dig though.”

“The Sergeant said that a shovel saved more soldiers’ lives than any rifle,” Justin said.

“Wands make better digging tools,” Hermione pointed out. “But the saying makes sense.” She studied the house again. “It’ll be a bit dangerous though. It’d be better if we had a Curse-Breaker.”

“Fat chance of that,” Justin snorted. Muggleborn Curse-Breakers were snatched up by Gringotts, even before the Ministry had started to persecute all muggleborns.

“We’ll have to make do with what we know. Louise and Jeremy have had some basic training.”

“And you’ve studied the matter,” the wizard said.

“A bit,” she admitted.

“Which means you know more about this than anyone else in the Resistance.” Justin grinned.

“Which, unfortunately, doesn’t mean that much.” Hermione sighed. “It would be so much easier and safer if the Aurors hadn’t switched to four-man patrols.” She shook her head. “Whoever has been attacking them really wrecked our plans.”

“Well, it’s not us, and the Death Eaters would leave a calling card, so it’s probably some other muggleborn taking revenge. Or another group.” Justin shrugged. “There’s not much we can do about it. We need to stop the Death Eaters.”

Hermione was certain she could do something about it, but nodded. “At least the Death Eaters are behaving foolishly. Murdering half-blood families will make more people hate them.”

“And fear them,” Justin said. “But I know.”

“At least with them acting like this, Allan’s no longer pushing for us to attack half-bloods to frame the Death Eaters,” Hermione said, maybe a bit too casually, while looking through her binoculars again.

“What are you implying?” Justin asked after a moment.

“It’s rather convenient, isn’t it? The Dark Lord doing what will help us.” Hermione looked at him. Justin met her eyes and frowned.
“The dates of the attacks match with Allan’s absences.” Hermione nodded slowly.

“He was with Seamus.” Justin sounded unsure though. Unwilling to believe this of their comrades.

“So Seamus says.” Hermione snorted. “He’d say a lot for a mate who wants to ‘score with a bird’,” she added, imitating the Irish muggleborn’s wording.

“If you’re right then… what can we do? This could tear us apart. There are a number who agree with his plans, even if they were outvoted. I don’t think they’ll agree with killing our own.”

“I know. We’ll have to proceed very carefully.” She stared at him. “But we can’t let him murder more innocents.” Or wreck their plans further.

Justin muttered a curse under his breath. “Just when we can finally go on the offensive, we have to deal with this.”

Hermione nodded. “Hopefully, he’ll be too busy with this mission to murder anyone else.” And as he had proven to be able to break the wards of those shops, he’d be the best choice to attack the wards of this house.

“It’s still mere suspicion though.”

“Yes. But we’ll find out the truth.”

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Hogwarts, October 26th, 1996

Ron Weasley rubbed his temples. It didn’t help with his headache. The Headmaster’s mental probe had been rather painful.

“I did tell you that it would be very painful.” Dumbledore sounded regretful.

“It’s alright,” Ron pressed out through clenched teeth. “I can take it.” Harry had suffered for weeks through such, and with Snape to boot.

“You did make significant progress,” the Headmaster added. Then he turned to Ron’s best friend. “Harry?”

The young wizard grimaced, but nodded. “I’m ready.”

Dumbledore pointed his wand at him. “Legilimens.”

Harry hissed in pain, but didn’t even try to look away. Ron winced in sympathy - he knew how that felt. His own headache was slowly fading. He longed for a potion to deal with it, but that would defeat part of the training - pain was helping them to master it, or so Dumbledore had said. No wonder he had picked Snape as a teacher for Harry!

After a few minutes, Harry was making a strangled noise, and Ron’s headache had lessened to the point of being an annoyance. Dumbledore lowered his wand.

“Very good. You’re close to mastering Occlumency. I did have far more trouble probing your mind than last time. Did you train?”

Harry groaned. Ron glanced at him, then answered: “Not exactly. But with how things are going, we’re very motivated.”
“Ah.” Dumbledore smiled faintly, and Ron wondered if he had seen what the two boys were trying to hide. Or Ron, in any case.

The Headmaster leaned back, and offered them lemon drops. Ron took one. He wasn’t that fond of them, but sweets were sweets. Even if these were sour.

“Is there anything we can do while we master Occlumency?” Harry asked.

“Apart from the training you already do, I do not think so.” Dumbledore sighed. “The Order is not yet that pressed for wands. The calm before the storm, you might say.”

Ron knew what the Headmaster wasn’t saying - that once the war heated up, and the Order clashed with the Death Eaters, the Order would be taking losses. He fervently hoped none of his family would be among them. He had lost two uncles already.

“I just feel so useless!” Harry spat out. “Hermione is fighting, Sirius is fighting, and I’m not doing anything.”

“That is not true,” Dumbledore corrected him. “You two have done a lot already. And once you have mastered Occlumency, you will be hunting Horcruxes, a very dangerous task.”

“How will we be doing this?” Harry asked, rubbing his forehead - though not his scar, Ron noticed.

“Horcruxes, like almost all enchanted items, tend to lose their power over time. That is the reason Magical Egypt is not still ruled by immortal priest-kings, by the way - their soul anchors’ magic faded in the millennia since the old dynasties.” The Headmaster ran a hand over his beard. “Few wizards chose this route anyway, knowing that for a few hundred years more, they would give up an eternity in the afterlife. Though not so few tried to find ways to solve this fatal flaw. They found a way, or so they thought. If a Horcrux was enchanted so that it would anchor itself to other enchantments in its vicinity, leeching off their magic to renew its own, it would not degrade.”

“And yet it must have been flawed, or they’d still be around,” Harry said.

“Exactly. Their method had two weaknesses. First, no enchantment is everlasting. Even the strongest wards have to be renewed and maintained.”

“Couldn’t they just recast those themselves?” Ron asked.

“They could. They did. But the second weakness was the inherent effect of a Horcrux on its environment. Those foul items twist and corrupt everything they touch. Items, plants, animals, people. Even the very magic they rely upon. Coupled with the need to recast enchantments or wards, and the often visible effect, many dark wizards found that their soul anchors were not easy to hide from their enemies.”

“If we’re looking for corrupt people, I think we should start in the Wizengamot,” Harry said, snorting.

Dumbledore chuckled. “An apt observation.” He sighed. “Alas, Voldemort made a breakthrough there - he managed to create Horcruxes with a diminished effect on the environment. And, even worse, he apparently decided to solve the problem of degrading soul anchors by creating multiple Horcruxes over the years. No one has dared to split their soul several times before him.”

“How do we find them then?” Ron asked. “There has to be a way.”

“His soul anchors need to be hidden in areas saturated with magic. Strong wards, lots of spells being
cast regularly, lots of enchantments,” Dumbledore explained. “There are not that many areas that fulfill those criteria.”

“Hogwarts.” Harry said.

“That is one of the locations I think he would have chosen, although my own presence might have dissuaded him from choosing this area.” Dumbledore sighed. “But Diagon Alley, and even the Ministry or Gringotts are very probable locations for his Horcruxes. In Britain. There are similar areas outside our country.”

“Blimey!” Ron exclaimed. “How do we search them all?”

“With great diligence, Mister Weasley,” Dumbledore said. “And with some magic.”

Ron saw Harry sigh and rub his forehead once they had left the Headmaster’s office.

“Does your head still hurt?” he asked his friend. “Or is it…?” He cast a privacy spell, then tapped his forehead.

“It’s not the scar,” Harry said. “I’m just tired. And tired of not doing much of anything.”

Ron frowned. “What’s eating you?” Dumbledore had told them a lot about their mission, and they were making progress. It didn’t make that much sense for Harry to be that down. “Is it about Hermione still not telling us what she feels about us?”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

Ron narrowed his eyes. “What’s the problem?”

He saw Harry clench his teeth, and for a moment, wondered if his best mate was getting angry. Then the other wizard deflated, and sighed. “I’ve been thinking.”

Ron nodded.

“About this whole thing.” Harry tapped his scar. “This, and the prophecy. And the rest.”

“Mh.” Ron wondered what Harry was going to say.

“I just… can I really have a relationship, with all that hanging over me?” Harry snorted. “You know what Dumbledore said about me and Tom.” The Gryffindor looked at Ron with a pained smile.

For a short but terrible moment, Ron was tempted to agree with his friend. Tell him he couldn’t risk dragging Hermione down with him. Then Ron wouldn’t have any competition for her feelings.

The moment passed. “Mate!” He grabbed Harry’s shoulders. “Do you honestly think Hermione will care? Do you think she’ll accept it if you suddenly tell her you can’t have a relationship with her?” Ron scoffed. “She’ll know something is wrong, and she’ll hound you until you admit it. And then she’ll be angry at you, probably hex you some, and then she’ll tell you not to act stupid.” He shook his head. “You don’t really think we’ll abandon you? Hell, she’s Britain’s most wanted witch, and did that make us back off?”

Harry stared at him, then slowly shook his head. “No. I guess not.”

“Besides, she hates it if people try to decide for her. Whatever it is.” Ron sighed.
“Unless of course she wants us to decide something,” Harry grumbled. But he wasn’t looking that down any more.

Ron slapped his friend’s shoulder. “There you go! Now let’s head back, and get some sleep. I’ve got the early shift for map watch.”

“Sirius said he and Remus are almost done with the new map.”

Ron snorted. “He said that last week already. I’ll believe it when the new map’s here and we can sleep in again.”

“As if. There’s still training.” Harry grinned. “Though first thing you need to learn would be to get up without anyone helping you.”

Ron rolled his eyes at him. “Hermione said she was told that a veteran soldier can sleep anywhere, anytime. I’m obviously ahead of you.”

“When it comes to doing nothing, yes.”

The two bantered on their way back to the dorm. Ron almost didn’t feel guilty about his moment of weakness any more.

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Hogwarts, October 27th, 1996

“You wanted to talk to me.”

No greeting, no small talk. Just some gruff words and a grim expression. His brother hadn’t changed, Albus Dumbledore thought. And yet he had - a few years earlier, Aberforth wouldn’t have come to Hogwarts. He wouldn’t even have accepted the message Albus had sent by owl. “Please have a seat,” the Headmaster said. “Thank you for coming.”

Aberforth sat down and stared at him. Waiting.

“The Dark Lord has finished rebuilding his forces. The Death Eaters he has broken out of Azkaban have recovered from their ordeal,” Albus said.

“He’s been attacking half-bloods already. I guess with the muggleborns all hiding from the Ministry, those were next on his list.” His brother scoffed.

“I fear you are correct.” Albus nodded.

“And you think as a half-blood myself, I’ll be in danger.” Aberforth stared at him.

Albus suppressed the annoyance his brother’s antics caused him. Aberforth was deliberately goading him. “As my brother, you are a target. But I trust your wards, and your other defences.” And their estrangement was quite well known in Tom’s circles.

Aberforth snorted. And waited.

Albus kept smiling. “I will not mince words.”

“That’d be a first!” his brother interrupted him.

The Headmaster ignored the comment. “With the Ministry riddled with spies and traitors, and more
focused on hunting muggleborns than Death Eaters, it falls upon others to face the Dark Lord’s followers.”

“Your ‘friends’, you mean.”

“My friends,” Albus said. “Though there’s a problem.”

“What problem? Did you make friends with another Dark Lord?”

Albus couldn’t help but glaring at his brother for that remark. Aberforth sneered at him, not backing down. The Headmaster kept his temper in check. “After the problems with spies in the last war, I’ve compartmentalised the Order.”

“Finally.” Aberforth had been in the Order, back then. And had been a vocal critic of some of Albus’s decisions.

“While that minimises the risk of one traitor exposing all members, it also makes massing forces to meet Death Eater attacks more difficult,” Albus explained.

“And you want me and my friends to help you out. Risking our lives while your Order plays it safe.” Aberforth glared at him.

“I just want you.” Albus said. If Aberforth brought friends with him, so much the better, even if they had questionable morals. Or even because of that - Mundungus certainly was not a law-abiding upstanding wizard, but he was quite useful to the Order.

“I see.” Aberforth’s glare didn’t weaken.

Albus waited, smiling politely. There was no need to argue much - his brother, for all his disdain towards Albus, wasn’t the kind of wizard to let innocents die when he could help it.

“You’re a bastard!” Aberforth spat out.

Albus inclined his head.

“I’ll not be sparing the Ministry’s thugs if they interfere.” His brother frowned.

“I do not expect you to. While I still hope the Ministry will come to their senses, there is a non-negligible chance that they will take offence at civilians protecting themselves and others against Tom’s forces. Amelia, sadly, is quite fanatical about the letter of the law, and often ignores both its spirit and common sense.”

“She’d have arrested her own brother, had she known about his actions before he was killed.” Aberforth shrugged. “So, you’ve finally decided not to play the good little teacher any more?”

“I have decided to do what is right, even if that puts me against the Ministry.”

“Well, it looks like you are able to learn from your mistakes. Too bad it took you so long. Again.” Aberforth stood up. “You know how to reach me.”

His brother disappeared through the fireplace without a further word. Albus closed his eyes, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. That hadn’t been pleasant, but in this case, the result was all that counted. Aberforth would be fighting in this war.

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London, East End, October 27th, 1996

Hermione Granger looked up when she heard the knock on her door. She hoped it wasn’t Allan. Just thinking how he had sat on her bed some evenings, how they had talked almost intimately, made her skin crawl. She didn’t think she’d be able to hide her thoughts from Allan in a similar situation, and she didn’t want him to suspect she knew about his actions.

“Hermione?”

That was Justin’s voice. She relaxed. “Come in.”

The former Hufflepuff entered, carefully closing the door behind him. He looked at it, then at her.

“I’ve improved the privacy spells in my room,” she told him. “If anyone asks it’s because I don’t want to hear what you and Sally-Anne get up to,” she added with a grin.

Justin actually blushed. “You heard us?”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t.”

He sighed with obvious relief, before growing serious again. “Allan’s out again. Seamus said they’d go to the pub for a few beers.”

Hermione closed her eyes and cursed silently. “What about Dean?”

“He’s preparing the next leaflet.” Justin sat down on her bed.

For a moment, Hermione contemplated conjuring a seat for him, but that would have been rude. He didn’t know about Allan’s visit, anyway.

“Do you think there’ll be another attack tonight?” Justin asked.

She bit her lower lips. “If he’s smart, he’ll not do an attack everytime he goes out.” She hoped he’d be that smart. To think he might kill another family…

“You sound convinced that he’s doing this.” Justin stared at her.

“It fits him.” Hermione met his eyes. “He’s been charming and friendly, but he always pushes for attacks on Aurors. And he had the plan to attack half-bloods and frame the Death Eaters.”

Justin nodded slowly. “He’s been talking to Louise and Jeremy as well. And to Mary and Tania. I don’t know what he’s been saying, or how they reacted.”

Hermione rubbed her temples. “I had hoped our resistance movement wouldn’t have to deal with internal plotting like this.” She didn’t want to end up like Michael Collins. Or Trotsky.

“If he’s doing this, then we can’t let him go on. You know what the Major taught us - if the soldiers start to go native, they’ll soon lose all control.” Justin pressed his lips together. He had to remember what else the Major told them.

“We can’t make an example out of him without knowing where the others stand,” Hermione pointed out. “Even using Veritaserum is risky.”

He understood what she was alluding to. “We can’t kill him just because we suspect he might be murdering people.”
Hermione knew he was killing people. “If we catch him doing this…”

“That’s dangerous. We all learned how to spot trails, and detect disillusioned people.” Justin grinned. “You’re not bad, but you’re not good enough to follow him undetected.”

Hermione couldn’t tell him about Harry’s special cloak. “That’s true. But there are people who can help with that.” It was misleading, but if he thought she was hinting at the Headmaster getting involved… The Resistance knew she was in contact with Dumbledore, though not how exactly. Nor did they know what she was doing with Sirius and Harry and Ron.

“Ah.” Justin nodded. “But… is it wise to involve him in this? He’s an outsider.”

She hadn’t exactly planned to involve Dumbledore, but now that she was thinking about it… “If Allan is murdering people he could simply disappear. That way, we’d avoid a lot of the potential trouble he could cause.”

Justin was surprised. She could tell how his mouth opened, then closed again without a word. “I see. That seems… “

“I don’t want some bloodthirsty murderer on the loose, nor do I want his punishment to cause problems for us in the middle of a war.” She leaned forward on her chair. “If he killed that family, just to frame the Dark Lord, what else will he do? How far will he go? And would we be any better than him if we let him continue? And what else could we do to stop him? Without endangering the Resistance?”

“I want to know he’s guilty before…” Justin clenched his teeth together.

Hermione nodded. “You will.” She didn’t know how exactly to achieve that, but she would do it. Allan would pay for his crimes. Without wrecking the Resistance she had worked so hard to organise.

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London, Diagon Alley, October 28th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle angrily vanished the leaflet she had just read while she was walking through Diagon Alley. The nerve of those mudbloods! They dared to warn the Aurors not to support or protect the Wizengamot members responsible for ‘the criminal persecution of innocents’ and the ‘blatant support of Death Eaters’, and threatened to kill them! At least they didn’t use weird muggle words like ‘fascist’ in that one.

Martin glanced at her, but didn’t say anything. Her partner vanished another one, not that it would do any good - there were hundreds of them covering the street, almost covering up the patches of mud still defacing the Diagon Alley. When she caught the mudbloods doing this…

The two reached the burned out ruins of a second-hand shop. The area was crawling with Aurors from Dawlish’s task force. Dawlish himself was standing a bit away, staring at the ashes and rubble.

“Morning John,” Brenda greeted him. “Another Death Eater attack?” She had heard rumours, but no details in the office.


They must have already taken down the Dark Mark then. “No Fiendfyre?” Martin asked.
Dawlish shook his head. “I think they didn’t want to endanger the neighbouring shops.”

Which were owned by purebloods, Brenda knew. “How considerate of him,” she said, snorting.

“Not so considerate for the Wilkinsons.” Dawlish nodded towards the ruins. “Both died in the flames.”

“They weren’t able to cast Flame-Freezing and Bubble-Head Charms?” Martin sounded incredulous.

Dawlish shrugged and glanced at Brenda. Both knew how quickly people forgot what they had practised for their exams.

Martin noticed, and added: “I’d have expected any half-blood family to practise, after the first two attacks.”

“Maybe the fire was enchanted or something, or cursed,” Brenda speculated.

“We’ll look into it,” Dawlish said.

Brenda wondered if the Auror hadn’t considered that possibility. But there were more pressing questions. “Why didn’t our patrols notice this? Breaking wards and throwing up jinxes had to take some time, and fire didn’t cause instant destruction either.

“With the four-wands minimum size for patrols, they cut the frequency of patrols in half to compensate,” Dawlish explained.

“That’s…” Brenda shook her head. “What idiot decided that? And why didn’t Bones step in?”

Dawlish shrugged. “Selwyn ordered it, or so I heard. And he has the backing of his uncle in the Wizengamot.”

The Head of the Patrol force… of course. “Let’s hope this disaster will give Bones the clout to set things right. We might as well stop all patrols if we’re cutting corners like this.” Brenda scoffed.

“We might lose recruits if they have so many night shifts,” Martin added.

“We were losing Aurors on patrols before this,” Brenda countered.

Dawlish snorted. “Rookies get the night shifts. It’s been like that forever. If they get those shifts a bit longer, who cares? We’re at war. Speaking of the war…” Brenda frowned when the other Auror held up a familiar leaflet. “What’s up with this? Just some posturing, or do we need to worry?”

Brenda hated to admit her ignorance, but there was no way around it. She wouldn’t lie to a fellow Auror. Not about this, at least. “Anyone can create such filth. If that’s from the mudbloods who wrecked Malfoy Manor and blew up Knockturn Alley, then yes, we should worry. As far as we can tell, they need time to prepare their attacks, but that’s just speculation.” Before Dawlish could make a comment about her lack of success, she nodded at the ruins. “Any plans to guard the half-blood shops?”

“Too many of them around for that.” Dawlish sighed. “Well, time to continue my work.”

“Good luck,” Brenda said. “We’re off to investigate our own case.”

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“And here’s your Pepper-Up Special,” Jane Mills said, handing an opaque vial over to Brenda, who
was once again using Polyjuice to disguise herself.

“Thank you,” the Auror said. Mills looked a bit nervous, but not overly so. And as a half-blood shop owner, she had reasons to be nervous, so it wouldn’t look suspicious anyway. Brenda pocketed the vial and paid the witch - her reward for the memory she had handed over. For all her original reluctance, the witch had come around rather quickly. The gold she received for the memories helped, of course. As did the knowledge that she was committed now - if the Aurors let slip what she was doing, the Mudblood Resistance would kill the witch.

Brenda walked slowly through Knockturn Alley. There was no mud here, as far as she could tell. Maybe the ones behind the mud transfigurations were living in this alley? It would fit them, in her opinion.

She ducked into a side-alley, and apparated to the safe house - or safe room, rather - Martin and she were using. She would have to wait out the Polyjuice, of course, before she could return to the Ministry. Too many spies there to risk detection. But she’d have the face of another mudblood to look for in Knockturn Alley. Sooner or later, they’d find someone with the right contacts.

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London, East End, October 29th, 1996

Two more people dead in a fire. Hermione Granger put down the Daily Prophet. She should have done something about Allan before this. Clenching her teeth, she looked at Justin. He frowned as well. Was he angry with himself, for not believing her? Or with her, for not doing anything? If he knew that she had tracked Allan, the latter would be the case, or so she thought. She certainly was guilty enough to deserve it.

The others at the table were muttering about Death Eaters. They were angry. Some were furious. And they wanted to lash out. If Hermione tried to delay things further, she’d lose them. As much as she hated it, she had no choice but to go ahead. Ride the tiger.

“Allright!” she spoke up. The Resistance members turned towards her. “We’ve scouted out the location for Rowle. We’ve mapped their wardline, and we located good positions for the ambush or attack. We’ll have to compromise so we can both attack or ambush relief forces, but it’s not too bad - we need to surround the area anyway to prevent her from fleeing, if she is around.” If Rowle wasn’t there, and no Death Eaters or Aurors arrived once the wards were under attack, then they could break in and lay traps at least.

“But we don’t have a Curse-Breaker. So we’ll need the next best thing.” She smiled at Allan. “I know I’m asking a lot of you - it’s very dangerous - but you’re the best at taking down wards.”

Allan nodded. She couldn’t tell what he really thought about serving as bait, or if he suspected anything. He looked like the rest - dedicated and brave. “I can do it. Provided the bunker is strong enough.”

“It’ll be,” Hermione assured him. It had to be - as much as Allan dying in the upcoming mission would suit her, it couldn’t be her fault, or the group would lose trust in her leadership.

“Good.” He smiled at her. “We should have started to attack them long ago.”

“That would have been difficult, without knowing where they live.” Hermione didn’t roll her eyes, but she couldn’t mask her annoyance fully. And judging by Allan’s slow nod and faintly smirking expression, he noticed.
“Remember Seamus: You need to check the bomb carefully. We can’t use too much explosive, or we’ll blow up our target.” Seamus’s grin showed he didn’t really care about that. It vanished though when she continued: “Or Allan.”

“Louise, Jeremy - you’ll be on Anti-Apparition, Portkey and Floo duty.” The two former Hit-Wizards weren’t as trained with rifles and other weapons as the rest of them, but had more experience and training with magical combat so they were natural choices for that task. “You’ll not be alone of course.” Just at the start.

“When do we strike?” Dean sounded as if he wanted to go out right now.

“Friday the first,” Hermione answered firmly. “There’s a Wizengamot session, so odds are she’ll be home afterwards.” And Tonks wouldn’t be on duty. Hermione wasn’t quite certain just how dependable the metamorphmagus was, but she was giving her the benefit of the doubt. So far.

“Now,” she addressed the whole group again, “we need to train for this operation. Some of us have been slacking a bit.” She glared at them. She wouldn’t let them get killed for lack of preparations.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, October 30th, 1996

“There was an interesting article in The Quibbler, Miss Granger,” Albus Dumbledore said, sitting in Sirius’s living room.

The young witch met his eyes. “Are you referring to an article covering our leaflets?”

“Indeed I am.” He summoned the magazine in question. “One might wonder if the Resistance is redirecting their efforts towards the Ministry.” An understandable reaction, in his opinion, yet a clear mistake.

Judging by the way the witch winced, she knew that. “We’re planning a strike at one of Voldemort’s suspected supporters. But we might face an Auror response. We wanted to warn them that if they helped Death Eaters and their supporters, they’d be treated as Death Eaters and their supporters.”

“If you cannot avoid such a response, is the attack worth the effect it might have on the Ministry? Dead Aurors will drive more to demand revenge and propose harsher measures against muggleborns.”

Miss Granger scoffed. “It’s not as if the Wizengamot can do much worse, not without showing their true colours.” She sighed. “Waiting any longer will cause even greater trouble. My group is becoming restless, and the constant attacks on half-bloods might drive them to do something rash.”

“Oh, I see.” He did. While he disapproved of this kind of reasoning, he knew that sometimes, the lesser evil had to be chosen. And young people, training for a war, were bound to act in a rash manner if left too long to their own devices.

“Incidentally, you might check with some of your sources Friday night.” The girl pressed her lips together.

He nodded slowly. The attack would happen this Friday then, and he would have to ensure his spies were not at risk. “Thank you. I think I shall.”

The witch bit her lower lip, apparently debating something with herself. But, as expected of a Gryffindor, she soon raised her chin. “There’s another thing. I suspect - or rather, I am almost certain
after some observations - that one of my allies has started to commit rather questionable acts in an attempt to frame the Dark Lord. I might need some assistance in dealing discreetly with him.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh?” Did she mean that some of the latest attacks by Death Eaters had been false flag operations? Severus had mentioned some followers of Tom showing initiative. Maybe he was mistaken?

Miss Granger nodded. “He’s been absent during a number of attacks attributed to the Dark Lord. And I’ve observed him wearing the robe and mask of a Death Eater.”

He took a deep breath. “Do you think he might have joined the Dark Lord?” Wearing the Death Eater garb was quite damning either way. And the measures Miss Granger had taken to ensure the security of her group might not stand up to the knowledge of the Dark Arts Tom had accumulated.

She shook her head. “We’ve taken precautions against such betrayals. And he has been arguing for the actions he is now - probably - taking.”

Albus nodded. “And you have decided not to call him out and voice your suspicion?”

“The risk of fragmenting the Resistance is too great, even if I can prove his actions.” The young witch frowned. “Him disappearing seems to be the best solution - provided he turns out to be guilty. An extensive interrogation will be needed for that.”

He almost smiled. Of course Miss Granger would both want to be certain of the young man’s guilt, as well as find out what exactly he had done. “I will of course provide any assistance needed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Though, maybe, not by himself.

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East Suffolk, Britain, November 1st, 1996

Hermione Granger watched the small house through her binoculars. The moon had risen two hours ago, but it was not a full moon, and the clouds reduced visibility further. That would help the Resistance, since they were using enchanted goggles to see in the dark, and not every Auror or Death Eater might be equally prepared, judging by what Sirius had told her. At the very least, the muggleborns wouldn’t be at a disadvantage.

“Do you think the Aurors or Death Eaters will spot Allan?” Justin, lying prone next to her, asked in a whisper.

She studied the area where she knew Allan was, underground, in the transfigured tunnel. Even having helped creating it - and hadn’t those hours spent spelling a tunnel from the forest’s edge to the wardline been a pain - she couldn’t spot the periscope-styled slits through which Allan would be able to see and attack the wards. Good enough, in her opinion. “I doubt it.”

Justin didn’t say anything, and she didn’t glance at him to gauge his reaction - they hadn’t spoken about Allan since that night.

She checked the spot Louise and Jeremy were hiding in. They were in a similar tunnel, if not as long, or close to the house. They too had to be close enough to cast and prevent their target from escaping. She couldn’t spot them either.
She switched the headset radio she was wearing to speak. “Leader to groups. Ready check.”

“Curse-Breaker ready.” Allan’s voice had a hint of sarcasm. Or she might be imagining it. He had mentioned a few times that he wasn’t a real Curse-Breaker.

“Jinxes ready.” Louise sounded calm and collected.

“Bomber ready.” Seamus sounded excited. Originally, Hermione had planned to put the bomb in place before starting the attack, so it would simply have to be detonated, but even disillusioned, it could have been detected, and the reinforcements might avoid or destroy it. So Seamus was carrying it, far up in the air, ready to drop it.

“Fire Team ready.” Dean sounded eager as well. He and the rest of the group were near Hermione, in concealed firing pits - foxholes, the Sergeant had called them. Just like herself and Justin. She would have liked to spread them out further, fully encircle the house, but since they didn’t know where reinforcements would be arriving, scattering the group would have been a bad idea.

She checked her watch. Almost midnight. There was no need to delay any further.

“Jinxes, go!”

Fifteen seconds later, she heard Louise on the radio. “House covered, spreading out.” The two former Hit-Wizards had learned the jinxes needed to disrupt the Floo Network from Hermione, who had learned them from Sirius. In their former line of work, that task had been done by the Floo Network Authority, and not that well.

Hermione nodded, even though no one but Justin could see her. “Curse-Breaker, go!”

She couldn’t see Allan casting, but with the help of a spell she could see the wards, and they showed the signs of Allan’s work, their strength slowly degrading.

Her rifle was still at her side. She didn’t plan to use it, unless things went drastically wrong. She was the commander of the group, and she had to focus on leading, not fighting. Unless circumstances dictated otherwise, of course - sometimes, officers had to lead by example. Or so she had been taught.

Minutes passed. She heard a few comments over the radio, and had to remind the group not to distract the Curse-Breaker. And to remain vigilant, not talkative. If Rowle had noticed the attack on her wards - and if she was present, she would have - then she’d have called for help.

If she could call for help. If she relied on the Floo Network, or owls, then the Resistance would be capturing the witch before any help could arrive. Provided she was present in the house. But how probable was it that a Wizengamot member would lack a way to call for help in an emergency? Everyone knew how raids went.

“Movement up north!” Seamus announced through the radio.

That was almost opposite their own position. Hermione focused on the forest’s edge … there!

“Three, no four humans, moving through the forest. About 20 yards east of the tall oak.”

“Got them.” Justin said.

“Two on brooms, but far below me,” Seamus alerted them.

Hermione saw four more people emerge from the woods. And she could see the first four more
clearly. Dark robes and white masks. “Death Eaters,” she said, and felt a shiver run down her spine. Finally, they’d face those murderous beasts in open combat. Or as open as was needed.

Four of the Death Eaters moved forward, towards the house. The rest hung back. Smart of them. Hermione hesitated a moment. Should she wait with the bomb, in the hope the rest of the Death Eaters would close as well? No. The risk of them detecting Louise and Jeremy, and Allan as well, was too great. “Fire Team, once the bomb goes off, suppress the Death Eaters at the back and take out those in the air. Jinxes, if the wards go down, secure an entry into the house.”

She took a deep breath. “Bomber, go.”

“Yeah!” Seamus’s answer was far from professional, but Hermione didn’t call him out on it. She stared at the Death Eaters, obviously searching for the Curse-Breaker attacking the wards, for a few more seconds, then scrambled back into her hole.

“I was about to drag you…” Justin’s words were cut off by the explosion of the bomb Hermione and Seamus had prepared. She scrambled up again, binoculars ready. The sight that greeted her made her hiss.

The splinter mantle she and Seamus had created had worked as planned. The four Death Eaters who had been at the house, searching for Allan, had been ripped to shreds. The house had lost part of its front, and the rest was peppered with holes. Screams caught her attention, and she saw one of the Death Eaters on brooms crash.

Then the Resistance opened up with the assault rifles and light machine guns. Tracers followed the second broom rider. He didn’t try to evade, probably still shocked by the blast, and was hit several times, slumping over and then falling off his broom… no, he was stuck to his broom, now hanging upside down, and twitching from more bullets hitting him.

“Switch fire from broom to forest!” Hermione ordered.

“They’re fleeing!” Dean shouted into the radio.

“I can cut them off!” Seamus announced.

“Don’t fly too close, harass them from above!” Hermione ordered. “Fire Team - suppress the Death Eaters and move half to the house. Jinx, secure the entry. Curse-Breaker, support if able.”

Allan didn’t answer. For a moment, Hermione was tempted to ignore him. If he had been hurt, or killed by the backlash from the wards collapsing… She shook her head. “Curse-Breaker, status?”

Still no answer. Louise and Jeremy were at the wrecked door to the house now, flinging spells inside. Dean and John were rushing towards them. The rest were firing. Hermione cursed. “Dennis, Colin - check on Allan.”

She saw more spells flashing inside the house.

“We need help here if we want to capture them alive!”

That was Louise. Hermione didn’t hesitate. “Mary, Tania - move to the house.” That left Sally-Anne, Justin and herself at their original position. Not much of a reserve, if anything went wrong now.

“Justin, keep an eye on the sky. Sally-Anne, watch the northern forest. Seamus?”

“I got one of them, but the rest escaped as soon as they left the area we had jinxed.” Seamus’s voice
was tinged with annoyance and frustration. “Check if that one’s alive.” Any Death Eater prisoner would be a good source of information.

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**East Suffolk, Britain, November 1st, 1996**

Petra Rowle née Parkinson was reeling - someone was attacking her home. No, mudbloods were attacking! The giant blast that had caved in the front of her house proved it. While she blasted her way through the hallway filled with the contents of two expanded rooms which had collapsed, she thanked all the gods that the mudbloods hadn’t managed to level the entire home, as they had done to Malfoy Manor. But why had they waited with the blast? She gasped, and froze for a moment, her wand aimed at a broken cabinet blocking her way. They had waited for her fellow Death Eaters! They had known she had called for help! This was a trap! And she had to escape! But not without her husband!

When she finally managed to clear the way to the entrance hall - or what was left of it - she found Alvin crouched behind a toppled pillar - marble, imported from Italy - firing curses at the remains of the door.

“We need to escape!” she yelled, taking cover at his side.

“They’re waiting for us!” he responded. “They want us to try to flee so they can ambush us!”

“We can’t stay!” Petra said, sending a Reductor Curse at the wall next to the door. The explosion should make the mudbloods shy away. “They’ll kill us if we wait!”

“They want us alive!” her husband answered. “They tried stunners first!”

Petra felt the blood freeze in her veins. To be captured by those animals! Inconceivable! They had to escape such a fate. One way or another.

Alvin sent a volley of curses down at the mudbloods. Plaster fell from the walls next to the door as the door’s frame was utterly obliterated, but there weren’t any screams or other signs that the mudbloods had been hurt.

She followed her husband’s spells with a Blasting Curse aimed right outside. Earth and stone were thrown up, but the mudbloods responded with curses of their own. If those were mudbloods - they were too competent for the cowardly rabble making up the Resistance according to the DMLE. “We need to get out!” she yelled once more.

Then the wall at her back blew up, and fragments showered her and Alvin, battering their Shield Charms. She whirled around, raising her wand, when two figures appeared in the dust cloud. Before she could curse them, her shield shattered and she found herself on the floor. Then she felt the pain from her wrecked legs, realised she was lying in a pool of blood. She had lost her wand. While she grasped around for it, Alvin fell next to her, his legs bleeding from multiple wounds. Then a red flash blinded her and everything went dark.

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Chapter 14: Disillusionment

‘At the time the Second Blood War had started, much of the focus of both the Ministry and the public was on the devastating effect of muggle explosives. Even now, some authors tend to focus on the bombs. When rumours spread of nuclear weapons, a fortunately short-lived panic spread through parts of Wizarding Britain - the culmination of the bomb scare that had sent so many pureblood families fleeing their manors. It is not surprising that, given those circumstances, the Ministry put a lot of effort into finding ways to counter bombs by any means possible. For many, bombs seemed to be the greatest threat to Wizarding Britain.

And yet they were wrong. For muggle explosives were just a result of the real threat to Wizarding Britain, which was muggle tactics and strategy. While the Muggleborn Resistance was founded by students who started the war as a group of teenagers, they were trained by experienced muggles - veterans of several wars and revolutions. Further, they had access to all the works muggles had written about insurrections and asymmetrical wars. As events proved, this was what ultimately turned a group of teenagers who had not even graduated from Hogwarts into a credible threat to both the Ministry and the Death Eaters.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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East Suffolk, Britain, November 1st, 1996

“We’ve got Rowle and her husband!”

Hermione Granger smiled grimly. They had the objective, but they still needed to get away. “Jinxes, move back to our position! Colin, Dennis, get Allan back as well! Fill up the tunnel too as you leave. Seamus, fly up and keep an eye out for new arrivals! Justin, move south in case the Death Eaters try to get behind us.”

She kept an eye on their flanks while Louise and Jeremy levitated the Rowles and started to sprint back towards her own position. Mary and Tania covered them. Colin was doing the same for Dennis with Allan. As soon as they had reached the line of foxholes, they took over covering the area while the other three moved back. Classic leapfrogging tactics.

“Jinxes, search the targets for Portkeys and other surprises!”

They had to leave the area as fast as they could. The Death Eaters would be back. Hermione just hoped they’d take a few minutes longer to assemble a larger force, and to decide on where they’d go. Long enough for the Resistance to get away. Otherwise they’d have to hide in the foxholes, have Seamus drop the second bomb, and hope for the best.

“South is clear,” Justin reported.

“Airspace’s clear too,” Seamus announced. But Hermione knew that the Anti-Disillusionment Jinxes didn’t reach that high.

“The targets have been searched.”

“Cancel the Anti-Apparition Jinxes! Everyone else - wipe out the foxholes!” They wouldn’t leave
those for the purebloods to find out about. She should research a spell to create and fill foxholes instantly. If only she had the time.

“Done!”

“Everyone, apparate!”

Hermione experienced the typical squeezed through a straw feeling, then she landed in the safe house they had prepared for the interrogation. The witch quickly took a headcount, and, once satisfied everyone had made it out, she issued more commands.

“Mary, Tania - guard the house entrances! Colin, Dennis - lookout on top! Louise…” She briefly paused. They had stripped the Rowles naked. Probably vanished their clothes. Well, it worked as a way to search them for portkeys. And it had exposed the witch’s Dark Mark. “Secure them in the cells after Sally-Anne has treated their wounds so they don’t die.” That they wouldn’t let a Death Eater live long went without saying. She turned to the only casualty of the Resistance. “How’s Allan doing?”

If John, who was looking the other Ravenclaw over, noticed that she hadn’t cared about Allan until everything else had been organised, then he didn’t comment. “He’s unconscious. Probably some backlash when the wards were destroyed by the bomb.”

That wasn’t exactly news, but Hermione nodded. “No internal bleeding?”

“None that I could detect.”

“Alright. Put him up in a spare room, and keep watch on him. Seamus, Dean - get some rest. And Seamus, I’ll need the second bomb back.”

The Irish wizard handed the shrunken bomb over with a pout that Hermione suspected wasn’t quite as fake as he made it appear, then left with his friend.

That left her and Justin. She conjured a seat and sank down into it.

“That went well,” Justin said.

“We were lucky the Death Eaters didn’t return before we left,” Hermione retorted. “Bombing our own position isn’t something I’d like to have to order.”

“They were surprised, and couldn’t have known how many of us there were.” Justin conjured a seat for himself.

“Can’t count on the enemy making mistakes,” Hermione quoted the Major. “We also suffered one casualty.”

“He’ll wake up, right as rain.”

“Yes.” Unfortunately.

“You kept a cool head in the battle,” Justin said.

“I tried my best.” She already was making a mental list of what mistakes she had made, and where she and the rest of the Resistance needed to improve.

But she’d have to interrogate their prisoners first, as soon as they were ready. Keeping a marked Death Eater prisoner for long didn’t strike her as a good idea, not as long as they didn’t know what
the Dark Mark allowed Voldemort to do.

Which was why this house had two escape tunnels ready in the cellar.

“But you’re right - this went well.”

And yet despite her earlier rejection of this thought, she still wasn’t certain if it wouldn’t have gone even better if Allan had died.

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East Suffolk, Britain, November 2nd, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle stared at the ruins of the Rowles’ home. Temporary home, to be exact - they had a bigger villa, abandoned after the attack on Malfoy Manor. It hadn’t saved them from the mudbloods, or so it appeared - the entire front of the house had caved in.

Parkinson was present, of course - it had been him who had called it in. She walked over to the other Auror. “Morning.”

“Morning,” Parkinson squeezed out. He looked angrier than she had ever seen him. Understandable, given that his aunt and her husband - who had raised him after the death of his parents in the last war - had disappeared, and likely been murdered. “What do you make of this?” He gestured at the conjured sheets covering the gory remains of four wizards.

“Death Eaters.” Easy to determine, their garb was very distinctive, even after getting ripped to shreds.

Parkinson glared at her. “Yes, they were Death Eaters. What were they doing here? And who did this?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “The destruction of the house looks like the work of mudbloods,” she went on before he could get angrier. “But the damage done is both less than what happened at Malfoy Manor, and different. It looks like a lot of Piercing Curses hit everything around here. Including the Death Eaters.”

“So, who took my family?”

“Mudbloods. The Death Eaters would have taken their dead with them.” That had happened in the last war too. The Dark Lord didn’t want others to know that his followers had been killed. Though even so, why hadn’t they recovered the corpses anyway? They would have had ample time to remove the dead before Parkinson’s night shift had ended.

The Auror nodded. “Curse that filth!”

“We’ll get them,” Brenda said, and regretted it at once.

Parkinson bared his teeth. “We haven’t caught any of them in months! You haven’t caught anyone! They kill our families with impunity, and it looks like not even the Death Eaters can stop them! What are you going to do, comb through Knockturn Alley again?”

Brenda felt her own temper rise in response to this, but controlled herself. Parkinson had just lost his parents in all but blood, who were probably being tortured to death right this moment. She’d react the same, she told herself. “I will not spill details about my case in public. Suffice to say, we’re making progress. But the kind of murderers who can do this are not easy to track.”
Parkinson glared at her, but before he could say anything else, Martin approached them. “I found these!” He held up several brass cylinders.

Parkinson glanced at them. “What’re those?”

“Muggle cartridges,” Martin answered. When Brenda stared at him, he added: “They are needed for guns.”

Ah. She knew the kid had read up on muggle weapons recently. “So, another sign that this was done by mudbloods.”

“Yes.”

Which meant this mess was her case. Unless the boss fired her for failing to catch the most dangerous murderers Britain had ever seen. Merlin’s balls, even the Dark Lord hadn’t killed as many at the same time as the mudbloods did at Malfoy Manor!

“I want in.”

Brenda turned her attention back to Parkinson. “What?”

“I said I want in. They took my family. I’m hunting them down. If you don’t let me, I’ll get you fired and take over.”

Brenda stared at the Auror. She heard Martin take a deep breath, and held up her hand to stop her partner. “Alright.” It was against regulations, but Brenda knew no one would care about regulations. Not with another member of the Wizengamot and her husband murdered by mudbloods in her own home. “Now let’s see what else we’ll find here.”

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London, East End, November 2nd, 1996

Hermione Granger pressed her lips together, watching while the bound witch drooled on herself, still under the effect of Veritaserum. The things this woman had done…

“I don’t know if her actions in the last war, or her actions this year are worse,” Justin said with a grim expression. Sally-Anne, standing next to him, nodded. She looked queasy, though she had held up well during the interrogation.

Hermione glanced at the transcripts. “It’s not a competition.” Privately, she thought the woman’s efforts in the Wizengamot were worse. Rowle had personally tortured half a dozen muggleborns and blood traitors to death, but the bills she had proposed would have doomed far, far more. “In any case, we now have more names of Death Eaters and their supporters.” Granted, most of them were already suspects, but confirmation was always good. And they knew of a few who had not shown their allegiance to the Dark Lord so far. Unfortunately, Rowle didn’t know anything about the current plans of the Dark Lord - apparently, Voldemort was practicing operational security.

“We also have more addresses,” Sally-Anne said.

“They’ll be deserted as soon as the Death Eaters hear about her having been kidnapped.” That was why Hermione had wanted to kidnap and interrogate people without anyone noticing. A plan Allan had pretty much sabotaged, if her suspicion was correct.

“We’ll achieve that sooner or later.” Justin smiled. “Though we have to decide what we should do
with the witch and her husband.”

“We still have to interrogate the husband.” Hermione glanced at Justin. “We already know about some of his actions from Rowle, but she might not know everything.” The witch certainly hadn’t trusted her husband with everything she did and knew.

“That’s true, but we already know that both are Death Eaters and murderers.” Justin met her eyes. “What do we do with them?”

“We can’t let them go!” Sally-Anne spoke up.

“Of course not.” Hermione did her best not to sound condescending. “But we can make them disappear, or use them for propaganda.” They’d be dead either way though.

“Drop them off with their Dark Marks exposed, in Diagon Alley?” Justin asked. “Might cause some trouble for the Ministry’s bigots.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s a good idea. Though we have to pick the location and the time carefully, so the Death Eaters or the Ministry can’t cover this up.” Which meant taking some risks to drop them off.

“We could transfigure them to mud and drop them in the middle of the street.” Justin grinned.

“That would frame whoever does those mudholes. I’d rather not do that.” Hermione wouldn’t want to have that on her conscience should the Aurors catch those people.

“The Ministry will execute them anyway!” Sally-Anne said, sounding surprisingly fierce. “Just like they murdered Martin!”

Hermione nodded. “I think so as well, but still… there are other options. We’ll have to resort to simply dropping them off in the early morning, together with leaflets I think.” If Portkeys would work in Diagon Alley it would be easy, but the Ministry wasn’t so inept as to risk a bomb getting portkeyed in.

“Seamus can do it. He loves to drop bombs,” Justin joked.

Hermione made a mental note to make more people train with brooms, just in case they lost their best flyer. Best was relative, of course - Seamus couldn’t hold a candle to Ron. Or any other Weasley, probably - there was something to learning how to fly as a child, instead of getting a few lessons in school. Apart from Harry, who was an exception - unless having a toy broom as a toddler counted.

“Alright. You two, secure her again, then interrogate the husband. I’ll talk to Dean and Seamus about the drop-off and the leaflets. And I’ll check up on Allan.” Hermione nodded at the two.

“How do you want to… deal with them?” Justin asked, gesturing towards Rowle.

“You mean, how will we kill them?” Hermione wasn’t in the mood for euphemisms.

“Yes.”

“Bullet to the head.” Hermione had thought about this. Torture was out - the Resistance was better than that. The Killing Curse was not an option either; the Ministry propaganda would have a field day. A bullet was quick, and very muggle. It was a statement in itself.

Justin narrowed his eyes. “Some might not like it. Too easy for them.”
Sally-Anne nodded, though reluctantly.

“Too bad for them. We’re not Death Eaters. We’re not going to stoop to their level.” Hermione stated. That was a line she wouldn’t let anyone cross. The Major had been quite clear about that as well.

If one day anyone absolutely had to do that, it would be her. No one else.

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Dorset, Britain, November 2nd, 1996

Pansy Parkinson was in tears. The girl was sobbing in Draco’s arms, hours after she had heard of her aunt’s disappearance. Not disappearance, death, Daphne Greengrass reminded herself. The mudbloods wouldn’t let a pureblood prisoner live. They had proven that more than once. Filthy murderous animals.

She hadn’t really liked Parkinson, but the girl had lost her parents, and now her aunt and uncle. Daphne went over and patted the witch’s back. Tracey followed her example, if a bit more reluctantly.

The girl didn’t react, but Draco smiled at them, before addressing Parkinson again. “You need to rest, Pansy,” he whispered.

Daphne glanced at Tracey, and nodded. “We’ll be in the living room,” she said in a low voice, before leaving with her friend.

Outside the room, she leaned against the wall. “That could have been my uncle…” she muttered.

“That could have been us,” Tracey said.

Daphne looked at her.

“They found four Death Eaters there, shredded,” her friend explained.

“What?”

Tracey nodded. “My cousin in the Aurors told me. They don’t know yet what they were doing there. Officially, that is.”

“They went there to help the Rowles.” Daphne knew Parkinson’s aunt was - had been - a marked Death Eater. And the Dark Lord protected his own. He had broken them out of prison, too.

“Yes. And if Parkinson had been there, she might have called us, and we’d have died.” Tracey grimaced.

Daphne swallowed dryly. That was not a far-fetched scenario. That was all too likely. “Merlin’s balls,” she muttered.

“We knew we were in danger,” Tracey said. “But…”

“… joining was supposed to make us safer,” Daphne completed the thought. Leaving… they couldn’t leave. She shook her head. “I doubt anyone is safe from the mudbloods. The Rowles were in hiding, but they found them.”

“But how?” Tracey asked.
“Someone must have betrayed them.” That was the most likely explanation. Daphne didn’t think the Rowles had made a fatal mistake. “Someone at the Ministry.”

“A blood traitor,” Tracey said.

Daphne nodded. No mudbloods were left at the Ministry. Half-bloods were a possibility as well. “Like the Weasleys.”

Tracey gasped. “Arthur Weasley?”

Daphne nodded. “He’s an expert in muggle items and an avowed blood traitor.”

“He’s not in the Floo Network Authority though,” Tracey said. “The Ministry has him sidelined.”

“He’s the father of the twins.” Daphne scoffed. And those two had been a terror at Hogwarts.

“We need to abandon the Floo network,” Tracey said.

“Yes. It’s too dangerous.” They would have to apparate everywhere. Daphne frowned. She didn’t like Apparition.

“And we’re trying to gain the twins’ trust…” Tracey winced.

Daphne nodded. “We’ll have to talk to Draco.”

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London, Ministry of Magic, November 2nd, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle sighed, staring at her report. She had written a scroll of parchment, added all the information they knew about the attack, and yet despite all the details about muggle weapons and the bomb, the important questions hadn’t been answered yet.

“How did the mudbloods find the Rowles’ home? And what was the role of the Death Eaters?”

“What?” Martin’s question made her realise she had spoken out loud.

“I’m wondering how they managed to find the Rowles,” she explained. “They should have been in hiding, safe Floo connection, wards - we know those stalled the mudbloods for some time - and I doubt they invited anyone but those they trusted with their lives.”

“Traitor in the Floo Network Authority?” Martin speculated.

Brenda shook her head. “Everyone with access to the records gets screened heavily. And Bones had everyone in the department dosed with Veritaserum today.”

“How did she manage that?” Martin sounded shocked,

“The Wizengamot granted her special authorisation.” Brenda smiled thinly. “They were all afraid that their hideouts might have been betrayed as well.”

“Does that mean we’ll be able to go after suspected traitors as well?” Martin smiled widely.

Brenda scowled. “No. This was explicitly limited to the Floo Network Authority.”

“Why not?” Martin stood up. “Why the hell did they do that?”
“Think it through, kid.” Brenda stared at him. “You know Bones. What would she do?”

Martin blinked, then sat down. “She’d purge the Ministry of spies and corrupt employees.”

Brenda nodded. “Yes. And that’s something neither Dumbledore’s supporters nor the rest of the Wizengamot want.”

“Fudge could fire Bones. Replace her with someone who is less rigid.”

Brenda glared at him. “He’d have replaced her long ago, if he had been able to.” Either she had enough dirt on the Minister to blackmail him, or Dumbledore was supporting her, in order to avoid a worse successor.

“We’re back to blindly grasping in the shadows then.” Martin sighed.

“Exactly,” Brenda said, her voice full of faked cheerfulness. “Welcome to the Auror Corps.” She paused. “Although… things might be changing. The Death Eaters left those dead for a reason. Something’s up.”

Martin nodded. The kid was still too inexperienced to last without her help, but he was getting better. Soon he’d be holding his own even in the dirtier parts of their job.

And, speaking of dirty... Brenda had an idea of how to get the drop on those mudbloods. She just needed to convince Bones.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, November 2nd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore carefully avoided smiling, despite the urge to do so when he saw how frightened some of the Wizengamot members were. A number of them would be having second thoughts about their stance towards muggleborns, he was certain. And yet, a bigger number would be looking to the Dark Lord for protection.

Even now, Augustus was touching on that subject, if quite subtly: “And what about those four wizards found dead - brutally killed - wearing the robes of the followers of the Dark Lord?” The wizard ignored the ‘call them Death Eaters!’ and ‘good riddance!’ comments from some of the more vocal of Albus’s allies, and continued. “Why were they there? Contrary to the ugly rumours spread by some, they wouldn’t have have attacked the Rowles.”

“Because they were Death Eaters!” Arlene Abbott shouted. Albus thought the witch should have been in Gryffindor, not Hufflepuff.

Augustus once again ignored the witch. “Madam Bones, can you answer this?”

Amelia stood up, not bothering to hide her disdain for Augustus. “We’re still in the first stage of the investigation. At this point, any comment about the motives of the Death Eaters found there would be pure speculation.”

Augustus frowned, but nodded. “Despite Madam Bones’s reluctant admission of the lack of progress in her investigation, every one of us knows that the followers of the Dark Lord are no friends of those muggleborn criminals trying to murder us. They have been warning us about the dangers those people present to our society for a long time, and now seem poised to take action to protect others.” He looked at Amelia again. “And I have to ask you a question again: Why weren’t Aurors present there, fighting those animals attacking an esteemed member of this body? Why does it look as if it
fell to others to defend Mrs Rowle, instead of the Ministry’s finest?”

Amelia sneered. “I would say because Mrs Rowle called them, and not us, for help. Unless you want to assume that the Death Eaters knew about the attack on her, and didn’t warn her so she’d serve as bait.” That caused quite a few murmured comments. Amelia scoffed while she continued. “Not that their presence did anything for Mrs Rowle. They were all killed instantaneously.”

Albus once again didn’t smile when he saw how this caused quite a few whispered conversations, and some openly concerned expressions. Hopefully, this would make more Wizengamot members doubt Tom’s ability to protect them. Albus needed all the help he could get to keep the Ministry from adopting a neutral stance towards Death Eaters as a result of this attack. Even though he feared it would be just a temporary success - the Wizengamot’s policy towards the muggleborns showed far too many similarities to Tom’s ideology.

Albus knew that was why the dead Death Eaters had not been recovered before the Aurors had arrived. Tom wanted the Wizengamot to see his followers as allies against the muggleborns, not ruthless murderers trying to take over Britain. Unfortunately, there were already a great many members of the Wizengamot who would welcome such a takeover. Enough of them were just driven by their fear of the muggleborns, though, that any doubt in the Death Eater’s ability to protect them might tip the balance in favour of Albus’s faction.

He’d have to talk to Severus, and find out if there was a weakness of Tom’s forces he could exploit. Or have exploited - Albus was quite certain Miss Granger would jump at the chance to attack Death Eaters.

But he’d have to ensure that this would not threaten Severus’s cover.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, November 2nd, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle’s day wasn’t going well. Not only was she doing overtime on a Saturday, but she had a meeting with the Head Auror. And Scrimgeour wasn’t in a good mood.

“I’ve just been questioned by Bones about the progress in our hunt for the Muggleborn Resistance. Or rather, the lack of progress,” the wizard said, scowling. “Apparently, several members of the Wizengamot are very concerned about the lack of arrests, after the Rowle incident.”

Brenda was quite certain that Scrimgeour had not as much been questioned as reamed out. And that he was now passing it on to her and her partner. She snorted. “They’re afraid they’ll be next.”

“Of course they are! And they have plenty of reasons to be scared.” Scrimgeour stood up from his desk and started pacing. “And they demand results. If we can’t deliver them, they’ll look for someone to blame.”

“Like us.” Brenda stared at him. If she was getting demoted, or fired because of this… first she loses her partner, now her career, maybe her job? All due to that mudblood Granger?

“Like you. So, what results can you deliver?”

Brenda clenched her teeth. She hadn’t much. “They’re hiding in the muggle world.” They had eliminated Knockturn Alley as a hideout early on. There were muggleborns there, but those were the older ones. Not the Resistance. “We can’t find them there. Which means our best chance is to catch them when they venture into Wizarding Britain. We know they are active - they are plastering their leaflets over Diagon Alley, they transfigure the alleys to mud, and they have to be scouting out their
targets.”

“Are you saying our patrols are inept, since they haven’t seen them?” Scrimgeour asked, with a glint in his eyes.

Brenda knew better than to answer that directly - she would find herself posted on patrol duty in a heartbeat. “I think they know our schedules. It doesn’t help that we cut the numbers of night patrols in half, of course.” She shrugged. “But the main problem is that by the time we arrive where they have struck, they have left already.”

“The Death Eaters arrived more quickly than that.”

“They were quick enough to get killed,” Brenda retorted. “And they were probably called by Rowle, or were already present.”

“Are you insinuating that the honoured member of the Wizengamot, Petra Rowle, has ties to the Dark Lord?” the Head Auror asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Of course not. Idle speculation.” Brenda snorted. “But it shows that even if we arrived in time, we’d run the risk of getting ambushed and killed - with one of their damned bombs.” And she had no intention of becoming another casualty in this ugly war.

“We could prepare for that though,” Martin cut in. “Turn the ambush against them. If we’re right on top of them, they can’t use a bomb without killing themselves. And we could prepare secure positions.”

Brenda exchanged a brief glance with Scrimgeour. Martin was still not that experienced.

The Head Auror shook his head slightly. “That’s a lot of preparation you’d need.”

“It’s possible,” Martin insisted.

“That it is. But we’d need to know in advance where the mudbloods will strike,” Brenda said.

“We can lay a trap for them. Evacuate the home of a Wizengamot member as bait.” Martin wasn’t giving up on his idea easily.

“Yes, we could,” Scrimgeour admitted. “But how would we make them attack that location without making it obvious that it was a trap? The muggleborns aren’t as stupid as some purebloods claim.” He shook his head. “We don’t know how they found Rowle’s home. So, we can’t feed them the information to lure them into a trap.”

“If it’s not one of the Floo Network Authority workers, then it’s probably a traitor in the Wizengamot,” Brenda said.

“Lots of them there,” Scrimgeour said, snorting. “Finding the ones working for the muggleborns might be difficult - those working for the Dark Lord certainly wouldn’t tell any of Dumbledore’s open supporters where they live.”

“They might have stumbled upon the home by chance. Caught the Rowles in Diagon Alley, and tracked them,” Martin said. “Somehow.”

“That’s not a practicable way to feed them the information then,” Brenda said. “We need more spies.” They needed spies, period - at best, they had informants among the questionable part of the population.
“Those mudbloods we can reach don’t know about the Resistance,” Martin said. “We’ve been looking into the ones hiding in Knockturn Alley without success so far.”

“I have an idea, but it will take more time,” Brenda said.

“So far, we’ve lost a lot of time without success, and it doesn’t look like we have many other viable solutions yet.” Scrimgeour looked at her. “What do you have in mind?”

“The dangerous mudbloods are hiding, from us and from the other mudbloods. They have no reason to trust the ones who are not fighting. But what if there was another mudblood resistance group?”

“There probably is,” Martin said. “There have been a number of incidents the Resistance hasn’t taken credit for.”

“Yes. But what if there was another group who carried out some well-known attacks? The mudbloods might at least contact them. After a while,” Brenda added.

“Are you suggesting that we fake a muggleborn group? Launch attacks on purebloods?” Scrimgeour sounded shocked.

“Not the kind of attacks the mudbloods are doing. But if we stage some flashy actions, that might catch their interest.” And if that wasn’t enough, then Brenda had an idea about further actions. “But we’d have to use trusted half-blooms, or capture a few muggleborns and use Polyjuice.”

“That’s a very dangerous plan,” Scrimgeour said. “And it might not work at all.” He sighed. “But I don’t see anything with more promise. I’ll talk to Bones about it.”

Brenda nodded. She didn’t smile until they had left the Head Auror’s office.

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London, East End, November 2nd, 1996

Hermione Granger managed not to frown when Sally-Anne informed her that Allan had woken up. She didn’t want to, but she had to go and visit the wizard, of course - it wouldn’t do to show her true feelings for the murderer.

Allan was already sitting in his bed when she entered his room where Seamus and Dean were telling him about the fight he had missed.

“Hello Allan.” Hermione managed to smile at him.

Allan returned the smile, though it lacked his usual charm. “Hello. I hear we caught the two purebloods, but half the Death Eaters escaped.”

“We completed our objective without permanently losing anyone,” she corrected him. “The Death Eaters were driven off before they could interfere or rescue the Rowles.” She wouldn’t let him cast doubts on the success of the attack.

“I would think me getting knocked unconscious for two days was a loss.”

It had been a gain, in her opinion. “We expected that, as you know.” That was stretching the truth a bit. Hermione had expected a backlash, not the exact consequences though.

“That was a fault of the plan,” Allan said. He didn’t have to say ‘your plan’ - everyone knew it had been hers.
“No plan’s perfect.” Hermione didn’t quite shrug, but her shoulders twitched. “In any case, you agreed to the plan, and you’re our best Curse-Breaker.” He should be, given how he had broken the wards on half-blood shops. “But I can reassure you: we’ll not be using that plan again.” The Death Eaters would be expecting it, anyway.

“We have to keep attacking the purebloods!” Allan spat out. Seamus and Dean nodded vigorously in agreement.

She noticed that he wasn’t at his best; he hadn’t recovered that much yet and was making more mistakes than usual. “Of course. But we’ll use other means to deal with the wards next time.” She smiled at him.

“What other means? Did you have an alternative and not tell me?”

“I hoped you’d be able to weather the backlash. As I recall, you said so yourself. But it’s obvious you cannot.” She sighed. “Which means I’ll have to get some outside help.”

“What kind of help?” Allan leaned forward.

She shook her head. “I’d rather not say at this point. There are a few options I want to explore first. Security is a concern.”

“They aren’t muggleborns,” Seamus said. “Are you picking them over us?”

“Don’t you trust us?” Allan stared at her. He must have been affected more than she suspected, to drop his facade that much.

“I’d be violating their trust if I informed others without their permission. You’d be rather angry too, should I share information about you, wouldn’t you?” Hermione met his eyes. “Trust goes both ways, and we need these people’s help.”

Allan scowled, but looked away first, then closed his eyes and sank back onto the bed. Rather theatrically, Hermione thought. Out loud she said: “I’ll leave you to get some needed rest, Allan. It’s good to have you back with us.”

The lie made her want to bite her tongue, but she kept her expression friendly until she had left the room.

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Justin was waiting for her near her room. He didn’t say anything, just winced when he saw her. Hermione nodded at him. “Have you prepared the drop-off?”

“Yes. I can show you the schematics.”

“Come in,” she said. It was a shame that they were acting like this in their safe house, covering up their meetings, hiding what they were doing from the other members. They shouldn’t have to do this, she thought. It wasn’t a good way to run a resistance movement. Quite the contrary. It made her feel ashamed and guilty.

But it was necessary.

“Allan’s back to normal, or almost. He’s already complaining that we ‘let half the Death Eaters escape’.” Hermione shook her head. “And Dean and Seamus seem to believe him. I doubt rational arguments will be heard by them any more.”
The wizard nodded. “So…”

“I’ll track him when he goes out again.” She had a feeling that Allan would want to continue his private campaign. “I’ll be meeting with one of my contacts at the same time.” So he’d have no cause to suspect she’d be tracking him.

“You’re not doing this alone.” Justin looked at her,

“I’m not. I’ll have help.”

“Alright. But I want to be there when you interrogate him.” Justin seemed to accept her word, without asking for more information. She didn’t know if that was a good or bad sign, all things considered.

“You will. We won’t have too much time though, so you’ll have to be able to come quickly.” And he’d need to have an excuse himself.

“I’ll claim I’m checking out a possible safe house.”

“At night?” Hermione raised her eyebrows.

He sighed. “This would be easier if I could bring Sally-Anne with me.”

Hermione shook her head. Sally-Anne was a nice witch, but she couldn’t keep a secret. Justin knew that.

“We could claim we’re meeting muggle sources.”

For a moment, Hermione was tempted to agree. It was a good cover, and fit with what they had done before. But she didn’t want Justin to meet Dumbledore. It was part petty, and part caution. “You could claim you’re meeting with a friend of your father, to find a safe house.”

Justin seemed to mull this over. “That’ll only work because none of the others has an idea about how my family handles things.”

That surprised her. “Not even Sally-Anne?”

Justin winced. “We don’t really talk about our families.”

“That’s…” she trailed off. Sally-Anne was from middle class stock, as Hermione’s mother would say. But lower middle class. Justin’s parents might not look favourably on such a relationship.

“Yeah. I figure we might die any day, and if we survive this war, then we can deal with it.”

Hermione nodded. Enjoy life as much as you could when fighting in a war - it was a sound philosophy. But she preferred to look ahead. Plan ahead. Consider the future.

She wasn’t Justin though. But sometimes, she wished she was.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, November 3rd, 1996

“Merlin’s rotting corpse!” Brenda Brocktuckle shook her head, staring at the two bodies.

“Those animals!” Martin muttered next to her.
“Auntie… uncle…” Parkinson, standing a bit to the side, was shaking. Whether with rage or grief, or both, she couldn’t tell. She tried to ignore him - seeing a veteran Auror like that was embarrassing at best, and dangerous at worst. Instead she focused on her work.

The corpses of Petra Rowle and her husband had been dropped in Diagon Alley, in the middle of the day. The gruesome sight had drawn a crowd at once, before the Aurors had been called, and all around Brenda, wizards and witches were muttering. ‘Death Eater’ and ‘Dark Mark’ were the most common words she heard. No wonder - both dead had been stripped down to their underwear, and the Dark mark on Rowle’s left arm was easily spotted. Which was what the mudbloods had intended, Brenda knew.

“That’ll cause some trouble,” she commented, more to herself than to anyone else. Out loud, she asked: “Did anyone see how the corpses arrived here?” It couldn’t have been a Portkey, not with the jinxes covering the entire Alley.

“They were dropped from the sky!”

“Yes, they floated down.”

Brenda looked up before she could help it. Of course the sky was empty but for clouds - and those were too high for a broom. If the mudbloods were now flying during the day, the Ministry would need patrols up there. Or they might drop bombs next.

“Why are you looking up now? They’re long gone!”

“Aurors! Always late!”

Martin hissed, but Brenda ignored the comments. She crouched down next to the corpses. They had been killed by Piercing Curses to the face. Probably. It might have been a dagger too, or a gun - mudbloods liked muggle weapons. A clean death, or so it seemed. But the legs of the bodies… she shook her head. Animals.

“Shut your traps! That’s my family!” Parkinson yelled suddenly. Brenda looked up and saw he had drawn his wand and was aiming at a passerby, who was backing away and paling.

“Parkinson!” she yelled. “We need you to take the bodies back!”

That shook the Auror out of whatever violent mood he was in, and he turned back towards Martin and Brenda. “Yes… of course.” He wiped his eyes with his free hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said, in a low voice, when he was closer.

“Thanks,” he pressed out, his eyes once again on his dead aunt.

“We’ll get the mudbloods,” Martin said.

“And they’ll get the kiss,” Parkinson agreed.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, November 3rd, 1996

“I’ve heard about the Rowle attack,” Sirius said. “Good work.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.” They were in his study, or what he called a room decorated with Quidditch and pinup posters he claimed were motorcycle ads.
“Did you get the information you wanted?”

“We have confirmed names of Death Eaters and their supporters, as well as a few addresses. Those will be vacated now though.” Hermione frowned. She had hoped for more.

“Don’t underestimate the arrogance and stupidity of purebloods!” Sirius grinned. “Some might very well not think you’d attack them.”

“And some might try to use this to ambush us.” She shook her head. “I’d rather not risk that.” Some in the Resistance would, of course. But she couldn’t let them get killed like that. If it was just Allan…

“I’d say who dares, wins, but you’re winning so far.” Sirius leaned back in his seat and summoned some drinks for the two of them.

“We’ve just started.” Hermione grabbed a Butterbeer. “And Rowle didn’t know anything about Voldemort’s plans.”

“Plenty of Death Eaters around to go after.” Sirius shrugged. “And each one you kill weakens the Dark Lord.”

Hermione had her doubts, but nodded. She handed the list with the names over. “Any addresses for them would be helpful. But even better would be ways to kidnap one of them without anyone noticing his absence. Or a way to hack into the Floo Network.”

“Hack?” The older wizard looked confused.

“Sorry. It means penetrating and taking over the network so we can track who uses it, maybe divert them,” Hermione explained.

“Oh!” Harry’s godfather rubbed his chin. “That’s not something I thought of. I doubt anyone has so far. Although if you altered an Anti-Apparition Jinx, maybe…”

She snorted. “Spellcrafting? That would take a long time. Time I don’t have right now.”

Sirius nodded. “So you said to Harry and Ron.”

Hermione stiffened and narrowed her eyes. “Yes. And it’s true.”

He cocked his head sideways. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” she pressed out.

“It’s not just an excuse so you don’t have to decide if you like them as more than friends?” He was smiling faintly, but his eyes sought hers. He wasn’t really teasing her, she realised.

She ground her teeth. “Did they ask you to prod me?”

He chuckled. “Of course not! Harry has asked me for some advice, but you know him - he wouldn’t want me to get involved.”

Hermione knew that Ron at least hadn’t minded Harry lining up his date for the Yule Ball, but she had to agree with Sirius. “And yet you’re doing this.”

“Of course. He’s my godson, and terribly inexperienced with witches, while I have a lot of experience.” He grinned, then grew more serious. “And I’ve some experience with teenagers in
times of war struggling with love trouble.”

She stared at him. “It’s none of your business.” She wanted to hex him, but that would be immature. And she wasn’t immature.

“It’s Harry’s business, and he’s my business. So to speak.”

“I’m telling him.”

“If you do that you’ll have to talk about the topic. Which you’ve avoided for quite some time. Procrastination isn’t exactly typical for you, is it?”

“I don’t have time for a relationship.” She was repeating herself. Maybe he’d get the message.

“That’s what you think. But you can’t really ignore this.” Sirius leaned forward, the last remains of his smile fading. “And you owe it to the boys to be honest with them.”

“Honest? I’m not lying to them!” She wasn’t.

“Then why not tell them how you feel about them? Are you afraid they’ll stop being your friends if you don’t want to be their girlfriend?”

Yes. She didn’t say that, of course. “I don’t want to hurt either of them.” If she picked one, the other would be hurt. But even if that wasn’t the case, things would change. They wouldn’t be three friends any more, but a couple and their friend.

“Do you love one of them?”

“I love both, but not that way!” She bared her teeth at him. Maybe that would impress his dog-side.

It didn’t. “Well, if you did love both that way, it would simplify things greatly. A ménage à trois would solve your problems.”

She gaped at him. “What?”

“A ménage à trois is when…”

She cut him off. “I know what it is!”

“Ah, good.” He smiled. “I thought you knew French.”

“How can you come up with anything like that?”

“Through logic and reason, of course.”

“Logic?” She raised her voice, a bit.

He nodded. “It’s the easiest solution to avoid breaking up your trio. And - but don’t tell anyone I said this - it’s also the most efficient. Wizards usually don’t last as long as witches, and two wizards and one witch works better than two witches and one wizard. Unless of course the witches like each other as well.”

Hermione blinked. He couldn’t be serious. They hadn’t even had one real relationship between the three of them, and he was proposing a ménage à trois? She opened her mouth twice, but couldn’t think of anything to say. Finally, she managed. “Love, emotions, they don’t work like that.”
Sirius shrugged. “You never know what works and what doesn’t unless you try it.”

Of course he would say that. She ground her teeth again.

“Just think about it!” He smiled at her. “Another drink?”

She was both relieved that they were changing the topic, and annoyed at what he had said. “What drinks do you have?”

She needed something stronger than a Butterbeer right now.

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Hogwarts, November 3rd, 1996

“You know, I haven’t been down there ever since… that day,” Harry Potter said, entering the defunct bathroom. He hadn’t even thought about it in years. Outside nightmares.

Ron shrugged. “Well, we both almost died there, multiple times. Ginny almost died there. And the ceiling almost caved in.”

“Didn’t keep us out of the Forbidden Forest,” Harry answered. Though if he was honest, he had to admit that they only ventured there if they had to. Moaning Myrtle didn’t seem to be around, which was a blessing.

“I am glad you showed some restraint,” Dumbledore said. “Although I also took some precautions to prevent accidents.” The Headmaster waved his wand, and Harry caught the glimpse of a spell hitting the room.

He didn’t know what had been cast. It didn’t matter though. He bent over the faucet he still remembered clearly, and whispered “Open!” in Parseltongue.

“No one has cleaned up here,” Ron commented, glancing down the dirty ramp. “Is basilisk poo poisonous, by the way?” He grinned.

Harry chuckled. “We slid down the ramp just fine last time. We did send Lockhart down first though.”

“A hopefully amusing experience,” the Headmaster said, chuckling.

Harry didn’t ask if he meant the sliding, or throwing Lockhart down the chute. He nodded, and jumped in. A short but wild ride later, he slid over the equally uncleaned floor. It wasn’t that different from his usual way of travelling through the Floo Network, and he was on his feet before Ron and Dumbledore had arrived.

“Blimey…” His friend shuddered. “That brings back memories.”

Harry nodded. “So… welcome to the Chamber of Secrets, sir.”

Dumbledore looked around with open curiosity. “Marvelous. Even though I wish we were here for a less serious reason.”

Harry agreed with that. “So… I just walk around, and hope my scar starts hurting?”

“With the help of a modified Supersensory Charm, yes. You didn’t feel any pain when you were near Tom’s diary, so this is unfortunately needed.” Dumbledore smiled apologetically and cast the
mentioned spell.

“Let’s just hope Tom didn’t decide to visit his old secret cave tonight, or I’ll probably die from pain before he even notices me,” Harry muttered, rubbing his scar.

Ron chuckled at that, but it felt forced.

“I can assure you that Tom would not be able to approach Hogwarts without the wards detecting him, and informing me - at the least. Ample time to cancel the spell.” The Headmaster spoke with quiet assurance, or so Harry felt. “Which is why I am certain he has not placed one of his items in Hogwarts proper - the wards would inform me if that was the case. But they do not cover this area.”

He nodded, and started walking around in the antechamber while Dumbledore fixed the cave-in. After a few minutes he started a running commentary: “Nothing… nothing… still no pain… nothing here either… dust and what looks like dead rats, but no twinge.”

“I think I found some remains of my old wand.” Ron held up some splinters.

Harry bit back a barbed comment. He was playing mine detector, and Ron was hunting souvenirs?

“The way to the main chamber is clear now. And safe - it was quite unstable. Even if we do not find what we are looking for - and I do not think we will - this has made this excursion worthwhile, I think.” Dumbledore was smiling.

“Well, it certainly will be the safest such search,” Ron said.

Harry walked past them, through the newly created tunnel. “Still nothing.” The stench of decay his nose, and he quickly cast a Bubble-Head Charm. He shivered when he reached the place he had fought the basilisk in… and the remains of the basilisk. There was not much left but decayed skin, rotten flesh and bones.

“Blimey! That was… I bet it could have swallowed a troll whole!” Ron exclaimed.

“Be careful not to touch it,” Dumbledore said. “Even the remains are still poisonous, as countless rats have found out over time.” He pointed at the skeletal remains of rats.

“I thought rats were smart enough to never eat from the same thing until they know it’s safe,” Ron remarked. Harry looked at him. “What? I had a rat as a pet. Percy told me all he knew about rats when he gave me Scabbers.”

“Ah.”

“We can ask Hagrid about this… once I have dealt with the most dangerous parts,” the Headmaster said, waving his wand at the head of the corpse.

Harry didn’t want to see what the old wizard was doing to the thing, and walked away, covering the rest of the room. Without success. Not even the secret chamber in the Chamber of Secrets yielded anything but shed skin and what looked like snake poop, as Ron called it.

“I must confess,” Dumbledore said, after about two hours of fruitless searching, “I did hope to find something. If only to be certain our method works.” He sighed. “Nevertheless, war is seldom glamorous, and often tiresome, if not boring.”

“Boring’s good,” Ron said. “It means we’re not fighting for our lives.”
“Ah, Mister Weasley, I fear you are mistaken. While the urgency might not be readily apparent, we certainly are in a life or death struggle with the Dark Lord,” Dumbledore said, “something your friend is quite aware of.”

“Well, she gets to capture and blow up Death Eaters,” Ron said. “We wade through dirt and dust and snake remains, and hope Harry gets a headache.”

Harry nodded.

“Are you so eager to kill?” Dumbledore asked. He didn’t sound that disapproving. More … concerned maybe.

Harry frowned. “I don’t exactly want to kill. But I don’t want the Death Eaters free to kill others. And I want to do something useful.” Though, if he was honest with himself, there were a few people he would like to kill. Pettigrew, most of all.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I know that this is important. That we’re working on destroying the Dark Lord. But it doesn’t feel as real as ensuring that there are a few less Death Eaters around doing his bidding. And as we have seen, imprisoning them doesn’t work.”

“And, aren’t we doing all we can to kill Tom?” Harry shrugged. “If we’re willing to do that, why wouldn’t we want to kill his followers?”

“I see.” Dumbledore looked weary, and more than a bit sad. “Let us return to Hogwarts proper. I dare say we all have earned some rest.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. His friend didn’t seem to have any idea what the Headmaster was thinking either.

“Though speaking of that… I have asked an old friend to help train you. While Sirius and Remus are quite skilled, he has far more experience, even if he does tend to overdo it a bit.” Dumbledore smiled at them.

Harry blinked. Who could… “Moody?”

“Indeed.” The Headmaster nodded.

“Blimey. We’ll need all the rest we can get,” Ron muttered.

Harry could not help but agree with the sentiment.

*****

Hogsmeade, November 5th, 1996

Allan had picked Hogsmeade again. Not surprisingly, Hermione Granger thought - he wouldn’t want to develop a pattern. Although, given that the Resistance had just dumped the Rowles’ remains in Diagon Alley, others might consider this a pattern. But she knew from Sirius that patrols had been increased in Diagon Alley, which meant they had likely decreased in Hogsmeade.

Once again hidden thanks to Harry’s cloak, she didn’t think she’d have trouble surprising Allan. But as the Major had taught her: There was no overkill if your life was on the line and you could spare the money. Which was why she wasn’t alone, but with Aberforth Dumbledore.

That the Headmaster had a brother hadn’t been a surprise - Hermione had found that out in her first
year, when she had been researching Flamel. That Dumbledore trusted his brother, and called him one of the most dangerous duellists in Britain on the other hand… all Hermione had known was that the two had had a falling-out, and that Aberforth Dumbledore was a wastrel, the black sheep of the family. Both of which had been proved wrong.

“Found him yet?” The whisper from her enchanted earring interrupted her thoughts.

“Not yet. He’s in the eastern part,” she answered.

“There’s a half-blood-owned shop there, Michael’s Magic Plants and Seeds.”

“That’s a likely target.” Hermione started walking - carefully - towards that shop. If she wanted to attack their wards… “He should be in the side alley, the eastern one.”

She sped up. She wouldn’t let another family be killed by Allan. She reached the mouth of the side alley. It looked empty, but… there, movement! She spotted a wand, and almost took cover, before reminding herself she was hidden from view. Instead, she sneaked closer. Black robe, white mask. A Death Eater. Or a Death Eater disguise. She had her wand out, but couldn’t aim well under the cloak. It wouldn’t matter though, once he started attacking the wards.

Suddenly, she heard a noise from the back of the alley. Allan whirled around, leading with his wand. As they had trained. Hermione slid her own wand out from her cloak. If Allan was spooked… she couldn’t let the wizard escape.

Her whispered stunner hit him right in the back of his head, and he dropped down. That left whoever or whatever had made that noise.

“Good work, lass.”

She knew that voice. From the end of the alley, Aberforth Dumbledore emerged. “A bit of a distraction. I thought you’d like to hex your own dog, so to speak.”

Hermione shivered a bit, when the tension started to lessen, and nodded. She appreciated the gesture, but the plan had called for him to attack. She wouldn’t bring that up though. Not now, at least. “Let’s get him and leave.”

*****

London, November 5th, 1996

When he woke up, bound to a chair, he knew he was already dead. He had been caught in a Death Eater robe, trying to attack a half-blood shop. No matter who had caught him, he’d be killed. And yet when he saw his captor, he was surprised. It wasn’t the Ministry, or the Death Eaters. It was Hermione, staring at him. And next to her stood Justin. Of course! He knew that those two were much closer than they claimed. The witch was probably sleeping with the Hufflepuff. Just as she was sleeping with Potter and Weasley. And she had refused him? Bitch.

“Hello Allan.”

He looked around instead of addressing her. He didn’t recognise his surroundings, but they looked muggle. A safe house then. “I’ve underestimated you. I didn’t think you’d be that ruthless.”

“Ruthless?” She cocked her head sideways, acting as if she was confused.

“Ambushing me. Capturing me. No one but you two knows you did this, right?”
“Was all that drivel about not striking at purebloods and half-bloods an act?” If he had known she was like that, he might have taken her into his confidence. “Did you oppose that simply because it was my idea?” She wouldn’t have wanted him to impress more of the group.

The witch scowled. “That’s how you think, right?” She shook her head. “You think you’re ruthless, making the hard decisions, doing the dirty work needed to win the war.”

“Of course! Someone has to! You can’t win the war acting as if this was a cricket game!” You had to kill people to win a war. Kill as many of the enemy as possible. And some of your allies too, sometimes.

She snorted. “It’s not about you being ruthless, it’s about you being an idiot. A stupid fool who is endangering us all. You’ve wrecked our plans and strategy, just so you could kill a few Aurors and two innocent families.”

“In a war you have to kill the enemy!” he spat.

“So, half-blood shopkeepers and their children are now our enemies?” She glared at him.

He scoffed. “Necessary sacrifices. Their deaths will drive more half-bloods into fighting purebloods.”

“Until someone catches you, and then they’ll come after us.” She shook her head. “Stupid and short-sighted. And arrogant. It fits.”

“What?” The witch dared to call him arrogant? She was acting as if she knew best, forcing the entire group to follow her plans just because she had the contacts and the gold!

“Just something I read.” She sighed. “We have wasted enough time.” She pulled out a familiar looking vial from her pocket. Veritaserum.

“You know the group will follow me. I’m doing something against our enemies, instead of holding us back. They’ll kick you out.” Or worse, he mentally added while the bitch and her lackey stepped closer.

“You really think you’ll leave this room alive?” She opened the vial.

He suddenly understood just how ruthless she was. He wanted to curse her, but Justin, the traitor, was forcing his mouth open with a ring gag, fixing his tongue in place, and so Allan could only make incoherent noises until the potion took effect.

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Chapter 15: Changing Plans

‘Many forces in the Second Blood War suffered from internal troubles. The Dark Lord mainly had to deal with overeager followers acting of their own volition, and subordinates plotting against each other. He dealt with those problems in his typical way - through swift and lethal punishment, although opinions on how fairly and accurately said punishment was applied differ. The Ministry of Magic, on the other hand, suffered mostly from traitors and spies. The Head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, could never be certain of any employee’s loyalty, even among the Aurors and Hit-Wizards, which unsurprisingly made dealing with the problem that much harder. Due to the direct intervention of the Wizengamot, the easiest means to find traitors - regular interrogations with Veritaserum - was limited to those cases where there was a prior suspicion, which meant that her efforts were doomed. Consequently, the Ministry was never as effective in the war as it could have been, and many operations suffered due to the lack of trusted personnel. Meanwhile, the Muggleborn Resistance was, at the start, just one among several groups opposing the Death Eaters and the Ministry, and a small one at that, which meant most internal troubles were personal issues rather than anything more serious. Due to the lack of coordination though, the Resistance’s plans occasionally suffered when they clashed with operations of other muggleborn groups.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, November 5th, 1996

Hermione Granger stared at Allan, whose eyes showed the vacant stare of the drugged. “Did anyone but you know about the murders you committed?” she asked.

“No one. No one ever suspected.” Allan droned, without the smug sense of satisfaction she knew he’d show normally.

“Who did you kill first?” Hermione knew about the first time Aurors went missing, but those could have been the victims of someone else.

“Umbridge.”

Or Allan could have killed long before that. She ground her teeth while Justin gasped. The Ravenclaw had been responsible for wrecking her carefully-planned schedule. He had caused the Aurors to come after her. She cursed under her breath. She should have expected this. It fit Allan, fit him so well.

“Why did you kill her?”

“She deserved to die. She tortured muggleborns for so long, unpunished… no one else was doing anything. And I had the perfect plan.”

“How did you kill her?”

“I sneaked into her office and ambushed her while disillusioned. I used a full Body-Bind Curse on her, then beat her to death with her own blood quill, transfigured into a golf club. Before the death blow, I obliviated her, so even if she became a ghost she wouldn’t be able to reveal me. Then I vanished the body.”
Hermione felt a shiver run down her spine. Extended answers under Veritaserum were very uncommon, as far as she knew. Allan must have wanted to tell this story. But he spoke of a ‘death blow’, as if… “How often did you hit her before you killed her?”

“I don’t remember.”

She winced. “What did you do to her before the death blow?”

“I smashed her limbs, broke every bone in them, crippled her. Then I broke her hips and ribs, crushed her shoulders. I spared her spine, so she would live longer.”

“Bloody hell!” Justin spat next to her.

Hermione briefly closed her eyes. She had a terrible suspicion. “Did you enjoy killing her?”

“Yes.”

“Do you enjoy killing?”

“Yes.”

Hermione hissed. Justin had gone rigid. It was as she had suspected. And feared. “Did you kill Auror patrols as well?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Two. Four Aurors.”

“Did you kill them like you killed Umbridge?”

“Only half of them.”

Hermione bit her lower lip. “Did you beat the female Aurors to death?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It felt better.”

“Bloody monster!” She could hear Justin take a few deep breaths after that outburst.

“Did you want to kill me as well?” She had to ask. Had to know if those talks, those moments, meant anything. Or had been part of a murder plot.

“No.”

She was surprised, but not yet relieved. “Why not?”

“You are too useful. Too many contacts and resources.”

Of course. She swallowed. “Would you have killed me if you had had those contacts?”

“Yes.”
Hermione closed her eyes for a second. “Why?”

“I thought you were too soft, too weak to fight this war.”

She felt Justin’s hand on her arm, heard him hiss “Stop!”, but she asked anyway: “Would you have liked killing me?”

“Yes.”

She turned away, towards Justin, and nodded to the door behind them. He followed her.

Outside, she leaned against the wall, shivering. “He’s a monster. A smart, cunning monster, but a monster nevertheless.” She bit her lip again. On one hand, this made what she knew she had to do easier. Justified. On the other hand… if she hadn’t been able to see what Allan was, how would she be able to see if anyone else was going down the same path?

Like her?

“Do you want me to deal with him?” Aberforth Dumbledore’s question made Justin jump - he must have missed his presence. Sloppy, Hermione thought, even though the old wizard had almost disappeared into the soft armchair he had conjured. He didn’t ask what they had heard, she noticed.

She shook her head. “No. We’ll do it.” He was a Resistance member, and dealing with him was their obligation.

Aberforth nodded, and she thought there was a hint of a smile on his lips. “Good.”

“You don’t want to know what he did?” Justin asked.

The old wizard shrugged. “He’s a muggleborn wearing Death Eater garb, caught trying to burn down a shop. That’s enough for me.”

Justin apparently felt the need to justify their decision some more. “He likes killing. If he can find any justification, he’ll kill. He’s a monster.”

Dumbledore’s brother nodded, but didn’t comment.

Hermione put her hand on Justin’s shoulder. “I’ll continue the interrogation. We’ll need to know what else he has done behind our backs.”

Justin shook his head, refusing her implied offer. “Yes, we do. Let’s get this over with.”

*****

“Stupefy! Obliviate!”

Hermione felt bad for using Allan’s own idea, even though it was somewhat poetic justice. But it was a smart idea, and she couldn’t take the risk of him remaining as a ghost and turning on them. She doubted that the enchanted contract she had created to protect the Resistance would have any effect on a ghost, and even if Allan was bound to the place of his death, if the Resistance needed this safe house…

And, she told herself, she hadn’t erased all his memories. In case whatever afterlife there was didn’t restore memories.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself. She had killed before, and had helped kill so many more,
but this was the first time she would be killing a helpless, defenceless … no, Allan was no victim! He was a monster. Like the Death Eaters they had captured. He had even been glad about Martin’s death, since that had made the Resistance members more bloodthirsty. She pointed her wand at his neck.

“*Diffindo!*”

She didn’t look away while his head dropped into his lap, then fell down on the floor and blood splattered on the ground.

“*Evanesco. Evanesco. Evanesco. Scourgify.*”

She left the room as empty as she felt, but far less stained.

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**London, Ministry of Magic, November 6th, 1996**

Brenda Brocktuckle was a veteran Auror. So she wasn’t surprised about the Ministry’s reaction to the revelation of Rowle’s Dark Mark. Her partner on the other hand…

Martin scowled. “Does anyone actually believe that the Dark Mark was put on her by mudbloods to frame her?”

Brenda shrugged. “It’s a convenient excuse. Like the ‘Imperius defence’ fifteen years ago.” She leaned back in her chair, letting her gaze wander over the scarce decorations on her desk. One picture of her and her parents after her graduation from Hogwarts - Dragon Pox had killed them before Brenda graduated as an Auror. A stone splinter a suspect had banished into her chest once, now serving as a paperweight. She had killed the man despite the wound. Nothing else.

Martin huffed. “I can’t believe Bones is going along with this!”

She shrugged once more. “I don’t really believe it myself. But Bones is not the kind of witch to let anything slide.”

She shrugged once more. “Who says she is? Dawlish might be investigating the affair more discreetly than he usually acts.” Martin snorted, and she grinned. “Alright… maybe Bones is working with Dumbledore. He certainly has no love for the Death Eaters.” And he had a number of ‘concerned friends’, as was shown during that incident in the Department of Mysteries. Discreet friends, who had left before the Aurors had shown up. But according to rumour, Dumbledore hadn’t visited Bones or the Minister since he had chased them out of Hogwarts. Of course, that could just be a ploy to make people think they were not working together…

Martin looked doubtful. “I can’t see Bones using such underhanded means.”

She nodded. “I don’t really believe it myself. But Bones is not the kind of witch to let anything slide.”

The door to their office was opened, and Parkinson walked in. “Morning,” the Auror grunted more than said, conjured a chair for himself and sat down.

“Morning.” Brenda nodded at him.

“Good morning,” Martin said, his tone carefully neutral.

Parkinson looked from Brenda to Martin and back, then snorted. “Yes, my aunt was a Death Eater. That doesn’t make me one.” He pulled his left sleeve back, to show his bare arm.
“We never said you were.” Brenda looked straight at him. He didn’t have to be marked to work for the Dark Lord. Not that she really believed that the mark couldn’t be hidden.

Parkinson shrugged. “You were thinking it.” His tone was rather casual, but then, the majority of the Wizengamot didn’t seem to frown on Death Eaters that much.

“We’re hunting mudbloods, not Death Eaters,” Brenda said. “Dawlish is the one who hunts the Dark Lord’s followers.” And she didn’t envy him that assignment. Not at all.

“Well, he doesn’t want to hunt them any more. Rumour is, he’s trying to take over this case.” Parkinson scoffed. “He doesn’t want to oppose the Dark Lord any more, or so it seems.”

Martin frowned. “Is he afraid of them, or of the Wizengamot?”

“He doesn’t want to oppose the Dark Lord any more, or so it seems.”

Martin frowned. “Is he afraid of them, or of the Wizengamot?”

Brenda nodded, then blinked. “Well… maybe Dawlish should take over the task force, as long as we get to run our operation.”

Parkinson’s eyes widened. “You want him to shoulder the blame for the things your fake mudblood group will do to gain the mudbloods’ trust!”

Brenda grinned. “Sacrifices have to be made.” It would certainly help if she was seen to be demoted to some meaningless case while she was actually running the undercover mission.

The other veteran Auror chuckled. “You have to get this past Bones, but if it works… Dawlish will be setting himself up for failure.”

“But if he takes over the hunt for the mudbloods, who’s taking over the hunt for the Death Eaters?” Martin asked.

Parkinson snorted. “Someone stupid, I bet. They’d be outing themselves as a blood traitor.”

Or someone working for the Dark Lord, planning to sabotage the efforts, Brenda mentally added. She stood up.

“I’ll have to talk to Bones.”

*****

Hogwarts, November 6th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore noticed that his brother was in a bad mood right away - Aberforth’s scowl was even more pronounced than usual when he entered the Headmaster’s office.
“Did something go wrong last night?” he asked. He was fairly certain he would have been informed at once, but sometimes Aberforth could be very unreasonable…

“No. Everything went according to plan,” his brother said. “But I found out a few things that don’t sit well with me.”

Albus raised his eyebrows. “Please elaborate.”

“Those are kids you’re using, Albus. Kids who are turning into killers, and worse,” his brother spat.

“They founded the Resistance without any help from me,” he defended himself. “They do not answer to me either.”

“Are you claiming you didn’t know about them?”

Arguing about what he had known, and what he had suspected, would be pointless. Too much bad blood persisted between him and Aberforth. He took a deep breath. “They would fight no matter what. Would you rather I ignore them, instead of helping them?”

“Helping and guiding them?” Aberforth scoffed. “Turning them into your personal tool against the Dark Lord?”

“Miss Granger knows as well as I do who the true enemy is.” And she also knew that fighting an enemy who’d surrender as soon as the Dark Lord was dead was a waste of time and often lives. “And she knows that coordinating with your allies is needed in a war.”

Aberforth seemed to concede that point. At least he changed the topic. “We caught a muggleborn in Death Eater garb trying to burn down a half-blood shop.”

Albus nodded. He had expected that.

His brother glared at him. “That fool can’t have been the only one thinking that this was a clever way to discredit the enemy.”

“It is quite a risky, and distasteful, ploy.” Miss Granger had had good reasons to dismiss such plans.

“Right up your alley then?”

Albus glared at him. Even counting his past failures, this was a low blow. “I am not having innocents killed.” Not if he could help it.

“What about those who are not innocent any more? Those who have fought, and killed?”

Any commander knew that sometimes, soldiers had to be sacrificed to achieve a victory. Albus knew that as well. “Not like this.”

Aberforth stared at him and for a few moments, neither of the brothers spoke a word. Then the old wizard nodded at Albus. “If I ever discover anything like this…”

“You will not,” the Headmaster said with as much conviction he could muster.

Aberforth nodded. His brother knew that Albus hadn’t promised he wouldn’t do such a thing. Just that Aberforth wouldn’t know.

After a glance at Fawkes, his brother said: “Your little witch didn’t go overboard. No torture, no revenge. Clean interrogation, clean kill.”
Albus didn’t let his relief show. He had not thought that Miss Granger would cross certain lines, but he hadn’t been absolutely sure.

“She didn’t want me to kill him for her either. She took the responsibility.” Aberforth’s expression implied that he thought that Albus didn’t, and hadn’t.

The Headmaster ignored the barb. “That sounds like Miss Granger,” he commented mildly.

His brother huffed. “She didn’t need my help to capture him either. And you knew that. You wanted me there to get to know them, and to make them trust me.”

“Not entirely. If there had been complications, your presence would have saved the day. Although yes, this will make future co-operation easier.”

“If you say so. Is there anything else?”

“No for the moment. But I expect the Dark Lord to strike at our friends soon.”

“I hope this bunch of your friends is not as unprepared as the last one were.” Aberforth snorted and stood up. “I heard your pet Auror finally got over what Crouch Junior did to him. Keep him away from me or I’ll make that look like a tickling hex from a first year.”

Albus nodded. Compared to the bad blood between Alastor and Aberforth, the relationship between the last two Dumbledores was positively cordial. He sincerely hoped the two would never have to fight side by side.

He leaned back in his seat, petting Fawkes until long after his brother had left. Unfortunately, with the way the Ministry was turning to Voldemort, he feared that hope would be dashed.

*****

London, East End, November 6th, 1996

Hermione Granger sat on her bed, staring at the wall. She had returned to the Resistance’s safe house, with no one the wiser. Late enough so her curt manner would have been attributed to being tired. Hopefully, at least. Justin had returned separately sometime before. As Mary had told her with a grin, he was with Sally-Anne right now.

And Hermione was alone. She sighed. Allan hadn’t cared for her, or liked her. He had just wanted to manipulate her. Use her for his own, sick plans. She should have known that. Viktor hadn’t liked her either. At least not the way she had wanted. He hadn’t known her either. He liked that she didn’t care for Quidditch. That wasn’t exactly something to base a relationship on.

Harry and Ron though, they knew her. They had seen her at her best and at her worst. Or had known her - she wondered what they’d think of her now, after she had killed Allan. They hadn’t liked him, but they wouldn’t have suspected what he had been doing. A sudden thought made her freeze for a moment. Would Allan have gone after them, if she had been in a relationship? He had asked, hadn’t he? And he had been going on about how purebloods and half-bloods couldn’t be trusted...

She bared her teeth. Another reason why killing him had been the right thing to do. She wouldn’t let anyone threaten her friends.

Her friends. Who wanted more than friendship. She didn’t have time for a relationship. It was the simple truth. She was leading the Muggleborn Resistance in a war against the Dark Lord and the
Ministry. She was already not getting enough sleep, and she would have to deal with the results of Allan’s sudden absence as well as keeping the offensive going.

But, damn it, she wanted to feel loved and desired! Not just liked and appreciated. She took a deep breath. She was a smart girl, and she’d handle this rationally. Think the matter through carefully and thoroughly. Weigh the pros and cons of a … relationship. With either Ron or Harry. That was the plan, she told herself, pulling out a notepad and pen.

Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived. Orphan. Not the best childhood. Brave. Almost stupidly so. Always willing to help anyone who needed it. Not always willing to let others help him, though she had cured him of that, or so she thought. Wore his heart on his sleeve, sometimes acted without thinking, and had a temper. And a tendency to brood as well. Utterly loyal, though loathe to take sides when friends had a row. More fragile than he appeared, and naive when it came to relationships - she remembered his crush on Cho. Very charming. Striking eyes. Quidditch mad.

Ron Weasley. Sixth son of seven children. Brave. Stupidly so - she remembered his sacrifice in first year. Sometimes didn’t think things through before speaking. Or acting. Had a temper as well. And felt inadequate compared to his older brothers, and probably Harry. Hated receiving charity. Jealous, though that had lessened a lot after fourth year. Not very experienced with girls - she remembered his attempt to ask Fleur for a date. Developing a very nice body, and cute freckles. Quidditch mad.

Listing those points hadn’t helped. Her two best friends had more in common that she had thought, and it didn’t seem that she’d be able to make a rational decision about whether or not to enter a relationship, and with whom. Drat.

It was just hormones, she told herself. Hers, and Ron’s and Harry’s. Perfectly natural, and it would pass as they all grew up and became adults. On the other hand, if it was just hormones, why hadn’t they gone for prettier girls? She wasn’t exactly stringing them along, was she?

Damn, she probably was. Odds were, the boys felt obligated to wait for her decision. Even if they might be interested in other girls now. Girls they could see each day, and meet in cupboards.

She frowned at that thought. She was jealous as well, she realised. Though she didn’t know of whom. She could imagine herself with either of the two boys. Had done so, actually, in some lurid dreams at least.

Unbidden and unwanted she thought of Sirius’s proposal again. A ménage à trois. It would avoid a number of problems. No favouring one boy over the other. No splitting up their group. Not seeing her best friends get heartbroken by some stupid witch who didn’t appreciate them… she frowned again and shook her head. It wouldn’t really work though. All of them were too young, too inexperienced. Too insecure. Too needy. Jealousy would crop up no matter what they did.

Hermione ground her teeth. She was a Gryffindor, she was supposed to be brave! And she was supposed to be smart. There was but one way to solve this mess. She’d have to go on a date with each of her friends, and see how that went!

Then she hunched her shoulders and rubbed her forehead. She was being silly. Emotions didn’t work like that. But it was the best solution she could think of that wasn’t running away from facing her feelings, and her friends.

It would have to be good enough.

*****
Hogwarts, November 7th, 1996

“Ron? Do you have a minute?”

Ron Weasley stopped writing his Potions essay and looked at his sister, who was standing next to his table in the Gryffindor common room. “Of course. What’s up?”

“It’s private,” the witch said, in a lower voice.

Ron frowned, wondering what this was about, and drew his wand. She shook her head. “Let’s talk somewhere else.”

“ Alright.”

They moved to an empty classroom, and he cast several privacy spells while Ginny summoned two chairs and a desk.

“Thank you.” His little sister sat down. She didn’t speak up right away though. Another reason for concern. Had someone hurt her? He knew she could take care of herself - she had been training with the rest of them, after all - but what if some boy had broken her heart? Hadn’t Zabini complimented her last week? If that slimeball...

“Ron?”

His thoughts of brutal revenge interrupted, he smiled apologetically at his sister. “Sorry. Go on.”

Ginny huffed, but didn’t comment on his absent-mindedness. “What’s going on between you and Hermione?”

“What?”

Ginny glared at him. “Don’t play dumb. I know you’re meeting her regularly. You and Harry have been sneaking out of Hogwarts several times.”

How did she… the map! Ron sighed. “That doesn’t mean we’re meeting with her.”

His sister rolled her eyes. “Please! If you weren’t meeting her, you’d be much more vocal about missing her.” She made a dismissive gesture with her left hand. “I know you and Harry very well.”

“Did you learn Occlumency?” Ron shot back.

“What? No. Why?” Ginny frowned when she understood what he meant and mumbled a few words Mum would scourgify her mouth for under her breath.

“Language, Ginny,” Ron said. He wasn’t trying that hard to imitate Hermione, but judging by her glare, he managed well enough. He held up his hand in a placatory gesture. “Look… why are you interested in this hypothetical question anyway?” Did she want to help them? She was too young for that sort of thing!

“I’ve heard you turned Lavender down when she asked you out.”

“Yes, I did.” That had taken longer to spread than he had expected. Apparently, Lavender and Parvati were not quite as quick to spread gossip when it concerned them.

“And I haven’t heard about you going out with any other witches.” Ginny stared at him.
“So?” Ron asked, feeling slightly irked. She was his sister, not his mum.

“So, why would you turn Lavender down, unless you were already in a relationship? With a witch who’s not at Hogwarts.” She rolled her eyes before he could answer. “Yes, no Occlumency.”

“There are a number of reasons. I might not like her.” He ignored her snort and mumbled comment about Lavender’s looks. “I might not have the time for a relationship.” And that hit a bit too close to home.

“Or you might be pining for a witch who turned you down.”

He ground his teeth. “What do you really want to know?”

For a moment, Ginny had that mulish expression he knew so well, then she sighed. “I want to know if Harry’s with a witch who’s not at Hogwarts.”

That sounded like a nickname Hermione would hate even more than Harry hated the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’-name, Ron thought. Then he focused on the question, and what it meant. “I thought you were over your crush.”

“I am.” Ginny raised her chin at his dubious expression. “That doesn’t mean I’m not interested in him. He’s a great guy. Much better than anyone else at Hogwarts.”

Ron had to wince at hearing that.

Unfortunately, Ginny didn’t miss his slip. She gasped. “You’re… he’s with her!”

“He’s with no one,” Ron said, before he could stop himself.

His sister looked confused. “What? Is she… are you both pining for a witch who’s taken?”

“She’s not taken.” Ron closed his eyes, angry at his lapse. “The hypothetical witch, I mean.”

“Merlin’s balls!” Ginny shook her head. “So, what’s going on between you three?”

“Nothing.” Ron stared at her.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.” He almost spat that.

“So… Harry’s single?”

“Was that what you wanted to ask me? Whether or not Harry was with… someone?” Why couldn’t she simply have asked that? Or asked Harry?

“Not entirely. I also wanted to know if you were involved with ‘someone’.”

“Because if I am, he’s not.”

Ginny nodded. “So… do you think this is a good moment to ask him out? I don’t want to, you know, catch him at a bad time.”

“It’s not a good time,” Ron said. “We’re kind of… waiting.”

“Waiting? For what?”
“An answer.”

“Oh.” Ginny’s mouth remained open for a moment. Then she blinked, and huffed. “Well, I hope she picks you.”

“Even though Harry’s much better than anyone else at Hogwarts?” Ron tried not to sound too sarcastic.

Ginny smiled a bit sheepishly. “You’re my brother, I don’t count you.”

Ron snorted. He knew where he ranked. But he still hoped. He might be stupid, but he wouldn’t give up. It was Hermione’s decision, after all.

“Let’s go back to the dorm,” Ginny said. “Please tell me when, you know?”

“OK.”

*****

London, East End, November 7th, 1996

Dinner at the Resistance’s safe house was about to start when Seamus all but yelled: “Allan still hasn’t returned!” He continued a bit more calmly. “I can’t reach his phone either. Something must have happened to him!”

Hermione frowned. “Where did he go? And when?”

Seamus grimaced. “He went to see his girlfriend. Yesterday evening.”

“You haven’t seen him since then?” She didn’t have to fake her anger. Not much at least. Seamus should have mentioned that earlier.

The Irish muggleborn had the grace to look ashamed. “I thought he had overslept, you know. With his bird.”

“Let’s call her then.”

Seamus winced again. “Err…”

“You don’t have her number?”

He shook his head.

“Her name?” She sighed at his expression. “He shacked up with a girl and didn’t tell her name to anyone?”

Everyone denied it.

“Great.” She took a deep breath. “Seamus, call his parents from somewhere other than London. If he’s had a traffic accident, the police might have informed them. If he was carrying any form of ID.”

Judging by the expressions on the other Resistance members’ faces, the thought that Allan could have been in an accident hadn’t occurred to them. Hermione hoped that this didn’t mean they were careless on the street.

“What if he has been captured?” Dean asked.
“We’ll move to a second safe house, at least temporarily. I trust our curse to protect us, but better safe than sorry.” Almost too late she added. “If he’s been arrested, we’ll know. And we’ll get him out.”

“How?” John asked. “We didn’t save Martin.”

“We weren’t ready back then. Things have changed. We have a good chance of springing someone from the Ministry,” Hermione said.

“You mean, your friends have.” Dean stared at her.

“Yes.” She didn’t deny it. As Allan had proved, it was better if the Resistance knew how much they needed her.

“What if Death Eaters got him?”

“There’s not much we can do about that, other than avenge him. And hope they didn’t take him alive,” Hermione said, in the most serious tone she could manage.

“If that slut was a trap…” Seamus mumbled.

“Was that the first time he went to visit her?” Justin asked.

“No… he has been visiting her for some time, when we were out…” the other wizard cringed slightly.

Hermione would have muttered something nasty about not sticking with each other, but since she was often out by herself, she would have felt like a hypocrite. “It’s unlikely that the girl was a trap then. Neither Death Eaters nor muggle criminals would have let him visit her several times before attacking him.”

“They might have waited until he was letting down his guard,” Dean cut in.

Hermione raised her eyebrow. “Do you think he was keeping his wand in hand and an eye on the door while he was shagging her?”

“He could have cast spells to protect himself,” Dean stubbornly defended his idea.

“And suddenly stop casting them?” Hermione shook her head. “Doesn’t sound like him.”

“Love can make a bloke do stupid things,” Seamus added.

Not just a bloke, Hermione thought, but she nodded. “Maybe. But still unlikely. Now let’s eat quickly and prepare to move. Seamus, you’re on lookout duty now.”

The Irish muggleborn didn’t argue - he must still be feeling guilty about covering for Allan, she thought, since he went up at once.

As she wolfed down her dinner, she felt quite annoyed that even after his death, Allan was still causing trouble for her.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, November 8th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass felt like she was walking into a cursed tomb as she made her way to Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes past several mudholes. Tracey, walking at her side, wasn’t looking that happy or
confident either. Taking revenge for their murdered parents had seemed like a fine idea back then, but now…

“I don’t like this,” she whispered.

Tracey glanced at her. “We just have to act scared and let the twins console us. Make them think we need protection, and feel threatened.”

“I don’t have to act as if I’m scared,” Daphne said. “I am scared.” The mudholes were the best proof that the mudbloods could roam Diagon Alley as they wanted. Who knew when they’d hide a bomb, rather than create mudholes?

“All the better for our mission then,” Tracey said. She ignored Daphne’s glare.

They arrived at the shop. Daphne wasn’t certain, but she thought the tingling sensation she felt when entering was stronger than last time. She ducked out of habit, but no item or spell tried to hit her.

“Mary! Cassandra!” One of the twins - Fred, since he was smiling widely - greeted them.

George, the other twin, nodded at them from the counter. He wasn’t crafting items in the back room then.

“Have you seen our latest invention? Weirding Water!” Fred squeezed what looked like a globe in his hand, and a jet of water shot at Daphne, drenching her. Before she could do anything more than splutter in growing outrage, she was dry again.

“Instant dryness. Perfect to tease people,” he added with a grin, handing her another globe. “It comes in a multitude of colours!”

Daphne smiled, took the globe, and used it on Fred. “I see,” she said, with a smirk.

That even made George the Grump laugh. Or George the Gay, as Tracey liked to call him when they talked about the twins - she was certain he simply wasn’t interested in witches to remain so … guarded … towards them.

Another new product. Daphne wondered, not for the first time, how the twins found the time to create all those products. Maybe they were not involved in the war? Even so, they were blood traitors.

Which reminded her of her mission. Fred must have noticed her sudden mood change, since he asked: “What’s wrong? Are there side effects? We did test them thoroughly, but…”

She shook her head. “No, no. I’m just… all this news about war and bombs scares me.” That, and the knowledge of what the Dark Lord did to those who failed him. Even if technically, they had never joined him, but Draco instead.

“Oh!” Fred smiled. “You’re safe here. Best wards you can buy. Or bother your brother into doing for you.”

“Why would you be scared? Would anyone want to attack you?” George had stepped closer, and seemed a bit tense.

“We’re half-bloods,” Daphne said. “Raised completely in Wizarding Britain, but…” she sighed. “… that doesn’t mean much these days.”
Tracey nodded. “Yes.”

“Oh.” George nodded.

Fred slipped his arms around their shoulders. “The Death Eaters will get theirs, don’t worry.”

Daphne had to force herself to smile at that. Hopefully, he’d think she was so tense because she was afraid of the Death Eaters. And not of blood traitors.

*****

Hogwarts, November 8th, 1996

Harry Potter was sitting on his bed, looking at the communication mirror propped up by his pillow. Hermione would call soon. Ron, sitting next to him, snorted. “People will start talking if we’re sharing a bed so often.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at him. “They haven’t so far.”

“Well… still feels a bit weird. We’re not twelve any more.” Ron shrugged.

“Nostalgia is a thing,” Harry said.

“Pining for when you were a first year?” His friend shook his head.

“Life was simpler back then,” Harry said, as seriously as he could, before chuckling.

Ron was about to retort when the mirror vibrated. Harry touched it, and Hermione’s face appeared. “Harry, Ron.”

“How are you doing?” Hermione asked a bit too casually, Harry thought. She was twisting a lock of her hair, though as short as it was now, she lost her grip on it.

“We’re training hard,” Ron said. “And we’ve helped the Headmaster.”

Their friend narrowed her eyes. “Oh?”

“We haven’t left Hogwarts,” Harry said quickly. “We searched the Chamber of Secrets.” He didn’t have to say what they had been searching.

“No need to ask what you’ve been doing,” Ron said. “The Prophet was full of it.”

Hermione nodded. She seemed a bit off, so Harry asked: “Did some of your friends get hurt?”

“One was knocked unconscious. He recovered though.” She bit her lip. “I’ll tell you more when we meet in person.”

That sounded important to Harry. “When will that be?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Well… you know…”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. When their best friend was stalling, then something was wrong. And Harry feared he knew what this was about.

“... I’ve been thinking about what you two said.” She looked to the side, then stared at them. “And…”
she sighed. “Alright. I want to go on a date with you. With each of you.”

Harry blinked, surprised. He hadn’t expected that.

“Blimey. Did you talk with Sirius?” Ron asked.

“What?” Hermione frowned. “Not like that! I mean… honestly, I thought about this, and I think the best way to find out if there is a potential for a relationship between us - between me and you, or me and you - is to go on a date. A romantic date. See how we do.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron again. He wouldn’t have expected that. And they had been talking about this situation, hadn’t they?

Apparently, Hermione thought they were waiting for her to elaborate. “It’s not as if the potential isn’t there - I can imagine both of you, you know…” she trailed off, biting her lower lip again, “so, I do find you attractive, it’s just… it would be unfair to pick one of you without at least having gone on a date with both of you.”

“Alright,” Harry said. “So… when would you like to go on those dates?”

“Next Friday and Saturday.”

Of course she would have a schedule already. Harry smiled. “So, what have you planned for the dates?”

“Ah… nothing, actually. You can decide what we do.”

Harry managed to not wince. That sounded like a test. A rather difficult test. He hadn’t been on a real date so far, not a successful one at least. “Great,” he pressed out.

“Yes,” Ron chimed in. “Great.” He sounded, in Harry’s opinion, about as sincere as Harry himself.

Hermione, though, looked relieved. “Good. So… tell me who goes Friday and who goes Saturday, and what I’ll have to wear by Wednesday, alright?”

“Of course.”

“Sure.”

The witch smiled, and bid them good night. Once her image had vanished from the mirror, Harry turned to Ron. “You don’t have any idea what you’ll do either, do you?”

Ron shook his head.

“Great.”

“Yes.”

*****

Hogwarts, November 9th, 1996

“That was pathetic! I thought Black and Lupin trained you! Did they teach you how to be a stationary target, or did you forget everything since then?”

Trying to train with a paranoid veteran Auror while worrying about a date a week from now wasn’t
a good idea. Ron Weasley was discovering that in a rather painful way as he slowly stood up after having been thrown a few yards into a wall by Moody’s latest spell.

“I can dodge better than that, and without my peg leg, boy!”

Ron bent over, holding his stomach, and glanced at Harry, who was sitting next to the back wall, still recovering from his own ‘training’. His friend hadn’t fared any better.

“Preparing to double-team me? Nice thought, boy, but you’d need to be more subtle! I do have an eye covering my back!” Moody cackled, flicked his wrist, and a red spell shot at Ron.

He almost dodged it, and almost managed to cast a Shield Charm in time. The Stinging Hex hurt more than it should, Ron was certain. He didn’t cry out though, but finished his Shield Charm.

It didn’t help him that much, as it turned out, since he caught one of two Bludgeoning Curses next, which shattered his shield and pushed him back, stumbling. When a few more colorful hexes flew at him, Ron simply stopped trying to keep his balance and dropped, avoiding the volley.

That’s when he discovered that someone had coated the stone below him with glue. Or transfigured it into glue. He was trying to get his wand arm free so he could finite it when the next Stinging Hex hit his forehead.

“And dead!” Moody shook his head. “Potter, you’re up! Try to last long enough so your friend has enough time to free himself! And try to keep me busy enough that I can’t hex him!” That was followed by another Stinging Hex.

Harry did his best, from what Ron could tell, but he still caught a few more hexes while he ripped his robe open and dispelled the glue. Which left him covered with dust. He was about to scourgify himself when Harry was hit by a series of spells and ended up upside and trussed up in conjured ropes.

This time, Ron was quick enough to dodge two spells, but got hit with a full Body-Bind Curse when he tried to get Harry free.

“I should leave you two like this until you figure out how to dispel that without moving your wand, but Albus wouldn’t like that.” Moody shook his head. “I see that we’ve got a long way to go.” He grinned, which was a rather frightful sight with his mutilated nose and spinning eye, in Ron’s opinion. “But don’t worry - I’ll be behind you, hexing you all the way to motivate you.”

Ron groaned while Harry muttered a few curses, and the old Auror cackled again, before freeing them. “At least you’re trying to work together,” Moody added almost as an afterthought. “That’s a good thing - too many Hit-Wizards, and even Aurors, try to duel enemies as if this was a match.” He left the room Dumbledore had provided for them.

Ron rolled on his back, and turned his head towards Harry. “We’ll have to get him next time.”

Harry, still on his stomach, nodded. “I’ll ask Sirius for help.”

That reminded Ron that he needed to write to Bill. A wizard who had a Veela girlfriend would know how to treat a witch on a date, wouldn’t he?

*****

Hogwarts, November 10th, 1996
Albus Dumbledore frowned as he read the latest report from Severus. He had to replenish quite a few ingredients - all of them needed for quite a specific potion. All of them listed prominently together. Delivered with a remark that ‘even out of school, some students continue to cause trouble’ for the Potions master.

He shook his head. Severus could have simply told him directly that Mister Malfoy was demanding, and therefore using, Polyjuice extensively. It wasn’t exactly subtle either, and he would only be able deny such a report in the most basic Veritaserum interrogation. Which told Albus that Severus had other reasons for being so oblique. Reasons to be found in his character.

His spy was a very complex man. Ridden with guilt, filled with hatred, his cruelty barely held in check by his cunning and pride, he was brave - or suicidal - enough to serve as a spy against Voldemort, knowing that one misstep would doom him. All because he hated Tom more than anyone else in the world.

Albus had no illusions - Severus wouldn’t really mind if most of the Order died, as long as Voldemort and his followers shared their fate. But he was smart enough, even without being aware of how the rest of the Order was doing, to know that at this point, Albus couldn’t afford to lose any allies. Which meant Mister Malfoy was either acting directly on Tom’s orders, or the young Death Eater had a dangerous plan.

The Headmaster sighed. He had hoped he wouldn’t have to do this. Wouldn’t have to risk the goblins’ ire at such a critical moment. No matter how misplaced their ire would be - Nicolas and Albus had been trying to reverse-engineer the Thief’s Downfall, back in the day, but they had never managed to completely duplicate it. Hadn’t really tried that much either - working with dragon blood had proven to be more interesting, offering new discoveries instead of copying the work of others.

What they had come up with was able to strip people of disillusionment spells and other magical disguises. Useful, but given alternatives at least to counter disillusioned enemies, not worth risking more trouble with the goblins.

Now though, circumstances had changed. Both regarding the need to use this discovery, as well as the opportunity to disguise its origin, should it become public.

Messrs Weasley had developed quite the reputation as very creative potioneers, after all. It would not be that unusual if one of their products might briefly affect a target with some harmless effect, and accidentally counter the effect of Polyjuice…

Albus summoned one of his old notebooks, copied a few pages, and then went to his fireplace to arrange a meeting.

*****

London, East End, November 10th, 1996

“I’ve done it!” John announced, standing in the door to Hermione Granger’s room in the Resistance’s temporary headquarters. His smile was unusual - after Allan’s disappearance, and continuing absence, the mood had been more than a bit sombre. Seamus and Dean had been particularly different. Hermione Granger had even started to miss their - often loud - talks and boasts.

She shifted in her seat and turned to the former Ravenclaw. There was one major thing he had been working on, for a month now. “Did you manage to duplicate the charms used to broadcast on the Wizarding Wireless?”
John nodded. “Yes! We can broadcast now!”

“How portable is the setup?” Hermione had been looking into pirate radios for a bit. The Resistance couldn’t set up permanently on abandoned platforms in the North Sea or the Channel, but they could use other tactics.

John shrugged. “The broadcasting crystal and the other parts are not that big. Takes a bit to set up properly, but it all can be shrunk.”

“Can it be tracked when broadcasting?” When they had interrogated him, Cory Briston hadn’t known if that was possible - apparently, it hadn’t been tried or needed so far. But they couldn’t afford to ignore that possibility.

“I have a few ideas that could work, but I haven’t focused on tracking the signal,” John said.

She nodded. “We’ll have to assume the Ministry will track us then. Maybe turn the broadcasting crystal into a trap. Or use expendable ones.” She saw him wince. “Too expensive?”

“Enchanting the crystal is hard and takes a long time.”

Hermione nodded. “Well, I think we should install it in a van then.”

John blinked. “That will make tracking it harder, but who among us can drive? And if we’re found, getting away will be hard while limited to the streets.”

Hermione grinned. “It’ll be a flying invisible van.” She knew two people who managed that feat. One of them even made an invisible flying car.

“Oh!” John smiled widely. “Cool!”

“We’ll have to prepare our first broadcast. Advertise it too. Leaflets. Maybe the Prophet will pick it up.”

“Or The Quibbler,” John added. “It’s a magazine dealing with, well, mythical animals. Undiscovered magical animals. Made up for the biggest part.”

“I’ve heard the name.” Hermione recalled Dumbledore mentioning that magazine. It was published by a neighbour of the Weasleys, she recalled. Mrs Weasley had not been fond of it.

John shrugged. “They also publish stories about how Fudge turns goblins into meat pies. The daughter of the editor is in Ravenclaw. Luna Lovegood, a strange girl. But I’ve heard that a number of people like the magazine because it’s funny.”

“Ah.” Hermione Granger wasn’t quite ready to dismiss any mythical animal as pure myth - until she had turned 11, she had ‘known’ that unicorns and dragons didn’t exist, after all - but the story about Fudge eating goblins sounded like something out of a satire magazine. Her eyes widened. If that was satire, then that would be a good way to distribute propaganda disguised as satire! “Thank you. I’ll look into it.” She stood up. “Let’s get busy with the broadcast.”

It would also be a good way to occupy the Resistance until they had another target.

*****

Devon, Ottery St Catchpole, November 10th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace in the Burrow with a smile on his face. He was very
fond of the Weasleys. They were a big family, not rich, but always generous, and all of them very brave. Ideal Gryffindors, in short, if Albus permitted himself to think so fondly of his own house.

“Albus! You’re early! Have you eaten yet? We’re just about to start!” Molly exclaimed.

The witch was already waving him to join her and Arthur in the kitchen before the Headmaster could answer. He hadn’t exactly been early, but Molly didn’t think anyone but her cooked proper meals, and this gave her an excuse to feed him. Not that he minded - he didn’t know many cooks that measured up to her, and none of them were found in Wizarding Britain.

Arthur as well as young William and Charlie rose to greet him warmly. “Fred and George claim they are too busy at work,” Molly explained, with a frown and a glance at Albus.

He nodded slightly. They were busy because of him, after all. Molly sighed - she understood the need for secrecy, but didn’t like it. Understandable, given her past.

The meal was delicious, and Albus enjoyed the small-talk, mostly centred on William’s relationship with Miss Delacour, and the young man’s refusal to ‘set a date’, even though it also made him sad - his own family had, for all intents and purposes, been gone for decades. But to show that would have been both impolite and thoughtless. In these trying times, everyone needed to enjoy what happiness they could find, and not have it ruined by an old man’s regrets.

After dessert though, Albus addressed the reason he had visited. He didn’t like it, but he had to do it. He cleared his throat, and the others at the table fell silent. Molly even flinched.

“I’ve some unfortunate news,” he began. “The Dark Lord is finishing his preparations, and going on the offensive. I expect that he will be targeting those who oppose him in the Wizengamot and the Ministry first, since he has trouble finding the muggleborns.”

Arthur nodded. He would know what was coming - the man had fought in the last war, after all. And had repaired the Burrow afterwards. William and Charlie looked serious, but confused since Molly was already sniffing.

“I fear that staying in your home will be too dangerous, given your prominent position on certain policies of the Ministry, and your past history with the late Mister Malfoy.”

As expected, the two young men wanted to fight, unwilling to abandon their home. William made a passionate plea to trust his wards. Charlie supported him. But Molly wouldn’t let them risk their lives. Not for a house that could be rebuilt.

While she dealt with her children’s opposition, Albus exchanged a look with Arthur, and excused himself. He had other Order members to visit still.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, November 11th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle, standing with her arms crossed, studied the two Aurors who had entered Amelia Bones’s office, Daniel Rickett and Doris Purvis. Both Hufflepuffs, both half-bloods. Both rather young. They fit what she was looking for. Brenda hadn’t found any sign that they were disloyal to the Ministry, but she hadn’t been able to use Veritaserum.

“Please have a seat, Aurors.” Bones pointed at two chairs in front of her desk.

Rickett and Purvis sat down, the witch glancing at Brenda, Martin and Parkinson, who were
standing to the side.

“You’ve been called to my office because there’s an important undercover mission that you qualify for. If you accept the mission, you will be discharged from the Auror Corps for harbouring sympathies for muggleborns. Death Eaters will consider you blood traitors, and may come after you. Your friends, your families will believe you are traitors. They cannot be told the truth, or all of you would be at risk. Your goal will be to gain the trust of the Muggleborn Resistance, and in order to achieve that, you will support muggleborn criminals, going as far as saving them from the Ministry. You will even have to fight Aurors and Hit-Wizards, but you will not kill them.” Bones stared at the two. “You’ve been chosen for this mission because you are familiar with muggleborns, and therefore not unlikely to be sympathetic, even if you’re not too familiar with the muggle world.”

Brenda knew that the not-killing part was a risk, but even mudbloods should understand that the two would not want to kill former colleagues, so it was just a slight one.

Rickett glanced at Purvis, then spoke up: “Can we think about this?”

Bones shook her head. “Once you leave this office, you will either be on the mission, or you’ll have been obliviated.”

The two Aurors glanced around, and Brenda grinned and lifted her left arm, showing that her wand was already drawn. She had obliviated two groups thus far, after all.

Purvis leaned over to Rickett and whispered in his ear. He nodded, and then whispered back.

Brenda tensed. If they tried something...

The two younger Aurors kept whispering for a few minutes. Martin was fidgeting, and Parkinson was scowling. Only Bones seemed unaffected, studying some reports on her desk. Brenda studied the expressions of the two Aurors. They seemed to be arguing with each other, with Purvis winning.

Finally, the couple stopped whispering, and Rickett addressed the Head of the DMLE: “Ma’am, we’re volunteering.” His partner nodded.

Bones smiled. “I’m glad to see that Hufflepuffs do not shirk away from dangerous work.” Then she fixed them with a glare and pulled out a vial. “I don’t like to do this, but we have to be certain of your loyalty.”

Neither Purvis nor Rickett glanced back at the wands that were now aimed at them. Brenda hoped that meant they were aware of that, and had enough self-control not to check. If they were oblivious then this would not end well.

But, she told herself, they knew the risks.

*****

Kent, Sevenoaks, November 11th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore spotted Kingsley as soon as the man entered the small pub. He even saw the Auror’s eyes widen when he noticed Albus. His friend grabbed a pint at the bar, and then made his way past the evening crowd to the table.

“I don’t think I have ever seen you in a muggle suit,” Kingsley said, once inside the area of Albus’s privacy spells.
The Headmaster smiled. “While I like colorful robes, I do know how to dress to fit into the muggle world.”

“Barely. That kind of style went out of fashion in the 40s.”

Albus made a mental note that he had to update his muggle clothes - again. If only it was still the 70s… “Thank you for coming, Kingsley.”

“If you want to meet me in such a place, it must be important.”

“It is.” Albus took a sip from his own ale. “You’re aware of how the Ministry and especially the Wizengamot is shifting towards the Dark Lord.”

“Even on my posting, I’m not entirely out of the loop,” the Auror confirmed. “No matter what the muggle press may write about No. 10 Downing Street.”

Albus chuckled, but quickly lost his mirth again. “Things are bad. If they continue unchecked, I expect the Ministry to be under the Dark Lord’s control in a month or two.”

Kingsley stared at him. “I didn’t think it was that grave.”

“It is.” Albus took another sip from his pint.

“You need me in the Ministry then,” the Auror stated.

“Yes. Though it will be very dangerous.”

Kingsley simply nodded.

Albus hadn’t expected another reaction. “I need you to lead the task force hunting the Death Eaters. John Dawlish took over the hunt for the Muggleborn Resistance, leaving his former group leaderless. His second in command is not exactly suited to lead it.” And was afraid of the Death Eaters.

The other wizard snorted. Dawlish was quite well-known in the Corps. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“I need you to antagonise the Death Eaters. I need them to lash out at the Ministry, and show their true colours before more of our esteemed members of the Wizengamot fall for the Dark Lord’s lies.” Albus put his glass down.

“They would focus on my team first and foremost. And we’ll have to expect sabotage from within the Ministry as well.”

The Headmaster nodded. “It is a very dangerous task I am asking you to undertake.”

“Who will be my replacement?” Kingsley emptied his glass and put it down a touch too hard.

“Percival Weasley.”

Again the man’s eyes widened. “I would have thought he’d be more useful in the Ministry.”

“We need a trusted liaison to the Prime Minister. Mister Weasley has done what he could to build his reputation as a man who has broken with his family for his career, but many of the more conservative Ministry employees still see him as his father’s son.” And Molly had asked Albus quite forcefully to keep her wayward son safe.
“You’ve been playing a long game then.” Kingsley sounded impressed.

Albus nodded. There was no need to tell his friend exactly when Percival had joined the Order. “So, will you do it?”

His friend nodded. “Better me than someone else. I’ll need some support in getting competent people. And some expendable curse fodder, maybe.”

“I’ll do what I can, though my influence on Amelia has waned lately.”

Kingsley snorted. “I wonder why.”

Albus ordered two more pints. “She has not changed since the last war.”

The Auror shook his head. “I’d almost admire her for her principles. If they were not about to lose us the war.”

“If she had a bit more of Cornelius’s character, and Cornelius a bit more of hers…” Albus trailed off as the waitress approached with their order.

“Imagine if they had kids together,” Kingsley said, grinning.

Albus chuckled, but as he raised his glass to his friend, he hoped that he had not just sent the Auror to his death.

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First Forays

Chapter 16: First Forays

‘Even in hindsight, it is easy to assume that the kidnapping and killing of Petra Rowle and her husband on November 1st, 1996 was the event that caused the, up to then, most violent Death Eater attacks in the Second Blood War. I do not share this assumption. Careful analysis of the conflict shows that it wasn’t the death of Rowle, who was revealed as a marked Death Eater at the same time, but the actions of the Ministry following that event that caused the Dark Lord to launch his attacks.

At that point he had already completed the build-up of his forces and could take the offensive. Some historians even maintain that he was forced to send his followers out, because he was running the danger of them acting of their own volition. I once more disagree. The Dark Lord was known to maintain iron discipline among his followers; the notion that he would be in danger of losing control of his forces is not very plausible.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Hogwarts, November 12th, 1996

“Sir?” Harry Potter asked, standing at the door to Dumbledore’s office. The gargoyle had let him pass, but it was just polite to ask in person before actually entering the office of the Headmaster.

“Come in, Harry.” The old wizard waved at him. “I’ve informed Minerva that you’re receiving another special lesson.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry did feel a bit guilty about skipping lessons. Not even telling himself that he would make it up later helped much. The Headmaster was covering for his absences so he could help Hermione and prepare for the search for Voldemort’s Horcruxes. Harry just wasn’t certain his current trip would be covered by either reason. Even though technically, it was to help Hermione.

“Please send Sirius my regards. And enjoy your visit. Family is important.”

Harry nodded and headed to the Floo connection. Judging by the smile on the Headmaster’s face, Dumbledore had seen through Harry’s excuse, but condoned his trip anyway. Even though Harry didn’t know exactly why.

A minute later he set foot into No. 12 Grimmauld Place. So to speak - both of his feet touched the floor. Sadly, so did his buttocks. And Sirius was chuckling while that nasty little creature in the corner was mumbling something about clumsy half-bloods. One of these days he had to get Hermione to tell him how she had managed to make Kreacher behave; neither his friend nor his godfather had told him.

“And hello to you, Sirius,” he mumbled, getting up and dusting himself off.

“Hello, Harry. Once we have the time, we’ll need to teach you how to use the Floo without falling down.” Sirius chuckled, then rubbed his chin. “On the other hand, you’ll have a better chance at avoiding an ambush that way.” His grin showed clearly that he wasn’t talking seriously.

“Says the wizard who could probably travel through the Floo network before he could walk.”
“Technically, you travelled through the Floo network before you could walk as well,” Sirius said. And winced right afterwards.

Harry nodded. Talking about his parents and early childhood was a touchy subject. Neither Sirius nor he knew what would set the other off.

“So… come, sit down. You said you needed my help, and Dumbledore let you skip classes, so it must be something serious.” His godfather opened the door to the living room and gestured at the couch. “Kreacher! Get us some tea!”

Harry sat down, again feeling guilty. His godfather probably had more important things to do, things to support the Order, than listen to him.

“So, Harry… spill!” Sirius sat down on the seat opposite Harry and leaned forward. “How can I help you?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I need some advice.”

“Oh? About girls, I hope?” Sirius grinned widely.

“I’ve got a date this weekend.” Harry noticed Sirius looked briefly surprised, before his grin widened further. “And I’ve no idea how to…”

“… show a girl a good time?” Sirius cut in. “You’ve come to the right person! I will gladly share my vast experience with you!”

“It’s Hermione. She’s dating me on Friday, then Ron on Saturday. And she expects us to plan the dates.” Harry quickly said.

“Hm.” Sirius rubbed his chin again. “I have underestimated the girl. It seems she has taken my advice to heart, if in an unexpected way.”

“What?” Hermione had asked Sirius for advice?

“Ah… I told her to consider a ménage-à-trois. It seems she has decided to give it a try.” Sirius beamed. “A girl after my own heart.”

Harry blinked. “Ron and I think this is a test for us so she can pick the better, more compatible man.”

“Oh.” Sirius frowned. “I guess that could be possible as well. Seems rather cold though.”

Harry had second thoughts about asking Sirius for advice, but he couldn’t back out right then. “So… I need to plan a date. For Hermione.”

“Well, you can’t go wrong with the classics. Dinner, a movie, some dancing, and then you take her home for a shag.” Sirius blinked before Harry could yell at him. “Wait. It’s Hermione. Scratch the movie, she’d prefer a play I think. Brainy birds usually do.”

“I think it’s the ‘shagging’ I should scratch,” Harry said through clenched teeth. He was no expert - far from it - but he was very, very certain that Hermione wasn’t the kind of girl to have sex on a first date. And he was also certain that his own lack of experience wouldn’t help even if she was that kind of girl.

“No shagging? What happened to ‘make love, not war’?” Sirius asked.

“The 80s.” Harry was so not asking why Sirius thought the Hippie movement was still in fashion.
“Oh.” His godfather didn’t seem to be impressed by his mistake. “Anyway, since she’s Wizarding Britain’s most wanted witch, you’ll have to stay in muggle Britain for the date. Though since she’s a muggleborn girl, that won’t be a drawback for you. You have to look your best. Dress smartly. Pick an expensive restaurant for dinner. Not one of those muggle things were you fetch your own food. Hire one of those long black cars to drive you around. Pick the most famous club in London. Bribe the club bouncer so he’ll let you cut the line. Be generous, show you’ve got the gold. Birds like a wealthy man.”

“Hermione isn’t like that!” Harry glared at his godfather. “She doesn’t care about gold!” Or she’d have picked him right away - he certainly had more money than Ron. 

“She’s a practical girl, thinking ahead. Having money makes for a better life than lacking money.” Sirius nodded at his own words.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. “She already knows that I have money. I don’t need to show her that.”

“But you need to show her that you think she is worth it. That you’ll make an effort to impress her,” Sirius said. “All girls like to feel wanted, desired, and hate to be taken for granted. Save that for after the marriage.”

Harry dug his fingers into his thighs. “She wouldn’t be impressed by me flashing gold around. She would be impressed if I show that I understand her. Know what she likes, and…” he blinked. “I need The Times.”

Sirius pulled out his watch.

“No, the muggle newspaper,” Harry corrected him. “I need to find out if there’s a good play in a theatre in London!”

*****

Hogsmeade, November 12th, 1996

Ron Weasley was certain his brothers, especially the twins, would be proud of him. Here he was, cutting classes and sneaking out of school, for a witch. Well, to prepare for a date with a witch. Which, he was rather certain, added up to the same. There was not much of a chance of meeting another student, and he doubted the teachers visited this part of Hogsmeade, but he was still carefully looking around while he made his way through the outskirts of the village. He wished he had asked Harry for the invisibility cloak, but it would have been a tad… well, asking Harry to help so Ron could impress Hermione on his date felt wrong. Both of them should probably learn the Disillusionment Charm soon though - they couldn’t rely on that cloak forever. Hell, he had just sounded like Hermione in his head!

He was still grinning at that when he entered the Hog’s Head Inn. He had been there before, on a Hogsmeade weekend, on a dare. The most ill-reputed inn in the village. Maybe Britain, outside Knockturn Alley. Just about every student from Gryffindor visited it once in their third year. It was, as Hermione had called it once, a rite of passage.

The owner was the brother of the Headmaster, and as gruff as they came. More importantly though, he didn’t care who he served, as long as they didn’t annoy the other guests. Which made it perfect for a meeting.

“Hey!”
He turned his head. There he was. Bill. Former Head Boy. Former Quidditch House Team player. Curse-Breaker. And fiancé to a French witch who also happened to be a Veela and a champion of the Triwizard Tournament. If anyone knew about girls and how to treat them well, it was Ron’s oldest brother.

He walked to the table in the corner Bill was sitting at - in a very cool pose, one boot propped up on the bench - and sat down. “Hi, Bill.”

“Hi, Ron.” Bill pushed a Butterbeer towards him.

“Thanks.” Ron didn’t know if that was Bill being nice, or a subtle way of showing him that real beer and stronger stuff was not going to happen on his watch. He didn’t care either - he was here for help, not alcohol. And the Butterbeer was probably the safest drink in the inn, seeing as it came in unopened bottles. He cast a privacy spell, ignoring the way Bill smirked at seeing it. Ron wasn’t just concerned about being embarrassed.

“So… you asked to meet me so I could give you advice,” Bill said. He sounded amused, but in that friendly way. Unlike Percy or the twins if they had been in his place.

Ron took a deep breath. “Yes. This Saturday, I have a date.” He wished Bill wouldn’t look quite that surprised.

Ron’s expression must have betrayed his thoughts, since Bill held one hand up. “Sorry… I was expecting you to need advice in how to ask a witch out. But I see you’re already past that.” Ron’s brother grinned. “Gryffindor courage, right?”

Ron pondered how much he could tell Bill. He couldn’t tell him it was Hermione. She was still a wanted witch - the most wanted, apart from Bellatrix Lestrange. Or, judging by what Dad had said, even counting Bellatrix. But Bill had to know a bit more to understand Ron’s situation. He sighed. “She asked me on a date.” Well, Hermione had told him she’d date him, but given the situation, and for Hermione, that was asking.

“Ah!” Bill grinned. “She must really like you then, for her to ask you out.”

Ron coughed. “She wants to go on a date to see if she should go out with me, or this other bloke. We’re both interested in her.”


“Yes?”

“Don’t take this wrong, Ron, but that doesn’t sound like a nice witch.” Bill shook his head.

“What?” Ron glared at him. “She’s the nicest witch I know!”

“Calm down! I just meant…” Bill frowned. “Look, what would you do if Ginny wanted to date a wizard, and he said he’ll date her and another witch, to find out who he likes more?”

“Ginny would hex him into a puddle!” Ron said at once. When he saw Bill nod, he groaned. “It’s not like that. Look - we both asked her out. Sort of.”

Bill blinked. “Who’s we?”

Ron ground his teeth. Another lapse. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon - at least he could trust Bill. “Harry and I told her that we like her.”
“Not together I hope!” Bill grinned, but he looked a bit incredulous.

Ron didn’t say anything.

“Wow. Alright, that is original.” Bill was still shaking his head.

“How those dates were arranged doesn’t really matter. What matters is that I need to make the best impression I can.” Ron grimaced. “You know Harry. He attracts witches without trying.” He almost mentioned Ginny, but she would hex him into a puddle if he blabbed to Bill about her love life.

“Yes. That bloke has all the charm and luck,” Bill said.

Ron didn’t quite glare at him - he knew that as well, but there was no point in saying it that directly.

“So, what can I do?”

Bill took a sip from his own beer - not a Butterbeer, Ron noticed - before answering. “Well, you have to consider your own qualities. Don’t try to copy Harry.”

“I can’t. We’re not telling each other what we’re planning,” Ron cut in.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, don’t try to act like Harry. Play to your strengths.” Bill took another sip.

“Are you telling me to just be myself?” Ron asked, with narrowed eyes.

Bill grinned. “Basically, yes. I know you’re feeling a bit overshadowed at times, but you’re doing good. And the witches will be seeing that as well.”

Ron thought of Lavender. He didn’t want to mention her, but she had asked him out, hadn’t she? Not Harry. “I guess so.”

“Hey, witches don’t all care about fame or money. The good ones don’t. If you have confidence in yourself, then you’ll be attractive to witches too.”

Ron wasn’t exactly feeling that confident right now, but he nodded. He could fake it.

“But don’t try to play a role. That only works if you love them and leave them, before they realise you’re not what you appeared to be. And even so, you’ll have a reputation after a while. Not a good one.”

So he couldn’t fake it, Ron thought.

“Witches like if you care about them. If you make an effort. Find out what she likes, so you know what you can talk about. But try to find things you both like to talk about.”

That would be a problem, Ron thought. He and Hermione didn’t share that many interests.

“And, make sure you’re having fun on the date. If it’s not fun for you, it won’t last. Did you think where you’ll go? Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley?”

Ron shook his head. “Muggle London. Safer.”

“Oh! Nice idea. You can impress her with your knowledge then. Maybe ask Dad for some advice about muggle dates.”

Ron winced.
Bill frowned. “I know what people say about Dad, but he deals with muggles a lot in his work. He
does know his stuff.”

“It’s not that,” Ron said. “I just don’t think I know more about muggles than she does.” Bill’s eyes
widened, and Ron knew he had made another mistake. “Don’t tell anyone,” he growled.

“I won’t. Promise.” Bill looked serious, to Ron’s relief.

“But I can only tell you this then: Be yourself. Make an effort, but don’t put on an act. She knows
you, after all. And witches hate being lied to. Almost more than anything else.”

Ron sighed, and leaned back. “I had hoped for something more concrete.” Not quite ‘Twelve Fail-
Safe Ways to Charm Witches’ - Hermione would kill him if he tried such a stunt - but… something.

“Well… she’s been to France, hasn’t she?”

Ron nodded. Hermione spoke French.

Bill grinned. “There’s this restaurant Fleur swears has the best cook this side of the Channel. And
there’s this club with live bands.”

Now this was why Ron had asked Bill for advice!

*****

Knockturn Alley, November 14th, 1996

“Should we be here?”

Brenda Brocktuckle glanced at her partner. Martin had asked that question twice so far. “It’s an
important operation. I owe it to them to at least be ready to intervene if things go wrong.” And it was
her important operation. And woe betide them if Rickett and Purvis blew it.

“Dawlish couldn’t mess this up if he tried. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s failing,” Parkinson
said.

All three of them were standing in the upper part of Knockturn Alley, near the exit to Diagon Alley,
polyjuiced. Brenda had handed over her case, including the leverage on Mills, and Bones had put the
pressure on Dawlish to arrest suspects. A little hint about the muggleborns hiding in that alley being
behind the mudholes, and Dawlish was off to arrest them. Or to try to arrest them and fail, if Rickett
and Purvis did what they were supposed to do. Which they had better do, if they knew what was
good for them.

Martin didn’t look too convinced. “It’s time,” he said, checking his watch.

As expected, Dawlish did things by the book. A book written for places that weren’t Knockturn
Alley. Six Aurors entered the alley with Dawlish in the centre of their formation. The regulars of the
alley knew what that meant, and started to react at once. Those who had reasons to fear the law more
than others disappeared - Brenda even heard the popping sounds of Apparition - while others moved
out of the way. The three disguised Aurors did the same, moving to the entrance of a side alley.
Brenda spotted a reporter for the Daily Prophet hiding in the alley opposite them, and grinned.
Tipping the newspaper off had ensured that everyone would hear about this.

Brenda spotted something moving in the dark shadows behind them. “Watch our backs,” she
whispered to Martin while she watched the Aurors walk past. Those who had experience in the alley
looked nervous or angry, but Dawlish was smiling. The fool hadn’t done any patrols here in years, and had apparently forgotten what things were like here. All the better for her operation, Brenda thought with a smile.

She knew the names and addresses Dawlish was going after, and if he was doing it by the book, he’d go after the one closest to the entrance to the Alley first. Bertram Bennington. Mills had told her that the old muggleborn had no family left, and hadn’t left Wizarding Britain for decades, which explained why he hadn’t fled yet. The fool had needed to be persuaded to leave even when told that the Aurors were coming for him. Brenda shook her head at the stupidity of mudbloods who wanted to follow the law exactly when they shouldn’t.

At least Dawlish was acting according to the plan, even if he didn’t know about it. He sent two Aurors, Meryn and Fleawater, up the small stairway next to a second-hand clothing shop that led to Bennington’s room. They pounded on the door. “DMLE! Open the door!”

Brenda winced. She knew what was coming, and didn’t like it, even if it was needed. Everyone knew the mudbloods showed no mercy, and wouldn’t trust someone who was too soft.

The door exploded outward, blowing the two Aurors off the stairs and into the wall opposite it. They hit it, and then fell down the three yards into the alley. Neither screamed, so hopefully they were unconscious already.

Dawlish froze for a moment, as did two of his remaining Aurors. The other two were already casting Shield Charms before aiming their wands up the stairs and moving to take cover.

Unfortunately, Rickett and Purvis knew how Aurors trained and worked. They were going out through the windows, disillusioned and on their brooms. Bludgeoning Curses hit Dawlish and one of the other Aurors, bowling them over before they managed to finish casting Shield Charms of their own. Dawlish struggled to get up, and was hit by a stunner while a Reductor Curse drove the three Aurors who were still standing into cover.

They would be casting Human-presence-revealing Spells now, which they should have cast before entering the Alley even. But with Dawlish out, and three others of their number down, they’d be thinking about escaping, not retaliating. As planned.

A few more Reductor Curses hit the ground, blowing small craters into the pavement. Close enough to shower the Aurors with splinters, but not close enough to seriously threaten them behind their Shield Charms.

Suddenly, a loud voice rang out through the entire Alley: “The Ministry has betrayed the people for the last time! We, the Avengers, will not let you kidnap Bennington or anyone else! Muggleborns, half-bloods, purebloods! Unite and throw off the yoke of the Ministry! Flee and hide!”

Purvis was getting into this, Brenda noted. It sounded very convincing.

“We’ll return when we are needed anew!” the undercover Auror shouted.

A few curses flew through the air, but hit no one - Rickett and Purvis would have flown away already. On the ground, Brenda saw flashes, and almost drew her wand - but it was just a man taking pictures of Dawlish, down and stunned.

That just made Brenda’s smile grow wider. Everything was going according to plan.

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Ministry of Magic, November 15th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore acted surprised when he left the Wizengamot Chamber and saw Kingsley leading a squad of Aurors through the hallway outside, even though he had known about this in advance. The wizards and witches milling around outside the chamber parted to let the group pass, and more than a few looked more worried than puzzled. Albus took note of those.

“Terrance Avery!” Kingsley stated, pointing his wand at a younger wizard who was talking to the esteemed member of the Wizengamot Bilius Runcorn. “You’re under arrest!”

The rest of Kingsley’s squad had their wands out as well, probably not needed here, but better safe than sorry. Not that Albus would stay out of any fight, should one happen.

While Avery blinked, looking more surprised than shocked, Runcorn was already stepping in front of Kingsley. “What is this? What are you doing? This is the Wizengamot!”

Kingsley faced the old wizard while two of his Aurors - Nymphadora among them, Albus saw - moved to the side and covered Avery with their wands.

“We’ve found proof that Mister Avery has been working for the Dark Lord,” Kingsley said in a calm tone.

“This is ridiculous!” Runcorn gasped. “I vouch for him!”

“Of course you will vouch for him, Mister Runcorn,” the Auror responded, and his tone and expression left no doubt that he would have arrested the Wizengamot member as well, if he could. “But our duty is clear; the evidence incriminating Mister Avery is too convincing, as the Head of the DMLE has agreed.”

He gestured with his free hand, and Nymphadora and the other Auror - Leslie Barnockle, Albus recognised him now - stepped forward to disarm and secure Avery. For a moment, the young wizard looked like he was about to resist, but then he scoffed. “I have done nothing wrong!”

“The Wizengamot will clear him!” Runcorn said, far louder than needed. “This is an outrage!” He turned to Avery. “Don’t worry, Terrance. I’ll talk with the Minister and have this sorted out in no time!”

Albus shook his head. How predictable. But then, that was why Kingsley was arresting Avery in such a public location, instead of more discreetly, like the others the information from Miss Granger had incriminated.

He turned to Cornelius, who had been staring at the scene. “Maybe this should be discussed in the privacy of your office, Cornelius? Instead of in the hallway?”

The Minister for Magic nodded. “Yes, of course,” he said, almost automatically, before he glanced at Albus and narrowed his eyes.

“Since this seems to involve the Wizengamot, I think it would be best if I was present as well, to provide information about the rules and regulation governing our esteemed body.” Albus smiled politely, but stared at Cornelius until the wizard nodded.

A few minutes later Cornelius, Runcorn, Amelia, Kingsley and Albus himself were in the Minister’s office.

“This is an outrage! To arrest an upstanding young Ministry worker, on hearsay and slander!”
Runcorn yelled and turned towards Kingsley. “How dare you!”

“The proof presented to me was more than sufficient for an arrest,” Amelia said, in that clipped tone Albus knew meant she would have liked to hex the man.

“What proof? I demand to see it!” Runcorn wheeled around.

“It’s part of a criminal investigation, and therefore not open to the public.” Amelia said with more than a hint of contempt.

“I’m a member of the Wizengamot, not the public!” Runcorn snarled.

“The Wizengamot has no special rights with regards to such investigations,” Albus remarked, doing his best to sound as if this was a purely academic question. “In fact, they cannot see such evidence, or they would prejudice themselves for a possible trial.”

Runcorn gaped at him. Everyone present knew that this was a rule not too many Wizengamot members followed to the letter. Something Amelia hated, even though Albus knew a number of cases where only his own intervention had prevented a travesty of justice.

“Exactly,” Cornelius said, smiling weakly. “We wouldn’t want to break the law ourselves, would we?”

“Of course not,” Albus said.

“This is not about the law! This is about politics!” Runcorn wasn’t giving up. “This is a ploy to weaken those among us who stand for tradition and a proper society!”

“Are you accusing me of faking evidence for political reasons?” Amelia glared at the older wizard.

“What? No, no!” Runcorn shook his head. “This is his work!” He pointed at Albus. “He is in league with the mudbloods trying to topple our society!”

“Really, my dear Bilius,” Albus said, “that is quite the accusation. How would I have managed to fool Amelia?”

“Yes. Please explain,” Amelia said through clenched teeth.

“I cannot explain without seeing the evidence, of course,” Runcorn said.

“So, you have no basis for your accusations; it is just wild speculation. Or, in other words, you are slandering Amelia and myself while you attempt to break the law yourself?” Albus shook his head as if scolding a student.

Runcorn reacted as he had hoped. The man snarled. “I see. Mark my words, once those who care about the country take over, there will be changes! Drastic changes!” He scoffed. “Your plot will be stopped in the Wizengamot! My colleagues will not be fooled with fake evidence!”

After Runcorn had stormed out, Albus sighed. “He was always a very passionate student. Although I do fear that the Wizengamot in its current state will not be too concerned about proof.”

“We will do our duty,” Amelia said, though her expression told Albus she was well aware of this. She wouldn’t let that stop her though - which he was counting on. A glance to Cornelius also told him that the Minister had understood what Runcorn had threatened. Hopefully, he would realise soon that Voldemort wouldn’t let him stay Minister, should the Dark Lord manage to take over the
Ministry. Amelia would already be aware that she wouldn’t be kept in office. Or alive.

If not, then Albus would have to engineer a few more incidents. Fortunately, the information from Miss Granger implicated more than just Avery, though procuring admissible evidence about the others that Amelia would act upon would take a bit more effort.

It would be worth it though, if it would keep the Ministry from falling to Voldemort.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, November 15th, 1996

Harry Potter checked his appearance in the mirror once again. The non-magical mirror in his room in Grimmauld Place - the magical mirror kept trying to convince him to put on a robe instead of the suit he was wearing. He muttered a curse while he adjusted his tie.

“You’re looking fine, Harry. You don’t want to look too perfect, or your roguish charm will suffer.”

Harry turned and rolled his eyes at his godfather. “Hermione is a perfectionist and she doesn’t like rogues.”

“All girls have a weakness for the bad boys, Harry. Especially those who appear to loathe them. Trust me, I’ve dated my share of Ravenclaws in Hogwarts.” Sirius grinned. “You’ll be fine, trust me.”

Harry sighed. He couldn’t help feeling nervous. This was worse than the O.W.L.s, in a way. Which was a thought he wouldn’t tell Hermione, of course. Among other topics that Harry and Sirius had deemed unsafe or unsuitable.

“Do you have the muggle money?” Sirius sneered, as he normally did when talking about ‘paper money’.

“Yes.” Harry patted his jacket. “I have also the emergency galleons, the emergency Portkey, the communication mirror and the shrunken Firebolt.”

“And you studied my notes!”

Harry blushed and rolled his eyes. “Your notes are in my pocket as well.” And there they’d be staying, he knew. The kind of things Sirius had taken notes about weren’t the kind of things he’d be doing with Hermione on this date.

“Perfect!” Sirius nodded. “By the way, she’s waiting in the entrance hall.”

“What?” Harry all but shrieked. “And you didn’t tell me?” He quickly checked his appearance again. “You left her waiting?”

Sirius smirked. “She’s early. You can blame me.”

Harry glared at his godfather while he rushed out of his room, and down to the ground floor.

*****

Hermione Granger didn’t fidget while she waited for Sirius to fetch Harry. She was just stretching her legs a bit, walking around in the entrance hall. She was early anyway. She wondered what Harry had planned for their date - he had told her to pick a formal dress. Her black evening gown certainly qualified, even though it had taken her several tries to adjust the dress so it both looked good and
quite a bit more expensive than the original cocktail dress she had transfigured.

“Hermione!”

She turned around and saw Harry descend the stairs, first taking two steps at a time, then slowing down. He was wearing a suit, she noted with relief - she wasn’t overdressed.

“Good evening, Harry.”

He stopped, and smiled at her. “You look great!”

“Thank you.” Hermione thought the compliment had been honest - Harry hadn’t sounded as if he had prepared it, or even thought about it. Certainly not as smooth as Sirius’s comment when he had greeted her.

“Sirius didn’t tell me right away that you had already arrived,” he added, with a frown, “or I’d have come down at once.”

She chuckled. That sounded like Harry’s godfather. “I’m early. I didn’t expect you to be ready.”

“Well, I am now.” Harry checked his watch - a new one, Hermione noticed - and added: “But the limousine will not be ready for another fifteen minutes.”

“You’ve rented a limousine?” She raised her eyebrows.

For a moment, Harry looked insecure, then he nodded. “Yes. It’s a date, after all.”

“You haven’t made reservations at the most expensive restaurant you managed to find, have you?” Hermione asked, smiling slightly.

“No,” Harry shook his head, grinning. “That would have been tacky.”

*****

Half an hour later, they were getting seated in the restaurant, and Harry Potter had to assure Hermione again that this wasn’t the most expensive restaurant he had been able to find. Just one of the most recommended. He kept smiling while he mentally cursed Sirius’s advice - ‘wants to see you make an effort’, indeed! Neither the limousine nor the restaurant seemed to have met with her approval.

He was looking around while Hermione was studying the menu. He coughed. “Just pick what you like. And don’t try to work out how much it’ll cost.” Which she had already, of course.

She looked at him. “Are you eating here often?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I didn’t get to eat out much, with the Dursleys.” He saw her wince, and hastily added: “But I’ve been to a few places with Sirius. He recommended this place.”

She snorted. “Figures.”

He wasn’t certain if that was a good thing. Fortunately, the waiter came by and they ordered. Then the drinks were served, and that served as another distraction. Harry wasn’t quite nervous, but usually, he felt much more at ease with Hermione. They had eaten together hundreds of times. Thousands even. He chuckled.

“Hm?” She looked at him, tugging on one of her still very short locks.
“Nothing. Just thinking that we’ve eaten together so often, and yet here we are, being awkward.” He snorted.

“We haven’t eaten in such an ambience,” she pointed out.

“True.” If she was blaming the restaurant, then he was fine with that. Better than blaming the occasion.

“Did you sneak out of Hogwarts?”

He shook his head. “Well… technically. But Dumbledore is aware of my absence. So, I have at least unofficial permission.”

She pursed her lips. Probably annoyed at the rule-breaking, or the favouritism. Before she could say anything though, the first course was served. “Oh… that’s good.” She even closed her eyes for an instant. “I take back what I thought about the restaurant. If all the dishes are as good as this, then it’s worth whatever money you are paying.”

Harry smiled, enjoying his own meal. “I might try to find this recipe myself,” he said. “I can cook, at least a bit.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m also handy around the house, though there’s spells for that.” Harry laughed, and regaled her with a few stories about some of his culinary experiments that hadn’t been unqualified successes.

When he ran out of those stories, the main course had been served, and he felt far more confident. She’d been laughing a lot, and they hadn’t touched any awkward topics. That was how a good date should go, Sirius had said.

Hermione looked around, and grew serious again. He saw her slip her wand out and move it under the table, then heard her mumble before the slight noise of a privacy spell told him what she had done. She took a deep breath, then stared straight at him. “I have to tell you something.”

He froze for a second. That wasn’t sounding good. “Yes?”

“You remember Allan Baker?”

Of course he did! Arrogant Ravenclaw. Jealous too. He nodded, not liking where this was going.

“I found out that he’s been… killing people on his own.”

Harry’s eyes widened. Was she saying…

“He’s been going out, in Death Eater garb, and setting fire to half-blood shops and homes. Killed an entire family.” She scoffed. “Just so people would think it was on the Dark Lord’s orders.”

He gasped. That was sick.

“He’s also killed Umbridge. He really likes killing.”

Harry shook his head. That had led to the Aurors attacking Hermione. “We have to do something about that!”

She snorted. “I’ve killed him. Captured him, interrogated him, then cut his head off.” She was looking directly into his eyes.
He nodded, slowly. “Good.”

“Good?” She narrowed her eyes a bit.

He wasn’t certain what she wanted to hear, so he stuck to the truth. “It’s not good what he did, but it’s good that he isn’t murdering people any more.”

“It had to be done.” She nodded and took a sip from her glass.

They remained silent for a while, finishing the main course.

“I’ve been wondering…” Hermione spoke up again.

“Yes?”

“Why didn’t you ask me to the Yule Ball, when Cho was going with Cedric?” She was staring at him again.

He took a deep breath. “It’s embarrassing.” It was. That hadn’t been his finest hour. He hadn’t been as bad as Ron though. ‘Hermione, you’re a girl!’ indeed.

“Yes?”

“I hadn’t really thought of you as a girl, back then.” He took a sip from his own glass while she looked at him with an unreadable expression. “You’ve always been with me and Ron, almost always at least. I’ve always seen you as a friend, like Ron, not as a girl. Girls for me were Parvati and Lavender, chatting about clothes and makeup and hairstyles.” She winced at that, a tiny bit. He went on. “Aunt Petunia had clear opinions of what girls and boys did.”

She snorted. “And I didn’t match her criteria.”

Harry shook his head. “You even hit Draco right in the face. That’s something boys do, not girls. At least I thought so. Unconsciously.”

“So, you never saw me as a girl, until Ron noticed?”

“Well, to be honest… I knew you were a girl then, but didn’t really realise just how much until the Yule Ball.”

“How much?” She had her eyebrows raised again.


“Maybe I should have used makeup and hairstyling charms earlier then,” she said.

“I’m not certain I’d have noticed.” He forced a chuckle. “I didn’t really pay that much attention to my friends’ appearances. Still don’t.”

“That’s not always a bad thing. People who focus on appearances are often rather shallow.” Hermione sniffed.

Harry agreed eagerly.

*****

“It was a wonderful date,” Hermione Granger told Harry when the two of them were back in the
entrance hall of Grimmauld Place. She wasn’t lying - the meal had been to die for, and the play Harry had taken her to had been interesting and well deserving of the good reviews. Though she hadn’t missed that Harry hadn’t enjoyed it as much as she had. She also didn’t miss how his face lit up at her words.

“So, you had fun.” His tone turned it into half a question.

“Yes.” She ran her tongue over her lips, and took a step closer to him. Close enough so if they wanted to dance, all he would have to do was to put his arms around her. He had grown a bit more, she noted - and he had been taller than her for a while.

He swallowed, looking more than a bit nervous. His shoulders twitched, for an instant, as if his arms had moved just a bit.

Smiling, she leaned forward, and kissed him. She was frowning when she pulled away. It hadn’t exactly been a chaste kiss, but… She grabbed his head and pulled him down for another kiss. A French kiss. When she pulled back after that, both of them were breathing heavily, and her hair was mussed. That had been a real kiss!

Part of her wanted to go on. Go further even. Test just how ‘compatible’ they were. Find out if and how those dreams she had had stood up to reality. She wouldn’t though. That wouldn’t have been fair to Ron. Who had featured in her steamy dreams as well.

“Thank you for a wonderful date.” She smiled at Harry.

“Thank you,” he said. Then he looked around. “I expected Sirius to appear, and tell us to get a room.”

She laughed. “He’d only do that if he didn’t want us to get a room.”

Harry blinked, before he laughed as well.

Five minutes later she was in a currently unused safe house of the Resistance, stripping off her dress. Another five minutes later, she was back in their headquarters.

Back in the war.

*****

Dorset, Britain, November 16th, 1996

“Ah, there you are! Come, everyone else is waiting!”

Draco was excited, Daphne Greengrass noticed that at once when he welcomed her and Tracey into his home. She glanced at her friend, and the two witches followed their host to his living room. Which had been expanded a bit more, as far as she could tell, and there were now paintings on the walls. No portraits, but that didn’t have to mean anything.

Pansy was there, Crabbe and Goyle, of course, as well as Nott, and Vaisey and Warrington, former Chasers of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Daphne and Tracey took up their usual spots, seated on a small couch in the corner with Pansy. The other witch in the room was looking better. Or at least, she was not crying any more.

“Alright! Now that everyone is here, I can finally share the great news I received!” Draco stood in the centre of the room, smiling widely. “Tonight, many blood traitors and mudbloods will receive
their just punishment! The Dark Lord himself has called upon us to fight for him!

Daphne was about to whisper to Tracey that she had thought they were already doing that, when Draco summoned a large bag to his feet. He opened it and pulled out a white mask. A Death Eater mask, Daphne realised.

“He has granted us the honour of wearing his robes and masks!” Draco declared. “He is acknowledging us as his!”

Daphne exchanged a glance with Tracey. She wasn’t quite certain what to think of this, and her friend didn’t look like she knew how to react herself.

“If we perform well, we might even earn the honour of receiving his mark!” Draco continued. Crabbe and Goyle nodded eagerly. The others smiled. Even Pansy was smiling, so Daphne forced herself to join in. She was rubbing her left arm though - and asking herself if she truly wanted to be marked like that.

But, she thought as she took one of the robes and masks Draco was handing out to everyone, refusing such an ‘honour’ was not exactly a decision conducive to a long life. No one insulted the Dark Lord and managed to get away with it.

That Draco was unlikely to share the glory of whatever they were about to do today with anyone was but a small consolation. More than ever she felt trapped.

*****

London, November 16th, 1996

At the bus stop closest to the restaurant he had made reservations at, Ron Weasley tugged on his new jacket. It wasn’t a leather jacket. Despite Bill’s advice, he had opted for a less… Bill-ish jacket. He wasn’t his oldest brother. He had wanted to get a coat, a long coat. Something that would feel closer to a robe. But that wouldn’t have been fashionable or appropriate for muggle London. Or so his father had told him. So, a jacket it was. Matching his trousers.

He checked his new watch - a cheap muggle one which wouldn’t work at Hogwarts, or anywhere else with too much magic. He preferred his own watch, but this was supposed to be fashionable for muggles. Though why they called it ‘Swatch’ he couldn’t fathom. Ten minutes left until Hermione would arrive. If she wasn’t late or early.

He noticed that the girl next to him was looking at him. He smiled at her, politely. She was waiting for the bus - muggle buses didn’t stop wherever you held out your wand.

She smiled back. “Big night out planned?”

He nodded. “First date.”

“Oh.” She looked him over. “Good luck then.”

“Thank you.” He paused for a moment. “You?”

“I’m going dancing,” she said.

“Have fun.”

“Thanks.”
He was about to ask which club the girl was going to when he spotted Hermione walking towards the bus stop. The girl was saying something, but he didn’t listen. His date was wearing a short black dress, just reaching her knees, and a black jacket over it. And matching ankle boots.

“Hi, Hermione!”

“Hi, Ron!”

He moved to hug her. She looked briefly surprised, but she returned the hug. “You look great!”

That made her smile. “You look good as well. I haven’t seen you in those clothes since the Cup.”

“Ah, yes. Fashion changed since then.” And he had grown older. She giggled at that. He hoped that was a good sign. He offered her his arm. “Let’s go. The restaurant is around the corner.”

“Oh? I thought we’d be taking the bus.” She sounded surprised.

“No, I just wanted it to be a surprise.” He wasn’t his father. He didn’t jump at the chance to do something muggle-style.

“Ah. I should have thought of that.”

“Did I really outsmart you?” He grinned at her, inclining his head.

She scoffed in response, but she was smiling. He had a feeling that the date was off to a good start.

*****

Hermione Granger was surprised by the restaurant Ron had chosen. It was a small, cozy one. French cuisine, and apparently with French staff. A family business, as far as she could tell. Not the kind of restaurant you’d find by browsing the yellow pages. Or the guides.

“Have you been here before?” she asked.

Ron shook his head. “No, but Fleur said this is one of the best French restaurants in London.”

“Ah!” That explained it. “Do you like French food?” She didn’t remember eating any at the Weasleys.

“Well… it might sound a bit weird, but Mum’s cooking is so good, not even Hogwarts’ elves match her, and the few times Dad took us to a muggle restaurant, I was a bit disappointed. But she doesn’t do French dishes.” Ron smiled.

She nodded. Neither of her parents could cook that well - or rather, took the time to cook well - so she usually associated eating out, or Hogwarts, with better meals. She frowned a bit. If not for the damn Ministry and the Death Eaters, she would be enjoying Hogwarts’ meals.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned the school,” Ron said, after they had ordered.

“No, no. It’s not your fault.” She knew whose fault it was. And they’d pay. She changed the topic anyway. “How are Bill and Fleur doing?”

“Oh, they’re doing well, though they are a tad stressed. Wedding preparations, and, you know…” he trailed off.

She nodded. Dumbledore’s Order. She had no doubt that the whole Weasley family were members,
with the possible exception of Ginny. “Will they marry in England or France?”

“France. Mum’s not happy about it, but she knows it’s safer. Still, I’m glad I’m not involved in all that.” He shook his head. “Even Bill is more stressed about the wedding than his work.”

And the war, of course.

He told a few more tales about Bill and Fleur, and their extended families, while they ate. Fleur had been right, she found out - the food tasted like it did in one of the small restaurants on the Côte d’Azur. One of the small, excellent restaurants. She wondered what had made the family - her guess had been confirmed by a quick question to the waiter - come to London. But she would pass the address on to her parents. After the war.

*****

Ron Weasley was growing more and more confident as the meal continued. They were talking, they were laughing, they were having fun. It was just like a good date should be going. Of course, that was when Hermione changed the topic from light-hearted to what Bill would have called ‘curse-trapped’.

Ron had just finished his main course - Bill hadn’t steered him wrong with his advice there either - when Hermione took a deep breath and cast a privacy spell, before asking: “Do you remember Allan Baker?”

He nodded. Of course he did. Git. Probably had been jealous of their friendship with Hermione.

She bit her lower lip. Which meant she was worried. Or distressed. “I found out that he’s been murdering people.”

“What?”

“He’s been disguising himself as a Death Eater and attacking half-blood shops. Killed an entire family to frame the Death Eaters.”

“Merlin’s balls!” Ron was shocked. That was… he would have expected that from Death Eaters! Killing your own people, innocents… he shook his head.

“He’s also killed Umbridge and several Aurors.”

Ron felt torn about that. Umbridge certainly had deserved to die, she had been a cruel monster. Aurors… well, they were hunting muggleborns. And Hermione. Some were also hunting Death Eaters though. “What did you do?” If Hermione had found out what he had been doing, she’d have done something about it.

She looked at him. “I’ve killed him. Captured him, interrogated him with Veritaserum, then cut his head off.”

Ron nodded, slowly. That was what he had expected. “He won’t be a threat to anyone else then.”

“No, he won’t.”

“Good.”

She looked a bit surprised. “That’s all?”

He shrugged. “People who act like Death Eaters should get treated like Death Eaters.” And killing
them was the best option. Malfoy had shown what happened when you let them live - they tried again.

Hermione nodded, smiling slightly.

Dessert was served, and Ron enjoyed a truly divine cake. Sadly, the portions were not as generous as they would have been at Hogwarts. But he guessed that was a question of quality before quantity. Even though he was really tempted to cast a Doubling Charm on the cake.

Afterwards, Hermione broke the silence - if her appreciative noises during dessert didn’t count: “Ron… when you asked me to go to Yule Ball with you…” She was staring at him.

He winced. That had been almost as bad as getting mad at Harry for being thrown into the Tournament. “Yes?”

“Did you really not think of me as a girl before that?”

He took a deep breath. “No, I didn’t. I was an idiot back then.” He shrugged. “I was focused on appearances. You know how I acted around Fleur. And I was too shy to ask any of the other pretty girls.”

She had narrowed her eyes a bit. “And then you noticed that I could be a pretty girl as well, at the ball.”

Ron nodded. He wasn’t about to lie to her. “Yes. That was a shock.”

“A shock?”

“Yes. I mean… I had known you for years. You and Harry were my two best friends. Both of you kept getting into trouble. Usually with me coming along. I didn’t think of us as two boys and a girl, we were just three friends. Two of them with wild, untameable hair.” He grinned, and she chuckled. “And then I realised you were a girl. A girl I knew. And was friends with. I was such an egotistical git, I didn’t want to believe that anyone other than Harry or me would have even thought of inviting you to the ball. Because why would anyone else realise you were a girl when we didn’t? You didn’t exactly act like Lavender or Parvati.”

Hermione had a rather wry expression now, he noticed. “Why, indeed? I was a bushy-haired nightmare.”

“Hey, now!” he protested. “That was in our first year! You can’t bring that up. I didn’t remind you of your skewed priorities, did I? ‘Killed, or worse, expelled’.”

“True,” she admitted, blushing slightly.

He quickly continued with his explanation. “So, at the ball I saw you were a pretty girl. Which was a shock.”

“You mentioned that already.”

“Yes, I did. Anyway, it took me some time, but I realised I like you.” He smiled.

She didn’t smile. “Because I could be pretty?”

“Because you are a great girl, friend, person.” He would be lying if he denied that it hadn’t hurt that she was pretty.
“That’s why you turned Lavender down?”

“Yes. I’ve grown up. I want you.”

That seemed to please her. He reached over the table and took her hand. She didn’t pull away.

*****

Devon, Ottery St. Catchpole, November 16th, 1996

The home of the Weasley blood traitors looked like it was but one failing spell away from collapsing. Daphne Greengrass, hidden behind a tree at the edge of the property, couldn’t really believe that this was the home of the family of a Ministry employee - it was a disgrace! She had seen hovels which had looked more impressive. Hunting lodges even! She shook her head.

And yet, it was protected with strong wards. Not as strong as those of Greengrass Manor, of course, but nothing to take lightly. The oldest son of the Weasleys was a skilled Curse-Breaker, she remembered, and he had obviously given his parents’ home the same attention he had given his brothers’ shop. She wasn’t looking forward to crossing wands with him, not even with a dozen Death Eaters on her group’s side.

Daphne was almost glad for the mask she was wearing; it hid her expression. She shook her head. She shouldn’t be nervous, much less afraid. Muggles had attacked far better protected homes. She wouldn’t be outdone by those murderers! She turned to Tracey and whispered: “Now I know why every Weasley is a Gryffindor - if they were less brave, they wouldn’t be able to sleep in such a building.”

Tracey laughed under her breath, but it sounded a bit off to Daphne. Or that could be the mask’s effect. She would have to be careful not to lose sight of her friend - with these masks, she wouldn’t be able to easily find her again.

“Alright, everyone, remember: Our task is to keep the house of the blood traitors covered in Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey Jinxes and keep them from escaping by other means,” Draco said. “The others will take care of the wards and attack.”

Their leader must be nervous himself, Daphne thought - counting the briefing at the meeting, that was the third time Draco had repeated himself.

“I’m not exactly sorry we’re not going in that house ourselves,” Tracey whispered when Draco had gone over to where Theo was standing, “one missed curse could bring it down on your head.”

“If they are smart they’ll simply set it on fire from the outside,” Daphne answered.

“Start casting!” Draco yelled suddenly.

Daphne stood up and cast an Anti-Apparition Jinx on the house while Tracey cast an Anti-Portkey Jinx. Both followed up with Human-presence-revealing Charms. And Muggle-repelling Charms. She waited for the blood traitors to dispel them, but they didn’t. Even while the Death Eaters were attacking the wards, no one seemed to even try to escape. That didn’t fit a family who was Gryffindor to the core. She ground her teeth. Something wasn’t right.

Minutes passed, and she still saw no Weasleys appear to defend their house. Were they even home? But the lights had been on, and she had seen movement behind the curtains. “I don’t like this,” she whispered.
“What?” Tracey whispered back.

“This doesn’t feel right. They should be doing something in that house. Why aren’t they trying something while the wards still protect them?”

“Maybe they are waiting for help?” Tracey said.

“If they are, they’ll be waiting until they are dead,” Daphne said. Draco had told them that all over Wizarding Britain, blood traitors and other enemies would be attacked now, while even more false alerts would be called in to the Ministry. No help would be coming!

And yet, they didn’t react. The Quidditch team on their brooms up in the air was ready, but no one tried to escape by broom. No one even tried to dispel their jinxes!

What were they waiting for?

“The wards are down!” One unfamiliar Death Eater suddenly shouted with glee. “Let’s get them!”

Daphne saw four Death Eaters rush to the house. Evidently, they were not about to simply set fire to the house. The one in front cast a Blasting Curse at the door, blowing it and half the wall away. Before they reached the new opening though, all four suddenly started screaming and collapsed.

Daphne stared, shocked, as the four writhed on the grass. One of them ripped his mask off, and she almost screamed when she saw his face - his skin seemed to turn to leather while his eyes shrank in their sockets.

“Moisture-Draining Curse,” Tracey whispered next to her while the screams died one by one and the Death Eaters stopped moving.

But who had cast it? Daphne hadn’t seen anyone.

A few more Blasting Curses followed, blowing more holes in the walls. Someone set fire to the house. Or tried to - it didn’t seem to take. But the wards were down, Daphne knew that. It didn’t seem to matter though, since the house started to collapse.

And still no one tried to escape. Even as the walls came tumbling down. Then she caught a glimpse of a stone structure in the middle of the house, right before the roof started to hit the ground. The curse!

“It’s a trap!” she yelled. “They’ve cursed the house!”

She was too late. A green light suddenly shone from within the ruins, covering the area. A second later, the remaining Death Eaters started to scream as they were sucked into the ground.

“Quicksand Curse,” Tracey said next to her. “Another favourite of the Old Egyptians.”

Screams from above them made Daphne look up. Vaisey and Warrington, the two former Chasers, were surrounded by what looked like small black clouds. They were flailing wildly, but the clouds seemed to cling to them. And that buzzing sound…

“Devouring Scarabaeus…” Tracey started to say.

Daphne grabbed her and dragged her away. They had to get out of the range of their own jinxes, so they could apparate away.

*****
“I didn’t expect you to take us dancing,” Hermione Granger said, once they had made it past the bouncer at the door and found a table in a corner to sit down. She had expected a movie.

“Did you expect me to take you to a museum?”

Museums were not open that late, Hermione knew. “Not exactly.”

“Well, you seemed to enjoy the dancing at the Yule Ball,” Ron said. Thanks to another privacy spell, the didn’t have to yell at each other. “And I haven’t been to a muggle club yet.”

Hermione hadn’t been to a muggle club either, yet. Apart from her last vacation in France, after her fourth year, and that hadn’t been a real night club. Certainly not a date. She nodded.

“If you don’t like it we can take a stroll through the town, and catch a late night movie,” Ron said.

“You seem to have planned ahead.” If he had.

“A bit.” He grinned. “I can apparate us to a cinema, at least. And I know when the last movie starts.” He took her hand again. “But I’d really like to dance with you. It’s not a ball, but…”

She smiled. “Let’s dance then.”

Hermione didn’t take long to realise that she liked dancing. And liked dancing with Ron. He wasn’t a particularly good dancer - it was obvious he hadn’t done this before - but he enjoyed it. And his attention made her feel good. And desired. He had grown up, as he had said. He had turned down Lavender, after all. Something not many teenage boys would have done, Hermione knew. She was no fool - she knew that Lavender was more attractive than she was.

And, she added to herself, Ron had also simply grown. He was as tall as Percy now, but had broader shoulders and a better build. A much better build. She had caught a few other girls eyeing him. But for this evening, he was hers. And she didn’t share, she thought with a smile.

She was just returning to their corner with two drinks when she felt her purse vibrate. The enchanted mirror. Ron must have noticed from her expression that something was wrong, since he was looking around, hand on where he kept his wand. She put the drinks down and pulled the mirror out.

Harry’s face appeared. “I’m very sorry to disturb you, really sorry. But there’s been attacks on the Burrow and other places. The teachers are calling the students whose families have been attacked, and I don’t think Dumbledore can cover for you.”

Ron muttered a curse. Hermione gasped. “Is everyone alright?” She knew the Burrow had been evacuated before, but if there were Death Eater attacks, then the Order would be responding.

“We don’t know yet,” Harry said, “sorry.” He did look miserable before his image vanished.

“Alright,” Ron said. He would be worrying for his family. Hermione felt rather selfish for being angry that her evening was cut short.

She sighed. “I better get back as well.” The Resistance hadn’t planned anything and was unlikely to get involved, but she should check with them.

He nodded. “Damn Death Eaters. Attacking people and ruining dates.”

She chuckled at the black humour. Then she looked at him, and slid closer. A few minutes wouldn’t
make a difference. “It’s not ruined. Just cut short.”

He looked puzzled. Until she slid in his lap and kissed him. No chaste kiss to start, not now.

When they pulled apart, Ron had his eyes closed. “Damn, now I hate them all even more.”

She nodded, slightly out of breath as she left his lap. That had been… passionate. Like in some of those books she didn’t read. “We have to go now.”

He nodded, and they stood up.

They held hands until they were out of the door, and around the corner. Until they had to apparate.

*****

Kent, Longbottom Manor, November 16th, 1996

Augusta Longbottom was glad that her grandson was at Hogwarts, and not at home, when she noticed that the wards of her ancestral manor were under attack. They were strong, and would hold whoever was attacking at bay for quite some time, but they would not hold out forever. And her Floo connection was dead - there was no way to call for help. Apparition and Portkeys were blocked as well.

She scowled. No one attacking her wards would fail to block magical travel. She could use a broom, but she was quite certain that the sky above her home was being watched as well. That would be, at best, a last resort.

She didn’t let any of those dark thoughts show though when she addressed her house-elf. “Pammy, gather the others and go hide in the cellar.” The elves were useless in a fight, their magic just barely making them better servants than muggles, but if the worst happened and the wards were breached, then they would be safe down there. The Dark Lord’s scum attacking her home wanted her. Hopefully.

She strode through the entrance hall of the manor, activating the enchanted statues in there, then stepped outside. More such defences were hidden in the garden, and she turned them on as she strode towards the wall that marked both the edge of the Longbottom property as well as the wardline.

Were the Death Eaters as brazen as to attack the gates itself? Or were they showing their true mettle, and trying to break in through the back? To Augusta’s surprise, she saw figures in dark robes moving behind the gate. Did they think she’d cower in her Manor while they tried to break in?

Filled with anger and contempt, she aimed her wand and conjured a few vipers outside the gate. Sudden yells told her that the enemies had lookouts at least. She scoffed and conjured stone stairs in front of her, high enough so she could cast over the wall and remain protected by her wards.

She saw half a dozen Death Eaters blasting the ground, killing her snakes. A yell from above her tried to warn them, but she was already casting, sending several Cutting and Piercing Curses at the two closest enemies. One of them went down, the other’s Shield Charm managed to protect him long enough so he could dodge her volley. Her Blasting Curse got him though. The rest took cover behind trees and rocks. Those were not the ones attacking the wards though. They would be hidden, better protected. But where?

Suddenly, red spells flew at the hiding Death Eaters from behind. She saw one jump up and start to run, falling to two spells after a few steps. Another slumped over and slid around a tree. Then she
saw red robes appear. Aurors. Four of them.

Two slapped small discs on the stunned Death Eaters, portkeying them away. The other two waved at her and walked to the gate. Augusta met them there. She recognised the leader. Kingsley Shacklebolt. One of Dumbledore’s faction.

“Good evening, Mrs Longbottom. We were alerted that your Floo connection had been sabotaged, and were dispatched to check on you. Are you alright?”

She nodded. “The wards are still under attack, so there’s bound to be a few more of them in hiding,” It wasn’t as if the scum could quickly withdraw; the backlash from the wards would kill them.

Shacklebolt nodded and turned to the other Auror. “Runcorn, take the others and make a sweep around the perimeter!” Turning back to Augusta, he asked. “Can I come inside and check the Floo connection? We think they may have found new ways of blocking it. And I think we need more Aurors here. Trusted ones,” he added, his emphasis telling her that he knew as well as she did that there were traitors within the Aurors’ ranks.

“Certainly.” She moved her wand and cleared him to enter. She kept her wand in hand, of course - she had just been attacked.

“Thank you.” He smiled at her. Then his eyes widened and his wand came up.

She turned around, wand out, but she saw no threat. She tried to turn back, but she was too slow. Too late.

“Stupefy!”

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Chapter 17: Plots and Propaganda

‘Taking an unbiased view, one cannot help but conclude that the Dark Lord had shown considerable restraint for over a year since his return, until the so-called ‘November Offensive’ in 1996. While some of my colleagues claim that only the timely disappearance of the muggleborns had prevented terror attacks on them and their families, as had happened so often in the First Blood War, I disagree. Apart from the attack on Azkaban, which, given the inhumane conditions under which prisoners were kept there, should have been expected by the Ministry, the only attacks attributed to the Dark Lord’s forces were in response to attacks on pureblood supporters of his - usually by muggleborns. Although the possibility that there were attacks and incidents executed and instigated by his followers without claiming responsibility cannot be excluded, especially in light of the cursing of Nigel Nye and the infamous riot in Diagon Alley.

Nevertheless, the theory that the Dark Lord’s attacks on so-called ‘blood traitors’ was the direct result of the change in Ministry policy that resulted in the arrest of several of his supporters among the Ministry employees appears to be quite compelling. And it cannot be overlooked that even in those attacks, the Dark Lord showed some restraint - certainly more than the Muggleborn Resistance showed.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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Outside Withernsea, Yorkshire, Britain, November 17th, 1996

“Rennervate!”

The Dark Lord Voldemort watched as his latest prisoner started to stir. He smiled faintly at how her eyes widened for a moment when she realised where she was: in the middle of his throne room, in front of him, surrounded by his most loyal followers.

“Good morning, Mrs Longbottom.”

The old witch slowly stood up. She had to be hurting - she had been stunned for the entire night, and the Dark Lord knew what a toll this took on an old body - but her face betrayed none of the pain she had to be suffering. And her voice didn’t quiver when she answered him. “Voldemort, I presume.”

Bellatrix snarled and raised her wand, eager to avenge the slight against his position, but he held her back with a gesture and inclined his head. “Discuss? We have nothing to discuss. Your mad dogs took my son from me.”

Her eyes briefly narrowed, but otherwise she did not react to his mocking of pureblood customs. The old witch raised her chin. “You are finally showing your true colours then. Striking against everyone who doesn’t follow you.”

He chuckled. “Attacking? I would say I have merely forcefully invited you to my home to discuss your current political views.” He flicked his wand and a soft armchair appeared behind the witch.

She remained standing. Her composure and pride would have been admirable, if they did not extend to her politics. She sneered at him, and he had to hold Bellatrix back again. “Discuss? We have nothing to discuss. Your mad dogs took my son from me.”
He leaned back in his seat. “Your son and your daughter-in-law fought in the last war. Everyone knows that people get hurt in war.”

She scoffed. “They fought for Britain. And they were ambushed by cowards!” She glanced at the Lestranges, sniffing.

They didn’t dare to go against his will and attack the old witch, but they very much wanted to. Bellatrix even begged with her eyes. “And your son killed my followers. It was war, Madam. But that war ended. And now we’re finding ourselves in the middle of another war - against the mudblood menace your family naively and erroneously protected.” He sighed. “I warned Britain, again and again, that tolerating mudbloods would be our doom. But did the Ministry listen? No! You can see the result of that mistake where Malfoy Manor once stood.” He stared at her. “It is time for us to stop fighting so we can focus on the real enemy.”

She sneered at him again. “Do you take me for a fool? All you want is power. And you will kill anyone and everyone to rule.” She snorted. “But while you have me, my grandson is safe. No matter what you do to me, or threaten to do, Neville will never follow you! He is his father’s son!”

He smiled, carefully not stretching his lips wider than a human would - his new body had wonderful secrets, but also a few peculiarities that alienated many. “Oh, you misunderstand me. I do not want you to follow me. No - all I want from those who are as misguided as you are is to stop opposing me. To simply do nothing.” He leaned forward, lowering his voice to a whisper that still filled the room. “And I think that while Neville would sacrifice you rather than join me, I doubt he would be as rash if all I ask from him is to do nothing. To continue his schooling, and advise the proxy who will replace you to simply abstain from any votes.”

She drew a shuddering breath, and the hatred that appeared on her face told him that he was correct, and that she knew that her grandson wouldn’t sacrifice her. Not if he could get her back by simply doing nothing - something, Severus had assured him, the boy was good at.

“No, Bellatrix, please show our guest her room and make her comfortable.”

The dark witch smiled gleefully, and pointed her wand at the old witch. “Imperio!”

While the prisoner was made to walk peacefully to her cell, Voldemort leaned back and dismissed his followers. Not all of his attacks had been as successful as the one on Longbottom Manor. The attack against the Weasleys’ home had been a catastrophe. Maybe Malfoy’s boasts about his plans to fool and ambush the Weasley twins had not been as self-aggrandising as he had thought. The family had certainly shown more cunning and brutal ruthlessness than the Dark Lord had expected, sacrificing their own home just to kill some of his Death Eaters. And the spells they had used…

He rubbed his chin. Yes, they would need to be dealt with. But with careful planning. He remembered Molly Weasley, and what she had done in the last war, after her brothers had died. If she had died in the Burrow this problem would have been solved, but now… He had to tell Malfoy that the Weasley twins had to be taken alive.

The Weasleys were too brave and foolish to betray their friends and allies, but if Voldemort simply asked for their neutrality? It was certainly worth a try. He would prefer it if the purebloods opposing him would learn to simply stand aside. It would make his future reign easier. And he could always kill his prisoners, should their relatives prove to be stubborn or difficult.

He would also have to order Rookwood to focus his research on those curses used at the Burrow. If Malfoy failed, or the Weasleys turned out to not care about hostages, then an alternative to deal with them would be needed. And the former Unspeakable was his best researcher - far too useful to risk in
Voldemort stood up and walked over to the tapestry depicting the founding of Hogwarts. Running his hand over the fabric, he took a deep breath. He still wasn’t certain that going on the offensive and attacking the blood traitors had been the right decision. He could have waited. Let his followers and their allies counter Dumbledore’s latest move. Continue to let the mudbloods kill purebloods until the Wizengamot saw no other way to save themselves than turn to him.

His first attempt to take the power, thirty years ago, had been, in hindsight, too brutal, too crude, even. His most loyal followers had been young, inexperienced. Too rash for many of the conservative members of the Wizengamot.

Which was why, this time, he had bided his time and kept his followers from starting a war. Let them slowly and subtly take over the Wizengamot and the Ministry and oust Dumbledore. Then the mudbloods had started a war. As brutal as his last one, if not more so. And his people had been growing more restless with each success of those animals, with each defeat handed to the Ministry. They hated to be thought weak and cowards by their peers. He had kept them in check, used the purebloods’ fear of the mudbloods for his own aims.

His fingers dug into the rising walls of Hogwarts on the tapestry. The same Wizengamot members that had, even eagerly, turned to him as an alternative to Dumbledore’s thinly-veiled reign over Britain had started to waver. No pureblood in power had liked Dumbledore’s progressive policies, but after his victory over Grindelwald, the old wizard had been too powerful for the Old Families to oppose. So they had forced themselves to bear it. Until the Dark Lord had appeared, more terrifying, more powerful than Dumbledore. More attractive to many purebloods. But only as long as they believed he could defeat Dumbledore, and save them from the mudbloods. Only as long as they feared the Dark Lord more than anything, more than anyone else.

He took a step back, releasing the tapestry, and smoothed it out with a gesture of his hand. No, he could not have waited any longer. He had to act, before his reputation suffered another blow.

The curse was cast. Now all that mattered was to see it through.

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Devon, Ottery St. Catchpole, November 17th, 1996

The Burrow was gone.

That was Ron Weasley’s first thought when he appeared at the edge of his family’s property. Debris covered the spot where the house had stood. Some was blackened, as if it had burned. Other parts were just broken, as if a giant had smashed them. And, for some weird reason, the uppermost part, the roof covering the upper attic, had settled down undamaged on the rest of the remains.

He shook his head. He had known that this could happen, that this probably would happen, when his parents had told him that they were evacuating their home, but to see the destruction… he ground his teeth to avoid cursing. The Death Eaters had destroyed his family’s home. His home. He closed his
eyes and drew a long, shuddering breath to calm down. Those who had attacked the Burrow had paid for it already. With their lives.

Whatever had done this hadn’t even spared his father’s shed. That had been burned down. He took a few steps closer, trying to see if his dad had taken his muggle item collection with him, but an Auror stopped him.

“We haven’t checked the remains in there for curses and traps yet.”

Ron opened his mouth to argue - muggle items were harmless, at least the ones his dad collected - then closed it when he saw another Auror conjure a blanket near the shed and realised that they were talking about human remains. He nodded, and turned away.

“Mate, I’m sorry. That’s…” Harry was shaking his head.

Ron knew that Harry came closest to understanding what he was feeling. Harry had once told him that the Burrow had been the first home he had felt happy in. Ron nodded at his friend, and clapped him on the shoulder. “No one was hurt. No one from our family, at least.” He frowned. “And it wasn’t your fault!”

Harry looked like he wanted to disagree - Ron’s friend had a complex about such things - but he caved under Ron’s glare. “Alright. I’m still sorry for wrecking your date.”

“Hm?” Ron looked away from the remains of gnomes that had been burned trying to escape their tunnels. “You didn’t ruin it. It went fine.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Ron smiled. “We had fun. We danced for hours.”

“Oh.” Harry looked surprised.

“What did you do?” Ron asked.

“We watched a play,” Harry said. “She liked it,” he added.

“You didn’t.” Ron looked at him.

“It was… interesting.” Harry looked to his side. “Oh, there’s Bill. Bill!”

Ron’s eldest brother walked over to them, a smile on his face. “Hi, Harry, Ron. I didn’t know you were allowed to leave Hogwarts.”

“We’ve got permission,” Harry said quickly.

“Family emergency,” Ron added.

“And why do I think that Mum and Dad don’t know about this?” Bill shook his head.

Ron couldn’t help but looking around for his parents. His brother chuckled. “They’re not here.” He grew serious. “Mum… she couldn’t stand the sight. Cried a lot. Dad took her to… where they are staying.”

That sounded like their mother. Ron nodded. “From what we can tell, your curses worked as planned.”
Bill blinked. “How did you know?”

“Moody used the opportunity to teach us how to ‘read a crime scene’,” Harry said.

Ron added: “Well, he told us what he could spot, with the right spells. We didn’t do anything here.”

Bill relaxed a bit. “Good. I used the nastiest curses I knew. Not all of them are safe even now.” He looked over the area. “They wrecked the house, but they paid for it. Eight Death Eaters down.”

Ron wasn’t entirely certain that even double that number was worth the destruction of his home, but didn’t want to argue. He simply nodded. Hermione would have grilled Bill for more information.

His brother must have picked up on it anyway - he was the eldest, after all, and had been responsible for Ron often - since he asked: “How’s Ginny doing? Didn’t she want to come as well?”

Ron shook his head. “No. She’s staying at Hogwarts where it’s safe.”

“She agreed to that?” Bill raised his eyebrows.

“She doesn’t know we’re here,” Ron explained. At least he hoped Ginny didn’t know.

Bill frowned. “I see.”

“What?” Harry looked puzzled. Ron didn’t know what Bill was talking about either.

His oldest brother shook his head. “Just wondering what you’re training for with the Headmaster.”

They couldn’t tell him that, so all three looked at the destroyed house for a while without saying anything.

“We’ll rebuild it,” Bill suddenly said. “After the war, when it’s safe.”

Ron nodded. Whenever that would be. Weasleys were stubborn. Like himself.

Hogwarts, November 17th, 1996

“So, the wards of Longbottom Manor were untouched. Yet the Dark Mark was floating above it, and Augusta is missing,” Albus Dumbledore summed up Kingsley’s report.

His friend nodded. “There are no witnesses. The elves said the wards were attacked, but that’s all they know. And the Floo connection was sabotaged.”

Albus nodded. Tom’s spies had been working hard last night. The Floo Network had been utterly disrupted. That hadn’t affected the Order; Albus’s friends had been prepared. But others who, like Augusta, opposed the Dark Lord politically, yet didn’t share Albus’s views of muggleborns... they had been isolated. Easy pickings. Half a dozen homes had been attacked. Although Augusta was the only Wizengamot member among those who had been kidnapped. The Dark Lord was after leverage, no doubt.

And Tom was still restraining his Death Eaters - there had been no massacres. So he still cared about the opinion of the purebloods. A pity. But Albus hadn’t really expected the Dark Lord to make the same mistake he had made in the last war.

“Have you heard anything regarding those ‘Avengers’ who attacked the Aurors in Knockturn
Alley?” Albus asked. He had expected other resistance groups to form, but this one had been surprisingly competent given the circumstances.

Kingsley shook his head. “That’s Brenda Brocktuckle’s case. She’s not been too successful in the past.”

The Headmaster nodded. His friend couldn’t meddle with that investigation, not without making waves that would render him vulnerable to more subtle attacks than the ones Albus wanted to provoke. Still, those people bore watching. Loose cannons could cause a lot of harm to his plans.

“I’ve heard the attack on the Burrow was a massacre,” Kingsley said.

Albus nodded. “Young William is an experienced Curse-Breaker. He used his knowledge quite efficiently.”

The Auror frowned. “Auror Brown used other words. ‘Brutal’ and ‘dark’.”

Albus spread his hands. “The old Egyptians were quite ruthless when it came to protecting their tombs.”

“Gringotts has been sending teams down there for decades. That’s the first time I have heard of such curses being used to defend a home.”

Albus smiled. “In order to create such strong and lethal defences, the Egyptians needed to limit their curses with specific conditions. Conditions rarely met by British Manors.”

“So, the Death Eaters won’t be able to use those curses to protect them?”

The Headmaster shook his head. “Even if they knew those curses, their hideouts and bases would not qualify.” There was no need to inform Kingsley that William had turned the Burrow into a tomb to be able to use the old curses. The sarcophagus had been removed, with Albus’s help, before the Aurors had been called.

“Alright.” Kingsley sighed and stood up. “Bones is spitting mad, and even Fudge seems to care about the kidnapping of Madam Longbottom. They’ve made it very clear that they expect results.”

The old wizard smiled. “I think they are now realising that the Dark Lord does not limit his violence to muggleborns. His hunger for power is too great to tolerate rivals - even such as Cornelius.”

Kingsley snorted. “Ruling Britain isn’t much of an achievement. Even Fudge managed that.”

Albus chuckled. “I am rather certain that the Dark Lord considers me the ruler of Britain, which is why he intends to take over.” Less than two years ago, it had not been far from the truth. Alas, Albus had come to discover that the majority of the Wizengamot and the Ministry had not followed his suggestions because they believed in them, but because they had come from the most powerful wizard in Britain. With that title challenged by the Dark Lord, many purebloods had quickly shown their true colours.

Kingsley was aware of that fact, but didn’t mention it. “I’ll be using the Floo Network sabotage to make more arrests.”

The Headmaster smiled. “Be careful though.”

His friend nodded.
Albus knew other members of his Order would have shrugged the danger off. Sirius, for one. “I will inform you as soon as I receive more information about our foes. Please keep an eye on Nymphadora.” The Tonkses hadn’t been attacked, but that could have been because their address wasn’t known to the Ministry. Albus had yet to hear from the metamorphagus whether anyone had tried to enter the flat the Ministry thought she was living in.

“I will.” Kingsley waved and left Albus’s office. He wasn’t taking the Floo. Not after last night.

Albus leaned back in his chair. Harry and Mister Weasley were still at the Burrow. He had pondered the decision to let them visit for a while. Alastor saw it as a training opportunity. And a way to show them the costs of the war, as well as the dangers. Albus agreed with his old friend that this was a valuable lesson to learn before the two boys started to hunt Horcruxes.

He wasn’t quite as certain that this was the only lesson the boys would learn. They might decide to take revenge for the destruction of their home. Harry was quite attached to the Burrow himself, even though he was now living with Sirius. Albus would have to trust them that they would not go down that particular path. No further than most, at least.

He sighed. This offensive by the Dark Lord also complicated matters with regards to Miss Granger. With the Tonkses moving to the safety of Sirius’s house, it would not be able to be used for private meetings any more. Young Nymphadora still had not fully come to terms with the actions of the Muggleborn Resistance. She was coming around though.

He petted Fawkes and sighed. There was another task he was not looking forward to.

He had to inform Mister Longbottom of the kidnapping of his grandmother.

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London, Ministry of Magic, November 17th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle wasn’t quite certain if she should be glad or annoyed about the attacks by the Death Eaters. On one hand, the pressure on her had lightened somewhat, with part of the Wizengamot panicking about enemies other than mudbloods. On the other hand, Aurors were being shifted from hunting mudbloods to hunting Death Eaters.

She shook her head as she sat down at her desk. That clever bastard Shacklebolt had been lucky again - not only had he managed to actually arrest Death Eaters as soon as he had taken over from Dawlish, but his case was now even given priority! Some people had all the luck. And, she added, thinking of Dawlish, some had none.

She looked up as her office’s door opened, expecting her partner, Martin. It was Parkinson instead. “Morning,” she greeted him.

“Morning,” she greeted him.

“It’s a bit late for that,” Parkinson answered.

She couldn’t tell if he was commenting on the time, or the events of last night. She didn’t care that much either, so she shrugged.

“Did you hear about the Weasley home?” Parkinson said, sitting down on the edge of her desk.

Brenda nodded. It was the talk of the Corps - not even the kidnapping of Longbottom had made such waves.

“Brown said he had never seen curses like the ones used there,” Parkinson went on. “And yet,
rumour is we’re not investigating the family.”

Brenda spread her hands. “Criminals attack an old pureblood family home, get killed in the process - you know how that goes.” The Wizengamot certainly took defending your manor seriously.

Parkinson scoffed. “The Weasleys are not an Old Family. And they’re only purebloods because the last two generations, they haven’t found mudbloods or half-bloods to wed.”

Brenda chuckled. “You mean, they’re too poor to count as an Old Family.” Gold mattered, after all. A lot.

The other Auror snorted, but conceded the point. “So, what’s new about those ‘Avengers’?” he asked with a grin.

Brenda sighed theatrically. “They’re hiding, I guess. Preparing their next strike, no doubt. But with the Corps currently focused on the Death Eaters, they might have trouble finding a similarly spectacular opportunity.” Dawlish certainly wouldn’t offer one with half his Aurors ‘temporarily dispatched’ to other duties.

“Well, something better crop up soon,” Parkinson grumbled.

As if such things could be rushed, Brenda thought. Fortunately, Martin finally arrived with some scones and distracted the older Auror.

Hogwarts, November 17th, 1996

Harry Potter entered the Gryffindor common room with Ron, and winced when he saw the students inside. Ginny had jumped up and now was glaring at him and Ron, hands on her hips. Neville, who was sitting near her, looked shaken, in need of a Calming Draught. The boy was staring at the carpet.

“Blimey! What happened to Neville?” Ron asked next to him. When Ginny made a beeline towards them, Harry’s friend whispered: “Damn, she’s furious.”

“So… you’re back from your ‘family emergency’. An emergency I was not told about until you had left already!” Ginny spat. “Why did you get to go and visit the Burrow and our family, and I had to stay here?”

Harry took a small step to the side. That looked like a question best handled by Ginny’s brother.

Ron cast a privacy spell before answering: “It was part of our training. The ‘family emergency’ was just a cover story.”

“Your mysterious training. For the Order. Of which everyone of our family but me is a member.” Ginny was still glaring at Ron.

“Aunt Muriel isn’t a member either.”

“Did you just compare me to that hag?” Ginny seemed to be fuming now. She had her wand in hand, even, Harry saw.

“Merlin’s beard, Ginny!” Ron exclaimed. “It’s not about you! You know we can’t tell you what we’re doing. We can’t tell anyone!”

“I can help as well!”
“That’s not up to us,” Ron said. Harry refrained from nodding along. “It’s up to Dumbledore to decide who he recruits.”

Ginny frowned, but she didn’t seem to be planning to rush off and accost the Headmaster.

“Besides,” Harry added, “you’re helping us here already, keeping an eye on the Slytherins.”

Ginny smiled at him, then pouted. “The troublemakers all left. The rest rarely leave their dorms. Well, Zabini does, but… you know what he does.” She blushed slightly.

Harry didn’t really want to hear about the love life of a Slytherin when his own was… complicated. He simply nodded.

“Did he chat you up, Ginny?” Ron asked.

“No, he didn’t. And if he did, it would be none of your business!”

Ron glanced at Harry. His friend didn’t seem to share that view. Harry agreed with him. Zabini hadn’t done anything suspicious, but that didn’t mean you could trust him. He was a Slytherin, after all.

“So… what’s up with Neville?” Ron asked after a brief moment of silence.

Ginny winced. “His grandmother was kidnapped last night. Death Eater attack on his home.”

“Merlin’s balls!” Ron muttered.

“Damn!” Harry hissed. He hadn’t been fond of his fellow Gryffindor’s stance towards the Muggleborn Resistance, but he couldn’t help but feel sorry for Neville - the poor bloke had just lost his last family. Harry knew how it hurt, being alone. His own family… he shook his head.

Ginny sighed. “He wanted to go home, but McGonagall said it wasn’t safe yet. They don’t know what happened. The wards are still intact.”

“Treason,” Harry whispered. “Someone must have let the scum through.” Just like Wormtail.

Ron nodded. “Someone Madam Longbottom trusted. A friend, or even a relative.”

“She wasn’t a member of the Order, was she?” Harry asked. He was quite certain that the old witch was dead. Or was wishing she was dead. He knew how callously the Dark Lord murdered people. And how he liked torturing his victims.

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “If she was I hope she wasn’t in a cell with anyone we know.”

Ginny looked puzzled for a moment. Harry explained: “The Order is made up of small groups. Apart from Dumbledore, you only know your group. Muggles call such a group a cell.”

“You heard that from Hermione, hm?” Ron’s sister cocked her head sideways.

Neither Ron nor Harry answered her. She sighed. “Sorry. I’ll head back to Neville.”

Once she had left, Ron recast the privacy spell. “That went well.” He seemed relieved.

“That was ‘well’?” Harry wondered.

Ron nodded. “Oh, yes. She’s usually on her best behaviour around you. But she has a temper, and a
loose wand. Or she had. Second year, well… she changed.”

Harry felt a pang of guilt. If he had paid a bit more attention… but then, no one had. Not even Ginny’s brothers. Or Hermione. He sighed.

Ron glanced at him. “It wasn’t your fault. It was Malfoy’s.”

Harry snorted. His friend knew him too well. And he apparently had had a rather nice date with Hermione. Ron had taken her dancing. Harry hadn’t thought of that. Hermione had brought up the Yule Ball during their date. Had that been a veiled clue that she would have liked to go dancing? More than she wanted to watch a play? She was Hermione, but… she had really enjoyed the ball, hadn’t she? At least until he and Ron had ruined it. He sighed.

Ron slapped his back. “I told you, it wasn’t your fault.”

For a moment, Harry was tempted to simply nod. Let Ron think this was about second year. Then he sighed again. “I was just thinking about the Yule Ball.”

“Ah.”

Neither Harry nor Ron said anything for a while after that.

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London, East End, November 17th, 1996

The Resistance had moved back to their regular headquarters, a fact for which Hermione Granger was glad. She had become used to her room. She knew it was a weakness - developing routines, becoming predictable was dangerous - but she liked having things set up just right. Though, she added, looking at the van standing in the middle of the large room on the ground floor, if she could have a mobile wireless studio, a mobile room, or even a mobile base, might be possible. Ron’s dad had managed to expand the interior of his car a lot, after all, and wizard tents did the same. Though if those spells ever failed… she shuddered.

“Is something wrong with the set-up?” John asked, sounding worried.

She shook her head. “No. I just had a thought about something else.”

“Oh. The attacks by the Death Eaters? Or the ‘Avengers’?” John grinned at that last part.

Hermione didn’t quite roll her eyes. The Resistance had had lively discussions about this new group. Dennis and Colin had been quite impressed and wanted to track them down and recruit them. Surprisingly, Dean and Seamus hadn’t been in favour of that - or not so surprisingly, given that no Auror had been killed in the attack.

Hermione herself had not been that impressed by the new group’s name. Picking either a TV show or a British comic series… But as flashy as their attack had been, the name might fit. She still convinced the rest to adopt a wait and see policy, until the ‘Avengers’ proved themselves. Not that it would be easy to contact a group in hiding anyway.

“I just imagined Extension Charms failing with people inside a wizard tent,” Hermione explained.

That made John shudder. “Are you planning to use this against the Death Eaters in hiding?”

Hermione chuckled. “I was more concerned with avoiding such a fate. But it would be a possible
way to bring down a wizard house.” They wouldn’t be able to use bombs on every target, after all. Still, to cancel or even just disrupt such charms… It would probably be easier to simply blast the structure to which they were anchored to bits.

“Well… the ‘studio’ is now finished. All we need is to enchant the van.” John patted the side of the vehicle.

She nodded. “I’ve looked into the charms needed, but I need to check with a source or two.” Sirius had enchanted his flying bike, though it hadn’t been invisible. Maybe she would have to ask Ron’s dad – though that would be tricky. She also needed to gather more information about those attacks. She had spoken with Harry and Ron on the mirror, but they didn’t know that much either.

“Who’ll go on air, by the way?” John asked. “I’m not exactly a DJ.”

“We’ll have to discuss that.” And probably ask for a volunteer. Hermione would have suggested Lee Jordan, the wizard had been an enthusiastic commentator of the Quidditch matches at Hogwarts, and knew how to rile up a crowd. That he was also horribly biased wouldn’t be a problem for the Resistance’s wireless. Or the Resistance Radio, as Sally-Anne called it. But Jordan wasn’t a muggleborn, and even if the resistance would accept him, she doubted he’d want to join them – every member had a death sentence hanging over them, and while Jordan might not be scared off by that, the danger their families were in would be too much. Or so she thought. Seamus was another option, but he was a bit too excitable. And bloodthirsty. Dean was the same, and already involved with the flyers. Colin or Dennis… even more excitable, but not quite as brutal. Sally-Anne was too meek, and Justin had already begged off.

“We’ll have to exploit this opportunity the Dark Lord has given us. We need to tell the public just how dangerous he is, and what his goals are.” She pursed her lips. “That means we’ll have to go over the script again.”

“Was there any news about Allan?”

Hermione was glad that John was focused on gathering his tools. She hated lying to the group. “No. I doubt the Ministry has arrested him. They would have announced that at once. And the Death Eaters… if the contract had not worked, then they would have probably attacked us as well, last night. And if it worked…”

John sighed. “Then they’ll likely have killed him out of frustration.”

“Maybe. They could’ve tried to use him as bait anyway.” It was what she would have done.

John chuckled. “No wonder you’re our leader. You keep thinking like that.”

Hermione wasn’t quite as flattered as John probably thought she’d be.

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London, Soho, November 17th, 1996

The nightclub was packed, the music too loud and the air so full of smoke, Hermione was tempted to cast a Bubble-Head Charm. She’d have to scourify her clothes afterwards, or she’d carry the stench of stale cigarette smoke back to headquarters. In short, it was no wonder Sirius had picked this location to meet her, now that his home housed the Tonkses. Hermione was shaking her head as she made her way through the throng of people, looking for the wizard.

She spotted him at the bar. To her surprise, he wasn’t dressed like a 70s reject - someone must have
given him some fashion advice. And he was chatting up a girl young enough to be his daughter - if Hermione was inclined to believe his claims about his third year. She shook her head at the display and walked to the bar herself, ordering a soda. Once she was certain Sirius had seen her, she stepped outside the club to get some fresh air.

A few minutes later, the wizard joined her at the corner. “Mandy thinks I’m in the loo, so we don’t have much time,” he said, after casting a privacy spell. “Here are the copies of the notes you wanted.”

“Thank you.” She stashed the parchment.

“Planning to ride a bike yourself? You’d look fetching in leather.” He grinned at her.

“You know, those girls on your calendar, what they’re wearing isn’t what real bikers are wearing.” She snorted at his reaction. “But no, not planning to enchant a bike.”

“A car then?”

“A bit bigger. I need to figure out a way to hide it too.” Though that wasn’t quite that urgent - they could fly around at night, and be pretty safe from being spotted with a Colour Change Charm.

He nodded. “There’s been no news about the attacks, other than that the DMLE confirmed the kidnappings. Five houses were hit.” He scoffed. “Augusta Longbottom is the most prominent victim, but all of the others are connected or related to a Wizengamot member.” He stretched. “I reckon I’ll be able to get you a few more names as a result - I think this will open the eyes of a number of people who have tried to keep their heads down so far.”

“Like Tonks?”

Sirius winced. “She’s slowly coming around. She hated the Death Eaters already. No surprise, since Bellatrix wants to kill her whole family. But the reaction of some esteemed purebloods to this might finally make her admit just how rotten the Ministry and Wizengamot are.”

Hermione doubted that it would be that easy, but ultimately, it didn’t matter. Tonks reported to Dumbledore, who could pass on any information she found to the Resistance. “Are you planning a counter-strike?”

Sirius took a deep breath. “Dumbledore says he is focusing on moving everyone to safe houses. But I’d be surprised if he hadn’t already set some things in motion.”

“Good. With this change of the Death Eaters modus operandi, we need to react quickly, before they cow the rest of the purebloods.”

Sirius sneered. “They are already cowed. We just need to show that we’re stronger than the Death Eaters.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll need another address then.”

“I’ll get it to you.”

“Thanks.”

He smiled at her, and then turned to walk back to the club.

For a moment, Hermione was tempted to follow him. Enjoy the night a bit. Dance. Forget the war
for an hour or two.

She shook her head. She had already spent two evenings on dates. She had more important things to do. People depended on her.

And she would not let them down.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, November 18th, 1996

“Please have a seat, Albus.”

“Thank you.” Albus Dumbledore smiled politely and conjured a chair for himself. Cornelius was flexible even for a politician - as soon as the Dark Lord had struck at purebloods, Albus had been invited back to the Minister’s office with all the courtesy due, and then some.

Amelia was present as well, nodding at him. She didn’t try to act as if they were best friends. He hadn’t expected her to either.

“We’re in a bit of a pickle, Albus,” Cornelius started. “Those Death Eater attacks… terrible business.” He shook his head. “Even other countries are taking notice.”

“The Dark Lord has finally shown his true colours,” the Headmaster agreed. “As I predicted.”

Cornelius nodded, though Amelia looked a bit doubtful. “It’s quite convenient timing,” she said. “As soon as some of his followers are arrested, he attacks purebloods in their homes.”

Albus shrugged. He hadn’t specifically arranged these exact attacks, but he had hoped and counted on the Dark Lord lashing out like this. Although he had expected the attacks to be aimed at Kingsley and other Aurors working with him, first. People who knew the risks and were prepared. “The Dark Lord must have decided that he had come as far as he could using less violent means, and now has switched back to the brutal attacks that terrified Britain twenty years ago.”

“One could say you provoked him,” Amelia said.

“Any sort of resistance provokes him.” Albus smiled. “He will never be satisfied, not even if he was the sole ruler of Britain.”

Cornelius shook his head. “First the attack on the Rowles, now Augusta has been kidnapped… terrible times are upon us.”

Albus could have pointed out that this could have been avoided if the Minister had listened to him earlier, but that would have been counter-productive. “The question is: What can we do now?” He leaned back. “There are still Death Eaters among the Wizengamot, and while these latest atrocities may have opened the eyes of many, others still follow the Dark Lord’s orders. Some out of fear.” He sighed. “And those attacks were only possible because of spies in the Ministry.”

Amelia frowned. “Aurors are hunting down those saboteurs. As you know very well.”

“They are doing their best,” Albus said, “but it might not be enough. And his followers in the Wizengamot itself are untouchable.” Legally, at least.

“The immunity of a member of the Wizengamot can be revoked,” Amelia said.

“With a qualified majority,” Cornelius cut in.
“Which we currently lack,” Albus said. And even a simple majority was unlikely for many proposals from his allies - or from the Death Eaters. Sadly, the only thing a majority of the Wizengamot might still agree upon was fighting the Muggleborn Resistance.

“That’s politics,” Amelia said. “Dealing with Death Eaters and other criminals is a matter of law enforcement.”

“Exactly!” Cornelius smiled. “And we need to coordinate our efforts for that.”

Albus raised his eyebrows. “Oh? In what manner?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

Amelia scowled. “Don’t play dumb. You’re the only one who can stop the Dark Lord in the field. And you’re the one who fed Shacklebolt the names he is arresting. You have spies in the Death Eaters’ ranks, and you have some vigilantes who are fighting them.”

Albus inclined his head. Amelia knew about her brother’s deeds in the last war.

“More importantly, you’re a symbol,” the Minister added. “If the people know that you’re with the Ministry, then that will raise morale, and sway many of those who are afraid of the Dark Lord.”

So, they wanted information, cooperation, and a public alliance. Or the appearance of one. As expected. “In these trying times, we need to band together,” Albus said. When Cornelius beamed at him, he added: “Against the real enemy of Wizarding Britain.”

That made the minister’s face fall and Amelia scowl. “Are you still protecting those mass-murderers?” she asked with a sneer, ignoring Cornelius’s grimace.

“I do not protect murderers, but I will not support any attack on muggleborns who are just fighting the Dark Lord,” Albus said. He wouldn’t be able to push for more. Not yet.

“Splendid!” Cornelius was smiling widely again. If he understood that Albus considered the attack on Malfoy Manor a strike against the Dark Lord, then he didn’t show it.

Amelia’s sneer told Albus that she understood it. And that she knew he couldn’t pressure her into stopping the persecution of the muggleborns. Not when he needed their support against Voldemort.

But things would change.

*****

London, East End, November 18th, 1996

Hermione winced when she hit her upper arm on the side panel of the van, right where she had a bruise. After the morning spent training in the woods, she should have used a magical ointment. But she had wanted to tough it out, and serve as an example for preserving the magical supplies for more serious wounds.

She sighed. It was her own fault. If she was more focused, she wouldn’t have such trouble with enchanting the van. At least as far as flying went. But she couldn’t help thinking about the dates. With her two best friends. And her inability to make a decision.

She sighed again - she was doing this a lot lately - lowered her wand from where she had been tracing runes on the chassis of the van, and simply lay there, on her back. It was supposed to be a simple solution: Date both boys, pick one. And it had failed. Utterly.
After the date with Harry, she had been happy. He had showed he cared about her, her hobbies and interests. He had been honest about their past... She frowned. ‘Troubles’ was too strong a word. He had been honest about their past differences. And he hadn’t been disgusted or taken aback by her confession about Allan. He cared about her, more than about himself. To quote her silly former roommates, Harry was prime boyfriend material.

Ron had taken a different approach, something she hadn’t expected. Instead of catering to her known interests, he had offered her a new experience. The French restaurant had been a familiar and surprising choice, but the dancing… she sighed. She had discovered that she liked dancing, or clubbing. Which she wouldn’t have expected. Nor had she expected that it would be Ron who would turn out to be the more adventurous one. Maybe she should have - the Weasleys weren’t exactly known for being conservative among wizards.

Ron was interested in discovering new things they could enjoy together. Harry on the other hand seemed to care about her a bit too much - she was mostly certain that he hadn’t really enjoyed the play. And yet - discovering what Harry liked would be an enjoyable experience as well, she suspected. Discovering what desires he had, under his urge to save and help others, would be interesting at the least. Then again, so would be trying out new things with Ron.

She sighed again. She was a selfish, silly girl who couldn’t make a decision. Who took things far too seriously, even though teenage relationships seldom lasted that long. Doubly so during a war where the three of them could be killed any day. But emotions, relationships, friendship, love - those were serious matters. History was full of examples where love or passion had been a decisive factor in deciding the fate of many people.

Alright, she was growing far too dramatic again. She hissed through her teeth, and raised her wand. She still had some time until she’d meet her friends again.

But why was she feeling so lonely, right now?

*****

Hogwarts, November 20th, 1996

Neville was looking even worse than after the attacks, Harry Potter noticed when he stashed his fifth year Transfiguration notes in his trunk. The other Gryffindor was sitting on his bed, staring at the window. Harry took a deep breath. He still resented Neville for his attitude towards Hermione and the other muggleborns, but Neville had just lost his grandmother. And with his parents in St Mungo’s… Harry knew how Neville was feeling. Or at least he could understand the boy, better than anyone else.

He stood up. “Hey.”

Neville didn’t react. Harry frowned. The boy was either ignoring him, or so out of it that he didn’t notice when someone was talking to him. Or, Harry added with more than a bit of guilt, he was expecting some more scorn heaped on him.

“Hey, Neville.” Harry was about to sit down next to him, but reconsidered, and kept standing next to the bed.

“Come to gloat?” Neville whispered suddenly, without looking up.

“What?” Harry gasped. Did the other boy really expect him to gloat about losing family? “Of course not! How can you think that?” Harry hadn’t been that bad, had he?
“You told me for months that the Death Eaters and their supporters were the enemy, and the muggleborns were just defending themselves. And now the Dark Lord has kidnapped my grandmother.” Neville raised his head and Harry saw he had been crying. “You’ve been right, and Gran’s been wrong. Just as you said. I’ve been wrong.”

“Well…” Harry swallowed his first thought. “That doesn’t matter. What matters is … what will you do now?” He should have thought about this a bit longer, he realised.

“I can’t do anything! They’ll kill Gran if I…” Neville pressed his teeth together.

“They’ve contacted you?” If Death Eaters could reach the students at Hogwarts…

Neville glared at him, then looked down. His shoulder twitched and he wiped his eyes. “I’ve received a letter.”

“What do they want you to do?”

“Nothing.” Neville stared at the floor. “Nothing! They simply want me to do nothing! Say nothing! Do nothing! Just stay ‘neutral’, keep my head down, and Gran will be released once the war is over.”

Harry winced. He didn’t believe Voldemort would keep his word. Not even if he won the war. The Dark Lord had tried to kill him in his crib, after all, due to a prophecy. He certainly wouldn’t leave Augusta Longbottom alive and able to take revenge. Or… He closed his eyes. What if he let the Lestranges torture her into insanity as well? That would be just like Voldemort.

Neville was looking at him, Harry noticed. “Do you think he’ll keep his word?” Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

Neville snorted. “His Death Eaters tortured my parents into insanity. How could I trust him? Or why would he think I wouldn’t try to take revenge?” Harry saw tears in Neville’s eyes again. “But if I defy him he’ll torture Gran to death. And it’ll be my fault!” Suddenly, the boy reached out and grabbed Harry’s arms. “What can I do? What can I do?”

Harry had no answer. He didn’t know what he’d do if Sirius was kidnapped. Or Ron or Hermione. His first urge was to try to rescue them, but what if that went wrong?

He winced as Neville released him and returned to staring out of the window. He had to inform Dumbledore. Even though he had a feeling the Headmaster might already know about it.

*****

Hogwarts, November 22nd, 1996

Ron Weasley had seldom seen so many students gathered around one wireless receiver in the Great Hall. Not since the first broadcast of the latest song of the Weird Sisters. He had expected the first broadcast of the ‘Resistance Radio’ to attract attention, but not so openly. But then, those waiting here weren’t Slytherins, but mainly Gryffindors, with Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs mixed in. He saw a number of the propaganda leaflets which had announced this broadcast floating around as well. The Resistance had dropped them on Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade and even Hogwarts.

“Ron!”

He turned around when he heard his name. “Luna?” Ginny’s childhood friend was standing there.
The blonde Ravenclaw nodded and offered him a … pointed hat sporting all the colours of the rainbow. “Here! For your protection!” She was wearing the same hat, he noticed.

“Uh… protection?”

“Against the muggle mind-control techniques. Tinfoil hats protect against them. I’m not quite certain if it can affect us through the wards of Hogwarts, but better safe than sorry, right?”

Ron blinked. Belatedly, he took the hat, earning himself a beaming smile. “Muggle mind-control techniques?”

Luna nodded emphatically. “Yes. We’re about to listen to muggleborn propaganda, which aims to influence our views on politics and the war. Which means it’s an attempt to influence our minds, since our views are decided by our minds. So… we need to protect our minds. With tinfoil. All the muggle sources Daddy consulted agree that this is the best way to protect your mind.”

While Ron stared at her, trying to make sense of her words, she pulled her own hat off and waved her wand over it. Suddenly, she was holding two hats. Luna had just cast a Doubling Charm. In her fifth year. Impressive.

Ron shook his head. “I don’t think it works that way, Luna. They want to persuade us with arguments.”

“That would be silly. Quarrelling has rarely if ever persuaded anyone of another point of view.” Luna shook her head.

Ron forced himself to smile. “I meant, they’ll try to reason with the audience.”

“Are you certain?” Luna peered at him

“Yes, I’m certain. They are not trying to mind-control us,” Ron said as convincing as he managed.

Luna wrinkled her nose. “Well, you’d know… on the other hand, you could be mind-controlled already.” She looked at the hat Ron was still holding.

Ron sighed and put it on. “The Resistance are not trying to mind-control us,” he repeated himself.

“Hm.” Luna pouted. “You could have been mind-controlled for so long, it could have become ingrained in your mind.”

“What?”

“This requires further study,” the blonde said, and Ron had the impression she wasn’t quite talking to him. She certainly wasn’t listening to him. “I’ll have to check Daddy’s notes about propaganda and counter-measures!”

The blonde witch skipped off, leaving Ron shaking his head at the absurdity of the entire scene.

“Ron!”

He turned around once more and found himself facing Ginny. “Yes?”

“Are you flirting with Luna now, or why are you wearing the ugliest hat I’ve ever seen since we visited Aunt Muriel?” Ginny asked, frowning at him.

Ron pulled off the hat. “I was talking with her. Or rather, she was talking to me. I’m not quite certain
if she understood what I said. I certainly didn’t understand her.”

Ginny shook her head. “Well, don’t start two-timing your girlfriend.”

He gasped. “Ginny!” He didn’t have a girlfriend. He quickly cast a privacy spell.

“What? You managed to impress her on your date. Wasn’t the point of that to see who is more compatible with her?”

“How do you know that?” Ron stared at her.

Ginny grinned. “I guilt-tripped Bill for leaving me stuck at Hogwarts, worrying about our family.”

Ron groaned. He should have known that Bill wouldn’t be able to stand up to Ginny. “Well, don’t spread it. There are enough rumours going around already.”

“I know,” she said. “So… how did Harry’s date go?”

“It went well.” He shrugged. “We haven’t really compared notes.”

“What did she say?”

“We haven’t really talked about that, yet. What with the attacks, and all.” And some things shouldn’t be said through a mirror, but face to face. “And she’s been really busy.”

“Oh.” Ginny pouted.

“Still rooting for me?” Ron asked, grinning slightly.

“Of course!” his sister said. “If you get her, I can get Harry.”

Ron wasn’t certain things would work like that, but didn’t want to start an argument. And the wireless broadcast began - right on time. Not that he would have expected anything else from Hermione.

It started with music. Rock music. He even recognised the song - they had danced to that, last Saturday. Grinning, he started to whip his foot in step with the music, ignoring Ginny’s puzzled glance.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the voice of the Muggleborn Resistance. My name is Tania, and I’ll be your host today as we expose the lies of the Death Eaters and their accomplices. And listen to great music!”

That was Tania Dennel, Ron realised. Gryffindor, two years above him. He hadn’t know she sounded that sexy on the wireless.

“You all have heard about the cowardly attacks by Death Eaters on several pureblood homes last Saturday. What you haven’t heard is that they could do this because of traitors in the Ministry. Yes, folks, the same people who claim to be protecting you were giving out the addresses of the victims, and then sabotaged the Floo Network so they couldn’t escape!

“Think about that for a moment.

“That Auror wanting to talk to you about a complaint? He might be a Death Eater spy, here to kill you. Or worse.
“Horrible, isn’t it? That’s how life has been for a muggleborn in Wizarding Britain for a long time! How many of those muggleborns who were killed ‘resisting arrest’ were actually resisting?

“Death Eaters are everywhere in the Ministry. Do you think you’re safe because you’re a pureblood? Think again! Remember the dozen guards of Azkaban, fed to Dementors? They were purebloods as well! Remember the kidnappings last week - purebloods again!

“It’s time to fight - for your rights, for your family, for your life! And we’ll tell you how!

“But first: More music!”

While another rock song started - Ron didn’t recognise that one - the students were already discussing the broadcast. Hotly.

Ron smiled. He wasn’t certain if many ‘neutrals’ would be swayed by this, but it certainly seemed to strike a chord with many of his friends.

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Hogwarts, November 22nd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore switched the wireless off when the last notes of ‘God save the Queen’ had been played. Cornelius would be incensed, Amelia livid, and the Death Eaters and their allies enraged. And a number of pureblood parents would be very concerned about their children listening to the broadcast as well, unaware that the more they tried to suppress this, the more attractive listening to it would become. The Prophet would likely denounce the show as well.

Chuckling, Albus leaned back in his seat. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Fawkes trilled at him, and he banished a treat to the phoenix, before focusing on the list in front of him again.

Kingsley had managed to find a few more Death Eater spies thanks to interrogating the ones he had arrested, but Albus had already known all of them thanks to Miss Granger. At least now there was evidence available in court. Severus knew more names, but Albus was loath to risk his spy to simply strike at a few more minions of the Dark Lord.

His fireplace lit up, announcing a call. He frowned - was there another attack? But the Floo Network still couldn’t be trusted. Probably not even after everyone working in the Floo Network Authority had been vetted with Veritaserum - there still remained the Imperius. He flicked his wand, and the fire turned green.

Aberforth’s head appeared in the middle of the flames. “I’ve got something for you,” his brother stated in a gruff voice.

Albus nodded. “I will be waiting.”

Fifteen minutes later, Aberforth entered his office. Instead of a greeting, he tossed a scroll on Albus’s desk.

Albus picked it up. There was an address on it. In Knockturn Alley.

“Death Eater recruiting spot,” his brother explained. “Friend of mine noticed some unfamiliar faces, and tracked them down.”

“How many wands are there?”
Aberforth shrugged. “About a dozen, maybe more. My friend didn’t go inside to check. People who do tend to join or vanish.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Aberforth scoffed. “Are you going to do something about it?”

Albus rubbed his chin. “I think so.” The Order’s cells were not large enough to tackle such a location. He would have to call two or three together, which would defeat the purpose of keeping them ignorant of each other. They had been facing similar problems when they had lured Voldemort to the Department of Mysteries, but some deception and cunning had allowed them to split the Death Eaters up while he had faced the Dark Lord. He’d rather not take a similar risk again though.

“I’ll tell my friends to stay away from the area then.”

Albus nodded. There was but one group large and hopefully skilled enough to attack such a location. “Your presence would be helpful in that mission,” he said.

“I’m not about to help your fine, upstanding Order,” his brother spat.

Albus shook his head. “This is not a mission the Order is suited for.”

“What?” Aberforth’s eyes widened. “You’re sending the children there?”

“They’ve struck in Knockturn Alley before.”

“Not that far inside. And the underground is now warded and watched. They won’t be able to duplicate that,” Aberforth said, then glared at him. “And that’s why you want me there, right?”

Albus nodded.

“Damn you, Albus. Damn you to hell!”

Albus didn’t say anything. His brother was already coming around. He’d contact Miss Granger soon.

Once Aberforth had left, he looked through the list again. He doubted any one of them knew where Augusta was being held prisoner, but it wouldn’t hurt to try to find out. And the Knockturn Alley attack might provide information as well - it depended on just how cautious Tom was. Though should Albus discover Augusta’s location, then he’d have to decide if a rescue was possible - and worth the risk.

He wasn’t looking forward to that decision.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, November 23rd, 1996

Daphne Greengrass glanced at every mudhole in the alley as she walked with Tracey towards Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. Who knew what traps were hidden in them? What curses would be unleashed on unsuspecting victims? Anything could be hidden in those mudholes, behind those transfigurations! She gripped Tracey’s arm while the two gave another mudhole a wide berth.

Daphne hated to feel like this. Nervous. Afraid. Terrified. But she couldn’t help it. The things she had seen that Saturday, at the Weasleys’ family home, still haunted her sleep. The deaths she had witnessed...
Who would have expected the Weasleys of all families to use such dark curses? They were supposed to be a bunch of fools! Blood traitors and muggle lovers! Not the kind of people who used magic that impressed even the Dark Lord!

At least that was what Draco claimed had happened when he had reported his failure. Since he was still alive, and not a nervous wreck, he hadn’t earned the Dark Lord’s ire either. He probably had blamed the dead for the failure - not entirely unjustly, in her opinion. Draco had told them that the Weasleys were tricky, or something like that.

She sighed, then yelped when Tracey gripped her arm a tad too strongly.

“Don’t lose it now,” her friend whispered. “You heard Draco: It is imperative that we capture the twins. Alive. And we’re the only ones who can do it. Or fail.”

Daphne nodded. She knew that any failure would be painful. “Aren’t you nervous? You know what the Weasleys did to their home.”

Tracey shook her head. “That was a trap. They can’t do that to a shop.”

Daphne hoped her friend was right. If she was wrong… Daphne didn’t want to die. “At least I don’t have to act as if I’m afraid any more.”

Tracey chuckled at that, but Daphne knew she was forcing herself to laugh. It wasn’t funny. Not after the massacre they had seen. If Tracey’s theory was correct and the eldest brother of the Weasleys was responsible for those curses, as well as for the wards… the twins’ had some really strong wards as well.

They had arrived at the twins’ shop. Daphne took a deep breath and entered, ducking beneath a rubber chicken that shot past.

“Well done!” That had to be… Fred, since he was cheerful. “You are the only ones to constantly dodge our welcome jokes!”

“We try,” Tracey said. Daphne nodded.

“And you succeed!” Fred stepped closer, beaming at them. “I’m glad to see you safe and sound. With the attacks last week, I was worried.”

Daphne nodded. “Those were scary.”

Fred’s eyes widened. “Did you see an attack?”

Tracey shook her head. “No. But just reading about them was bad enough. To think they managed to go through the wards of Longbottom Manor…”

Fred nodded. “We’ve some theories how this could have happened.” He pulled out a box from his robe’s pockets. “And we’ve worked on something to help people.” He grinned, and suddenly, two balloons appeared, flying straight at Daphne and Tracey, drenching both.

“Our famous Instant Dryness combined with…”

As Fred trailed off, Daphne realised to her horror that Tracey had retaken her true form. As had she herself.

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Chapter 18: Strikes

'Some historians are of the opinion that the November Offensive by the Dark Lord showed a paradigm change. Instead of attacking muggleborns and blood traitors, he had his followers attack mainly pureblood families - and among them, only the Weasleys were considered blood traitors. A careful analysis shows that the Death Eater attacks followed the same distinct pattern in both Blood Wars: They went after the easiest available targets first. Their goal was, as far as it can be determined, to not only sow terror among the population and weaken the morale of the Dark Lord’s enemies, but to also let the new recruits among his own forces grow accustomed to killing.

When the November Offensive was launched, the muggleborns had already been hiding from the Ministry for months, thus removing themselves from the list of available targets. In a similar way, Dumbledore had correctly anticipated such attacks, and had prepared his allies for it. That left either half-bloods or purebloods not allied with the Dark Lord or Dumbledore as the best targets. It’s quite logical that he selected the purebloods with ties to the Wizengamot, since attacking the half-bloods had already caused negative reactions to his cause.'

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Diagon Alley, November 23rd, 1996

She had to escape! She had seen what the Weasleys did to intruders! If she stayed she would die!

Daphne Greengrass screamed and threw herself to the side, straight into the stand with the ‘Randy Rubber Duckies’ while a red spell barely missed her. The stand toppled over and she drew her wand while she slid over the rubbery abominations. Another spell hit the stand, sending the things bouncing throughout the shop with a cacophony of moans and dirty jokes. She hastily cast a Shield Charm while scrambling behind the Fireworks display.

“George! Come at once! Emergency!” she heard Fred yell, somewhere behind the Slippery Scrolls stand.

She glanced at Tracey and discovered to her horror that her friend was lying on the ground, stunned or dead. The door was just a few yards behind her. She could flee. Get out and apparate away. But Tracey… her best friend.

She cursed her own stupidity.

“Incendio!”

She set fire to the display in front of her. The first fireworks started to go off a second later. Then she banished the display towards Fred. More and more fireworks were going off. Shooting Stars peppered the ceiling. Screaming Screwdrivers whirled around, setting fire to the Nagging Newspapers. Explosions toppled the basket of Wilting Wands, and smoke started to fill the room.

Perfect!

Daphne sprinted towards Tracey, stumbling when a Howling Howitzer struck her shield. She ignored the embers dotting the witch’s robe - Tracey could heal from that, but not from the curses the
Weasleys used - and aimed her wand at the door.

“Reducto!”

Her spell hit the door and exploded.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

She barely heard her own voice in the deafening noise. Just a few steps… the door was untouched!

“Reducto!” she yelled in desperation. How strong were the protections on the door?

“Alohomora!”

She threw herself at the door, to no avail. She was trapped in here. Trapped in this inferno. Trapped with the Weasleys. More rockets hit her Shield Charm. Another hit Tracey. Tracey!

Daphne used her wand to drag her friend behind her. She needed to shield her from the fireworks going off. She took a step forward, and almost fell when she slipped on a scroll. Half the shop’s stock was now strewn or flying around. A dragon made of green fire blocked the way to the back room. Not that she would have any chance to get through both twins. She couldn’t even get through a damn door! If only Tracey… Daphne blinked, and could have cursed herself for her own stupidity.

“Rennervate!”

Tracey began to stir, then yelled with pain.

“Open the damn door!” Daphne screamed at her, wildly casting spells towards the back of the shop. “Open it or we’re dead!”

Her friend shrieked when a firework hit the window near her and bounced off, but finally recovered her wits and started to cast at the door. The smoke was clearing. The fireworks going off were diminishing. The dragon had disappeared already. A Spinning Wheel was fizzling out. Soon the twins would have clear lines of fire.

“Tracey! Hurry!”

The two would die in here. And it was all Daphne’s fault for forgetting to wake up her friend! A single mistake!

Daphne blew up the stack of Galloping Glasses, sending shards and enchanted glasses flying when Tracey grabbed her arm. “Come!”

The two witches stumbled through the door, into Diagon Alley. Daphne’s shield shattered, and she felt something strike her back. For a moment, she was certain she was cursed. Dead. But there was no pain. And then she realised that joke items were shooting out of the shop, together with one lone firework.

A second later, she apparated away.

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Hogwarts, November 23rd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore had rarely seen the Weasley twins as angry as they appeared to be when they entered his office through the Floo connection. He had rarely seen them angry at all. Acting as if they
were angry, outraged at whatever accusation a teacher leveled against them, yes. Truly enraged, no.

“Death Eaters just attacked our shop!” one of them, Fred, Albus thought, bellowed. “They used Polyjuice to appear as harmless customers!”

“Oh?” Albus doubted they’d sit down, but he conjured seats for them anyway.

“Half of the shop is destroyed! They set fire to it.” Fred shook his head. “If I hadn’t removed their disguises…”

“By accident!” George cut in.

Fred glared at his brother. “It was no accident; I wanted to use our new formula.”

“But you didn’t expect them to be disguised. You just thought it would be a nice prank to impress two girls.” George shook his head. “You were lucky.”

Albus cleared his throat. “I assume then that you have finished the project I asked you to undertake?”

Both nodded. “Yes, sir,” Fred said. “Instant Dryness mixed with a derived formula that will remove magical disguises.”

“He means Polyjuice. It will not affect animagi, metamorphmagi or Disillusionment Charms,” George clarified.

Albus smiled. They had been quicker than he expected. “I am impressed.”

“Don’t be,” George said. “The two Death Eaters escaped, and now the enemy knows what we did.” He gestured towards his brother. “The lovestruck fool here was unable to capture them.”

“Lovestruck fool?” Fred scoffed. “You’re just jealous.”

Albus cleared his throat. As entertaining it was to see the twins argue with each other, instead of unite against a teacher, an attack by Death Eaters was serious. When both wizards looked at him with a rather sheepish expression, he nodded. “Please tell me what happened, from the beginning.”

“Of course. It started a month ago, when those two girls, Mary and Cassandra, started to visit our shop,” George said. Fred opened his mouth, but a glance from Albus silenced him, and the other twin continued. “They flirted for almost an hour with Fred, before buying our products. They returned a few days later, to flirt some more. Two weeks ago they were back, all afraid of Death Eaters, saying they were half-bloods. Fred did his best to console them.” The twins exchanged glares. “And today, they were even more nervous.”

“You weren’t there when they entered. I was,” Fred said. “They were even more nervous, yes. I demonstrated our formula, and Mary and Cassandra turned into Greengrass - the elder one - and Davis. I managed to stun Davis, but Greengrass set fire to the stalls at the entrance, woke up her friend, and they managed to flee from the shop. Despite the locked door.” Fred grinned. “I hit Greengrass with a ‘Traceless Tracker’ though, so we know where they apparated to.”

That was very good news, Albus thought. Provided the two witches were actually Death Eaters. “Did they attack you?”

“They were panicking,” Fred said. “They were about to, but I was faster. Still… half the shop went up in flames. Mostly. That’ll hurt our finances.”
“Given your latest achievement, I am certain Sirius will cover the damages,” Albus said. The two boys perked up.

“We can strike at their hideout,” George said. “Make them pay for this - figuratively.”

“We don’t know if they kidnapped Cassandra and Mary to impersonate them!” Fred said. “We can’t just attack their house.”

“Are you still stupid? Didn’t she duck under our greeting joke?” George huffed. “That was a spy mission from the start, and you fell for it like a confunded Hufflepuff!”

“What?” Fred glared at his brother.

“Please,” Albus said. “This is a serious incident. Though I have to agree that we cannot assume that the two witches were Death Eaters. Given your house, and family, and past, two young Slytherins could very well have chosen Polyjuice to visit your shop, to avoid trouble from their families and friends.” Stranger things had happened, after all.

George scoffed. Fred glared at him. “I’m just saying we can’t set Hermione on them. Not if there’s a possibility that they have innocents imprisoned.”

Albus didn’t react to Miss Granger’s name, though he agreed with that statement, if not for the same reasons. “Well, gentlemen, it appears that there is a need to gather more information before we act rashly. And with your shop in such a state, you will not be expected to be out and about for some time.”

“You mean we should spy on them?” Fred asked.

“Yes. We need to know just what happened, before we can decide on the proper response.” Albus smiled. “How likely is it that your ‘Traceless Tracker’ will be discovered?”

“It’s called ‘traceless’ because it vanishes when it’s touched, or if the Disillusionment Charm on it is dispelled, or after a set amount of time,” George explained.

“Six hours, in this case,” Fred said. “There are a few ways to bypass that, but I doubt the Slytherins will know or think of them.”

“They will not expect to be tracked then. Very good.” The Headmaster rubbed his chin. “Where did they apparate to?”

“Dorset.” Fred pulled out a map. “I’ve marked it here - it’s not near any muggle houses.”

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**Dorset, November 23rd, 1996**

“... and that’s when we managed to apparate away,” Daphne Greengrass finished. Tracey was sitting next to her, on the couch of Draco’s home. They were still shaking, hours after their close brush with death.

“They can counter Polyjuice?” Draco shook his head. “Have they made a deal with the goblins? Where did they get the gold to pay for that secret… Black! It has to be Black! That blood traitor! Wasting the gold of my family!” He sighed. “But you managed to escape them with your lives despite this surprise.”
“They didn’t expect us. Fred looked surprised when whatever he used worked. If they had been prepared we’d be dead,” Tracey said.

“They still almost killed us.” Daphne closed her eyes. If only she had thought to wake up Tracey right away.

“On the other hand, their shop was damaged,” Draco pointed out. “That will cost them more gold that could have been spent on fighting us.”

Daphne didn’t think that was a big achievement, but held her tongue. Although, discovering that the blood traitors had found a way to deal with Polyjuice was important information for the Dark Lord. Draco started to pace. “But it’s obvious that we cannot depend on Polyjuice any more. We’ll have to find another way to strike at the blood traitors and mudbloods.”

Tracey, never one to hold her tongue, snorted. “We didn’t do well at the Burrow without Polyjuice.”

Draco scoffed and made a dismissive gesture. “That was a trap. Other attacks succeeded, like the one against Longbottom. We just have to pick our target carefully.”

“And find it,” Tracey added. “Most are in hiding. As are we.”

Draco glared at that reminder. “The blood traitors still visit Diagon Alley and the Ministry.”

“Under the eyes of the Aurors,” Daphne said.

“Some of them are quite sympathetic to our cause,” Draco retorted.

“If we show our faces, we’ll also draw attention. We might get attacked.” Tracey frowned. “We might even be sought by the Aurors right now, if they claimed we tried to rob them.”

“You two, robbing a joke shop? The Ministry knows better than that. And the Wizengamot is on our side.” Draco smiled.

“It’s not going to be on our side that much longer, if Dumbledore has his way,” Daphne said. Her uncle had told her about the latest development in the Ministry.

Draco suddenly had a glint in his eyes. “We might have to do something about that. I will ask the Dark Lord for advice.” He seemed to be already thinking about how to approach the Dark Lord, and probably how to claim the credit for discovering that the blood traitors could counter Polyjuice.

She didn’t really mind. The less she was known to the Dark Lord, the easier it would be to avoid attention. She exchanged a glance with Tracey, who seemed to share her thoughts. “We’ll go home then.”

Astoria had been asking more frequently what Daphne was doing, and all but demanded to help her. Daphne had no intention at all of letting her little sister get involved in this. Not after the Weasleys had shown their true colours in such drastic ways.

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London, Knockturn Alley, November 23rd, 1996

Hermione Granger could think of worse missions than scouting out a Death Eater base in Knockturn Alley at night from the air, but not that many. She knew both Harry and Ron loved flying, but she
hadn’t ever been that comfortable in the air. At least not on a broom. She could fly, contrary to some tales that had gone around at school, but she’d never love it.

But she had other things to do than focus on the possibility of her broom failing and her falling down. She needed to find a way to break into this house. Preferably without alerting both the Ministry and the Dark Lord, but she’d settle for a quick way in and out, so the Resistance could be done and gone before any response would arrive.

The underground was out; after the bombing of the potion shop of the traitor, the Death Eaters would have reinforced their basements. And laid traps. And then there were the wards. Any conventional attack on the wards would allow the Death Eaters to call for help - and even if they didn’t want to call upon their fellow murderers, they could inform the Ministry’s Aurors. A bomb of sufficient power dropped from above would take down the wards. And destroy the houses nearby which were not quite as strongly warded. Evacuating them beforehand would certainly alert the Death Eaters. But killing so many civilians… Hermione shook her head.

A directed explosion would solve that problem. Maybe a shaped charge of sorts. Blow a hole into the wall, and take down the wards at the same time. She had thought about such a device, and made some calculations, but she lacked the skill to construct one. A penetrator dropped from high enough would go through the wards as well, but both reaching such a height and aiming it would be hard. As would avoiding muggle attention.

It looked like they would have to use a rather daring tactic to get inside the house. A plan Hermione would have preferred to save for another target, but as long as no witnesses were left alive, that wouldn’t be a problem.

A lot would be riding on one person, though. She didn’t like such plans. But she couldn’t think of a better way to get inside the wards and capture the Death Eaters.

Not that it meant her current mission was done - the Resistance needed to know who was coming and going through the doors.

*****

Hogwarts, November 24th, 1996

Harry Potter rolled over the stone floor, blindly casting with his wand until smoke filled the air around him. That should throw his opponent’s aim off, and allow him to recast his Shield Charm!

Some liquid splashed over his face and chest before he finished the charm. He clenched his teeth, then yelled “I’m out!” He had learned his lesson - if Moody didn’t hear him surrendering after getting hit, the spells would keep coming, and would become more painful.

And Moody’s training was already painful enough. Even Snape’s Occlumency training hadn’t been that bad.

“Damn, Harry!” Ron yelled. “Now I’m… OW!”

“And that’s another double-defeat, boys,” Moody said.

Harry was certain the old Auror was shaking his head, though he couldn’t see that through the smoke he had conjured.

“And what have we learned?” Moody asked, dispelling the smoke and chuckling at Harry’s paint-covered face.
The boy sighed. “If your enemy is hiding inside smoke, use an area-effect spell.”

“Not exactly.” Moody frowned. “Weasley?”

“Uh… don’t use, I mean, don’t count on smoke as cover?” Ron said.

Moody sighed theatrically. “Boys… the lesson is: Transfigure the air around your enemy into smoke. He can’t see you, and you can see what he’s doing while you seek cover or hide. Other than that, you showed better teamwork. Still not cunning or sneaky enough to beat me, but I guess you’d have beaten a rookie Auror.”

“We’d have beaten a rookie Auror even before we started training with you,” Harry mumbled. When he saw the grizzled wizard stare at him, he narrowed his eyes and scowled. “They’re rubbish.”

Moody held his gaze for a moment, then started to chuckle. “Most of them are rubbish, aye. But not everyone. So, what does that make you?”

“Better than rubbish,” Ron said, rubbing ointment on his forearm.

“You don’t aim high, Weasley, do you?”

Ron scoffed. “Just high enough to win. Showing off is bad.”

Harry nodded. Another lesson Moody had hexed into them. “You said yourself, we work well together. And you complained about Aurors not working together until they’ve been around for a few years.”

“Caught that, did you?” Moody grinned. “Maybe I wanted you to think that, hm?”

“We have independent confirmation of that.” Harry cleaned the paint off his face and robe with a Cleaning Charm.

“Oh, you have?” Moody looked at them. “Not from Tonks.”

“Hermione took down two of them at once.” Harry wasn’t about to tell Moody about the Aurors Allan had murdered.

“Yes. And Hermione wasn’t the best in Defence among us,” Ron added.

“You’ve been talking to her, hm?” Moody’s scarred face twitched, but Harry couldn’t tell if he was angry or amused.

“None of your business,” Ron spat.

“It was in the newspaper anyway,” Harry said.

“Maybe you’re making progress with getting a bit sneakier,” Moody said. “You still need more training before we can go off hunting.”

“Where are we going first, anyway?” Harry asked, brushing his trousers off. He glanced at Ron, who was slowly getting up and ambling over to the basket with the snacks. Behind Moody.

“Gringotts is closest. And safest, as long as you don’t start a fight with the goblins. The buggers are spoiling for one, right now.” Moody scratched his cheek and bared his teeth.

“What?” This was the first time Harry had heard about that.
Ron was rummaging in the basket, and glanced back over his shoulder. “Harry, do you want a cauldron cake?”


“Aye. The scum always try to attack if they think the wizards are weak.” Moody coughed. “They almost started a rebellion during the last war. Albus stopped them, but he never told me what he did.”

“Catch!” Ron said, throwing the cake towards Harry, and pointing his wand at Moody’s back.

Harry was already moving, his own wand flashing forward.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

The old Auror had dropped to the floor though, causing both spells to miss. Harry was already moving and casting, but he missed while Moody slid over the floor as if it was ice. Ron was hit with a Disarming Charm, strong enough to bowl him over. Harry’s friend hit the floor, hard.

Harry sidestepped a Hex, and his foot simply kept going, finding no purchase. He ended up on the floor, and yelled in pain when he pulled a muscle. Then he yelled again when Moody’s Stinging Hex hit his face.

“I’m out!” he said, but another Disarming Charm had already hit him, and he slid over the floor - which Moody had turned into ice, he realised.

“Better. You need to pay more attention to your surroundings, and remember that I have an eye in the back of my head. But that was your best try yet, with the cake thrown as a distraction. If that trick hadn’t been old when I graduated, it might have even worked - if you’d had better aim.”

Harry numbed his hurting thigh and slowly, carefully stood up. He needed more ointment.

“I think we’ll work on aiming and dodging for the rest of today,” Moody said, grinning widely. “If you do well enough, we’ll talk about how to fight goblins next session. Just in case.”

Harry nodded while checking up on his groaning friend. They were making progress, at least. But Moody was convinced that pain was the best teacher.

If Hermione could see them now… At least they now had another story to tell their friend. And plan the next ambush.

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Brenda Brocktuckle had grown used to the glances and glares she received from some Aurors, even months after she had lost her partner. Some people never forgave or forgot. Being glared at in the Auror offices for doing her job though, that was a new experience. And not one she liked.

“Damn idiots!” she muttered, closing the door to her office behind her. “The fact that I’m hunting the mudbloods doesn’t make me a Death Eater.”

Martin, loyal partner and in the same boat, nodded. “People are going crazy ever since Shacklebolt started his purge.”
Brenda shook her head. “Shack’s doing his job, like we’re doing ours. People don’t like that he took the task force over from Dawlish and is having success.”

“Rumour has it he’s working for Dumbledore, hunting down Death Eaters - and people opposing Dumbledore’s policies. Including us, for hunting mudbloods.”

Brenda cocked her head to the side. Martin looked concerned. “Where did you hear that?”

Her partner shrugged. “I’ve heard it from a few people.”

Before Brenda could ask who exactly was spreading this, Parkinson entered. “Damn blood traitors! Shacklebolt is just waiting to arrest me!” the man loudly complained, before conjuring a seat for himself.

Brenda glanced at Martin, who shrugged. “Really?” she asked.

“He’s been asking me questions about my aunt. The kind of questions you ask a suspect.” Parkinson scoffed. “How stupid does he think I am? He wants to arrest me because I’m no mudblood lover.” He looked up. “And you’re on his list as well. He probably suspects that you’ve something big going to get the mudbloods, and will try to stop you.”

Brenda frowned. She knew Shack had ambitions, but she didn’t think he’d go as far as framing people. “In the kind of investigation he’s running, he has to suspect everyone.”

“That’s his excuse! He said so to my face!” Parkinson sneered. “But we all know that Shack’s job is not going to help him with his career. Hunting down the relatives and friends of Wizengamot members? That’s what leads to blacklisting. And Shack’s smart. He knows that.” He grinned. “So, why would he volunteer for this?”

“Maybe he lost someone dear to him to the Death Eaters,” Brenda said. “Or he thinks that at the end of the war, things will have changed.” Long odds for that, in her opinion.

“Oh, I bet he hopes things will have changed! That’s why he’s doing this for Dumbledore!” Parkinson ground his teeth. “The old man aims to take over Britain, and turn it into a mudblood country. Haven’t you heard that he refused to support the Ministry against the Mudblood Resistance?”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Brenda admitted.

“I’ve heard it from Fudge’s secretary herself. The Minister and Bones weren’t that happy about it, apparently. Still think he’s not a mudblood lover?” Parkinson sneered.

“Dumbledore likes mudbloods, everyone knows that,” Martin cut in. “That doesn’t mean Shack shares those views.”

“Well, I certainly never saw him with the ‘right kind of purebloods’, if you get my drift.”

Brenda nodded. If an Auror had ambitions, they needed friends in high places. If Shacklebolt wasn’t with the Death Eaters, he’d be with Dumbledore. Maybe. “That still does not prove that he’ll frame us.”

“If he’s working for Dumbledore, then he’s working with the mudbloods.” Parkinson sneered. “Why do you think that they keep escaping us?”

“Are you telling me he’s a spy?”
Parkinson shrugged. “Spy, saboteur, mole…”

“He’ll have enough on his plate hunting the actual Death Eaters,” Brenda said. Which might include Parkinson.

“Oh, yes. He hasn’t made any friends. If he ever needs support from the Hit-Wizards, or more Aurors, then that’ll be interesting.”

Brenda narrowed her eyes. If the spies of both sides in the Ministry started to attack or assassinate each other… They might believe she was a spy just because she wasn’t with them. “Maybe we should have gone undercover. It seems safer than working in the office right now.” She sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

“Bit late for that,” Parkinson said. “But I’d maybe change my address.”

Brenda knew the Floo Network had been sabotaged by Death Eaters during their wave of attacks. She looked at Martin, who had a grim expression on his face. “Well,” she sighed, “we’re hunting the Resistance, and if they have a spy here…”

“We don’t know that,” Martin cut in.

“We can’t really risk it either.” Brenda had thought the mudbloods at least had no spies in the Ministry. But if they were working with Dumbledore… “We might as well pick a flat among muggles.”

“What?” Parkinson stared at her.

“The mudbloods won’t use bombs in the middle of Muggle London,” Brenda explained. At least she hoped so.

The wizard looked surprised, then he grinned and rubbed his chin. “I see. That’s a good idea. The mudbloods wouldn’t want to kill muggles, right?”

Martin nodded. “We expect that they would lose too much support if they started killing muggles.”

“I guess I’ll have to find myself a muggle flat as well.” Parkinson grinned. “Unless you want a third roommate?”

Brenda looked at Martin, who shrugged. She’d rather not share a flat with Parkinson, but that wasn’t the kind of thing you refused a man who was supposed to have your back. They’d manage. That at least. “There’s one problem though.” She drew a hissing breath through her teeth.

“Yes?” Parkinson’s expression made it clear that he was planning to remove that problem, no matter how.

“We need to learn how to fit in among muggles.”

Judging by Martin’s and Parkinson’s expression, neither had thought of that.

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London, Soho, November 26th, 1996

Hermione Granger had put her foot down when Sirius had asked to meet in a nightclub again. She had told him flat-out that it was not ‘traditional’, but impractical. They needed to talk to each other without being interrupted or distracted by the kind of girls who apparently found Sirius as charming
as he claimed he was.

Which was why she found herself in a hotel room in London with a grinning Sirius. She frowned at him. “Next time we rent a room as a girl with her dog, not as a couple.”

Sirius grinned at her. “Muggle hotels allow pets now? They didn’t in the 70s. Lily told me so.”

Hermione was quite certain she knew why Harry’s mother had told Sirius that. “I think they don’t allow Padfoots.” Which was true.

Sirius snorted. “Anyway, it’s just the two of us now. No one will disturb us here. And our spells ensure privacy. Just as you wanted.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at Sirius. “Yes, Harry. Sirius took me to a hotel room, so we could have some privacy.”

The wizard pouted at her. “When you say it like that it sounds bad.”

“You just said the same thing.” Hermione shook her head. “Let’s get down to business.” She ignored his chuckle at that. “We’re preparing a strike against a Death Eater base in Knockturn Alley. We need some way to spy on them, so we know what we’re facing. Do you have something that would help with that? Like the Wireless Ears?”

Sirius tapped his index finger to his lips. “Hm. To place those you need to get inside, which kind of defeats the purpose. But the twins are currently on a similar mission, so they would have something to get past wards.”

“Oh? They’re spying on the Slytherins who tried to sneak into their shop? Greengrass and Davis?” Hermione had heard the gist of that from her friends.

“Yes. The two witches didn’t notice the tracker they were tagged with, and led the twins to their base.” The wizard grinned. “Quite careless of them, but then, they were panicking, or so I heard.”

“Where is their base?” If they were such amateurs, then the Resistance would not have any trouble wiping their cell out.

“Somewhere in Dorset. Though there’s some doubt whether the girls are Death Eaters or not. Hence the spying.” Sirius shook his head, clearly showing what he thought of that.

Hermione nodded. Greengrass’s sister had tried to kill the Gryffindor third years, after all. “Well, if you’d get us some spy gear, we can use it.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll ask them. Since I’m funding their research, I’m certain they’ll share the results.” With a sly grin, he added: “Ah… to think of the lengths we went to back at Hogwarts to spy on the girls’ showers…”

Hermione glared at him, but didn’t ask if that was true or not. She’d rather not know. “Good.”

“I’ve heard your broadcasts. Quite interesting,” Sirius said. “Did you manage to make the van invisible yet?”

Hermione pursed her lips. “No. As expected, it’s quite difficult.” Invisibility Cloaks didn’t last long, after all, and were quite rare. Apart from Harry’s. “We’re working on simply adapting the Disillusionment Charm, and until then, we charm the colours to match the sky at night.”
“Ah.” Sirius grinned. “As long as it works it’s good enough.”

Hermione sighed. “It’s more work though. But we’ll manage. How is your family doing?” He’d know what she was asking.

“The Tonkses?” He sighed. “Andromeda and Ted have been through the last war; they know Bellatrix wants to kill them all and understand what we have to do to beat the Death Eaters. Nymphadora is still not certain if she’s an Auror first, or an Order member.” He shook his head. “Though the recent rift inside the Corps might finally make her see reason.”

“Rift?” Hermione hadn’t heard about that.

“Seems that the split between Death Eaters and ‘blood traitors’ is worsening. Nymphadora said there’s talk of purges, and worse. And since she’s considered a blood traitor simply for existing…” He grinned widely.

She nodded in agreement. “She needs to understand that this is a war. Police and their procedures have no place in it.”

“Indeed.” Sirius rummaged through the mini bar in the room. “Fancy a muggle whiskey?”

“No, thank you. Soda please.” She certainly wouldn’t drink alcohol on a mission.

“Suit yourself.” He tossed her a soda, ensuring she’d have to wait until she could open it, and grabbed the whiskey for himself. After one sip he frowned. “Are they allowed to serve this to their guests?”

“You picked the hotel.” Hermione grinned.

“I did.” He huffed, but didn’t put the bottle away. “So…” He leaned forward. “... tell me how the dates went, hm?”

She narrowed her eyes. “That’s none of your business.”

“But… I need to know. Harry’s my responsibility. How can I teach him how to improve when I don’t know what he did wrong?”

“What makes you think he did anything wrong?” Hermione huffed.

“Well, he’s not asking me for advice on how to properly satisfy a witch.”

Hermione rubbed her forehead. The worst thing was that she couldn’t tell if Sirius was actually being serious or not.

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Hogwarts, November 27th, 1996

“So… Albus will talk to the goblins, but even if they give us their permission to search Gringotts - which is by no means certain - that doesn’t mean it’ll safe to do so.” Moody grinned. “If we fall victim to a trap they forgot to tell us about, or run into some of their ‘disgruntled criminal elements’, they’ll claim it wasn’t their fault if we get hurt.”

Harry Potter was surprised how close Moody’s teaching was to the impostor’s lessons in fourth year. Not that he’d mention that, ever, to the old Auror.
“Goblins have criminals?” Ron asked.

“Goblins are criminals, lad,” Moody said. “Assume they want to rob you, kill you and eat you, and that just the threat of swift and brutal retribution keeps them in check.”

Harry blinked. That was the first time he’d heard this. “What?”

“Why would we trust them with our gold if they were criminals?” Ron shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense!”

The Auror grinned. “It makes sense if you consider the fact that we fought countless times against the goblins. They’re a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters. The only thing they love more than blood is gold.”

“So, we gave them our gold? We paid them off?” Ron shook his head. Harry had to agree - that sounded barmy.

“Well, after we beat them the last time, and apparently were considering ending their race, they finally seemed to wise up and accept that they couldn’t raid Britain any more. So they offered us a deal.”

“That still doesn’t explain why we gave them gold. Instead of taking it from them,” Ron said.

“Gold was the key part of the deal. Galleons, Knuts and Sickles cannot be counterfeited or copied. The goblins use their own magic to mint them. Something that Wizarding Britain never managed. They’ve protected the secret with rituals and magic…” Moody shook his head. “A few rebellions broke out when they suspected that the wizards were trying to find out their secrets so they could mint coins as well.”

Harry was confused. “Didn’t that deal end the Goblin Rebellions?”

Moody laughed. “No, the deal ended the Goblin Wars. Since Gringotts was founded, there haven’t been any wars, just rebellions. Usually by ‘disgruntled elements’.”

“I still think giving them our gold is barmy if they are that bad,” Ron grumbled. “What keeps them from simply taking the gold from us, and then rebelling again?”

“There are safeguards in place, or so the Ministry claims. But the biggest reason they won’t do that is that we’d wipe them out in response.” Moody grinned. “The nasty little buggers know that. We’ve only gotten more dangerous since the Goblin Wars. They haven’t been able to keep up.”

Harry wasn’t quite certain what he should be feeling about the fact that, apparently, only the threat of genocide kept the peace between goblins and humans.

“They could be trying to lull us into a false sense of security. Build up their forces, fool us with a few rebellions that are easily put down,” Ron said.

“Ah, now you’re thinking properly!” Moody grinned. “Of course they’re trying to do that. But on the other hand, they haven’t managed to do so in hundreds of years. And we’re keeping an eye on them. They need human employees, after all, for all tasks that need wands.”

“And yet they almost started a rebellion in the last war?”

“Of course. They’re like animals - if they sense a weakness, they’ll pounce. The trick is to not show any weakness. Or at least remind them regularly that no matter how weak the average wizard looks,
Britain still has the wands to put the goblins down for good.” Moody laughed. “Though that’s a task for Albus. I’m here to teach you how to fight goblins.”

He stood up. “Fortunately, their way of fighting doesn’t use wands, so we can use conjuration to get us some training dummies.”

Harry cursed and threw himself to the side, drawing his wand. As expected, there were already some crude goblin-like figures behind them. As he blasted the closest apart, noticing that Ron was doing the same, Moody laughed again. “You are learning, boys! Maybe this won’t be as much of a babysitting job as I feared.”

Harry would have liked to answer with some cutting remark about old people who should be in a home for the elderly, but he was too busy defending himself against an onslaught of goblin look-alikes.

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London, Diagon Alley, November 27th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore was smiling at the goblins standing guard at the entrance to Gringotts. They didn’t react, of course. They never did. He knew it riled them up though - goblins had to be polite, lest they suffer the consequences. Albus could afford to be polite because he wanted to.

He had a quick chat with Eberhard Faulkner. Hufflepuff, half-blood, owner of ‘Faulkner’s Furs’, and reassured the man that he was doing all he could to deal with the Death Eaters, then approached the closest free teller.

“Good morning, sir.” He nodded slowly at the surly goblin. “I would like to talk to a manager, if one of them has time to meet me.” Again, he knew that his polite request was anything but a request - Gringotts could not afford not to meet with the Chief Warlock. But Albus was polite and respectful, no matter if it was appreciated or not. It was a matter of principle.

A few minutes later, he was led to the office of Gutripper, a member of the management, as the leadership of the bank had been calling themselves since 1972. “Greetings, Gutripper. Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice.”

“Of course, Chief Warlock. What can we do for you?”

“There are two matters I would like to discuss.” Albus smiled, then looked at the mounted head of a Deep Crawler behind the goblin. “Is that a new trophy?”

“Yes. I acquired it a few months ago.” Gutripper showed his teeth, briefly.

“Impressive.” Albus had noticed that the goblin had not gone into detail just how he acquired that trophy, but didn’t ask.

“But I would not want to waste the time of such an important wizard,” the goblin said, the effort it took him to avoid sneering obvious to Albus, “so, what can we do for you?”

“I have heard some rumours about a dark artefact hidden in Gringotts,” Albus said.

“We’re not responsible for whatever items are stored in wizards’ vaults,” the goblin said quickly.

“But you are responsible for the discretion and safety guaranteed to the owner of a vault, are you
“Yes. That’s stipulated in our standard contract.” The goblin was guarded now. He had to know what Albus wanted.

“Indeed. But that does not include hiding contraband and banned items, right?” It didn’t, but everyone knew that for the right price, Gringotts would do almost anything.

“Of course not. Though some might suspect that a search for an illegal artefact was but a pretext to spy on vault owners.”

“Well, they would be wrong.” That was just a benefit. “I am concerned about a very dark - and dangerous - artefact. Dangerous to Gringotts as well.”

“Really?” Gutripper’s teeth were showing fully now. “And why wouldn’t our employees have noticed this?”

“Because the magic that conceals it is beyond their power,” Albus said with a smile. It was true too, no matter how much it galled the goblins.

“I see.” Gutripper hissed more than he spoke. “And will you conduct this search in person?”

“I will be in the area, in case I am needed, but there are a few specialists who will be searching. I would appreciate it if you would provide them with all the help they request for this task. It is of the utmost importance.” He met the goblin’s eyes directly. “It goes without saying that I will personally hold the bank responsible for their safety.”

“I see,” Gutripper pressed out through his clenched jaws.

“Good. I was afraid there would be some misunderstandings.” Albus smiled widely. “With tempers riled up in the current conflict, misunderstandings could have catastrophic consequences.”

The goblin paled just a shade. “Of course. When will those people arrive?”

“On the 29th. Probably after business hours - I would not want to inconvenience you.” He smiled again.

“Thank you for your consideration. You mentioned another matter you wished to discuss.”

“Ah, yes. There were rumours, or rather, speculations about Gringotts’ stance in the conflict with Voldemort.”

“Gringotts does not meddle with internal matters of Wizarding Britain,” Gutripper spat.

“Oh, that is not what I am concerned about.” Albus leaned forward. “I overheard some of my students discussing their latest lesson in Magic History. They talked about how often goblin rebellions were started in times of turmoil. Like Wizarding Britain is currently experiencing.”

“Mere speculation, I assure you.” Gutripper smiled showing all his teeth,

“Oh, I am convinced you would never be as foolish as that. After all, this would be seen by the Ministry and other concerned parties as siding with Voldemort.” Albus bared his teeth. “And I know you are very much aware of the kind of retribution that would follow. From the Ministry.” He noticed that the goblin was slightly sneering. “And from the people who destroyed Malfoy Manor. And of course, from me.”
The goblin wasn’t sneering any more. “The Muggleborn Resistance is fighting the Ministry. They might welcome allies.”

Albus snorted. “They are well aware of what kind of allies you are, and what your goals are.” And if not, they soon would be. Harry and Mister Weasley certainly would tell Miss Granger all about it. “But even if they did not - do you think they will let you go back to the old ways of raids and pillaging? Have you forgotten how muggles have changed? How they wage war these days? What weapons they wield?”

“Muggles cannot even find us, much less fight us.”

“But muggleborns can. And they will destroy you, to protect the muggles. Or themselves.” Albus leaned back in his chair. “The times you yearn for have passed. Both in Wizarding Britain and in muggle Britain. And be glad for that.”

Gutripper slowly nodded, his voice a whisper. “I understand.”

“Good.” Albus stood up. “I am glad we had this talk. It is far better to avoid a misunderstanding than to deal with it after it has happened.”

“Of course.”

Albus nodded politely, and left the goblin to stew in his frustration and rage. He hoped that the rest of Gringotts’ leadership would see reason as well.

Otherwise, they might discover just how much the times had changed - to their, likely fatal, detriment.

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London, Knockturn Alley, November 28th, 1996

“That’s some clever gadget you’ve got there.”

Hermione Granger looked up from the scroll the enchanted quill was filling, and at the Headmaster’s brother. “The Wireless Voles?” She didn’t know if the old wizard was talking about the latest invention of the Weasley twins, or the enchanted goggles she was wearing.

“Yes. Ingenious… that they can pass through wards…” he shook his head.

“That’s actually simple. The things are completely harmless, so they do not register as a danger. And they are not alive, so they do not register as animals. Despite looking like voles.”

Hermione knew that should the secret of their existence get out, people would be able to use counter-measures. A simple privacy spell would fool them, unlike the Wireless Ears. But as the Death Eaters in the house across the street proved, not many would think of using such spells in the privacy of a warded house.

“I didn’t invent them,” she added. “Nor did I name them.” She certainly wouldn’t have chosen such a silly name!

While Aberforth chuckled, Hermione moved a bit closer to the window of the deserted flat they were hiding in. From the remains of the torn newspapers they had found - looters hadn’t taken those - it had belonged to a muggleborn. The Death Eater hideout looked unchanged. Just another house in the alley. As long as the windows remained dark, no one would suspect their presence.
“Bit of a waste to spy on them like that, only to attack the place.”

She wasn’t certain if the man was serious, or simply testing her. He was a bit like his brother in that regard, Hermione thought - not that she’d mention that, again. “This is just a recruiting post. The scum who frequent it won’t know anything valuable. Not enough to let them continue. We want to catch their liaison or leader. They know more important people and locations.”

The wizard nodded. “You’re set on this then.”

“Yes.” She glanced at the man. Did he think she’d shy away from attacking Death Eaters? Or killing them?

“Despite the risk.”

She shrugged. “It’s a solid plan. I trust you to protect the trunk until we’re inside.” And to set it up in a good spot as well. That went without saying.

“Albus put in a good word for me?” he asked, a bit too casually.

Hermione was well aware of his opinion of the Headmaster. “He picked you to help us.” She had checked though, just to ensure the old wizard’s reputation as a wastrel was wrong. The Headmaster had told a few tales…

“I see.”

She wasn’t certain what he meant, but nodded, and focused on observing the door. “There should be a man named Callum leaving soon. He just said he’d be back in two days.”

Aberforth moved forward to stand next to her. “I know the man. Drunk and violent, but not useless with a wand. He’ll do.”

Hermione didn’t offer to help subdue the man. If Dumbledore’s brother couldn’t handle one Death Eater, then she would have to reconsider her plan.

She didn’t think that would be needed though.

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London, Diagon Alley, November 29th, 1996

“The bank looked much less foreboding before I knew so much about goblins,” Harry heard Ron mutter next to him as they made their way to Gringotts. The sun had already set, and there weren’t many people left in Diagon Alley. These days, no one wanted to be outside their wards at night. They were missing the next broadcast of the Resistance, but this was more important.

“Did you never wonder why Binns covers so many Goblin Rebellions?” Moody snorted behind them. “He knows exactly what cruel buggers they are, and does his best to remind everyone of that fact.”

“Well, his best is not exactly much,” Harry said. “He’s boring. I doubt anyone pays attention to him.”

“Hermione does. Did,” Ron said.

“Not since first year. She was reading the book while he talked.” Harry saw Ron glance at him. “She told me last week.”
“Ah.” Ron looked at the Goblin guards. “Are they expecting us?”

“Aye,” Moody said. “Albus had a talk with them. They should be on their best behaviour. Which, mind you, isn’t all that good.”

“Great,” Harry mumbled. Then he straightened up. This was an important mission. He and Ron could finally do something important in the war. Grumbling about it wouldn’t do.

“Moody and company. We’re expected by Gutripper,” the old Auror told the guards at the door.

The two goblins didn’t react at all, and for a moment, Harry thought there had been a mistake. But then the door opened, and another goblin stood in the entrance. “Come inside.”

The three stepped inside, and the goblin seemed to hesitate.

Moody laughed. “Don’t worry about Dumbledore. He’s watching.”

The goblin - Harry didn’t know if he was Gutripper, or just a doorman, seemed to scowl at that, but then nodded, and closed the door.

“You know what we’re here to do. Let’s get on with it!” Moody said “We’re wasting time standing around…”

“Follow me.” The goblin turned around without checking if they were.

Harry sighed, and cast the modified Supersensory Charm. Now he just had to walk around and hope for a headache. Simple. As long as the goblins didn’t betray and ambush them.

The goblin led the three wizards to the entrance to the vaults. “We’re not taking the cart,” Moody said as soon as they saw one of the contraptions. “Too easy to sabotage.”

“If we wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” the goblin growled.

“Yes, and Albus would avenge us. But some of you might be dumb enough to think that if it looks like a ‘tragic accident’, he might not kill the lot of you.” Moody grinned. “Best not to risk an accident, hm?”

Without a further word, the goblin led them to another door. And to stairs that seemed to descend forever.

“We could take out our brooms and fly down,” Ron said, earning a glare from Moody. Apparently, they were supposed to keep those a secret, Harry thought. As if it made much of a difference.

After what felt like eternity, they reached the first vaults. And Harry discovered that the spell made any pain much worse. Including the slight ache in his leg. He groaned.

“Harry?” Ron looked around. “Do you…?”

He shook his head. “No. Just my legs.”

“Oh. Oh!” Ron winced in sympathy. “That’s going to be nasty.”

It was. A few hours later, Harry’s whole body ached terribly, but for his scar. And there was still a level of vaults left. At least the goblins had not broken their agreement.

The goblin was glaring at them. Harry hoped the bugger was feeling as tired and bad as he was. The
creature had been a pain to follow, and about as helpful as a rock with an attitude. Ron, Harry and Moody had regularly cast detection spells of all kinds, but Harry was not quite certain that had fooled the goblin. He was past caring though. All he wanted was for this to end, and then head to Hogwarts, guzzle down two or three Pain Relief Potions, and sleep for a week.

Ron was looking haggard as well, and even Moody hadn’t berated them for not being as vigilant as a paranoid cat in a room full of rocking chairs for an hour at least. One more level, and they’d be done.

Then Harry’s scar started to hurt. So much, he winced and bent over, groaning.

“Harry?”

“Lad?”

“Yes…” Harry closed his eyes. “I’m fine.” He cast another detection spell, which he didn’t need, and started to act as if he was following his wand while he tried to sense where the pain was worst.

For the next minutes, he walked around, aimlessly and unable to find which vault the Horcrux was stored in. Only when he finally sat down to catch his breath though did the pain from his scar grow even worse.

“It’s beneath us,” he mumbled, then repeated it, loudly. “It’s beneath us.”

“There are no vaults there!” the goblin snarled.

“That’s where the wards are anchored, right?” Moody said. “It’s there then, hidden.”

The goblin hissed. “No outsider is allowed down there!”

Moody scoffed. “Well, someone obviously didn’t listen.”

“Why would they hide a dark artefact there, and not in a vault? That makes no sense!” The goblin sneered. “This is a trick!”

“It’s not a trick,” Moody said. “It’s down there. Probably linked to your wards even. And we’re the only ones who can find it. So, you either let us down there, or we leave and ask Dumbledore to settle this.”

“It’s connected to the Dark Lord!” Harry saw the goblin was staring at him. “That’s why the Boy-Who-Lived is here! What is it?”

“It’s a soul anchor,” Moody said.

The goblin gasped. “Connected to our wards? One of those leeches?”

“Aye.” Moody grinned. “Aren’t you glad we found it?”

Harry blinked. Weren’t they supposed to keep the Horcruxes a secret? Or did Moody think that telling the goblin was the best way to remove it?

Apparently, it was. It took another hour - which Harry spent on the stairs, a level up, where his scar didn’t hurt any more - before the three of them could descend to the lowest level. With a dozen goblin guards. The little buggers were about as paranoid as Moody, in Harry’s opinion.

The ward anchors were sealed behind the thickest, strongest vault doors Harry had seen so far. And that included the scene in Fort Knox in ‘Goldfinger’. But when they were open, the pain was so bad,
Harry had to drop the charm - and he could still feel the Horcrux.

He remembered to keep his wand out, and acted as if he was led by a spell, not pain, while he walked between polished stones covered with runes - and what looked like either paint or dried blood - until he finally found a small rock, oval and polished, hidden behind one of the more worn stones. “This is it,” he said, pointing his wand at it.

Moody cast a few spells at it, then shook his head. “Can’t remove it from that web.”

“What? You said you could!” Gutripper snarled.

“I said we’d find it. And now we’ll deal with it.” The old Auror pulled out a small vial. “Stay back. Basilisk poison is quite deadly.”

The half a dozen goblins who had swarmed the stone and had started to run their hands over it scattered at once.

Moody chuckled, and then tipped the vial, carefully. A hissing sound filled the room, followed by unnatural screeching. The pain in Harry’s scar flared up and he felt liquid - blood - run down his face. He saw a green shape - a familiar view, after his first and second year - flicker, before it started to fade.

The pain went away with the shade, and Harry relaxed, relieved. He didn’t even protest when Moody vanished the blood on his face.

“Well done, boy. Now let’s leave this forsaken place so the goblins can repair the damage to their wards. I bet they wouldn’t want an Auror to see what exactly they are doing here.” The old wizard chuckled, but no goblin reacted to him.

This time they flew up the stairs - literally.

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London, Knockturn Alley, November 30th, 1996

Hermione Granger was back in the deserted flat overlooking the Death Eater hideout. Calling it a base was not entirely accurate - it was more a hangout for riff-raff and other scum willing to kill for Voldemort. Most of the Resistance was there with her, all in fatigues turned black by the Colour Change Charm.

“I wish that damn Avery would arrive already!” Seamus muttered - not for the first time. Hermione hoped no one would take offence at his complaining - waiting for the mission to start was not easy on their tempers. Dean and Seamus were very eager. Hermione suspected they saw this as an opportunity to avenge Allan. She had never even thought of not taking them on this mission though. They needed this.

Justin was more sensible - or at least he acted like he was. Hermione’s closest friend in the Resistance was standing near her, watching the scrolls the Wireless Voles were filling. Without muttering about the time they had already spent waiting. Which was a good thing - since he was the one in command of the reserves. He, the Creevey brothers, Sally-Anne and John would be waiting here, watching the house, in case some Death Eaters managed to flee - or reinforcements or Aurors arrived.

There! The quill had just written ‘everyone up, the boss’s arrived!’ Hermione smiled. “Avery arrived. Let’s go.”
Aberforth Dumbledore slowly stood up from the chair he had conjured for himself - an obvious display of calm and patience, Hermione thought, both the chair, and his manner. He was already polyjuiced into Callum’s form, so no one but Justin and her knew who he was, although that had led to some grumbling when she had told the group - they didn’t like working with unknowns. She understood that, but had still persuaded them to trust him. With their lives. She wouldn’t have managed that had Allan still been with them, she knew that. But if this went well, the group should trust her even more.

“Alright, everyone inside!” the wizard said in his unfamiliar voice, pointing to the trunk next to him. It was the same model that Moody had once been imprisoned in, so fitting seven people inside would be a tight fit, but possible - they had tested it. Air could be a problem though.

“Bubble-Head Charms up, everyone!” Hermione said. Then Mary and Tania went in first, followed by Hermione herself, then Louise and Jeremy, and - last in, first out - Dean and Seamus.

They were packed inside, and Hermione fought down the brief panic she felt at being inside such an enclosed space, unable to move much, and unable to watch or even listen as the Headmaster’s brother carried them inside the Death Eater hideout.

What if it was a trap? What if the Death Eaters had found the Voles? Or if they expected this sort of attack? What if Callum had been bait? They had used Veritaserum on him, but if the Death Eaters had obliviated him...

Hermione closed her eyes and took deep breaths. She couldn’t panic. She was the leader. And the die was cast. “Remember: We need prisoners.”

“Are we there yet?” Seamus asked. “Mum? I have to pee!”

Hermione laughed together with everyone else, and the tension was broken.

Then the trunk was opened.

Dean and Seamus stormed out at once. The two former Hit-Wizards followed, and then Hermione. They were inside a rather shabby room, thin-looking walls, no furniture. Aberforth was at the door, Louise and Jeremy were running towards him, wands drawn, Dean and Seamus were already there, behind conjured cover.

Hermione took a step to the side to let Mary and Tania pass and pull their rifles out while she started casting Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey Jinxes, followed by a Human-presence-revealing Spell. As soon as she had finished, she said: “Go!”

Aberforth opened the door and flicked his wand. Dean and Seamus cast as well. Hermione heard a body hit the floor, followed by a scream, cut short by another spell. Then Dean vanished the stone cover, and Aberforth stepped inside. Dean and Seamus followed, going right, to secure the main entrance. The two former Hit-Wizards went left after the door, Shield Charms covering them as they went to block the back door.

Hermione entered the room after Tania and Mary - she didn’t want to block their line of fire. The two witches were covering the stairs leading to the first floor, in conjured firing positions. A stone wall was blocking the entrance to the cellar. Aberforth stood in the middle, his wand aimed at a small room to the side. Hermione heard screams from there, and saw one wizard in black robes stumbling out of it, his hair on fire. Aberforth stunned him almost casually, then sealed the room up.

“The leader is inside the living room,” Aberforth said, pointing at a door in the middle of the wall
Hermione nodded and drew a ‘flashbang’ grenade, then moved to the side of the door. Dean and Seamus should be done any moment.

They weren’t. She heard more screams from the main entrance. And explosions. Curses, not grenades. She looked at the old wizard, who nodded, grinning. A second later, the door was blasted to pieces, some of them hitting her shield. She threw the grenade inside the room without looking or exposing more than her hand - and almost lost that one to a brown spell.

The grenade went off, and she heard screams. Tania had left the stairs to Mary and stuck her rifle into the room, aiming low. She emptied one magazine, then pulled back. Hermione heard more screams. Then Aberforth conjured a slab of floating stone and banished it into the room, followed by another he used as a shield as he entered. Hermione took a deep breath and followed him.

Inside, a scene of carnage greeted her. She saw one man dead on the ground - hit in the chest and head by rifle rounds. Half his skull had been blown off. Another was pressing his hands on his bleeding legs. One witch was in the corner, stumbling around and rubbing her eyes. Hermione quickly stunned both of them, then dived forward in a roll, behind the remains of a couch which had started to catch fire. Dumbledore’s brother was exchanging spells with a wizard. That had to be Avery - he was wearing Death Eater robes and a mask, unlike the rest of the people she had seen so far. And he was giving the old wizard some trouble, casting Killing Curses as quickly as Aberforth could conjure stone obstacles to absorb them. And Tania couldn’t fire without endangering both of them. Taking Death Eaters alive was much harder than simply killing them.

Hermione saw no marker, so there was no disillusioned foe nearby. She crawled forward behind the smoldering couch, then popped up to cast. Her first Piercing Curse was stopped by the dark wizard’s shield, but her second shattered it. He flinched and turned towards her, snarling, but before he could cast, a stone slab smashed into him and flung him into the wall. Two stunners, one from her and one from Aberforth, found him before he reached the ground.

“I think he should have survived that,” Aberforth commented, “but you better check.”

She nodded, cast an Amplifying Charm - she wished radio worked in Knockturn Alley - and yelled: “Main target down! Main target down!”

There was no need to take risks to capture more of the riff-raff.

She reached Avery and cast a quick diagnosis spell. He didn’t seem to be in immediate danger, so she cut his robes off and collected his wand, then bound him. Then she cut off some of his hair. Turning to Tania, she pointed back. “Get him and the other living ones into the trunk.”

When she left the room she saw a body on top of the stairs, blood running down the wooden steps.

“I’ve driven another one back,” Mary informed her.

“I’ll handle the ones above,” Aberforth said.

Hermione nodded. “Tania, stay with the trunk once you are done! Mary, check with Louise and Jeremy!” she ordered while heading to the entrance hall.

She cursed under her breath at the sight that greeted her there. The door had been blown open, Seamus was on the ground, covered by a conjured wall, and Dean was trying to still the bleeding in his friend’s leg. She saw three corpses near the door, and one right outside.
“What happened?” She asked, kneeling next to Seamus. A quick charm told her his leg bones had been shattered. She couldn’t do anything about that, but she could stop the bleeding, and numb the pain.

“Half a dozen rushed the door. They were too many to stop. One of them got Seamus when he tried to block the door instead of covering himself,” Dean said. “Justin’s group got them though.”

Hermione hadn’t felt the mirror in her pocket vibrate, so Justin had not encountered further trouble. Or so she hoped. “We got our target. Get Seamus into the trunk, I’ll cover you.”

She quickly sealed the door with a conjured wall of stone, then pulled out the communication mirror. “Justin, we’ve got the target. Prepare to move to the rally point.”

“Alright,” Justin said. “We’ve killed two runners in the street.”

When Hermione got back to the room they had started in, the rest of the group was filing in. Louise was fine, Jeremy slightly hurt. Nothing to worry about. Tania and Mary stayed right outside the door though, to cover the stairs again. “Where’s our ally?”

“Still upstairs,” Tania answered.

Hermione thought about heading up herself, but decided against it. She had to trust the man. “Justin, how’s it looking outside?”

“The usual reaction to violence - people have disappeared from the street. No Aurors in sight yet.”

“Alright.” To the group, she said: “Shrink the trunk and move to the backyard. Secure the area and be ready to take down the Jinxes.”

While the group moved out, Hermione opened a bottle filled with petrol, then cast a Doubling Charm on it. The bottle started to spill and multiply. She left the room and closed the door, repeating this with another bottle in the entrance hall.

“You’re moving quickly,” Aberforth said when he descended the stairs, still covered by Tania and Mary. A bound man floated behind him.

“Everyone taken care of above?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.”

She nodded and handed him the hair. While he fed the prisoner Polyjuice with Avery’s hair she pointed her wand at the remains of the living room. “Accio Death Eater robe and mask!”

Aberforth draped the remains on the polyjuiced man, then cast a Bludgeoning Curse and a Cutting Curse to match the damage to the garments. The Dark Lord might not be fooled by this, but it wouldn’t hurt to make it appear as if Avery died in the building.

“Time to go.” She took down her jinxes on the way to the backyard, then set fire to the spreading pool of petrol in the hallway. A second later, she apparated to the rally point.

Behind her, the house went up in flames.

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Chapter 19: Revelations

‘With regards to the effects of propaganda in the Second Blood War, opinions differ greatly. Once again, one has to carefully consider the sources we have. Those who think that the pen is mightier than the sword naturally propose that the various efforts of all sides to influence the hearts and minds of the population were decisive for the outcome of the war. With regards to those claims, one has to consider the differences between the First and Second Blood War. Without a doubt, propaganda was responsible for a lot of the Dark Lord’s successes in the first war. Thanks to his skilled manipulation and public attacks, the Dark Lord’s reputation increased well beyond what an unvarnished recounting of his actions would suggest. The population feared him to the point they refused to speak his name.

In the Second Blood War though, the same strategy was not quite as effective - despite many of those who had lived through the First Blood War still remembering their own horror and fear. Some of my colleagues think this happened because the ‘Resistance Radio’, the voice of the Muggleborn Resistance, countered the propaganda and fear spread by the Dark Lord’s followers, and strengthened the morale of the muggleborns, the half-bloods and even the purebloods.

I disagree. A careful analysis shows that the Dark Lord’s strategy at the start of the war hurt his own reputation. He tried to capitalise on the horror many purebloods felt when Malfoy Manor was bombed and portray himself as the country’s salvation. And yet, the more the Muggleborn Resistance members were feared by the purebloods, the less they feared the Dark Lord - even more so when he seemed to be ineffective against the very danger of which his followers warned Britain. With the Death Eater attacks on purebloods in November 1996, the Dark Lord’s own actions delivered a propaganda victory to the Resistance Radio.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Diagon Alley, November 30th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore watched the flames shoot up over the roofs of Knockturn Alley through his enchanted glasses. Miss Granger’s group had succeeded then - though he did not yet know at what cost. He wouldn’t either, until Aberforth reported to him. Once again the need to keep secrets even from his allies vexed him. And yet, it was needed to lessen the danger of betrayal, willing or not.

A minute later, a glowing white goat arrived, snorted at him, and vanished. That meant the Resistance had successfully left Knockturn Alley. There was no longer a need to keep the Aurors busy elsewhere then. He smiled - John was both desperate to achieve any success in his hunt for the Resistance, and not too bright; an easy mark, Mundungus had said.

And indeed, the leader of the Auror task force had jumped on the chance to capture ‘muggleborns attacking Nott Manor’. Albus’s friend hadn’t even needed to launch another diversion.

Hopefully, the goblins would inform the Dark Lord that his Horcrux in Gringotts had been found, fooling him into thinking Albus was wasting time and resources on finding all of them. Ideally, Voldemort would decide to create more Horcruxes to be safe - the amount of work needed to create them, and even more so to hide them would certainly hurt his efforts to take over Britain. Even, Albus reminded himself, if it would mean more sacrificial murders. Sometimes, the lesser evil was
still evil.

He watched the first Aurors on brooms arrive over the burning house. The fire wards of the
neighbouring buildings would keep the blaze contained, but it was a rather spectacular view. He’d
like to call it the funeral pyre of Tom’s plans for Knockturn Alley, but the Dark Lord would have
other plans in place already.

The information wrung out of Avery on the other hand… that should make a difference. Now if the
Weasley twins came through as well, this would be a really bad week for the Death Eaters. He took
another look at the flames dancing in Knockturn Alley, then apparated home. Aberforth would meet
him soon and report.

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London, East End, November 30th, 1996

They had been lucky, Hermione Granger knew. Their wounded didn’t require specialised care - no
dark curses had struck them. Even Seamus’s shattered bones would be fine in a few days, with
Skele-Gro. Hopefully, the painful potion would convince him to pay more attention next time to his
own safety. And they needed a magical way to communicate instantly. She had to adapt the wireless
system, even though that would not be safe until she managed to encrypt it. But better coordination
needed communications. Otherwise, their tactics had worked, apart from Seamus’s lapse. The wizard
should have used a flashbang to disorient the others and stop their flight.

“You’re already making plans to improve our training, aren’t you?” Justin’s soft question interrupted
her thoughts.

“Ah… yes.” She smiled. “Force of habit.”

“As long as it keeps us alive I won’t complain.”

She looked at him. Everyone complained about training.

He grinned. “Well, not overly much.” Then he grew serious. “The prisoner’s been treated, and we
can start interrogating him. Seamus and Jeremy are back ho... at headquarters with the rest. The other
prisoners are stunned and secure.”

She nodded. She didn’t think they knew very much that would be useful, but they’d interrogate them
later. Avery was the real prize.

“Alright.” Hermione turned away from the window in their secondary safe house, and went to what
she and Justin had now dubbed ‘the interrogation room’.

Aberforth, still in his disguise, was waiting for them outside. “He’s an old one. Spent time in
Azkaban. He’ll have done unspeakable things.”

Hermione just stared at him. Did he think she didn’t realise just what monsters they were fighting?

The old wizard snorted. “You know, you don’t have to act so tough all the time.”

Hermione glanced at Justin. “Trust us, we won’t lose our tempers and kill him before we have
finished wringing every last bit of information out of him.”

Strangely, that did not seem to reassure the Headmaster’s brother.
When Hermione and Justin arrived at headquarters, the celebration was winding down. Sally-Anne quickly dragged Justin off to his, or rather, their room, leaving Hermione to face the rest of the group. Seamus was there as well, despite his leg bones currently being in the process of being regrown. It was obvious that he had dulled his pain with quite a lot of alcohol since he simply waved at her with a mellow smile. Dean, though, was not quite as sloshed.

Before he could ask her about the interrogation, she addressed the whole room. “We all did well today. We got our target, we wrecked a Death Eater operation - in public as well - and we didn’t lose anyone.”

“A dozen Death Eaters dead!” Seamus said, raising his bottle.

“They were fresh recruits, none of them marked, but for Avery.” Hermione pursed her lips. Common criminals would probably have fit most of them. “But they certainly were followers of the Dark Lord, ready to massacre muggleborns. They deserved to die.”

The group voiced their agreement with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Jeremy was particularly loud. Louise rubbed her ear, then asked, once the noise had died down: “Was our ally happy with the results as well?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded. “Avery knew quite a number of other names and locations, but unfortunately not where the Dark Lord is currently hiding. Voldemort’s been meeting his followers in various safe houses, always changing the locations.” Avery had also told them about his crimes, and those of his friends. Hermione had executed him without any regret after hearing his bloody tales.

“When will we hit the next house then?” Dean stared at her.

Hermione wondered if the wizard was trying to follow in Allan’s footsteps. She didn’t let her annoyance show though. “We’ll analyse the situation and then pick the most promising target.”

“You mean our ally will analyse the situation. The ally we’re not allowed to know about!”

Dean was trying to imitate Allan, alright. Hermione wanted to sigh. Instead she nodded. “We’ll coordinate with our allies, yes. And you should be aware of the need for security and secrecy.”

“I didn’t join the Resistance to be a tool for some pureblood wizard!” Dean scoffed. Seamus nodded as well, not that she had expected anything else, especially not when he was inebriated.

“Who says it’s a pureblood wizard?” Louise cut in.

“If it was a muggleborn, then we’d have been told. We’re all already hiding, after all.” Dean looked around, trying to drum up support. He was no Allan though.

“No, you wouldn’t have been told. That’s how Resistance cells work.” Hermione frowned. “I explained that several times.”

“That’s how muggle cells work. We have magic to protect our secrets!” Dean scoffed. Seamus nodded as well, not that she had expected anything else, especially not when he was inebriated.

“Yes, we do.” Hermione stared at him. “We’re not about to trust magic to take care of everything. That’s the pureblood way.” It was a cheap shot, but given how late it already was, more sophisticated arguments would not work anyway.
“So, that means we’re some other group’s lapdogs? Who holds your leash? Harry or maybe his godfather?” Dean scoffed. “Can’t be Ron; he’s a lapdog himself.”

“We’re no one’s lapdogs,” Hermione said, trying to hold her temper in check. “But we’re also not mad dogs running wild. We’ll coordinate our attacks with our allies. We’ll exchange intel. And we’ll help each other when needed. We won’t win this war by ourselves. As today has proved.” She let her eyes sweep over everyone in the room. Dean met hers, Seamus blinked. No one looked away.

“We did fine so far,” Dean muttered, but he was sitting down again.

“And we can do better,” Hermione said. “I’ve already made some plans to improve our training.”

Jeremy groaned loudly. “I shouldn’t have let them heal my wounds!” He was grinning though, even when Louise elbowed him.

“We won’t start tomorrow.” Hermione smiled. “But Monday.”

That caused a few more groans. But as far as she could tell, they were all good-natured. She had the group’s trust. Dean was no Allan; he wouldn’t be able to do much. Not after such a success.

But she would have to keep her eye on him and Seamus. There wouldn’t be another Allan on her watch.

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Hogwarts, December 1st, 1996

Ron Weasley knew his best friend had a tendency to brood. It was worst on Halloween. For everyone else, it was a holiday. The Old Families, at least those who followed pagan gods, celebrated Samhain. Others Halloween. And many remembered the day Voldemort had been defeated by the Boy-Who-Lived. But for Harry, it would always be the day he lived while his parents died. Not a date he wanted to be reminded of, much less glorify. Ron even suspected that if not for the great food, Harry would skip the feast altogether.

It wasn’t Halloween, but Harry had been almost as moody ever since they had returned from Gringotts. He had disappeared in the early afternoon, but Ron had tracked him down to the room they used for training.

“Reducto!”

A stone statue that looked vaguely like a snake-faced monster shattered under the force of Harry’s spell.

“Confringo!”

The floor between two more statues exploded, pieces striking both.

“Bombarda!”

Ron dropped to the ground and cast a Shield Charm just in time before the entire floor in front of the back wall exploded. “Mate!”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“I was about to make a joke about how Hermione would have been delighted to hear you’re training, but she wouldn’t condone wrecking the school.” Ron sighed while he stood up and cleaned his robe.
of the dust that covered most of the room.

“The room’s reinforced. It won’t break.”

“Well, we’re not reinforced.” Ron shook his head. “What happened? You’re not usually this intense. You weren’t this intense a month ago.” On Halloween.

Harry took a deep breath, then cast a cleaning charm on his own robe.

His was sporting a few scratches as well, Ron noticed. And a cut that was bleeding lightly. He raised his wand and took care of them, then waited. Pressing Harry for answers didn’t work well. Not that that had ever stopped Hermione.

Finally, after about a minute, Harry sighed. “I’ve been thinking.”

Ron nodded.

Harry glanced at him, then continued. “Our trip to Gringotts. Some things don’t add up.”

Ron frowned. “What do you mean?” It had gone well, in his opinion. One Horcrux dealt with.

“Why did we take the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron and then walk to the bank, instead of travelling directly to the goblins?” Harry started to pace. “That would have been safer, and more discreet.”

“Moody said Dumbledore was around as well… Merlin! Do you think we were bait for Death Eaters?” Ron gasped. Would the Headmaster go that far? “No, that doesn’t make any sense. Not with the Prophecy.”

Harry nodded. “Yes. I thought that maybe the goblins don’t allow outsiders to use their Floo connection.”

“I’d have to ask Bill about that,” Ron said. “He’d know. But Dumbledore arranged the visit after business hours. He probably could have arranged a Floo trip as well.”

“Exactly!” Harry gestured at Ron. “It feels like a set-up, somehow.”

Ron nodded. “And he told us about the Horcruxes in such secrecy, but then Moody tells the goblins.”

“It might have been the only way to make them let us go down to the lowest level.”

“Maybe.” Ron had to concede that, but still… something wasn’t right there. “We could have used Polyjuice or your cloak to disguise ourselves. At least for the trip through Diagon Alley.”

Harry nodded. “But that’s not what has been really bothering me about our trip.”

Ron raised his eyebrows. Harry had been moody this weekend, but if it wasn’t because of this...

Harry sighed. “I was wondering why my scar hurt so much when I was close to the Horcrux. It even bled.”

“It’s your link to Voldemort,” Ron said.

“Yes. But what is it?” Harry tapped his scar with his index finger. “What is this link to Voldemort? My scar didn’t hurt that much when I destroyed the diary. Or Quirrell. Something changed.”
He looked at Ron. “And I think the Headmaster knows what happened.”

“Well, let’s go ask him?” Ron said.

“Yes.”

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**Dorset, Britain, December 1st, 1996**

“And we have gathered here to celebrate, as our ancestors did since time immemorial. We follow our most ancient tradition as we stand here to honour the dead and let them pass judgment upon us.”

Daphne Greengrass watched as Draco stepped forward and lit the bonfire in the garden of his temporary home. Next to her, Tracey sighed. Daphne glanced at her.

Tracey noticed, and took a step closer. “I’m just wondering how long Draco will take to light the fire so we can go inside again,” she whispered.

Apparently, not even losing her parents had changed Tracey’s view of religion, Daphne thought. She wasn’t that religious herself, but the thought of her parents watching her, from beyond the veil, on this day, was comforting. It certainly had helped her sister, who was staring at the slowly growing fire with rapt attention. So, for Astoria’s sake, Daphne glared at her friend.

Tracey rolled her eyes. “I just wish Draco would hurry up. It’s getting cold, and the tradition of letting the ‘sacred fire warm us’ instead of a spell is something that should be rethought,” she whispered.

“You could always cast a spell yourself,” Daphne whispered back.

“What? You expect me to flout ‘our most ancient traditions’ in the home of the family who gave them back to us after we had lost them for a thousand years?” Tracey snorted. “That would be a faux pas indeed.”

Daphne knew that a lot of the Malfoy family’s prestige and influence was based upon them rediscovering the lost traditions of the pagan ancestors of the British Wizards after the Statute of Secrecy had gone into effect. That, and their gold, of course. The family had been a bit ostracised for their close association with muggles in the 16th century, but as Daphne’s father had told her, it had been those muggle connections that had allowed them to find the old records of pagan rites - apparently, muggle scholars had preserved them.

“Zabini told me that it’s fake anyway, you know,” Tracey whispered.

“What?” Daphne spoke so loud, Draco noticed and looked over his shoulder.

“Yes. He told me that the muggles had even less knowledge about the pagan rites of Britain than the wizards had. According to him, the Malfoys faked the whole thing.” Tracey grinned. “Or why would he do this on the Advent?”

“Zabini says a lot about Draco. That’s why he’s still at Hogwarts,” Daphne said.

Her friend shrugged. “I wouldn’t put it past the Malfoys. But we’ll never know.”

Daphne nodded. Some rival of the Malfoys had destroyed the original records in the early 18th century. And most of the oldest copies had been destroyed together with Malfoy Manor. Another
crime to be laid at the feet of the mudbloods, Daphne thought.

Astoria was glaring at them now, and Daphne smiled at her sister. “Sorry,” she mouthed.

The young witch sniffed and turned to watch the fire again. Or Draco, Daphne noted. She wasn’t certain what to think of her little sister being interested in Draco.

“Oh…”

And of course, Tracey had noticed. Daphne frowned at her friend. “Don’t tease her. Or him.” Draco might get ideas.

Tracey pouted, but she knew not to cross Daphne where Astoria was concerned.

Daphne turned her attention back to Draco. The fire was burning brightly now. It was time to honour the dead. And this year, there were far too many dead.

Draco pulled out a list, and started to slowly read name after name. His voice wavered a bit at the start.

“Lucius Malfoy.”

He waved his wand to make the fire flare up - according to the faith that would light the way to the afterlife for the soul of the dead.

“Narcissa Malfoy.”

The fire flared up again.

“Oliver Parkinson.”

Daphne heard Pansy sob.

“Florence Parkinson.”

Another flare, and another sob.

“Robert Greengrass.”

Daphne pulled Astoria into her arms.

“Esme Greengrass.”

She closed her eyes, thinking of her parents. They were in the afterlife now. She knew that. And they were watching her and Astoria.

“Zachary Davis.”

Tracey didn’t sob. Or hid it too well, Daphne thought. Though her friend’s relationship with her father hadn’t been the closest.

“Grace Davis.”

Her friend sniffled. Daphne pulled her into her arms as well. The three witches remained like that as dozens of names were read, one after the other. Goyle. Crabbe. Rowle. Too many. Far too many.

When finally the last name had been read, Draco saluted the fire with his wand, then slowly turned
around until he was facing the group with his back to the dying fire.

“Too many of those now travelling to the afterlife left us before their time. Murdered by mudbloods. Not content with scorning and dishonouring our traditions, they have taken up wands to kill their betters. Driven by hatred, they will not be stop until we stop them.”

Not just mudbloods, Daphne thought. She shivered, remembering how Fred had almost killed her and Tracey.

“But we will not forget them, or their murderers! We will beat those animals, and make Britain safe again! Safe for our families, and our future!” Draco raised his wand to the sky. “I promise this to our dead ancestors!”

Daphne raised her wand as well, together with Astoria and Tracey. Next year, this war would be over, and they’d be safe again.

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Hogwarts, December 2nd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore nodded at the Weasley twins, after reading the transcripts they had brought. “They held a pagan celebration then.” He had expected that - the Malfoys had been trying to make Hogwarts abandon their Halloween feast for a Samhain ritual, and Christmas for Winter Solstice for a long time. Ever since Albus had changed the celebrations, decades ago. It was to be expected Draco would adhere to that faith.

“You could say that. But they were more concerned with future deaths, muggleborns and ‘blood traitors’, ” Fred said, scowling, “than honouring their own deaths. And we have heard nothing that would even hint at them having prisoners.”

“Malfoy’s their leader. The rest do not seem to have met the Dark Lord yet,” George added. “And we also confirmed that they were among the attackers at the Burrow.”

“Stupid Slytherins, they attack us, and then blame us for defending ourselves!” Fred scoffed.

“A common stance, unfortunately,” Albus said. Not only among the followers of the Dark Lord, of course. “They cannot see how their own bigotry and blind adherence to Voldemort’s ideology have caused this war.”

“Malfoy’s always been blaming everyone but himself for all his troubles. Of course his friends would be the same.” Fred shook his head. “I still can’t believe I almost fell for their act.”

“I told you.”

Fred glared at George. “Yes, you did. Many times - especially after I unmasked them.”

Albus let the two boys bicker while he read the transcripts once more. He didn’t think it was likely that Mister Malfoy would try use the upcoming Winter Solstice for dark rituals involving sacrifices, but it never hurt to check - Tom certainly had been using the occasion for vile things.

When wands were drawn, he cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, do I have to remind you where you are?”

The two boys looked sheepish. “Sorry, sir;” Fred quickly said while his brother nodded.
Albus smiled and nodded. “I am impressed. Your ‘Wireless Voles’ seem to perform admirably. I would like a number of them, to pass on to a select group.”

“Like Hermione’s?” Fred asked. “Sure.”

Out of habit, Albus didn’t confirm that, even though he was aware that the twins knew of his contact with Miss Granger.

“What are we doing about Malfoy’s group?” George glanced at Fred, then looked at Albus. “They’re already taking part in attacks with the other Death Eaters.”

Albus sighed. He had hoped the young people wouldn’t cross that line. Even if they were not marked yet, he couldn’t let them continue. “They will be dealt with at the earliest opportunity.”

“They’ll be killed then,” George said, then pressed his lips together. His brother nodded.

“Do you disapprove?” Albus asked, curious. George had been suspicious of Miss Greengrass and Miss Davis, and yet now seemed to be less… radical in his views. Fred on the other hand… a wizard scorned and betrayed had quite the fury.

Fred shook his head. “They attacked our home and tried to kill us in our shop. Good riddance to them!”

George though seemed to be hesitating to condemn them. “As far as we know they haven’t killed anyone.”

“Yet,” Fred added. “Not for lack of trying.”

“You’ll try to take at least Malfoy alive. To find out what he knows.” George wasn’t looking at his brother now, addressing Albus.

“Yes.” Albus looked over his reading glasses. “Do you wish to capture the others as well?”

“I don’t want to risk our friends’ lives for it…” George said, frowning.

“Of course not!” Fred said. “That would be stupid!”

Albus nodded. “I doubt our forces will take risks, nor will I ask them to, but should the two witches be captured, would you want to interrogate them?”

“Yes.” Fred said at once. “We’d like to be involved in the attack.”

George didn’t say anything. He probably realised that after the interrogation was finished, the question of what to do with the prisoners would have to be answered.

Albus nodded. “For security reasons, I think it would be ill-advised to mix our forces. Not the least because people not used to fighting together are prone to make potentially fatal mistakes.”

Fred looked stubborn, but George grabbed his brother’s shoulder, and nodded. “We’ll take our leave then, and keep spying on Malfoy.”

“Goodbye. And be careful.” Albus nodded at them as they left, then looked at the time. Harry and Mister Weasley would soon arrive; they had asked to talk to him.

Albus had an idea what the two boys wanted to talk about. And he wasn’t looking forward to that particular discussion.
Hogwarts, December 2nd, 1996

“Thank you for seeing us, Headmaster.” Harry Potter smiled.

“My door is always open for you.” Dumbledore smiled, and Fawkes trilled. “Please sit down. Lemon sherbet?” He pointed at the small bowl on his desk.

Harry shook his head. “No, thank you, sir.”

Ron declined the offer as well.

Dumbledore took one himself. “What do you wish to discuss?”

Harry quickly glanced to Ron, who nodded at him, then took a deep breath. “We have some questions about the mission to Gringotts.”

The old wizard nodded. “I see.”

“Some things just… appeared a bit weird, to us,” Harry said. He fidgeted a bit on his chair. “You arranged our trip with the goblins in advance.”

“Yes, I did.”

“So… why did we walk through Diagon Alley? We were seen by a number of people in the Leaky Cauldron, and on the street.” Harry watched the old wizard.

“Yes. There could have Death Eaters among them. Or spies,” Ron added.

“I assure you that you were perfectly safe. I was present as well.” Dumbledore smiled. “And Alastor told me that you were ready for such an outing. He still does not think you are as good as you should be, but he has very demanding standards.”

“Merlin, yes!” Ron muttered.

Harry nodded, but didn’t let this distract him. “But, wouldn’t it have been safer to take the Floo directly to Gringotts? No one would have known about us.”

Dumbledore sighed. “You are wondering if this was a set-up, are you not?”

Harry blinked. That was a bit more forward than he had expected. Nevertheless, he nodded. “Yes, sir. You told us how important it was to keep the Horcruxes secret, and yet Moody told the goblins.”

“And Moody told us just how evil goblins are!” Ron said. “And how greedy! Some of them might turn traitor and tell the Dark Lord.”

Dumbledore slowly nodded. “Indeed. I have to apologise to you for not telling you. I am counting on Tom to learn of this.” He held up a hand. “I did not use you as bait, if you suspect that - I ensured you would be safe.”

“But…” Harry was confused. “If Voldemort learns that we know about his Horcruxes and are hunting them down… he’ll do something about them.”

“You are correct. I expect that Tom will spend quite some efforts to improve the security of his remaining Horcruxes.”
“Blimey!” Ron muttered, “do you plan to have him lead you to their locations? Do you have a spy so close to him?”

Harry stared. Had the Headmaster planned for that?

Dumbledore hesitated, then shook his head. “No. That would have been an ingenious plan, but if I had a spy so close to the Dark Lord, I would have used that to deal with him in a more direct manner. I do not think Tom would tell anyone about his Horcruxes. He distrusts his own followers - and with good reason, I think.”

“But why did you want him to do this then? It’ll make our mission harder and more dangerous!”

Harry couldn’t understand what the Headmaster was thinking.

“It will make him focus on protecting his Horcruxes, and wasting time and resources on improving their safety. And it will make him underestimate us.” Dumbledore smiled. “His own hubris will help us there.”

“But… Merlin’s ghost!” Ron stared at the Headmaster. “It’s a feint! You have another way to kill him!”

Harry blinked. His friend was right. “Why haven’t you told us?”

Dumbledore took a deep breath. “I could say that I wanted you to act naturally. Or that it was a test, to find out if you would see through this plot. But the truth is, I kept this from you because you did not yet need to know.”

“Yet?” Harry frowned. “Were you planning to tell us then?”

“Yes.”

Harry didn’t know if the old wizard was telling him the truth. It made sense, somewhat. But… “Do you think then that the unknown power I supposedly have will vanquish him? Did you find out what it is?”

“I think I have a very good idea of what this power is, yes.” Dumbledore sighed. “I am not yet certain though.”

Ron cut in: “You’re certain enough to use the Horcruxes as a diversion, though.”

Harry pressed his lips together and kept staring at the Headmaster. “What is it then? My link to him? My scar bled when I was too close to his Horcruxes.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, looking far older than Harry had ever seen him. “The prophecy the Dark Lord and you have heard was incomplete. I am the only one who knows the full prophecy.”

“Tell me!” Harry demanded. This was his life, the reason his parents had been killed.

Dumbledore recited the Prophecy Harry and Ron already knew, then continued: “…and he and the Dark Lord will be one, and either will crush the other, for neither can let the other survive or they will lose what they hold most dear. The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month ends.”

“What does that mean? I and the Dark Lord will be one?” Harry felt his stomach drop. “What is my link to him?” When he saw how sad Dumbledore looked, he started to tremble.
“Your scar contains a shard of Voldemort’s soul.”

“What?”

“Damn!”

He had a piece of the Dark Lord in his scar? Harry reached up with his hand, but stopped before he touched it. That evil monster, hiding in his head… He didn’t notice he was panting and shaking until Ron grabbed his arm.

“Mate, calm down!”

“The blood protection contains the soul fragment - up to a point. If you are close to other parts of the Dark Lord’s soul, it grows stronger.” Dumbledore was looking at him with a grave expression. “I am deeply sorry to have to tell you this, Harry.”

“So… we’re going to be one… he’ll possess me, like Quirrell?” He had a sudden vision of the scar splitting, and Voldemort’s head emerging from it, and hunched over, feeling sick. Fawkes trilled, and landed on Harry’s shoulder, rubbing his head against his own. Harry felt calmer, and patted the phoenix in response.

“That is where your power matters, Harry. Through your link, your mind, your souls, touch each other. Tom has decades of experience as a wizard. His knowledge of the Dark Arts makes him my equal in a duel. You cannot hope to match him spell for spell. Nor will you be able to count on the effect of your wands sharing the same core, as you did once already.”

“In the graveyard.”

“Yes. But that scene proved one thing: When it comes to a contest of will, you are the Dark Lord’s equal.”

“That’s my power?” Harry felt like laughing at the absurdity of this. He was to face the Dark Lord… like that?

“You have one advantage over Tom: He cares about no one but himself. He has no friends. And, most importantly, he is ruled by fear. And fear makes him weak.”

“You’re a Gryffindor, Harry!” Ron smiled at him.

Harry didn’t think this would be a good moment to mention that the Sorting Hat had wanted to send him to Slytherin.

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Hogwarts, December 2nd, 1996

Albus Dumbledore stopped smiling as soon as the two boys had left his office. He closed his eyes, pulled off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He felt ashamed of himself for treating Harry like this. Keeping the boy in the dark about the real purpose of the hunt for the Horcruxes. Not telling him about the soul fragment in his scar. Or that he was to face Tom through his link to him, in a battle of wills.

But he was most ashamed that he hadn’t told him about his contingency plan. The link was a weakness of the Dark Lord, through which he could be attacked by various means. But, as Harry and Tom were linked, spells using their link would affect both.
Fawkes landed on his desk, and rubbed his head against Albus’s hand. The phoenix must have sensed his distress, the Headmaster thought. But did he understand how much Albus deserved to suffer, for what he had done? Or was Fawkes’s love unconditional, like a dog’s? Even after decades, Albus couldn’t tell. He patted the bird’s head, and slowly leaned back in his seat.

Should he have told Harry about his plans? Would it reassure the boy that if he failed, all hope would not be lost? Or would it weaken his resolve? Would he fight harder if he thought all depended on him? Which could be true - Albus’s plan was founded on a few assumptions, and was unlikely to deal with the Horcruxes. Although it would buy time to deal with them, and more importantly, to deal with Wizarding Britain.

He scoffed at his rationalisations. If he was honest with himself - and he tried his best to be - then he had to admit that keeping secrets had become second nature for him. After the betrayals in the last war had cost so many lives, he had sworn to not make the same mistake ever again. He had reorganised the Order. Kept it compartmentalised. And kept the information shared with others to a minimum. It had worked - none of the Order cells had been betrayed so far. No families had been attacked and murdered after the enemy had been informed of their safe houses. And none of his plans had been revealed to Tom before they were implemented.

But then again, his plans had been wrecked because others had not known about them, and inadvertently sabotaged them. The Order couldn’t respond in force to Death Eater attacks. And morale suffered because his friends didn’t know all that was being done in the war by other cells. And it hurt those who trusted him, when they realised just how little he trusted them.

He massaged his temples. Should he change? Was it worth the increased risk of betrayal? He had taken precautions so his crucial knowledge would not be lost with him, should he die suddenly, but could he take enough precautions to avoid a repeat of the betrayals of the last war? After he had failed to see just what so many purebloods really thought about muggleborns?

Could he even change if he wanted? Or had keeping secrets from everyone truly become part of his very being?

He didn’t know the answers. But he knew that no matter what he might decide, others would pay the price should he turn out to have been wrong.

He focused on a slightly more urgent problem. Augusta Longbottom. As far as he knew, the old witch was still alive. Severus had managed to find out that Tom had not killed any of his hostages yet. But Albus was certain that the proud witch was suffering. Even if she was not being tortured by the Dark Lord or his followers - and Albus knew how cruel Tom and his ilk were - the knowledge that she was a prisoner of those who had taken her son from her would hurt her greatly.

Albus wished he could save her. Even though Augusta had never forgiven him for the fate Frank and Alice had suffered while fighting for Albus, he respected her. But Severus didn’t know where she was being held. Which, in a perverse way, was a good thing. It meant Albus wouldn’t have to decide that saving Augusta wasn’t worth risking his spy.

Augusta was a skilled witch, with strong convictions. But she was just one member in the Wizengamot - where she was acting as her grandson’s proxy. Severus, though, was a member of Tom’s inner circle. If he could earn the Dark Lord’s trust enough to find his location, the war would be over in a day, and the Dark Lord would be, if not killed, at least reduced to a shade. His reputation would take another blow as well - it was one thing to return from the dead, it was another to keep being killed.

No, even if Albus knew where Augusta was he would not risk Severus for her. No matter how much
he hated himself for it.

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Hogwarts, December 2nd, 1996

Ron Weasley cast a privacy spell as soon as he and Harry were on their way back to the Gryffindor dorms. “So…” he started to speak, then trailed off, not certain what to say.


“We know now why Moody was acting like he did.” Ron smiled.

“And we know I have the Dark Lord’s soul in my head!” Harry bared his teeth.

“In your scar,” Ron corrected him.

“Scar, head - I’m linked to him!” His friend had stopped walking. “I’ll have to face him in my mind!” He tapped his scar, then rubbed it. “It almost feels as if this thing is digging into my skull!”

For a moment, Ron even feared Harry would scratch it bloody, as if that would release the soul fragment. He shuddered at the image that thought conjured. “Mate… you also heard Dumbledore: You can beat the Dark Lord.” He tried to be positive. Harry needed him now.

“I also heard him say once that we need to track down the Horcruxes to beat the Dark Lord!” Harry snarled. But he dropped his hand from his forehead.

“Do you think he was lying?” Ron hadn’t liked that they had been deceived, but he thought the Headmaster’s explanation was reasonable.

“I think he’s hiding more.”

“Well, of course he is. He’s running the Order - you know what Hermione said about organising a resistance group. He can’t tell people who might get captured much.” Ron flashed a weak grin. “I don’t like it either, but it makes sense.”

Harry sighed. “Of course it does. But… damn it! What do I tell Hermione?”

“What?” Ron stared at his friend.

“I’ve got Voldemort in my head!”

“And you mastered Occlumency and have your mother’s protection.”

“Voldemort has certainly mastered Legilimency, and he has taken my blood, so the protection doesn’t work that well any more.” Harry looked like he wanted to hit the wall. With his fist, or his head.

“It still works well enough, right? You don’t feel the Dark Lord until you’re almost on top of a Horcrux.” Ron put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You’ll get that monster.”

“And what if I don’t? What if he crushes me?” Harry shook his head.

“You beat him once. After getting tortured with the Cruciatus, and losing a lot of blood.” Ron wanted to shake some sense into his friend. “Look, we’ll tell Hermione, and discuss the thing. See what she’ll say.” Harry would listen to Hermione, Ron hoped. He usually did.
Harry sighed. He raised his hand up again, towards his head, and Ron snatched it. “Don’t scratch it. Even if it itches.”

“It doesn’t itch.” Harry said, showing his teeth.

“Good.”

“I don’t want to tell her that through the mirror. We need to meet.”

“Yes. As soon as possible,” Ron agreed. Before his friend went crazy. “You can also talk to Sirius, can’t you?”

Harry stiffened. “He doesn’t know about this. You said such secrets need to be kept.”

Ron nodded. It sounded like an excuse to him, but he wouldn’t push. Harry was already on edge. At least Ron had still an important task, after hunting Horcruxes had been revealed to be a ruse: He had to take care of his friend. Keep him from going mad.

“Come on, let’s swing by the kitchen, and grab some snacks.”

“I’m not hungry.” Harry scowled.

Ron almost sighed. “For the rest of our house then. Come on!”

Harry scoffed, but followed him down to the kitchen. Ron hoped that some sweets would help his friend’s mood.

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London, Sutton, December 3rd, 1996

“And this is the living room. As you can see, the appliances are all brand new. You will be hard pressed to find another flat at this price.”

Brenda Brocktuckle hadn’t understood half the things the muggle had told her during the tour of the flat. That the clothes she was wearing itched hadn’t helped either. At least it looked like Martin had managed to follow the woman’s words.

“It comes with garage as well - though if you have two cars you might need to rent another parking space.”

“We don’t have a car,” Brenda said. And they could stash their brooms in that umbrella stand easily. “I haven’t seen a fireplace though.”

“A fireplace? If you want to install an electric one, then you need permission from the landlord, as for all major structural changes to the flat.” The muggle laughed loud. “Not that you could install a real fireplace, of course!”

Brenda wished she could tell the dumb muggle that yes, they could install a real fireplace easily. They were not stupid muggles who could only do one thing and even that rarely well. Instead she smiled and nodded.

“The kitchen has a modern dishwasher too, in addition to the washing machine. The former tenant didn’t use either much - he was a bachelor, you know.” The muggle winked. “He didn’t even sleep at home often, I think.”
Martin nodded. He seemed to understand what those devices were - and why the muggles needed two different machines to clean things. Brenda just needed her wand.

The flat was surrounded by muggles. Many of them had children - the muggle had mentioned it could be a bit loud if the windows were open - and it was in London. It was as safe from mudblood bombs as it could be. The price sounded steep, but then, this was paper money, not real money.

“We’ll take it,” Brenda said.

“Oh? A good decision. You will not regret it.” The woman pulled out a stack of paper. “I have the contract right here, please read through it carefully.”

Brenda glanced at Martin, who winced, but nodded and picked the stack up. While the younger Auror started reading, Brenda went to check the bathroom. The appliances there looked… weird.

“Pardon my curiosity, but… is this the first shared flat for the two of you?”

The muggle had followed her. Brenda nodded, peering at the shower stall. “Yes.”

“Ah. You’re a lucky woman.”

Brenda laughed. “He’s my partner at work. This is just a temporary arrangement - until we can return to our homes. Another co-worker might join us as well.”

“Oh. Were you reassigned to London?”

“Something like that. We decided it would be better to rent a flat together than look for one for each of us.”

“A smart decision!” The woman smiled. “Do you need some decent but not too expensive furniture as well? I know a few businesses with very reasonable prices.”

Brenda shook her head - she had all she needed in her pocket, and she could conjure whatever she might lack. “No, we’re set for furniture.”

“I’m done. You can sign as well, Brenda.” Martin interrupted them, saving Brenda from more inane chat with a stupid muggle. It took another half an hour until the woman was finally gone - she had insisted on showing the two Aurors the basement and attic as well.

More than a bit tired, Brenda turned to Martin. “I’ll inform Parkinson, ask him if he wants to move in as well. You can start arranging the furniture. I want a proper fireplace.”

“Without a Floo connection?” Martin knew as well as she did that the Floo Network Authority was riddled with spies, so they couldn’t be trusted.

“It’s a matter of principle,” Brenda said. A witch’s home had a fireplace. Not those muggle contraptions. Even if the central heating worked, or the muggles would have frozen to death by now.

“Alright.” Martin hesitated, then added: “Do you know how to use those muggle devices in the kitchen?”

“Didn’t they cover that in Muggle Studies?” Brenda asked.

He shook his head. “Not that kind.”

“Well, we don’t need them. We have spells for that. Start with setting up wards too.”
“Alright, boss!” Martin even stood at attention, as if he was a Hit-Wizard. She snorted, and shook her head before apparating away.

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A few hours later, the flat looked more like a proper wizarding home. Fireplace, owl cage, wireless receiver, an ice box, and bookshelves. Parkinson would arrive later - Brenda suspected the Auror wanted to wait until they had set the wards. Which they were in the process of doing. None of them was a Curse-Breaker, but between the two of them, they knew enough to craft some decent protection.

A knock at the door interrupted them, and Brenda frowned. “Do we expect anyone?”

“Might be our neighbours,” Martin said.

“Probably. Cover me.” Brenda didn’t know much about muggle customs, but she knew enough to deal with a noisy neighbour.

She opened the door, hiding her wand behind her back. “Yes?”

“Ah, hello! I’m Susan Farmer, I’m your neighbour.” A middle-aged muggle woman pointed at the door opposite theirs.

“I’m Brenda.”

“I wanted to say hello, and I was wondering... did you already set up your telly?”

Brenda shook her head. “No, we haven’t yet used the electricity.”

“Oh... well, once you do, could you check if your telly is working? Mine stopped working, and I’m trying to find out if the problem is in my flat, or in the house.”

Brenda nodded. There was no way she would try to use any muggle device, but she couldn’t tell the woman that. They wanted to fit in after all.

“Thank you.” The woman was smiling, but she was all but craning her neck to peer inside Brenda’s new flat.

“Hello, ma’am. I’m Martin.” Brenda’s partner stepped into sight. “We’ve just moved in today.”

“Oh, pleased to meet you. I know, Emily told me. She’s the tenant in the first floor. Her telly is working, you know.”

“Good to know.”

“But the Smiths from the second floor, above your flat, their telly isn’t working either. Mr. Smith was very annoyed - he doesn’t want to miss the Derby, you know.”

Brenda had no idea what derby the woman was talking about, but she nodded again. And she had a feeling that she needed to confound the woman if she wanted to get rid of her.

“I’ll go back to arranging the furniture,” Martin said, ignoring her glare.

He better get started on the muggle-repelling wards, Brenda thought, if he knew what was good for him!
London, Greenwich, December 3rd, 1996

Hermione Granger really missed Grimmauld Place. Instead of meeting her two best friends there, she was meeting them in a café, in disguise. She preferred a familiar place for the kind of talk they were about to have. The witch checked her watch. It was almost time. She grinned ruefully - without her to nag them, they probably would arrive at the last minute in their classrooms. She smiled when she remembered their first Transfiguration lesson.

She missed Hogwarts too.

She spotted them before they entered the café. They were disguised as well, but she knew them better than anyone else. They didn’t change their height and build, nor how they walked. And apparently, they had recognised her too - the two came straight towards her table.

Ron stepped forward and hugged her while Harry hung back. “Harry’s in a dark mood,” he whispered into her ear, then released her. She noticed that when she went and hugged Harry - her friend flinched, and was stiff, then hugged her back hard, and hesitated to let go.

She cast a privacy spell as soon as they had ordered, her wand swishing under the table, then leaned forward. “What happened?” This was certainly more important that talking about their dates.

Harry and Ron exchanged glances, causing her to frown. Couldn’t they just get on with it?

Harry sighed. “We were in Gringotts last Friday. Tracking down a Horcrux with Moody. And… well, we thought the whole mission was handled a bit weird.”

“How so?” Hermione frowned.

“We didn’t travel directly to the bank, but to the Leaky Cauldron, then walked to the bank.”

“What? Were you disguised?” Hermione couldn’t believe that they had been so… careless? Voldemort had spies all over Diagon Alley, Hermione was certain.

“No.”

“Moody let that happen?” Hermione shook her head. “Did you check him for Polyjuice?”

Harry snorted. “We should have… but then again, if he had been a traitor, he could have easily cursed us both.” He shook his head. “No, Dumbledore later told us that he had been there as well, so it was safe.”

“Supposedly,” Ron added.

“But,” Harry went on, “when we went to his office two days ago, he told us that he staged the whole thing - he wants Voldemort to know about us hunting the Horcruxes. So that he’ll waste resources on protecting them, and doesn’t suspect the real plan to kill him.”

Hermione took a deep breath. The real plan to kill the Dark Lord? The Horcrux hunt was a diversion? “What is the real plan to kill him?”

Harry tapped his scar with a wry grin. “This contains a part of his soul, and links us two. The Headmaster said that I’ll have to defeat the Dark Lord in a battle of wills.”

Hermione gaped, then covered her mouth with her hand. “No.”
Harry nodded. “Yes. Shocking, right?”

Hermione forced herself to chuckle. Harry carried a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul in his cursed scar. And they were linked! That was horrible! “That’s… did he say how this will happen?”

“He didn’t. But since we’re linked, I think it’ll be possession or something like it.”

Hermione winced. Possession. Like Quirrell.

Harry must have known what she’d think of, since he nodded again. “I’ve had a nightmare where my scar splits, and his head pushes out of it.”

“Ugh.” Ron groaned, then looked at the waitress that was approaching with their order. “I just lost my appetite.”

Hermione didn’t feel like eating anything either, but when she saw Harry’s expression - her friend had just found another thing to blame himself for, she just knew it - she started to eat her own cake. Even if she barely tasted it. Harry had a soul shard inside his scar! How was that possible? His blood protection had been so powerful, it had burned Voldemort! Maybe the Killing Curse had been stopped, but opened a weakness in the protection, which had led to the scar, which had absorbed a part of the soul when the Dark Lord’s body had disintegrated...

“See? I told you, she’s already thinking of a way to handle this.”

Ron’s cheerful - too cheerful - voice interrupted her. But she played along and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry… I was just considering how this was possible.”

“We don’t expect a solution right now. Tomorrow is fine,” her friend said in a teasing tone.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she answered, in a dry voice.

“Anyway… you see, I have a link to Voldemort. A part of him, even. So… I don’t think…”

“He’s trying to say that he thinks he’s not safe to be around,” Ron interrupted their friend. “I tried to tell him that was bollocks, but he doesn’t listen too well.”

Hermione sighed. “Honestly, Harry, if you were not safe to be around, don’t you think Dumbledore would have said something?” It was the best argument she could think of, without a proper examination of the scar and some research.

“He lied to me about the Horcruxes once already. Lying about this would seem par for the course.”

“But if you were a danger to those around you, then he’d risk far more by letting you walk around. Sirius’s home, the Gryffindor’s dorm, this meeting - Dumbledore would be risking far too much if there was a danger that you’d be possessed at a whim.” The longer she argued, the more sense it made to Hermione. “No, we have to assume that your mother’s protection effectively seals that scar up. And there’s your Occlumency. You haven’t felt any signs of possession, have you?”

Harry shook his head. “Only nightmares about it.”

She nodded. “Then you’re safe.” To be around, at least. “It likely will need some effort to activate the link.”

“The scar started bleeding when he was close to the Horcrux.”

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from swearing, and nodded. “Or close proximity then.
You’re still safe. You can even serve as an early warning system with regards to Voldemort’s presence.”

“Just what I always wanted to grow up into - a living Sneakoscope!” But Harry was smiling again.

“Well, I’ll certainly appreciate your new power, mate!” Ron said. Her other best friend was eating his cake now.

They talked about less important things while they finished their tea. School. Hermione really was missing Hogwarts, but she tried to hide it, so her friends wouldn’t feel guilty and stop talking about it. She wanted to know what was happening at Hogwarts - and not just the things relevant to the war, but also how and what her friends and acquaintances were doing. Dear Lord, she thought - she had turned into a gossip!

If Lavender could see her now! She chuckled at her realisation.

“So… with Harry straightened out…” Ron said. She noticed that he was looking nervous now. “What about, you know, dating?”

“Dating?” Hermione kept smiling with an effort. She was a Gryffindor, she shouldn’t be afraid of talking about anything. “Well…” Hermione took a deep breath. “I loved both dates.”

Her friends nodded.

“And while they were different, I couldn’t really say which I preferred.”

The boys exchanged glances. “Oh,” Ron said.

He seemed, to her surprise, more relieved than disappointed. She looked at Harry, who was smiling.

“So…” She trailed off.

“So?” Harry leaned forward.

“The whole ‘let’s date and see if we’re compatible’ didn’t work out as I thought,” Hermione said, wincing. “I’m sorry.”

“Well… what now?” Ron asked

“We go on like before?” Hermione proposed.

“You mean another set of dates?” Ron was glancing at Harry, who nodded.

“Yes.” Hermione hadn’t exactly meant that, but she hadn’t not meant that either. She was such a coward when it came to relationships! She was, she realised with a sinking feeling, acting exactly like a heroine in one of the novels her mother read, torn between two men! Or boys!

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Hogwarts, December 4th, 1996

“I hope you’re happy with the information you got from Avery.” Aberforth said, stepping out of the fireplace in Albus Dumbledore’s office.

The Headmaster raised his eyebrows at his brother. His first impulse was to answer with a sarcastic ‘I am doing well, thank you for asking’, but that would just antagonise Aberforth needlessly - his
brother had a chip on his shoulder about Albus’s ‘habit of trying to lecture him’. Instead he said: “We have the names of two more Death Eaters we did not yet know, Adalbert Bulstrode and Felix Macmillan. And the address of Macmillan. Although I think, as expected, that we will have to wait with using this information. At least until our enemies believe that Avery died in the flames and do not expect an attack any more.” Which would take some time.

“And you only had to send kids into war for it.”

Albus hid his annoyance. They had gone over this before. “Kids who were training to fight, eagerly, for months before I made contact with them.”

“When we interrogated Avery, they tried to assure me that they wouldn’t lose their temper and kill him before he had told us all we wanted to know. And they didn’t. Killed him cleanly afterwards.”

Albus rubbed his chin. “That is remarkably cold-blooded. But, given the circumstances and the information, I am impressed by their self-control.”

His brother stood up and glared at him. “Albus! Do you realise what you’re saying? You’re impressed that two kids killed a man in cold blood!”

“I’m impressed they haven’t killed him in a rage, or tortured him.” Which, given the way the war was being fought, was not unlikely.

“Two of them were wounded. Luckily, they were facing new recruits, and they weren’t hit by dark curses,” Aberforth added. “Otherwise, one would have lost his leg. And the other would have interesting scars.”

Albus nodded. He wasn’t about to say something trivial, but true - like that the Muggleborn Resistance members knew the risks.

“You don’t really care, do you? As long as the Dark Lord is defeated, there are only acceptable losses, huh?” Aberforth stood in front of his desk, glaring at him baring his teeth,

“I do care. But as I told you before - those young wizards and witches would be fighting anyway. With our help, we can reduce the risk for them - all kind of risks. Left to themselves, they would run the danger of matching their enemies atrocity for atrocity.”

His brother scoffed. “I doubt that. Hermione’s keeping the more bloodthirsty members on a short leash.”

‘Hermione’ was it now, Albus noted. “Maybe. But I know how much we have to compromise when we’re fighting a war. People change in one.” He had seen that before. A Prussian village, massacred.

Aberforth scoffed once again. “So… you’re not acting on the information right away. Is there anyone else you want these children to kill for you?”

Albus frowned, but didn’t react to the barb. “As a matter of fact, yes.” He pushed a piece of parchment over to his brother. “We have discovered the current residence of Draco Malfoy. He leads a group of young wizards and witches in the Dark Lord’s service. They meet there regularly.”

“And you want the Resistance to hit it?”

“I want them to capture Mister Malfoy. Not just for the information he knows. If he can be persuaded to part with some of his family fortune, then this would both hamper the Dark Lord’s war efforts, as well as help ours,” Albus said.
“They’re going to finish what they started at Hogwarts, aren’t they?”

Albus sighed. “Unfortunately, the group led by Mister Malfoy has been rather active. They have yet to murder anyone though, so I hope they’ll be captured rather than killed outright. I will certainly stress the need for information.”

“And now you want the Resistance to stop following the course of action you condoned before and not kill the Death Eater spawn.” He shook his head. “Do you honestly think they should be saved?”

“Not at the expense of others, no. But even leaving the morality aside, I think it would be more beneficial for our cause if they are not killed, which would let other followers of Voldemort inherit their family fortunes, but instead taken prisoner.”

“Kidnapping for gold and hostages…” Aberforth shook his head. “What a noble way to wage war.”

“There is nothing inherently noble in war, as you know well enough.” Albus saw his brother scowl when that remark hit home. “So… can I count on your help with that endeavor?”

“I’ll do what I can, though I don’t know if I’ll be able to join them on this mission. Unless I pose as an informant with a personal grudge.”

Albus smiled. “That would work very well I think.”

“All those lies are going to have some repercussions.”

“A price I will gladly pay if it means I can save more people,” Albus said.

“You will? Well, let’s hope that no one else will pay the price instead.”

Aberforth shook his head and scowled as he stood up and walked towards the fireplace. Obviously, their discussion was over. Seeing his brother leave in anger hurt - even more so since Albus’s actions might have rendered any possibility of reconciliation impossible.

But he’d rather suffer himself than sacrifice others.

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Outside Withersea, Yorkshire, Britain, December 5th, 1996

The Dark Lord Voldemort frowned when he read the report from one of his spies. Harry Potter had been seen entering Gringotts after business hours last week, protected by Moody. The Dark Lord had been certain that the Boy-Who-Lived would not have met the goblins at that time of the day just to talk about his finances. And so he had ordered his spies to find out what exactly Potter had done in the bank.

And his spy had come through, although it had taken more than a few days. He scowled. Potter and Moody had found the Horcrux Voldemort had hidden there, in the deepest levels of the bank, tied to the wards. That was worrying - the enchantments he had crafted had hidden this soul anchor even from the paranoid goblins’ eyes. How had the boy managed to find it? He knew it wasn’t the work of Moody - if the Auror had been able to track the Horcrux, say with his enchanted eye, then he would not have brought the boy with him. It was Potter then. But how? Was this ‘the power he knew not’? That was a possibility he’d have to take into account.

And it meant that soul anchors he had thought safe were not. Depending on how far Potter could track Horcruxes, even those he had hidden on the continent might not be safe. Fortunately, the Dark
Lord had not limited himself to Europe. And even if the boy was able to track those soul anchors, he’d have a very difficult time getting to them. Even, or especially, with Dumbledore’s help - some of the locations he had chosen to hide his Horcruxes were the domains of wizards who loathed Dumbledore. Still, creating another spare would not go amiss. Just in case.

On the other hand, and this brought a smile to his face, if Potter could track his Horcruxes, then this meant there would be an opportunity to lure the Boy-Who-Lived into a trap. Or ambush him on the way to a Horcrux’s hiding location. Dumbledore must be desperate to risk the boy like this. Unless… of course! The boy was bait. Bait for a trap for Voldemort! That was Dumbledore’s plan!

He chuckled. He wouldn’t fall for that ploy. He’d watch how the Boy-Who-Lived risked his life finding his soul anchors, and replace them faster than Potter could find and destroy them. And maybe some of the defences of his Horcruxes would be enough to kill the boy.

Chuckling, he put the report down and grabbed a fresh sheet of parchment. There was another boy he had to deal with. Longbottom. The boy would give his word to stay neutral, or his grandmother would suffer like the boy’s parents had suffered. Or worse. That should suffice to break the boy, and make him pliable enough for further demands at a later date.

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Chapter 20: Assault

‘Some historians have claimed that the surge of pureblood wizards and witches moving to live among muggles in the autumn and winter of 1996 led to them having a better understanding of muggle culture. In my opinion, such claims are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how those purebloods lived. They may have rented and moved into muggle houses, but they did not live among muggles. Afraid for their safety, they did not use the door of their flats, since that would have taken them outside their wards. Instead they relied mainly on Apparition to enter and leave their homes. Even if there was a garden, they would only have used it if it was covered by their wards - which meant they would not mingle with muggles. Even more telling was that the wards themselves prevented the use of any and all muggle technology, further preventing the pureblood refugees from experiencing how muggles lived. Many even went as far as to ward their flats against muggles, effectively isolating themselves completely.

When you consider the fact that at this time during the war, the Muggleborn Resistance was feared by a segment of the pureblood population almost as much as the Dark Lord had been in the First Blood War - although by a different group of purebloods - then you inevitably come to the conclusion that this move into muggle homes led to nothing more than purebloods using muggles as human shields - not a stance that would lead any among the purebloods to feel any empathy for muggles.

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Ealing, December 6th, 1996

Hermione Granger was glad that the Headmaster had agreed to a sensible location for their meeting, instead of the hotels and clubs Sirius usually wanted. She was sitting on a bench, as if waiting for the bus, and reading a book - quite normal for a girl in the afternoon. She had to move a bit carefully though - the training that morning had been hard on her. Not as hard as on Seamus, though, who had been a bit too reckless, again, and had paid the price in bruises, not just sore muscles.

Some of her friends had grumbled about the intensive training, citing their recent success as proof that they were doing well. She had put her foot down though - they could do better, and they would have to do better. Sooner or later, something would go wrong, and then they would be glad for all the training she was putting them through.

She wasn’t actually reading the book, of course - she had to keep an eye on her surroundings. Even with Justin as backup, invisible and on a roof nearby, it would not do to neglect her security.

“I see an older man walking towards you, should be turning the corner soon.”

She heard Justin’s voice through the enchanted earring she wore. It wasn’t a perfect system; Hermione and John had barely gotten it to transmit sound. John was working on refining it, but he hadn’t found a way to protect it against others listening in - other than picking a frequency that was not used by Wizards. They would have to use code names until then, to provide minimal security. Another thing they would need to train for. “Alright,” she whispered.

As announced, an older man walked around the corner. The size and build fit Dumbledore, but that
didn’t have to mean anything; the old wizard could be using Polyjuice.

“Is this seat taken, Miss?”

The voice though was his. She looked him over. He had shaved his beard and dyed and styled his hair. Together with muggle clothes, it made him appear like a different - and younger - man. And he was carrying the agreed-upon newspaper from the day before.

“No, please sit down,” she answered.

He took a seat, gingerly stretching his legs. Both cast privacy spells.

“How are you and your friends doing?” he asked, not looking at her, but at an ad across the street.

“We’re doing fine. More training, to avoid the mistakes we made.”

“I see.” He smiled, as if she had just handed in an essay for extra-credit.

Hermione smiled in return, then scolded herself. She wasn’t in school anymore. She shouldn’t crave her teacher’s approval.

“Have both of your friends who were hurt recovered?”

“Yes. Though one of them seems determined to hurt himself again.” Hermione pursed her lips.

Dumbledore chuckled. Then he grew serious, and passed a rolled up scroll to her. “This is the new address of Draco Malfoy. His home also serves as a meeting spot for the other young wizards and witches who follow him in the service of the Dark Lord.”

Hermione had to struggle a bit to coolly nod, instead of smiling widely. Malfoy’s home! That creep had wanted all muggleborns to die back in their second year! He was rotten to the core, and him having escaped the bombing of Malfoy Manor had irked her a lot.

“I have to stress that, if possible, Mister Malfoy should be captured so he can be interrogated. He may have crucial information. But do not risk your lives for it, please. Just do not simply turn the house into a crater.”

“If I can study the house beforehand, I can calculate the force of the bomb needed to take down the wards - provided it’s not standing near other houses,” Hermione said.

“Fascinating. A quite ingenious, if a bit heavy-handed, solution to wards. Some Curse-Breakers might want to use the method as well, I think - for more peaceful pursuits.”

Hermione wasn’t convinced that this method would ever be safe enough for civilian use, but who knew what could be developed? “That should shock them enough so we can capture Malfoy.”

“Please capture anyone else, if possible. Not only may others have valuable information as well, but most of them are the current, if still minor, heirs to their family fortunes - and Wizengamot seats. Having them taken prisoner would offer several more possibilities to weaken the Dark Lord’s cause further than killing them out of hand.”

Hermione could see the sense in that, but she had a duty towards her group. “We’ll certainly not go out of our way to kill them, but we’ll not take undue risks to capture them.” She hadn’t forgotten how the Headmaster had used Harry and Ron. She almost asked about them, and that trip, but held her tongue. They’d told her that they had settled that, after all.
“I cannot ask for more.” He smiled. “My brother should be available to help you again. You can claim that he was the informant for this.”

That would make the mission safer - the Death Eaters would respond quicker than Aurors, Hermione was certain - but it might lead to more questions from the rest of the group. She nodded. “Very well, sir.” She could handle questions better than dead friends. “I will inform my group that the prisoners will be used to extort gold then, but they might expect a cut.” More gold certainly wouldn’t hurt. Sirius was generous, but she felt as if she was taking part of Harry’s money as well. If she could get Death Eater gold to pay for waging war against them, that would be ideal. “How quickly should this be done?”

“There is no special hurry. We have them under observation. But should they decide to launch an attack, our hand might be forced to prevent further innocent victims.”

Or rather, her and her friends’ hand. “I’ll get on it then, sir.” She nodded at him. “Anything else?”

“I am still preparing the facilities to hold prisoners - they will be ready in two days.”

“Good.” Hermione didn’t expect to be told where those facilities were. She wouldn’t have told him either. She checked the schedule for the buses. A few more minutes until the next one arrived. “Have you read the latest article in the Prophet, sir?”

He sighed. “I have, yes. Miss Skeeter’s work has grown more and more extremist lately. She also seems rather terrified of you.”

That evil liar should be terrified, Hermione thought. She hadn’t forgotten what Skeeter had done in their fourth year - or their fifth. The only reason she hadn’t chosen her as a target was that the articles Skeeter wrote were such blatant lies, they discredited the Prophet - or at least they should. Though anyone who still believed that muckraker was beyond help anyway. “She still hasn’t fled, or stopped writing though.”

“Do you think she’s under pressure to keep writing?”

Hermione nodded. “I think that’s a possibility.”

“I will have someone look into it.”

The young witch smiled.

*****

London, East End, December 6th, 1996

Hermione Granger smiled at the Resistance members assembled in the living room - or what had become their living room - of their headquarters. “As you know, I’ve met with an informant today.”

“Yes, your secret informant,” Dean mumbled, loud enough even Hermione heard it.

She ignored it, but noted with some pleasure that the majority of the group glared at Dean. “I’ve been given the location of a new target.”

“A new target? What about the information we received from Avery’s interrogation? That information almost cost me my legs!” Seamus, of course, wasn’t deterred by glares at his friend.

“We’ll be waiting on striking at those until the Death Eaters believe they’re safe,” Hermione said. “In
the meantime, we will be focusing on Malfoy’s new home.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“We got the bastard!”

Hermione smiled. As she had expected, everyone was very eager to finally deal with Malfoy. That bigot had tormented every one of them for years - even the older students during Umbridge’s reign. She waited until the excitement had died down a bit. “He’s been working directly for the Dark Lord, as far as we know, and he has been leading a group of Slytherins in raids. Two of them died in the attack on the home of the Weasleys.”

“Good riddance!” Seamus said, smiling widely. Many nodded.

“Since Draco is reporting directly to Voldemort, the goal is to capture him alive for interrogation.” Hermione looked at every member, to impress how important that was.

“As long as we kill him afterwards.” John shrugged.

“We want to see him die!” Dean said.

“We deserve that!” Seamus added.

Hermione glanced around, then nodded. Never give an order you know won’t be obeyed, the Major had taught her that. “It’ll be a clean execution.”

Seamus opened his mouth, but Dean laid his hand on the Irish wizard’s arm and shook his head, stopping what Hermione was certain would have been a protest.

“The members of his group - Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Davis have been identified - should be taken alive as well, if possible. Don’t take too many risks for that though,” Hermione continued.

“Why? Do they know anything important as well?” Sally-Anne asked.

“Well, Draco’s probably not smart enough to keep information secret - you know how he always boasted and bragged,” John said.

“Still, they wouldn’t know anything Draco doesn’t know. If we have Draco we don’t need to take any risk to capture the rest; we can just kill them.” Sally-Anne’s ruthless statement surprised Hermione. She hadn’t expected that. But then, Sally-Anne was in love with Justin and probably feared for his safety. Hermione could understand that - if she thought Harry and Ron were asked to take pointless risks…

“They might know the names and locations of family members who are Death Eaters. Malfoy wouldn’t know about them. Further, they are the heirs of their families. Greengrass and Davis have not just inherited large fortunes, but seats in the Wizengamot as well. If they are killed, then those go to the next of kin - another Death Eater sympathiser or recruit, in all likelihood,” Hermione explained. “Astoria Greengrass already tried to kill the Gryffindor third years, as you know. So, if they are captured instead, that gold and maybe even that influence can be used for our cause.”

“How would we do that?” Mary asked. “And we can’t really keep prisoners; there are not enough of us to guard them and keep fighting.”
Hermione shook her head. “We can’t do it. But others can. We’ll get our fair share of the gold though,” she added quickly.

“Can we trust them?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes,” she stated. “Implicitly.”

“But you won’t tell us who they are,” Dean said.

“No, I won’t. That’s not how resistance cells work.” Hermione stared him down.

“And if you die?” Seamus asked. “What then? No one but you knows those people.”

“Precautions have been taken,” Hermione said. She didn’t want to be too specific. “We don’t have to be concerned about that; all we have to do is hand our captives over. After Malfoy’s execution, we’re done.”

“Crabbe and Goyle are not that rich. Makes no sense leaving them alive.” Seamus said.

She was getting tired of this. “If they are not useful alive, and have done enough, they’ll be killed as well. In that case, we’ll send Malfoy to his death with his two grunts.”

Seamus looked like he wanted to argue further, but since she had just given him what he had asked for, he couldn’t. Hermione almost smirked.

“Now… we’ll be observing the house. It’s isolated, so we’ll be able to simply blow the wards away. I’ll need some time to calculate the amount of explosives necessary. We’ll be striking when they are gathered, so we can get the entire group. There’s no time pressure, unless they start to plan an attack on others; in that case we’ll hit them right away.”

Everyone seemed to agree with that.

“And in the meantime, we’ll practise indoor assaults and broom interception. We can’t let them escape.”

That was received by groans all around.

“What about tunnels?” Tania asked.

“We’ll be looking for those as well. But if we cover enough of the area with Anti-Apparition Jinxes, even tunnels won’t help them.” Hermione would still look for a way to scan for those. Just in case.

“Any other questions?” She waited a few seconds. “Then let’s get started!”

*****

Hogwarts, December 7th, 1996

Ron Weasley was still rubbing his shoulder - he had landed quite hard on it when he had dodged one of Moody’s more painful spells - even an hour after the training session had ended and he and Harry had returned to the dorms. He could go to Madam Pomfrey, maybe claim he had a little accident with his broom… he shook his head. He could endure this. He had to if he wanted to make a difference, as Hermione put it.

He stared at the embers in the fireplace nearby. He had thought he was doing something important, crucial even, helping Harry find the soul anchors that kept Voldemort from dying. Keep him safe,
protect him against Death Eaters. But it was just a distraction. A ruse of the Headmaster’s. Harry didn’t need his help to defeat Voldemort - his friend would do that alone, inside his mind.

Ron couldn’t help with that. He snorted, thinking of the jokes that his brothers would make about him and minds. Harry would be defeating the Dark Lord. Hermione was killing Death Eaters in droves. And Ron? He was Harry’s moral support. A joke, in other words.

Well, not entirely. He doubted that Harry could simply stay safe at Hogwarts and kill Voldemort with his mind. The two would have to meet. Which meant a battle. Which meant that someone would have to protect Harry’s back while he faced the Dark Lord.

Ron could do that. Would do that. Harry was his best friend, and he’d rather die than let him down. He still felt ashamed when he thought of the Tournament. He had been so stupid, so petty… He shook his head and hissed through his clenched teeth. If Harry died, Hermione would be devastated. And it would be Ron’s fault. He ignored the tiny voice in the back of his head which whispered that if Harry died, Ron would have Hermione.

He noticed Ginny heading his way, but kept staring at the glowing remains of the logs in the fireplace.

“What are you moping about?” His sister let herself fall into the armchair next to his.

He glanced at her, turning his head just enough to meet her eyes. He wasn’t in the mood for an interrogation. “The war,” he grunted.

“Oh.” Ginny frowned. But as he had expected, his sister didn’t let his attitude stop her. “Well, what’s going on with Neville?”

“What?” This time he turned his head.

“Neville Longbottom. Same year as you, has his bed next to yours.”

“Your sarcasm needs more work,” he spat. “What about him? And why do you know where he sleeps?”

“From the map.” She shook her head, then leaned forward. “What’s going on? He looks worse than I’ve ever seen him and barely talks to anyone, not even the teachers. Didn’t you notice?”

Ron hadn’t, actually. He knew the boy had been crying at night, but that was understandable, wasn’t it? And not something he thought Neville wanted to talk about. And, Ron told himself, he had had more important things to worry about.

He must have hesitated a bit too long to answer since Ginny scoffed. “Really? Merlin’s pants! He’s your roommate!”

“Harry and I have been busy.”

“Yes, yes, your secret missions.” She rolled her eyes and flipped her hair back over her shoulder.

He quickly cast a privacy spell. “Ginny!”

“Oh, come on - everyone knows you’re on some secret mission, or whatever. Think we have missed how you and Harry disappear so often?” Ginny waved his concern away. “We won’t tell anyone.”

“People can read your minds,” he whispered.
That made her eyes widen in surprise for a moment, then she pouted. “As long as you don’t tell us what you’re doing, it’s OK. But Neville’s not OK.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think the Dark Lord sent him another letter.”

“Did you tell Dumbledore?”

She shook her head. “He would know already, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe. Probably.” Ron wasn’t quite certain. “Wouldn’t hurt telling him.” And Dumbledore might know how to help Neville - Ron certainly didn’t. And he doubted that Harry knew either. He didn’t know how he’d react, in Neville’s place. How could you sacrifice your family, even if it was the right thing to do? “I’ll tell him.”

“Good.”

He expected her to leave, but she looked around, and leaned further forward. “So, how are things with you and Hermione?”

“You mean, how are things with her and Harry.”

“Oh.” She looked at him with wide eyes.

He winced. She had misunderstood him. “No, they are not together. I meant, you want to know how things are between Harry and her.”

“Well, yes.” She grinned.

He stared at her. “We’re still sounding things out.” He didn’t want to lie to her, or tell her off, but this was a private matter, between him and his friends.

“Why has Harry been so down then?”

“That wasn’t because of his love life. And no, I’m not going to tell you why he was down.”

“I can ask him myself!”

“Yes, you can.”

She huffed and stood up. “See if I don’t!”

He watched her leave, and wondered if she’d actually do it. She was a Weasley, and a Gryffindor, so she might. Although Harry was already up in their room, probably sleeping, or trying to. He blinked. That might not stop Ginny if she was riled up. On the other hand, she hadn’t yet talked to Harry about her feelings, and it had been weeks since she had told Ron.

He returned to watching the embers in the fireplace. Some things were best left alone. His sister’s love life was one of those things. Unless, of course, someone hurt her.

*****

Dorset, Britain, December 7th, 1996

“Ah, there she is, the Bane of Bigotry!”

“‘Bane of Bigotry’? Really?” Hermione shook her head at Fred and George.
Fred shrugged, grinning. “You’re the terror of the Death Eaters. Another year or two, and they’ll call you “The-One-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“I doubt that,” Hermione said dryly.

“Scythe of the Slytherins?” George asked, with his head cocked to the side.

Hermione rubbed her temple and ignored the two while she looked around inside their wizard tent. It was not as luxuriously furnished as the one Arthur Weasley had borrowed for the World Cup. Sirius might have cut a few corners there. Not that she could blame him - why spend gold on frivolous things for such a mission? “So… what’s the status of Malfoy’s home?”

“Unchanged. He’s not home that often, and apart from Crabbe and Goyle, he hasn’t had visitors since the last meeting of his group,” Fred said. “You’ll need to keep it under constant surveillance though, so you can strike when all the Death Eaters are visiting.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Hermione nodded. The Resistance had enough members for that. “But if there are too many, we might wait until Malfoy is alone instead. If he’s as close to the Dark Lord as Dumbledore suspects, help will arrive quickly.” Hopefully not Voldemort himself - Aberforth wouldn’t be enough to stall for long.

George agreed with her. Fred scowled. “Those witches are dangerous spies. We need to take them out.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Hermione assured him. “But Malfoy is the priority. Now… I’ll have to study the wards, so I can prepare the bomb to take them down.” If she made a mistake, the results wouldn’t be pretty. A bit too much, and she’d level the building, killing everyone inside. A bit too little, and it wouldn’t take the wards down, and result in Malfoy knowing that his hideout was compromised. Judging by the twins’ expressions, they were aware of that. It couldn’t be helped though.

“I’ll come with you. Just in case,” George said.

“If Harry and Ron kill you for hitting on their girl, I get your belongings,” Fred joked, earning a glare from Hermione and his brother. As much as she appreciated and respected the twins for their innovation, she wished they’d be more serious. Far more serious.

Half an hour later, Hermione was studying the wards through her customised Omnioculars while hidden by spells and carefully arranged bushes. The wards were not exactly weak, but a far cry from powerful. The Resistance’s HQ had better wards. The house looked sturdy too - another safety margin.

She started to take notes of her readings - she could calculate the explosive needed later, at home. At headquarters. Once she was done, she whispered: “We can leave now.”

“Ah…” George said, “There’s a thing I wanted to talk about with you.”

“Yes?” Hermione frowned. Was that why he had come along? “What has Fred done?”

She heard a surprised hiss, and a muttered “Scary.” Then George whispered: “He’s taking this very personally. I mean, I warned him about those girls. But he was all over them. One or both, I don’t know - but he was in love, I think.”

“That must have hurt,” Hermione said. If Harry and Ron had betrayed her like that… she didn’t know what she’d do.
“Yes. For a while, I feared he might do something foolish.” George sighed. “He wants them to die, you know.”

“We kill Death Eaters. We only agreed to try to take them prisoner since the Headmaster asked me to.” Hermione didn’t think they were in the best spot to discuss this.

“Yes. I just… it would help him and me a lot if we could find out just what they were planning for us.”

That was standard practice. He would know that. Hermione narrowed her eyes. “What are you trying to ask me?”

“Please, capture them. Fred and I need to know what they thought about us. I don’t want Fred to wonder what might have been, you know?”

Hermione resisted the urge to rub her forehead. “We’ll do what we can. Let’s return now.”

At least someone else’s love life was as messed up as hers.

******

Dorset, Britain, December 8th, 1996

“Nice setup you’ve got here. Though not as cozy as I expected.”

Hermione Granger chuckled at Aberforth’s comment upon entering the wizarding tent. “It’s not mine. I sort of inherited it.” And she hadn’t seen the need to change the furniture. She had cleaned it though.

The old wizard nodded and sat down on a conjured seat. “So. Albus told you about this.”

“The operation? Yes. He wants Malfoy alive, and if possible, the other members of his little Death Eater cell as well.” She pointed at the enchanted scrolls of parchment with the transcripts from the Wireless Voles. “We’ve been monitoring the house for days now, and have been training for the assault.” And arranging it so she could meet Aberforth when she was alone here had taken some scheduling. Most of the Resistance was enjoying a night out in town, after a special training session this morning, while she had graciously offered to man the surveillance post.

He nodded. “I’m to pose as an informant with a personal grudge, wanting to observe the attack myself. So I can help, if needed.”

She frowned slightly. “If you help then that cover will be blown.” Her friends suspected something already - even though some probably suspected everyone she met to be her secret contact.

“Of course. But that’s better than needing my help and not having it.” Aberforth snorted. “Malfoy may be an idiot, but he’s rich and he’s close to the Dark Lord. I doubt he’s just trusting that no one can find him.”

“He isn’t,” Hermione said. “He hasn’t gone into details near one of the Voles, but he mentioned reinforcements they could call upon. The wards won’t stop us, but we’ll have a rather narrow window before we have to leave or face a sizeable Death Eater force.”

“How do you plan to leave then?”

“Brooms.” She didn’t like them, but they were the best way to retire from a battle - especially at
night. She hoped Malfoy would gather his group in the evening, at least. And some covering fire from their machine guns would hopefully discourage pursuit.

“I’ll have to bring my own then.”

Hermione didn’t believe he left his home without a shrunken broom in his pocket - she didn’t either, despite her aversion to flying on it - but nodded. If she had the time to fix the invisibility enchantment on the van, they could use it, though they would need to remove the studio gear first. Maybe another flying van would be a good addition. Enchanted to be more durable too. Armored, even. She would be able to stomach the A-Team jokes from Seamus and Dean. “The main problem is that we have to find a way to stop them from fleeing on brooms.” Preferably one that didn’t impede the Resistance as well.

“Have you thought about filling the sky with conjured animals?” Aberforth asked. “Sometimes the simple solutions are the best.”

“We’ve discussed that.” Dennis had wanted Pterosaurs, but the principle was the same. “They would be a tad vulnerable, and their ability to stop a broom rider seems questionable, unless acting in a swarm. And even then, a Shield Charm might allow them to break through.” Which was why Dennis had asked for ‘flying dinosaurs’.

“Unless the animal’s presence scares them off even trying to fly away.”

“All of the ones who would achieve that are not native to Britain.” She had checked.

“Well, most people don’t think clearly when they are attacked, and see a dragon fly overhead.”

“None of us can transfigure or conjure a dragon.” Hermione pursed her lips. She thought she could learn, but she’d take a lot of time. That kind of spectacular magic seemed to suit Harry, who had mastered a Patronus Charm in their third year, and then driven away dozens of Dementors. She didn’t want him involved with this. He was needed at Hogwarts, after all, he couldn’t hide with her. Ron had seen dragons up close when he visited his brother Charlie, but Hermione doubted that would let him create one through Transfiguration or Conjuration.

“I can.”

“That would pretty much ruin your cover.”

“Right.” He didn’t sound as if he’d mind that too much, Hermione thought - and wondered why that would be the case. Anyone caught with the Resistance would have to go into hiding - the Ministry was still hunting them vigorously.

“Covering the airspace with nets is not feasible - and nets could easily be dispelled or destroyed.” She had run the numbers. “We’ll have to rely on air cover and shock and awe. Though we’ll add conjured birds - owls would be very good for their size and night vision.” Hermione had thought about enlarging animals, but any sizeable change would ruin their ability to fly. “And we need to keep an eye out for Death Eaters arriving to save Malfoy.”

It would be so much easier if they could simply kill Malfoy. She knew how much explosives they’d need to turn the house into a crater.

And she’d have more than enough around - should the Death Eaters arrive too quickly, and force them to leave, they’d blow up Malfoy and his group with his house before leaving.

*****
Even sitting in the living room, eating breakfast, Daphne Greengrass didn’t feel safe. She hadn’t felt safe in her home for months, but lately it had grown worse. After she and Tracey had barely escaped with their lives from the Weasleys’ shop, she had started to reconsider her decision to enter the war against the mudbloods. Draco had been quite persuasive, and the mudbloods were a danger to everyone, but the fight in the twins’ shop had been the second time in a week that she had almost died. If she was just dealing with Draco, she would have told him she was taking a break, at least. Claimed she needed to take care of Astoria. Maybe even faked more fear than she actually felt, if he tried to insist she should stay.

But withdrawing from the Dark Lord’s forces? She was quite certain he’d see that as desertion, and would punish her. Or, worse, her sister. And he certainly knew, or could easily find out, where she lived. Her family had not been quite as willing to impress their peers by inviting them to their manor as the Malfoys, but there were enough who had been their guests among the Dark Lord’s followers. But even if she stayed in the Dark Lord’s service - and she had no real choice there - who knew how long it would take the mudbloods to find her? No, she wasn’t safe in her family’s ancestral manor. Not anymore.

But she couldn’t easily leave. She needed a safe house, a hideout. And she needed to talk to Tracey about this. Together, they might find a solution.

Maybe even for more problems than the danger their homes were in.

Her breakfast had grown cold while her thoughts had wandered, she discovered. Frowning, she pushed her plate away. She wasn’t that hungry anyway.

“Daphne?”

She turned her head. Astoria was standing in the door, dressed in her robes. That was a surprise - her little sister was even less of a morning person than Daphne herself. “Yes?”

“When will you take me with you to Draco?”

Daphne closed her eyes. She really didn’t need this, not now.

“I already helped attacking mudbloods and blood traitors! I can help you as well! I don’t even have to fight, I can make potions, repair things…”

At least her sister had some sense left, Daphne thought, sighing. She met Astoria’s eyes. “I almost died twice in one week, Astoria. I only survived because I was lucky and could flee. Vaisey and Warrington died in a trap.” She shook her head. “It’s too dangerous for you. It might even be too dangerous for me.”

“What?” Her sister was gaping.

Daphne scoffed. “What did you think the war is like? Each time we go out, we are in danger. We could walk into a trap, or an ambush.”

“But…”

“No, Astoria. It’s too dangerous for you. I’m actually thinking we should leave the manor, and move to a safer place for the duration of the war.”
“What? Do you think the mudbloods found us?”

Daphne’s slight anger at her sister’s idea vanished when she saw Astoria’s shocked expression. “I don’t think so, but they might,” she quickly said.

Her sister started to tremble. “Like… like… mum and dad....”

Daphne rushed to wrap her in her arms, just in time for the tears. Stupid, she berated herself - Astoria hadn’t yet come to terms with the loss of their parents. Her words had just scared her again.

While she held her crying sister, Daphne couldn’t help but curse her life.

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London, East End, December 9th, 1996

“I don’t see the problem. Let’s just cast the Imperius on the bastards and order them to surrender!” Dean said, slamming his hand on the table the Resistance had gathered around. “Easy!”

Seamus, of course, nodded his approval, Hermione Granger noted. At least Louise and Jeremy, as well as Justin, looked as appalled as Hermione herself felt.

“Using the Unforgivables will do far more harm than good,” she told the two wizards. “Yes, it would make capturing Death Eaters easier.” It wasn’t as if any of those Death Eaters could resist it, unlike Harry. “But it would also harm our reputation. We’d be seen as dark wizards, barely better than the Death Eaters, by many purebloods and half-bloods who are sympathetic to our cause.”

“Feh!” Seamus sneered. “There are not many of those around. Apart from your mysterious ‘contacts’, we haven’t received any help from those ‘sympathetic purebloods’.”

“There are quite a number of purebloods fighting the Dark Lord,” Hermione pointed out. “And even more who hate and fear him. Alienating them would hurt us a lot.” Especially with regards to the time after the war had ended.

“And trust me - Aurors and Hit-Wizards hate people who use the Unforgivables,” Louise cut in.

“Really? You used them yourself in the last war,” Dean said. His tone made it clear that he was all but calling Louise a liar.

“That was fifteen years ago,” the former Hit-Wizard spat. “Fifteen years where everyone in the Corps only saw those Unforgivables used against them, by criminals.”

Hermione doubted that there were many such incidents, but this was not the time to mention the general lack of combat experience of Aurors and Hit-Wizards. “Indeed. Casting an Unforgivable at another wizard or witch carries a life sentence in Azkaban. That should tell you how much they are scorned.”

“No one has to know,” Seamus said. “No witnesses, no problem.”

“You can’t count on that,” Hermione said. She wasn’t about to discuss the morality of killing witnesses; the odds of anyone in the house being innocent were far too low. “Such things tend to get out.”

“We’ll just have to be careful. If we use it only if there is no other way, we’ll be fine,” Dean said.

“You can’t count on that working out,” Justin said. “We shouldn’t rely on such spells. We have
alternatives.”

“With other spells, you need to hit them twice - once to shatter their shield, once to stun them.” Dean wasn’t giving up on his idea, or so it seemed.

“Good luck hitting a broom rider twice!” Seamus scoffed.

Hermione bit her lower lip, then frowned - at herself as much as at Dean and Seamus. She should have found a better way to capture the Death Eaters. But stopping people fleeing on a broom without killing them was harder than it sounded. Especially if the Resistance had to use the same means to withdraw from the battle. She had had some ideas. Enchanted Bludgers, smashing into the brooms. They could be charmed to not attack the Resistance. In theory at least. The twins were certain they could create them.

But that kind of work took time. Time the Resistance didn’t have - the last transcript had shown that Malfoy had called a meeting for a new mission for the next day. They would have to fill the sky with conjured birds, probably owls, as well as bats, and a few broomriders of their own. She knew, though, that the odds of anyone being captured alive after taking to the sky were very slim.

She could live with that.

“We won’t be using those spells. There’s no guarantee you’d hit anyone on a broom even once. And if they’re not on a broom we can deal with them.” Hermione stared at Dean. “If they escape on brooms, and we can’t stu[n]m them in time, we’ll shoot them down.”

That made Seamus grin. Dean frowned for a few seconds, then finally nodded.

Hermione didn’t sigh with relief. She simply went on with the briefing, pointing at the map pinned to the wall behind her. “Here you can see the area around the house. We’ll be here,” she pointed at a spot, “until the bomb goes off, then we’ll move to the house, sealing the windows from both sides. We haven’t detected any curses or traps in the vicinity so far, and with the Death Eater cell meeting there, it’s unlikely that they’d trap the house itself.” Hermione hoped so, at least. If they had the kind of traps Bill Weasley liked to use, then this would be a catastrophe. But those traps couldn’t be used when people lived in the house. Hermione had asked.

“Now, Dean and Seamus will be on brooms, above us. They’ll support us, if needed, and stop escape attempts. Louise and Jeremy have point for the entry, with Tania and Mary behind them. Justin and Sally-Anne are reserves, and will keep an eye out for Death Eater reinforcements on the north-eastern side. Dennis and Colin will do the same on the other side. John and I will cover the back door, and enter there if needed. Our contact wants to see the attack with his own eyes - he hates Malfoy - and will be with us as well.”

She looked at the assembled Resistance. Most of them looked eager. Justin and Sally-Anne at least had more sense and looked grim, but determined.

They were rather stretched for people, she knew. They’d need the enemy afraid and shocked, unable to offer organised resistance at least at the start, or things would go wrong.

Hermione really hoped she hadn’t made a mistake in accepting and planning this.

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Hogwarts, December 9th, 1996

Harry Potter was, not quite anxious, but feeling a bit nervous. The Headmaster had asked him and
Ron to come to his office, and while whatever Dumbledore wanted to talk about obviously wasn’t urgent, or they would have been summoned at once, it had to be important. Which meant related to his scar, or to the war.

“Mate?”

Ron’s veiled prodding - his best friend knew he was stalling, and why - made Harry glare at him, even as he spoke the password to the enchanted stone statue guarding the door: “Snickers.”

Privately, Harry and his friends were certain that the password was not needed, and that the gargoyle simply alerted the Headmaster upon being spoken to, who then decided if the door would open. Listing a selection of sweets could not be enough to break into Dumbledore’s office. If the twins were still at Hogwarts, Harry would ask them to test it, but then, wouldn’t the Headmaster expect that? He pushed the thought away when they entered the office.

“Good evening, Harry, Mister Weasley. Please have a seat.”

“Good evening, Headmaster,” both boys chorused, sitting down on two conjured seats.

Fawkes briefly looked up from where he was grooming his wings, then went back to whatever birds did to their feathers.

“Ah, sir. Before we talk about what you called us here for, I have a question. Or a problem, maybe,” Ron spoke up.

“Yes?” Dumbledore looked curious, Harry thought.

“It’s about Neville. He looks even more out of it lately,” Ron said. “He doesn’t want to talk about it, but he’s suffering. So… do you know if anything happened?”

The Headmaster sighed. “I do. It is private though.”

Harry didn’t think that there was anyone at Hogwarts who didn’t know that Neville’s grandmother was Voldemort’s prisoner. But he knew that he wouldn’t like being in the same situation as Neville. He had been there a few times, after all. “Can you help him?”

“I am doing what I can, but ultimately, Neville has to decide what course of action he will take.” Dumbledore spread his hands. “No one else can decide for him.”

Harry winced and exchanged a glance with Ron. That meant a rescue mission was not possible. Poor Neville.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said, as if he had been reading Harry’s thoughts, “it is a terrible situation to be in. He needs friends now, more than ever.”

Fawkes looked up again, trilled, and went back to grooming.

Harry felt guilty again at giving Neville the cold shoulder. “He doesn’t want to talk to us, though.”

“That never stopped Hermione,” Ron said, under his breath, “when you were brooding.”

Harry didn’t quite glare at him.

“Now… you might wonder why I called you to my office,” Dumbledore said, breaking the short silence.
“It’s about the war, or my scar.” Harry tapped his forehead.

“Precisely.” The old wizard beamed at him. “I want to start teaching you the way into the Dark Lord’s mind. Legilimency.”

Harry hissed in surprise. In retrospect, he should have expected that - he knew from his ‘lessons’ with Snape about Legilimency. He cleared his throat. “And who will I be training on?” Who would risk revealing his deepest secrets to him?

“I have asked a few friends, to begin with,” Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded. He hadn’t expected Dumbledore himself - unless the Headmaster was planning to obliterate him of any accidentally acquired secrets. Then he chuckled at his paranoia - he doubted that he would be able to enter the man’s mind anytime soon. Or ever.

“Blimey. You’ll be able to read minds!” Ron shook his head.

“The ability to discern the thoughts of others can be abused very easily, Harry. It will be difficult to restrain yourself,” Dumbledore said, “especially if it might offer you the solution to a problem, or the answer to a question. But a person’s mind is theirs - it should not be entered without the most urgent need.”

“I understand, sir.” Harry did. He remembered how Snape had gleefully read his thoughts, taunting him with the secrets, however banal they had been, that the Potions Master had ferreted out. But he wasn’t Snape. He would be better than that git.

“I have to warn you, though. Your particular connection to the Dark Lord will, unless I am sorely mistaken, allow Legilimency to achieve things usually impossible. And you will be in greater danger as well. Fredrick Beanwalker tried to enter his own mind, and was rendered mad as a result. He died after decades in St. Mungo’s, never able to recover his wits.” Dumbledore said, looking directly at Harry.

“Well, I’ve been accused of being crazy often enough.” Harry chuckled. It wasn’t as if he had a choice, anyway - he had to defeat the Dark Lord in a battle of wills, after all. And that would be rather hard without Legilimency. And if he didn’t master this first, the Dark Lord might use it on him later.

Dumbledore nodded, a sad smile on his face, then turned to Ron. “Would you like to learn it as well, Mister Weasley?”

Ron looked surprised. “Oh.”

Harry wondered why Ron wouldn’t have expected to be included - he was trusted with every secret, after all. And he had mastered Occlumency as well.

“This is… I’ll have to think about this, sir. As you said, it’s very easy to abuse.”

“And you fear you should not be trusted with this power?”

Ron nodded.

“Those who question themselves are generally more trustworthy than those who do not, Mister Weasley. The greater the power a wizard wields, the more he needs to question himself. Many a talented wizard has found out too late that his confidence in himself was not justified.” Dumbledore smiled, though once again, he looked sad.
“I see,” Ron said. “I would still prefer to think on this.”

“Of course, Mister Weasley.”

Harry felt jealous of Ron. His best friend had a choice. He could refuse to learn this skill. And even if he learned it, he’d not be in as much danger as Harry. He pressed his lips together. He shouldn’t feel like this. Ron wasn’t at fault for Harry’s messed-up life. That was Voldemort’s doing. And the Prophecy’s. And the Death Eaters’. And Ron was choosing to do this, to follow Harry, of his own free will. He had a choice, and he chose to help Harry.

Harry had no doubt that Ron would follow him in this as well. He was his best friend.

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London, December 9th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle sighed when she arrived at her new and hopefully very temporary home. Another day spent in an increasingly tense office. Rumour had it that Shacklebolt almost cursed Lewis Selwyn when the latter raised his wand to summon a cauldron cake. Of course, Shacklebolt’s friends probably told each other that Selwyn had tried to curse the veteran Auror, and had managed to cover up his attempt when he realised Shacklebolt was ready for him. Selwyn was that kind of wizard, underhanded and too clever for his own good, in Brenda’s opinion.

But spending hours in an office, recasting discreet protection spells on the door every so often, was stressful. In addition to that, her undercover operation was currently stalled - she had to find another spectacular attack or heist for Rickett and Purvis; all that they were doing so far was giving aid to the few muggleborns still around in Knockturn Alley, and painting slogans on walls. But arranging such a coup without risking a security leak was very hard - she couldn’t actually ask other Aurors for help.

And Dawlish and Shacklebolt were still arguing whose task force would have the lead in investigating that massacre in Knockturn Alley. Dawlish insisted that it should be his, since it was an attack by mudbloods. Shacklebolt maintained that since the victims were Death Eaters and their recruits, it was his investigation. Brenda thought Dawlish would come out on top - there was only hearsay and mudblood propaganda that claimed the dead were Death Eater recruits. Not that many cared about it - the general public wasn’t really concerned about dead Knockturn Alley residents, no matter their blood. Neither did she care - all Brenda wanted now was to occupy the couch, eat something, and listen to the wireless.

And she would, if not for Parkinson.

“No, the muggles are still making a ruckus outside.” The other Auror was staring out of the window. “They are walking around with their weird devices, and growing angry.”

“So what? Martin has finally placed Muggle-Repelling wards on the flat. They won’t bother us with their muggle problems.” Brenda understood now why the Magical World went into hiding - muggles were noisy and needy. Their new neighbours had knocked on the door three times before Martin finally shut them down. All because their telly was not working.

“Those outside are muggle repairmen,” Martin said, entering from the kitchen, where he had placed the takeout food they had brought with them on trays. “Apparently, they cannot find the problem.”

“They are the problem,” Brenda said, standing up and grabbing her own dinner.

“I could disillusion myself and repair their tellies,” Martin said, as he sat down at the table.
“What for?” Parkinson scoffed. “Just cast a Silencing Charm on the window, and their pathetic problems won’t bother us. See?” His wand flashed, and the noise of talking muggles disappeared.

Brenda smiled. “Well done!”

If only all their problems could be solved so easily!

*****

Dorset, Britain, December 10th, 1996

Hermione Granger studied the house through her Omnioculars - which she should rebuild into a form that was easier to handle and conceal, she thought, not for the first time - while Justin looked at the transcripts on the scrolls.

“They’re still waiting for Nott,” he said.

Malfoy, Parkinson, Nott, Greengrass, Davis, Crabbe, Goyle - if the Resistance managed to capture or kill all of them, that would be a heavy blow against the Death Eaters, Hermione knew. But it was riskier than she liked. They outnumbered them, but only as long as no reinforcements arrived. Which is why they’d focus on casting Anti-Apparition Jinxes over a wide area, to keep Death Eaters from arriving on top of them.

They were hidden in a trench they had created, a few hundred yards from the house. Close enough to observe and rush it, far enough not to have to worry about the bomb Seamus would be dropping on the house as soon as Hermione gave the signal.

She saw Mary and Tania check their rifles. For the fourth time. Those lessons of the Sergeant had stuck. Others - especially those regarding discipline - hadn’t been retained that well. A fact Hermione often felt quite keenly when Seamus and Dean tried to derail briefings.

Even Aberforth in his disguise looked nervous - though she knew it was an act. The Headmaster’s brother didn’t really fear the upcoming battle. Nor did he fear the potential repercussions should he have to reveal his true talents. Hermione even had the impression that he’d like making trouble for his brother.

Justin’s voice interrupted her musings. “Nott just arrived.”

Half the Resistance jerked, the other half tensed up. Hermione turned towards them. “Take cover!” She paused half a second, checking that everyone was inside the trench. “Shield Charms!” She cast one herself, her words drowned out by the other’s incantations. Then she touched her throat mic. “Green, do it.”

She heard his yell, followed by “Bomb away!”, and counted the seconds until both the wards and parts of Malfoy’s house vanished in an explosion that rattled her and the others despite their cover and Shield Charms.

She stuck her head up a second after she had heard the explosion. As planned, the front part of the house had been caved in - turned to rubble, actually. The back part, where the group was meeting, was still standing, but they’d be rattled, panicking, and half-deaf. She touched the mirror again.

“Everyone, go!”

*****
Daphne Greengrass was holding her ears. She was screaming. Others were as well. Not that she noticed. Again! It was happening again. The mudbloods had found them! Those monsters were going to kill all of them!

She turned to Tracey, who was bleeding from a cut on her head, where some plaster had dropped on her. Daphne didn’t think she was looking any better. She had trouble standing upright as well. Or running - she stumbled and fell when she rushed towards the door of the living room they had gathered in. A hand gripped her arm and pulled her up with enough force to lift her off the ground for a second. Goyle.

“Thank you.” She doubted he heard her words, but he nodded anyway.

Tracey joined her. Crabbe was moving towards the door. Pansy was shaking, screaming - the only one still to do so, Daphne noticed. Draco was trying to calm her down, holding her, but she was thrashing in his arms. Hysterical.

“Gregory!” Draco yelled, over Pansy’s fading screams, holding out his arm. “Touch my mark!”

Goyle was at his side in an instant. The large wizard ripped Draco’s left sleeve off, then jabbed his wand at Draco’s arm. Draco ground his teeth.

“Help’s on the way. The Dark Lord will send his followers. We’ll just have to hold out until then.”

Crabbe had opened the door. Dust was settling in the hallway. He aimed his wand at the remains of the front. Goyle joined him, covering the back.

Just like… Daphne shuddered when she remembered that awful night. She drew her wand, taking deep breaths. She couldn’t panic. That would be fatal.

“Did they misjudge the bomb?” Tracey asked, glancing around. Her wand was trembling. “Merlin’s ghost! The windows!”

Daphne whipped around, wand aimed at the windows. Then she noticed that they were blocked from the outside with stone.

“They are trapping us in here!” Tracey yelled. “We’ll have to break out.”

Daphne panted - the mudbloods wanted to capture them! And torture them to death! Like Pansy’s aunt! They had to flee!

“We just have to hold out for a few minutes!” Draco yelled back. “Stay calm! Theo!”

Nott was sitting there, as if dazed. He blinked. “Merlin’s balls…”

“Theo! Cover the windows!” Draco still held Pansy, who was sobbing into his chest. “The Dark Lord will save us! Just hold on!”

Daphne wanted to flee. They couldn’t hold. Not with the wards down. Not against the mudbloods. She looked at Tracey, who shook her head.

Daphne was about to protest when she heard more explosions and Goyle reeled, stumbling back into the room with his arm hanging down uselessly, blood soaking his sleeve.

The mudbloods were attacking.
Hermione Granger checked that the windows were still sealed while Louise, Jeremy, Mary and Tania rushed towards the house’s broken front on their brooms. They dismounted in the rubble, and started to enter the remains of the house. “Back door’s secure!” John reported to her, his rifle aimed at it from a makeshift trench. She checked her watch. Less than a minute had passed. They were fast, but they didn’t have much time. The Dark Lord’s worst would soon arrive. She raised her wand and added a few birds - owls - to the swarm circling overhead. If they had Bludgers… but they didn’t. But the owls could at least spot broom riders better than anyone without night vision gear or spells.

She heard rifles going off - Tania and Mary were engaging the enemy. Cover fire so Louise and Jeremy could close in and use the flashbangs. At least that was the plan. Another thirty seconds gone. Time was already running short.

Finally the flashbangs went off. Hermione grinned. Disoriented…

“Assault One to Lead. Flashbangs delivered, but they sealed themselves inside the living room. Conjured stone. We’re about to go through the wall.” Louise’s voice sounded through her radio.

“Lead to Assault one. Understood.” Hermione bit her lower lip. Damn those Death Eaters!

“Watch to Lead. Movement at the edge of the forest. Half a dozen at least.” Justin’s voice drowned out John’s comment. “Suppressing them.” Short bursts from Justin’s machine gun started.

Hermione cursed under her breath. Reinforcements had arrived. They were now outnumbered - those wouldn’t be the only ones. They’d have broom riders as well.

“Green to Lead: Nothing in the air.”

“Lass, I’m taking care of them,” Aberforth said, already moving. Hermione nodded. They needed more time to dig out Malfoy’s goons.

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Daphne’s first thought was that someone had cast a Silencing Charm on her - she couldn’t hear anything. Her second though was to realise that those cylinders had exploded inside the room. Nott was on the floor, clawing at his eyes - he hadn’t had a Shield Charm ready, she knew. Pansy hadn’t had one either, but Draco had shielded her with his own body and shield. Tracey was aiming her wand at the windows, but then reconsidered. Her lips were moving, but Daphne couldn’t hear her. She shuddered - was that blood running out of her ears? Were her own ears bleeding?

Tracey pointed her wand up, at the ceiling, and Daphne understood. They would be watching the windows, and the doors. She aimed her wand up as well. “Reducto!” she yelled, but didn’t hear anything. Tracey’s spell followed, and the two ducked when more plaster came down on them. But there was a hole in the ceiling now, leading up to the attic. They could break through the roof easily, with the wards gone! Daphne pulled out her broom.

Draco was yelling something, but she could hardly make out the words. He had a broom in hand, and was shaking it at Pansy, who was shaking her head. Nott was still out, Crabbe and Goyle were covering the door, even though it was sealed with stone. Daphne shook her head. The walls were barely stronger than the ceiling, and they had broken through it.

“Watch the walls!” she yelled, but they didn’t react. Their loss. She straddled her broom. She had to get out before it was too late. Tracey was already through the hole in the ceiling. She saw a flash in the attic - that must be her friend blowing a hole in the roof.

Just as she was lifting off, the wall near the door exploded, throwing her into the back wall. Her
Shield Charm protected her, but barely held. And through the door, mudbloods came charging!

Daphne aimed her wand at the first, her curse missing though. She saw Crabbe turn, the wizard’s own curse hitting the mudblood’s shield. Then the Slytherin’s shield shattered, and Crabbe fell down, holding his bleeding legs. A Stunner took him out. Goyle sent a curse through the hole, then one at the attacker inside the room. Daphne thought he hit them, but couldn’t tell - her own curse had been stopped by the man’s shield. Goyle grabbed his friend’s collar. Before he could drag Crabbe away, though, his shield broke, and the man collapsed.

Daphne aimed her wand at her broom, summoning it. Before it reached her hands though it blew up - Reductor Curse, she realised, shocked. Crying, she wildly cast the darkest curses she knew at the mudbloods. “Die! Die!” she screamed. “Avada Kedavra!”

She saw Draco lift Pansy on his broom, still yelling at her. No, yelling at Daphne. Waving at her. There was a stone wall offering cover, Daphne just realised. She sprinted to the safety it promised. Where were the Death Eaters coming to save them?

Draco pointed at the broom, then at the ceiling. Daphne blinked. Pansy was stuck to the broom! And trying to get off! Then Daphne understood, and nodded at Draco, who flashed her a grim smile before conjuring another stone wall.

Daphne mounted the broom, ignoring Pansy’s tears and her feeble blows to her back. She waited until Draco sent more curses at the room, right when the stone wall to her front vanished, and shot up, to the hole in the ceiling.

“Draco! Nooo!” she heard Pansy scream, directly into her ear. But she was hearing again, she thought. Her shield shattered on the way. There was no time to recast it. No time to stop and draw her wand. She bent low and willed her broom to fly faster. They shot through the attic, then through the hole in the roof. She had escaped!

Something hit her head. She reeled, almost losing her grip on her broom. Pansy was screaming again, had she ever stopped? Pain erupted in her shoulder, and her head was struck again. Feathers flew as she almost lost control of her broom. Lights flew past her, too fast and too numerous for a spell. She pulled away from them, away and up. Gaining altitude was the key. She had to get out of range of the attackers on the ground!

More lights flashed by, closer. Pansy stopped screaming. And Daphne felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. She looked down and saw blood running over her stomach and thighs. She was… she was… slipping off the broom.

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Hermione watched as a body flew through the air, dragged by the clothes it was wearing which she had summoned with her spell. Someone had tried to escape through the roof, but the spell that had blown a hole into it had given John enough warning to aim his rifle, and the first broom rider out had flown straight into the path of his bullets.

Unfortunately, John had changed position, and started firing at the Death Eaters trying to surround them from the west when another broom shot through the hole in the roof - one carrying two people. “Broom leaving roof!” she shouted into her radio.

“On it!” Seamus yelled back. She saw tracers reach out to the fleeing Death Eaters. The first and second burst missed. The third struck home. One rider slipped off the broom and fell, the other seemed stuck on it, but slumped over. And the broom was descending rapidly… there! It crashed
straight into the forest.

“Assault to Lead. We captured the main target. I repeat: We captured the main target.”

Hermione bared her teeth. Yes! They had Malfoy! The body she had summoned landed near her, and she pointed her wand at the other on the grass. She touched her microphone. “Rally on my position to transport him.” Then she pointed her wand at the broom rider who had fallen off. “Accio second body’s clothes!”

While she focused on that floating body, she looked over at Justin’s position. He was falling back towards her, she saw, together with Sally-Anne. They covered each other as they had been trained to, she noted. On the other side, Dennis and Colin were retreating with less order and discipline. And yet, there were fewer spells flying at them than at Justin - Aberforth must be there, she thought.


Hermione’s brief feeling of triumph in response to capturing Malfoy vanished. They had to go before they were completely surrounded, even in the sky!

She quickly checked the bodies she had summoned. Both were still alive, she noted - though bleeding, and they were likely to have internal injuries from the crash. Davis, the first, had been hit in the shoulder and side. Multiple broken bones too. The second, Greengrass, had a hole in her stomach, and her legs looked broken as well. Hermione winced at the sight, then opened Aberforth’s trunk and levitated both of them inside.

Four brooms raced through towards her. The assault team. Two were carrying a body. Malfoy. They landed, and Louise dismounted. “We left Crabbe and Goyle. This is Nott.”

“Stuff them inside! We need to leave!” Hermione aimed her wand at Justin and Sally-Anne’s original position, and sent a Blasting Curse at it, hoping it would make any pursuit hesitate.

Justin slid into the trench she was in, right after Sally-Anne. Both were breathing heavily. “They’re about a hundred yards behind us!”

John switched his aim in response, and sent a few bursts down the field.

“Covering fire!” Hermione ordered. Justin and Sally-Anne stood up, the wizard shooting his rifle, Sally-Anne casting spells. Hermione added a few of her own. So did Louise and Jeremy, covering the Creeveys. Tania and Mary were securing Nott and Malfoy. She should have had the two Gryffindor witches shoot, and the two former Hit-Wizards take care of the prisoners instead, Hermione berated herself.

Dennis and Colin were twenty yards away. Their pursuers had gone to ground, or so it looked like. Ten yards. Almost. They should have taken their brooms, Hermione thought.

Dark yellow curses hit both from above right before they reached the trench. Colin screamed, his leg collapsing under him. Dennis continued to run, but stumbled and lost his wand when he grabbed his right arm, screaming as well. Hermione saw that it seemed to shrink.

“Accio Dennis’s wand!”

“Accio Dennis’s clothes!”

“Accio Colin’s Clothes!”
The two brothers shot into the trench, followed by Dennis’s wand.

“Both of you, into the trunk!” Hermione yelled while opening it. They didn’t talk back, this time, and went inside. Or were carried inside. Their limbs were withering, Hermione saw.

“Our informant is missing!” John yelled.

“He’ll get away on his own!” Hermione said, hoping she was right. She tapped the trunk and shrunk it. “We need to go now! Green, Black - cover us!”

She put the trunk into her pocket and mounted her own broom. “You know the rally spot! Everyone - go!”

Eight brooms shot out of the trench. Hermione flew up to the forest’s canopy, then leveled out, trying to keep as low as possible without crashing into a branch. Behind them Dean and Seamus were filling the night sky with tracer fire. Something flew at her from the front. A spell. A curse. She pulled to the side, flying more erratically. “Death Eaters in front!” she yelled - she couldn’t use the radio while dodging. More spells flew towards the group, and the brooms started to fan out. Mary or Tania returned fire with their rifle - Hermione didn’t see anything but tracers cutting through the night sky.

She had to reach the edge of the Anti-Apparition Jinxes soon. Hopefully, soon enough. How many Death Eaters were there?

“Dropping gift!” Seamus announced.

Hermione bent low over her broom’s handle and counted the seconds again, until a fireball lit the sky up behind her. For a moment, the curses stopped. She thought she even heard screams - someone blinded by the light, maybe.

It didn’t matter. She had flown far enough.

A second later, she was at their rally spot. Aberforth was already there, looking none the worse for wear. Hermione landed as quickly as she could and pulled the shrunken trunk out.

“We’ve got wounded!” she yelled as others arrived and started to land. Sally-Anne, their best healer, jumped off and sprinted over. She looked at Aberforth, who nodded and joined the witch. Hermione hoped they would be able to save Colin and Dennis. And their prisoners.

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Chapter 21: End of a Line

‘Pureblood supporters of the Dark Lord often accused the muggleborns of being ignorant of Wizarding Britain’s culture. While, by and large, the muggleborns did not know the intricacies of pureblood society very well, they cannot be blamed for that. There was no course covering this topic at Hogwarts. The reasons given for this vary. Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black once said that it would be a waste of gold and time; muggleborns were neither inclined nor able to learn the sophisticated manners of purebloods.

Headmaster Armando Dippet did not share this opinion, but said that as children picked up how to act in polite society from their family, muggleborns would pick up how to comport themselves properly during their seven years at Hogwarts. And the most famous Headmaster of Hogwarts in the 20th century, Albus Dumbledore, was quoted as saying that he saw “no sense in trying to teach students the manners of people who would never accept them in the first place, nor in elevating the outdated attitudes and pretensions of a very small segment of the pureblood population into a course when the vast majority of the purebloods didn’t act that differently”. Sadly, that quote has never been properly dated, so we lack the context to interpret it properly.

However, it cannot be denied that even those purebloods Headmaster Dumbledore would not have counted as pretentious were ignorant of muggle culture. A weakness, as it was revealed, that would cost several of them dearly when they went to hide among muggles during the war.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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Dorset, Britain, December 10th, 1996

“Justin! Ensure there is a perimeter! And take a headcount of all arrivals!” Hermione Granger said to the former Hufflepuff while she walked towards the trunk containing the wounded and the prisoners of the Resistance.

Aberforth and Sally-Anne had levitated the wounded out of the trunk, and laid them down on the ground nearby. Hermione winced at the sight. Dennis’s arm and Colin’s leg looked withered. They looked like dried leather wrapped around bones. The boys were trying to be brave, but she could see that both were shocked and horrified by this. Then Dennis started to sob, and Colin followed quickly.

“It’s a dark curse,” Aberforth said. “I stopped its progress, but I cannot heal the damage done.”

Hermione closed her eyes for a second. They couldn’t take the boys to St Mungo’s - they would be arrested at once. They could look for a Healer, maybe a muggleborn who had left Wizarding Britain. But… “Do you recognise it?”

The old wizard, still disguised, shook his head. “No. It must be an exotic or family curse.”

Which meant there was no chance to find a counter-curse. If it was a dark curse, then there was no way to heal this anyway. The limbs would have to be amputated. She hissed through clenched teeth. She had thought that the two would be safe, watching the perimeter. That the Death Eaters would not rush in, not after the ambush during the attack on Rowle. She had been wrong, and the Creeveys
had paid the price. “Please do what you can. We... they can decide what to do later.” Maybe she could find a way to heal this damage… if she had the time to spend on research.

She stepped away, towards the wounded prisoners Sally-Anne was working on. Greengrass looked bad. Sally-Anne hadn’t been able to close the hole in the girl’s belly yet and was pouring a potion down the girl’s throat. Davis was unconscious, but no longer bleeding out. Nott was unconscious, as was Malfoy, both sporting numerous wounds, but none of them looked life-threatening. She checked their restraints and added zip-ties. Just in case.

Sally-Anne was still working almost desperately, but it seemed that the wound was worse than what she could handle. For such a case, the Resistance had scouted out a small private muggle clinic. Its staff included former members of the British Army who could handle such wounds, and a Confundus would keep the police from being alerted. But to bring a prisoner there… she shook her head. If Greengrass didn’t make it, then so be it. They already had taken a big risk trying to capture them.

They had Malfoy. That had been the priority. Anyone else was a bonus. Hermione wouldn’t risk her friends further for a few junior Death Eaters.

A loud yell caught her attention, and she was crouching, her wand aimed, before she realised Seamus and Dean had announced their return. She felt relieved - they had taken longer than she had expected. Then she narrowed her eyes. What if… she strode towards them, wand still out. An Imperius would be fooled by her contract. They’d lose all memories of the Resistance. But Polyjuice… “Hold still!” she ordered, then threw some of the twins’ concoction at their faces. They didn’t change. She lowered her wand, noting that Justin and John did the same.

“We’ve not been compromised,” Dean said, but he didn’t complain - the Resistance knew they couldn’t be too cautious.

Seamus grinned widely. “I dropped the second bomb, and it went off as planned! I’m certain half a dozen of the scum was caught in the blast!”

“Should teach them to attack us,” Dean added.

“Hopefully,” Hermione said. If the enemy was unpredictable, then that would make the war even worse. “I’ll check on the prisoners, then we’ll move.”

Greengrass should have either been stabilised by now, or died. Either way, they could return to London.

Where they’d interrogate Malfoy and the rest. Hopefully their information was worth all of this.

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London, Hampstead, December 10th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore was already sitting in a conjured armchair, waiting, when Miss Granger, Mister Finch-Fletchley and Aberforth arrived with Mister Malfoy.

“They caught Nott, Greengrass and Davis as well,” Aberforth said, before Albus could ask, “but that’s the only one with a Dark Mark.”

Albus nodded. Malfoy was the only one they had to hurry to interrogate then. They still did not know all that Voldemort could use his mark for, and even if no interrogation so far had been interrupted by the Dark Lord, it still was prudent to be both quick and cautious about it.
Miss Granger levitated the unconscious wizard to the chair Albus had set up in the centre of the room. He noticed when she dispelled the magical bonds that she had also secured Mister Malfoy’s hands using muggle means - and used those to fix his arms and legs to the chair. Albus approved of such precautions.

“Two of them were struck with a dark curse,” Aberforth continued, “the limbs that were hit look as if they had withered - dry, and thin, barely more than skin and bones, and the skin looks like old leather.”

Albus ignored the wince from Mister Finch-Fletchley, and the way Miss Granger focused a bit too much on securing the prisoner. He nodded. “I think I have seen such a curse before. It was cast by a Caribbean wizard. I will search my library for a counter-curse.”

When Albus saw the smiles on the two muggleborns’ faces, he had to struggle to keep smiling himself - he doubted he’d find a counter-curse. That curse he remembered had been cast by a hounGAN, and they were notoriously secretive. And despised the British wizards.

“Please do,” Miss Granger said. “Dennis and Colin were guarding our flank, and when they moved to our rally spot, they were attacked from the air. I underestimated the Death Eaters. I didn’t expect them to rush at us on brooms.”

Albus hid his reaction. The Creevey brothers. Those were the two youngest members of the Resistance. Children. And they had been struck… He smiled at the young witch, barely more than a child herself. “It is as likely that you might have overestimated them - the Death Eaters are often quite reckless, and even foolish.”

“Either way, it’s my fault.” Miss Granger frowned.

“Hogwash!” Aberforth cut in. “You had a sound plan. As good as anything we thought up. Things went awry, that’s all.”

Albus nodded. “Indeed. The best plans can be wrecked due to simple bad luck.” His own plans had suffered that fate more than once. “Please do not blame yourself for something you could not prevent.”

The witch nodded, but Albus doubted that she would heed his advice. He would have to speak with Harry and Mister Weasley, and mention that their friend was in need of some comfort.

He looked at the prisoner, then cast a spell. The wizard was hurt, but the worst of his wounds had been treated. He was in no danger of dying - at least not from his wounds.

“The others are in worse shape,” Mister Finch-Fletchley said. “Greengrass almost died. She should be stable now.”

Meaning, she could still die. Albus smiled. “I am certain you all did what you could. We’re at war, and our friends and allies come first.” He still hoped that the Weasley twins would be able to interrogate Miss Greengrass as well as Miss Davis. That should give them some form of closure, at least.

He turned towards the prisoner once more. “Now, let us get started. I fear this will be a long night for us all.”

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“... and then the Dark Lord granted me his mark.”
Hermione Granger closed her eyes. Malfoy’s description of how he had earned his Dark Mark was sickening. She heard Justin mutter a curse under his breath. Her friend had been fingering his wand since Malfoy had started talking about the cruel murder he had committed in front of Voldemort. So had she. Aberforth was glaring at Malfoy. The Headmaster was the only one who had remained calm. To torture someone to death… At least they now knew how he had summoned the other Death Eaters.

“Do you feel any regret about what you have done?” Dumbledore asked, in a tone as if he was asking about the last Potions lesson.

“Yes.”

What? Hermione blinked. Justin gasped. Was Malfoy...

“What do you regret?”

“That it was a muggle, and not a mudblood. I could as well have killed an animal, for all the good it did to our cause,” Malfoy said.

Hermione ground her teeth. She should have known Malfoy would not regret anything. He had already told them about the other Death Eaters he knew, and what plans he had. Unfortunately, he didn’t know where the Dark Lord was hiding - Voldemort summoned his followers to various locations, and Malfoy hadn’t been to the same location more than once. Now the interrogation was just covering Malfoy’s past, and thoughts. Interesting, in a sick way, but not crucial.

“Why did you join the Dark Lord?” Dumbledore asked.

“To kill mudbloods. To avenge my parents. To protect purebloods from blood traitors and mudbloods.”

“Did you send Miss Greengrass to attack the Gryffindor third years?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hope that there would be deaths as a result of the attack?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“The blood traitors and mudbloods tried to kill us. They deserve to die.”

Dumbledore nodded, as if he had expected that. Hermione frowned. The Death Eaters had started this. They had struck first, depriving the muggleborns of their rights, and preparing to murder them.

“Did you consider the effect such an act would have on the young Miss Greengrass? How do you think she would have been feeling, if she had actually killed those children?”

“She’d have been proud for defending our country and avenging her parents.”

Dear lord! This was worse than Hermione had expected. Malfoy was a true believer. He honestly thought that murdering muggleborns was the right thing to do! She glared at Malfoy. The witch longed to ask a few questions of her own, but she wouldn’t interrupt the Headmaster. And certainly not simply to satisfy her curiosity.

“Was that the reason you formed your group?”
“Yes. Someone had to do something about those beasts. We had to protect ourselves, and our families.”

“Did you have any plans to attack muggleborns before your parents were killed?” Dumbledore asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To teach them their place. They should serve their betters. Uppity mudbloods need to be dealt with, before others follow their example.” Malfoy’s scorn was audible even through the haze Veritaserum had put him in.

Hermione really wanted to know what Malfoy thought of her, but asking that felt petty. Frivolous even. She was better than that.

“Did you really hope that Slytherin’s monster would kill all muggleborn students, in your second year?”

“Yes.”

“Would you have killed them yourself, given the chance to?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was weak, then. A mere child.”

Dumbledore sighed and cast a Silencing Charm on Malfoy.

“That… that monster!” Justin exclaimed. “He hoped we’d die to the basilisk!”

Hermione nodded. “Too much of a coward to do the deed himself, he hoped a monster would do it for him.” She sneered. “That’s typical for Malfoy!”

“He’s his parents’ son,” Aberforth said. “Lucius preferred to have others do his dirty work.”

“While I cannot deny that the parallels are obvious, a child is not a mere extension of their parents. Even pureblood wizards and witches like Mister Malfoy spend seven years at Hogwarts, surrounded by half-bloods, muggleborns and other purebloods who do not share their views,” Dumbledore said. “He had ample opportunities to make up his mind, to judge for himself what he believed in and to choose his own path. He decided to eagerly follow in his father’s footsteps. He has no one to blame for his fate but himself.” Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose. “We all heard him confess to murder, to planning more murders, and to supporting the Dark Lord in his attempt to take over Britain and murder all muggleborns. We know we cannot bring him to justice by handing him over to the Ministry; the Wizengamot would not convict him.”

Hermione knew all of that already. “We’ll execute him.” As she had promised her friends.

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London, Hampstead, December 11th, 1996

“Six o’clock in the morning.” Hermione Granger mumbled. “Almost a traditional time for an
In front of her, Seamus and Dean were busy checking the gallows they had conjured. Hermione would have been fine with simply cutting the wizard’s throat while he was strapped to the chair, but the rest of the Resistance wanted to make this as formal and as muggle as possible. Criminals like Malfoy were to be hanged.

The two boys had gone all out - they had created a hole in the floor, down to the basement, for the drop, before conjuring the gallows itself. Hermione wondered if they had calculated the length of the rope, so Malfoy’s neck would be broken. She hadn’t asked. Malfoy would be dying today, one way or the other. And she was rather tired. She could take a Pepper-Up Potion, but she was loath to use one without a real need. She just wanted this over with.

“Alright… let’s test it!” Seamus said, tying a sand bag to the rope. “Ready!”

Dean pulled the lever, and the trapdoor opened. The bag fell down, and the rope jerked.

“Yes!” Seamus smiled. He turned to Hermione. “We’re ready now!”

“Good.” She gave him a brief nod, then left the room - the execution chamber, she corrected herself - to inform the rest of the Resistance and Aberforth. Dumbledore had left before the Resistance’s arrival, but Aberforth’s cover required him to stay.

Sally-Anne had stayed with the wounded Creeveys, and Mary and Tania had opted to guard them. Just in case. Which left John, Justin, Louise and Jeremy. The four of them were seated on conjured couches in the other room, all but Louise napping. “It’s time,” Hermione said.

“Finally!” the older witch said.

She probably would have preferred an simple Piercing Curse to the head as well, Hermione thought. While Louise prodded her partner awake, Hermione roused the rest. Then she followed the two former Hit-Wizards down to the basement, to the cells. Aberforth was there, watching both Malfoy’s cell and the one in which the other stunned prisoners were locked up.

“You finished with your stage?” He said, sounding gruffer than she had heard him.

She was tempted to blame Dean and Seamus, but didn’t. She was the leader; it was her responsibility. So she nodded. “Yes. Everything’s ready. We’re lacking a priest, but… I do not think Malfoy would appreciate one.”

“The Malfoys have a reputation as being quite religious, despite their past and name,” the disguised wizard said.

Hermione shrugged. “Ironic, given their name.” She stepped to the door and opened it. “It’s time.”

Malfoy glared at her. His lips moved, but thanks to the Silencing Charm, she didn’t hear a single word. She knew what he’d say anyway - mudblood this, the Dark Lord that. Predictable. Magical ropes bound him, in addition to the plastic bindings on his wrists. Hermione levitated him out of the cell, between Louise and Jeremy, then dispelled the ropes. The two grabbed Malfoy’s arms, ignoring his brief struggle. Hermione led them upstairs.

When they entered the execution chamber and Malfoy saw the noose, he started to struggle in earnest. It didn’t do him any good - a full Body-Bind Curse later, he was carried up the gallows, and held upright below the noose while his legs were fastened together. Hermione almost sighed when she climbed the gallows as well.
“Do you have any last words?” she asked Malfoy, before dispelling the spells holding him immobile and silent.

“Mudblood whore! Murderers! You’ll all pay for this! The Dark Lord will kill you all! He’ll make you beg for…”

She cut his tirade off with another Silencing Spell. He swayed, and would have fallen to the ground if Seamus hadn’t held him. Dean pulled a hood over Malfoy’s head, followed by the noose. Hermione climbed down, to stand next to Justin and Aberforth. She wished this was over already. It felt more like a spectacle than justice being served. And Dean and Seamus seemed to enjoy this a bit too much.

Malfoy was still struggling, moving his head under the hood. Pulling at the bindings on his wrists. He would be yelling as well, she thought. Maybe even crying - though he had been showing more composure than Hermione had expected of the git.

She took a deep breath, then started to speak. “Draco Malfoy, for murder and attempted murder, for willingly joining an organisation with the goal of murdering all muggleborns, and for several other crimes, you will be hanged from the neck until you die.”

She nodded at Dean, who pulled the lever.

Draco fell. The rope snapped taut.

Hermione was glad that no one cheered.

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London, Hampstead, December 11th, 1996

Not even thirty minutes after Malfoy’s death, Hermione Granger was the only Resistance member left in the safe house Dumbledore had provided. The others had already gone back to their headquarters. She was alone with Aberforth. And with Malfoy’s body, wrapped in conjured cloth, with the noose still around his neck.

“That was a spectacle,” the old wizard said.

Hermione agreed with that, but she shrugged. She was the leader of the Resistance. “They were not too happy about all the secrecy. They needed to see Malfoy die with their own eyes.”

“So they could take revenge?”

She shook her head, then pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. She made a mental note to cut her hair - it was growing too long again. “So they could see what they had fought for, what their friends had been hurt for: The death of a murderer who had wanted to kill all of them.” Malfoy had been the most hated student at Hogwarts - doubly so among the muggleborns. “They wouldn’t have accepted simply being told he was dead.”

“You didn’t need to make a production out of it.”

“It was a symbolic act. A pureblood bigot, hanged like the common criminal he is. No magical act, just muggle justice being done.” Even though the death penalty for murder had been abolished in 1965, treason still carried it - and the Death Eaters were traitors.

Aberforth scoffed. “They enjoyed killing him.”
“Some may have,” Hermione admitted. “But not all of them. And I think the whole execution impressed on everyone that this was a serious act.”

“Maybe.” Aberforth snorted. “Will you drop the body in Diagon Alley again?”

“Hogsmeade this time. We don’t want to be too predictable.” Hermione sighed. “I’ll have to write up all his crimes. We’ll broadcast them in two days, but I want a list stuck on his chest. So others understand why he was killed.”

Aberforth remained silent for a few seconds, looking at her. “You want them to know why you killed Malfoy. What about why you fight?”

“People know why we fight: To defeat Voldemort and his Death Eaters and to restore the rights of the muggleborns the Ministry has taken away,” Hermione said. “And to ensure that this will never happen again.” That had been written on most of their leaflets, after all.

“And how do you plan to achieve that?”

She knew he didn’t mean the defeat of Voldemort. Or the restoring of their rights. She hesitated - she hadn’t talked about this with others outside the Resistance - but then answered: “Wizarding Britain needs to be reformed. The system is the problem, not just, as some believe, individuals.”

“The Wizengamot, you mean.”

“Ultimately, most of the problems of the country can be traced back to the Wizengamot. A parliament and supreme court whose members have either inherited their seats, or are appointed by a man elected by the Wizengamot, is unacceptable. The members need to be elected by popular vote.”

Aberforth snorted. “The Wizengamot will fight that tooth and nail. Far, far harder than they’ll ever fight any Dark Lord.”

“I know.” Which was why they hadn’t made those plans public, yet. They needed more influence, and more momentum - more victories - for that.

“Did you discuss this with Albus?”

She shook her head. “No.” She was convinced though that the Headmaster at least suspected what she wanted. It was the logical consequence of the events that had led to this war, after all.

“Afraid you’ll change your opinion after one of his discussions?”

“No. I’d rather focus on the war.” Hermione didn’t think anyone would be able to make her change her position on such a fundamental demand, but there was no need to discuss this while the Dark Lord was still their most urgent problem.

“You might be surprised just how radical he can be, despite his old age.” Aberforth scoffed. “Or how manipulative. Don’t wait too long, or he might have already made arrangements for you.”

Hermione nodded. “What will happen with the other prisoners?”

“They’ll be interrogated, and then kept somewhere safe,” the old wizard answered.

“Do you have the numbers to guard them?” Hermione knew the Resistance did not; guarding three prisoners would have taken so much of their manpower that any larger attacks would have been impossible.
“That’s Albus’s problem to solve. Though they’ll probably be given Draught of Living Death, and then kept hidden somewhere.”

A drastic, but logical solution. “They’ll be woken up from time to time to exert pressure on their families I assume. And to prove they are still alive.”

“Aye.” Aberforth vanished the gallows and repaired the hole in the floor. “Are your friends alright with that?”

“Malfoy was the one they all wanted dead. The rest…” She shrugged. “They can live with it.” Probably - once the war was over, some might feel that justice demanded a bit more. “As long as we get our share of gold, and the information from their interrogations.”

She grinned. They were not hurting for gold, but every Galleon paid to them by the families of the prisoners was one less Galleon spent for Voldemort. And they could always kill the prisoners at a later date, should the interrogation reveal enough reasons for that.

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**Dorset, Britain, December 11th, 1996**

Brenda Brocktuckle ground her teeth, staring at the ruins of yet another house destroyed by the mudbloods. And yet another Auror force that had arrived far too late. And another Malfoy residence blown up.

“Why were we called in?” Martin asked. Her partner was a bit annoyed at having been called by headquarters that early. “Shouldn’t they have called Shacklebolt or Dawlish?”

Brenda motioned to a tree stump behind the ruins. “They’re already here. We were either called because one of them thinks we can help, or because Parkinson pulled some strings.”

“Joy. I always wanted to be in the middle of an office feud,” Martin muttered. He was sounding more and more like a veteran with each day.

But he wasn’t quite there yet. “I’d prefer to be in the middle of an office feud, instead of what could turn out to be a bloody massacre,” Brenda said. “I don’t know if Dawlish is a Death Eater, but many of his Aurors are.” And everyone knew that Shacklebolt was Dumbledore’s man.

“Parkinson’s a Death Eater too,” her partner whispered.

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you certain?”

“I don’t have proof, but what he says, and how he says it…” The Auror shrugged. “I know.”

“He’s been trying to recruit you, then.” Brenda wondered why Parkinson hadn’t started on her. Maybe he thought it would be easier if Martin was on his side before he tried to recruit her. Or he didn’t think she’d join. Brenda didn’t know how to feel about that. Death Eaters were quick to count those who didn’t want to join as enemies, or so she heard.

“You’re not surprised,” Martin said, interrupting her thoughts.

She shook her head. “He lost his family to the mudbloods. If he wasn’t a Death Eater before, he’s likely to be one now just for that.” And the Rowles had been Death Eaters. “Where is he, anyway?”

“He should be here already,” Martin said. “He left before we did.” The Auror crouched down and
picked up a piece of copper from the ground. “Another casing,” he remarked. “Same type as was found in Knockturn Alley.”

“That was to be expected.” Brenda didn’t care much - the thing was likely the result of a Doubling Charm, and would not last that long. They already knew that the mudbloods were using muggle guns - apparently, the wounds were quite specific, if you were familiar with those filthy weapons.

They walked over to Shacklebolt and Dawlish. The two men were arguing already, though fortunately a bit away from the body covered by a blanket. A young Auror was standing next to it, looking uncomfortable. Maisie Maygold was one of Shacklebolt’s - knowing that was important these days.

“Who’s that?” Brenda asked, nodding at the blanket.

“She has been identified as Pansy Parkinson,” the rookie said.

Brenda closed her eyes and hissed through her clenched teeth. Another of Parkinson’s family, gone. No wonder the man wasn’t here - he had probably been sent away after losing it. Aurors shouldn’t investigate the murder of their family, every one knew that. And yet, few heeded it.

Martin lifted the blanket, then winced. “Merlin’s beard!”

Maygold had turned her head away, Brenda noticed, before she took a look herself. Understandable, she thought - the young witch’s body was mangled almost beyond recognition. She crouched down and waved her wand. “No sign of curses. She was killed either by the guns, or the impact, or the explosion that followed.”

“Impact?” Maygold asked.

Martin pointed at the splintered, blackened wood nearby. “That’s a broom.” Brenda saw that he was smiling at the other Auror. She almost sighed - a crime scene wasn’t the place to flirt. “Who else has been identified so far?”

“Ah…” the witch turned towards Brenda. “They found the bodies of Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, inside the ruins.”

“Malfoy’s missing?” Brenda asked, covering up the corpse again.

Maygold nodded.

“Missing, presumed dead,” Martin said.

“Is anyone else missing?” Brenda asked.

“Shacklebolt said that Astoria Greengrass alerted the Ministry when her sister did not return from visiting Malfoy. She was with her friend Tracey Davis, and they suspect that Theodore Nott was present as well.”

Brenda whistled. All of them had inherited seats in the Wizengamot, currently held by proxies. Which meant that the pressure to solve this case would be enormous. She was very glad this wasn’t her case.

“Why’s Shacklebolt here?” Martin asked. “There’s no sign of Death Eaters being involved.”

“Malfoy is a suspected Death Eater, as were his parents,” Maygold said, quoting her team leader
verbatim, Brenda thought, “and two bombs were used by the Resistance. The second might have been used against Death Eater forces arriving - there are some signs of combat on the perimeter.”

Brenda nodded. Definitely Shacklebolt’s analysis. The rookie wouldn’t have caught that.

“I guess we’ll know when they find the bodies,” Martin said.

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Hogsmeade, December 11th, 1996

An hour later, Brenda was staring at the body of Draco Malfoy. The mudbloods had left him hanging from a conjured gallows in the middle of Hogsmeade.

“I’m glad it’s not a weekend,” Martin mumbled next to her.

“Why? Do you think this would have shocked them?” Brenda asked. The students had seen a lot, lately.

“No. They might have mutilated the body further,” her partner said. “Malfoy had to flee the school, last I heard.”

“Ah.” If the mudbloods had not taken responsibility by sticking a sheet of parchment on the corpse’s chest listing all his supposed crimes, they would have had to interrogate the students as suspects.

“Murder, attempted murder, membership of the Death Eaters…” Martin started to read the parchment.

“Stop that!” Brenda snapped. She was not in the mood to listen to mudblood lies and propaganda. Bragging about their murders, acting as if they were the law… it was sickening.

Martin stopped. “They executed him.” After a wave of his wand, he added: “But they didn’t kill him here. That was just for show. He was hanged, though.”

“Like muggles,” Brenda scowled. What was next? Burning wizards alive? How low would those mudbloods sink?

She noticed the gawking people passing more sheets around, and cursed. “Let’s get him down, and collect the filth here, before it spreads.”

By the time they had managed to undo the conjured gallows, though, the whole village knew about the accusations against Malfoy. Brenda scowled again - her superiors wouldn’t like that.

She really needed a success with her undercover operation, but it wasn’t as if she could just send them to attack anyone. Unless… she studied the roofs of the houses around them and smiled.

She would have to get it cleared by Bones, but the Avengers would soon strike again.

*****

Outside Rawtenstall, Lancashire, Britain, December 11th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore frowned, watching the stunned and bound prisoners lined up in the cells of the safe house he had set up in Lancashire. All of them were hurt, Miss Greengrass the worst, and while they were in no immediate danger of dying from their wounds, they needed a Healer.
Unfortunately, while there were several Healers he could count on to treat the members of the Order of the Phoenix, he couldn’t exactly trust them with treating prisoners that the Muggleborn Resistance had taken. While all members of the Order were determined to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters, not all of them understood that the actions Miss Granger and her friends took were needed. And it would be a catastrophe if his close relationship to the muggleborns were revealed to the Ministry and the public. At least at this point.

He sighed. He didn’t like obliterating his friends and allies, but sometimes it was needed. At least, he told himself, the Healer he had in mind would prefer to be obliterated instead of letting those three youths go untreated.

It still felt like a betrayal.

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A few hours later, his wards alerted him. He closed the book he had been reading - a description of various dark curses used by houngans in the last war with Jamaica, as well as their counters, unfortunately without an entry for a withering curse - and drew his wand to unlock the back door. Messrs Weasley had arrived.

“That’s your own secret Azkaban? It looks rather normal!”

He chuckled politely at Fred Weasley’s remark upon entering the kitchen. “It is primarily a safe house. The facilities to keep prisoners were a later addition.” He gestured at the table. “Please serve yourself, unless you have eaten dinner already.”

“We actually did eat before coming.” George said. “We really didn’t expect this.”

Albus wondered what they had expected. A torture chamber? He didn’t ask though, merely kept smiling. “To surprise you two is quite the achievement for a wizard my age.”

Both chuckled. Fred grabbed a lemon drizzle slice from the tray. “Do the prisoners get this food as well?”

“No, I don’t deprive them of food.” Albus asked in response. “It seems wasteful to serve different meals to guards and prisoners when a simple Doubling Charm will provide enough food for both. Although most of the time, the prisoners will be under the influence of Draught of Living Death.” He couldn’t spare the Order members to keep the prisoners under guard.

Fred nodded. “Smart.”

George seemed to disagree with his brother, judging by his expression, but the wizard didn’t object. Instead he took a cup and filled it with tea. “According to the rumours, the attack on Malfoy was quite bloody. What state are the prisoners in?”

“They have been seen to by a Healer,” Albus answered. Whom he had obliterated afterwards, as planned.

“Good.” George nodded.

“Wouldn’t want them to die before they have been interrogated,” Fred said. Albus thought it sounded a bit forced, but he wasn’t certain.

“Mister Nott has been interrogated with Veritaserum already.” And he had revealed two members of his family as Death Eaters. Confirmed, actually - it wasn’t as if Albus hadn’t already suspected that
Thadesius and Melara Nott were followers of the Dark Lord.

“That leaves Davis and Greengrass, then.” Fred nodded.

George smiled briefly, behind his brother.

Albus inclined his head. “Shall we proceed then? The sooner we have the information, the more valuable it will be.”

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Outside Rawtenstall, Lancashire, Britain, December 11th, 1996

Daphne Greengrass woke up with a scream. For a moment, she thought she was falling to her death, before she realised she was sitting on a chair. She was alive! Then she remembered the wound, the hole in her belly, and tried to pat herself down to check - but she couldn’t move her arms. Her hands were secured behind her back. Her elation at having survived the battle vanished at once.

She was a prisoner of the mudbloods. She knew what that meant - those animals would torture her to death! She didn’t want to die. Not like that. Not at all. She struggled, but her hands remained bound, as did her feet. And she was stuck to the chair. She was still wearing her robe, but it sported several rips and tears… and a hole over her stomach.

Daphne looked around. She was in a small room, bare floor and walls. A solid-looking door. No window. And there was a faint smell of blood. No, that was her robe. She pulled on her bonds again. She had to escape. They had taken her wand, but… she ignored how her wrists started to hurt. She had to escape!

The door started to open and she froze for a second, then schooled her features. She wouldn’t give those animals the satisfaction of seeing her cry. But when she saw Fred and George Weasley enter, she couldn’t help but gasp. She had known that they were blood traitors, like their whole family, but to… to work with those murderous mudbloods?

“Hello, Miss Greengrass,” Fred said, grinning. “Or do you prefer ‘Mary’?”

“Traitors!” she spat. “Murderers!”

“Murderers?” Fred sneered at her. “We’re not the ones working for the Dark Lord, attacking muggleborns.”

“You and your friends murdered my family!” She bared her teeth.

The two traitors exchanged glances. “Your parents died in Malfoy Manor, didn’t they?” George asked.

“Yes! Murdered by you and your friends!”

Fred shrugged. “If you ally yourself with the Dark Lord’s worst, you have to expect that. People tend to object to getting murdered for being born.”

“My parents weren’t allied with anyone! They were simply attending a ball!” Daphne felt tears appear in her eyes, and angrily shook her head. She didn’t want to show weakness, not now.

“A ball thrown by the Dark Lord’s right hand.” Fred stepped closer. “Where all the rich purebloods could mingle, and plan how to make his takeover of the Ministry easier.” He scoffed. “Did you think
the muggleborns wouldn’t notice what you were planning?”

“We didn’t plan anything! You and your mudblood friends murdered dozens of people just for being purebloods!” She sneered at him. “Or for being rich, I should say. Does it feel good to attack your betters?”

“We didn’t attack Malfoy Manor.” George cut in, holding up his hand to stop his brother from aiming his wand at her. “But we would have helped, had we been needed. Or asked.” He stared at her. “Why do you think the muggleborns attacked you?”

“Because they hate us! They are jealous of us, of our culture, of our way of life. They want to tear it all down!” She felt tears running down her cheeks, but didn’t care any more. She was dead anyway.

“They hate you - now. After all you did to them, on the orders of the Dark Lord.” George shook his head.

“We didn’t do anything to them!” They hadn’t! Daphne hadn’t even talked to a mudblood in months, when she had still been at Hogwarts!

“How stupid are you? The changed laws, the discrimination, the punishments by Umbridge! You force them out of Hogwarts, out of Wizarding Britain, and think you didn’t do anything? It was your family and friends in the Wizengamot who voted for those laws and policies!” Fred glared at her.

“No one was forced out of Hogwarts! If they had passed the test they could have stayed! It’s not our fault they are too stupid or too lazy to study!” She clenched her teeth.

“Hermione was too lazy to study? Too stupid to pass the test?” Fred leaned in, his face but a foot from hers, and his voice became a whisper. “You bigots lied and cheated to drive the muggleborns out, to please the Dark Lord. How many muggleborns were killed by Aurors ‘resisting arrest’? Did you think they wouldn’t notice? Did you expect them to let you continue until you had killed them all?” He scoffed. “You and your friends were all too happy, getting rid of muggleborns. Cozying up to scum like Malfoy.”

Daphne glared at him. Granger. Always Granger. As much as she hated to admit it, that mudblood had been smart. Top of the class, even. A mudblood, beating purebloods! The teachers had been fawning over her. Daphne had loved the day the upstart had been taught her place, the day she had learned that some things you couldn’t learn no matter how much you read. She raised her chin, meeting his eyes. “And does getting expelled from Hogwarts justify murdering people? That’s the act of a rabid animal!” She saw him jerk, and suddenly, the tip of his wand was digging into her throat. “Go on, murder me! Just as your friends murdered my family!”

For a moment, she thought he would. Then George put his hand on Fred’s arm, and pushed it down.

Fred stared at her. “You really don’t understand what you and your friends did, do you? You have no idea why the muggleborns fight you. Or why we fight you.”

“Because you hate us! Because you’re jealous!”

Fred cursed. “George, let’s dose her and get this over with, before I kill her.”

His brother seemed to hesitate a moment, then Daphne saw him nod and pull a vial out of his pocket. She gasped. Veritaserum!

“You monsters!” She spat, then pressed her lips together. It didn’t help her - a simple hex, and her mouth was open. George was there, with the vial, and… things started to get hazy. Easy. The chair
was quite comfortable, and why had she wanted to escape again? Oh, they wanted her to answer a few questions. Of course she would!

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“And why did you spy on our shop?”

Albus Dumbledore, disillusioned, watched as Miss Greengrass blinked in response to Fred’s question.

“Because Draco wanted us to,” the witch said in the typically dreamy voice of those under the effect of Veritaserum.

“What was his plan?”

“We were supposed to lure you into a trap.”

Fred hissed. “I knew it! Did he want to kill us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you want to kill us?” Fred asked.

“I don’t know. When?”

“How stupid is she?” The young wizard turned to his brother.

George took over: “When you were in our shop and attacked Fred.”

“No. I wanted to escape.”

“And before that?”

“Draco said that the Dark Lord wanted you alive.”

Albus watched the expressions on the two wizards.

“As hostages?”

“I don’t know.”

Fred sighed, his frustration evident. “She doesn’t know anything. No Death Eaters, no plans, no safe houses, nothing!”

George seemed to almost shrug. “Were you just following orders?”

“Yes.”

“Even when you were attacking the Burrow?” Fred cut in.

“Yes.”

Albus glanced at the transcript of the interrogation. They had gone over this before. Before he said anything though, George spoke up. “I think we’re done here. We’re repeating questions.”

“Right.” Fred raised his wand. “Let’s stun her and get Davis.” The boy turned his head in Albus’s direction.
The Headmaster didn’t answer - it wouldn’t do if Miss Greengrass knew of his involvement; future arrangements might be endangered - but stunned the girl himself. Then he ended his Disillusionment Charm. “A thorough if unfortunately not too fruitful interrogation,” he said. “Though I did not expect anything else from Miss Greengrass.”

“She really didn’t understand why the muggleborns attacked Malfoy Manor,” Fred said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe it!”

“Her world has no place for muggleborns. She was raised to believe that it was a privilege for them to learn magic - but she never learned how privileged she was herself.” Albus knew that he could have made certain that Miss Greengrass and her peers had learned that lesson. But it would have been a harsh and painful one, and would have required efforts or methods that the Ministry and the public wouldn’t have tolerated. And yet, if he had made the attempt, maybe… He sighed. He hadn’t, preferring to focus on other plans, and he had to live with the results of his choice.

“Well, we know she was not a fanatic,” George said.

“She was eager enough. A willing tool of Malfoy,” Fred said, glaring at the unconscious witch.

“A fool, I would say - but every one of us is a fool at times,” Albus said. He was glad that the young witch had not done anything irredeemable.

Fred scowled, but George nodded. “So… she’ll be fed Draught of Living Death, and woken up once the war is over?”

“I gather she will be woken up a few times until then, to deal with things,” Albus answered. “Such as instructing her family.”

“Alright. I’ll fetch Davis.” Fred left.

Albus looked at George. “Are you satisfied?”

“It wasn’t as bad as I feared, but not as good as I hoped,” the young wizard said.

“A result quite common in life.” Albus smiled.

“He didn’t ask her if her interest in him had been feigned.”

“Indeed. Maybe he did not want to know?” Albus shrugged.

“Great. I had hoped he would be over her.”

Albus was not certain that the young wizard was quite honest, but didn’t press the issue.

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**Hogwarts, December 11th, 1996**

Ron Weasley pushed his homework - an essay for Potions - around on the table in the library. He hadn’t written anything for half an hour. Instead, he had tried to make up his mind whether or not he should learn Legilimency. And he hadn’t made any progress. On one hand, it would be very useful. To read an enemy’s mind… if he learned how to catch glimpses of their intentions during a duel, he could react to their spells before they cast them. And he would be able to find out what all those Slytherins were thinking.

Only there weren’t that many Slytherins still at Hogwarts. Zabini was the most prominent one left -
and if he was a Death Eater, he was hiding it really well. And the Headmaster would have already checked, wouldn’t he? And Ron didn’t think using such a skill to find out what that wizard thought about Ginny would be a responsible thing to do.

Which was the crux of the issue. Despite some rumours to the contrary, Ron wasn’t averse to learning and studying, as long as he could see the need for it - which he didn’t with regards to that damn Potions essay! But once he had learned it, could he restrain himself from abusing it? He had spent the day wondering how it would be, being able to read minds. To know what the other students were thinking. Or the teachers. Was Digby really a Cannons fan, or was that just a way to get closer to Harry? Was he a fan of the Boy-Who-Lived, or even a Death Eater sympathiser? What had been so amusing that Bones had giggled loudly in class?

“Hey, Ron!”

He almost jerked, snatching his wand up. Lavender was standing in front of his table. Merlin’s balls, he hadn’t noticed her! If she had been a Slytherin… Moody would roast him alive if he knew!

The witch was showing both her hands. “Don’t hex me!” she said, though she was giggling.

“Sorry, you surprised me,” he muttered. He didn’t stow his wand though - he started to play around with it, as if absentmindedly. A trick Moody had taught him and Harry to keep their wands ready without appearing to. Was it time for their patrol already? Not according to his watch.

She grinned. “If only I had managed to surprise you in the last Defence class!” She twisted one of her blonde locks around her finger. “You hexed me pretty badly.”

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t, really - compared to Moody’s special training, those Defence lessons were nothing. A few Stinging Hexes.

“It still hurts a bit, when I rub it,” Lavender said, running a hand over her thigh.

Maybe he had been a bit too callous. But then, Moody always said that it was better to suffer in training than to die in battle. He caught himself staring at her hand, and looked away. He did see her smile though.

“So… I was wondering… Do you do anything but training? Quidditch and Defence?” Lavender asked.

“And patrols,” Ron said. They were prefects, after all.

“Yes.” He saw her tongue wet her lips. “But I mean, something… fun, you know?”

Ron didn’t have to read minds to understand what she meant. “I don’t have a girlfriend, if you mean that.” He was dating, but… it was complicated.

“That was one of my guesses, actually. I wondered if you were sneaking off to see a witch.”

He nodded. He was, sometimes at least, but he couldn’t tell her that. “That’s more training,” he said.

“Mh.” She crossed her legs and shifted her position on the table a bit. “You remember what I told you, when we had a similar talk?”

“Yes.” But he wasn’t over Hermione.

She looked at him with what he thought was hope in her eyes, briefly biting her lower lip. Like
Hermione, but different.

He sighed, and shook his head, smiling faintly. “I’m not over her.”

He saw how she briefly stiffened, then smiled. “Ah, well… if you do, you know…”

“Yes.”

She slid off the table, and nodded. “We’ve got a patrol in ten minutes… meet at the Fat Lady?”

“Yes.”

She was five minutes late for their patrol, and Parvati seemed to glare at him in the common room, but otherwise, they acted like usual. If he were able to read her mind though… he wouldn’t, he realised.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, December 11th, 1996

Even though he was alone, the Dark Lord Voldemort didn’t vent his anger while he paced in the reading room of his latest residence. It wouldn’t do to let emotions rule him. Malfoy had been murdered by the mudbloods. By itself, that would not have been a crucial loss. Malfoy’s heir would continue to support Voldemort with gold - unless he wanted to become the next late Malfoy - and the boy hadn’t been much of an asset apart from that. He had had potential, and had shown initiative by gathering a group for the Dark Lord, but others had done the same, or more.

No, the problem was the manner in which Malfoy had been murdered. He had been attacked in his new home, his wards shattered, his group defeated - killed or captured, all of them - and the Death Eaters the Dark Lord had sent as reinforcements and a relief force had failed. If their leader had not been killed by the second bomb, he would have been punished for such a blunder. News of this, if not all the details, had spread quickly through Wizarding Britain after Malfoy’s corpse had been found in Hogsmeade. Two heirs to a seat in the Wizengamot killed, three more still missing - and in the eyes of Wizarding Britain, all of it was the work of the mudbloods!

He knew that Dumbledore was behind it. The timing was too perfect. Just after Voldemort’s reputation had recovered thanks to his attacks on blood traitors, the mudbloods copied him. Soon, his old nemesis would offer protection from the mudbloods for anyone who opposed Voldemort. The Dark Lord would do the same in his place. And many, too many of the spineless worms in the Wizengamot and the Ministry would accept such an offer.

He ground his teeth. He couldn’t let that happen. But more attacks on blood traitors would not have the same effect as before - he needed to strike at the mudbloods. A trap might be possible. He could lure them into an ambush by using another Death Eater as bait.

He could do that - and play right into Dumbledore’s hands. The old wizard was waiting for Voldemort to commit himself to an attack to strike at him. Between the mudbloods and Dumbledore and his Order, the likelihood of the Dark Lord’s death was too great. He’d return, thanks to his Horcruxes. But while returning from death once was a legendary feat, returning from death for the second time meant that he’d have been killed twice already. And that was considerably less impressive.

No, he had to fight back in a way Dumbledore wasn’t prepared for. A decisive strike.

And there was just one target where that was possible.
“Hermione?”

Sally-Anne’s voice interrupted Hermione’s planning session with John for the next Resistance Radio broadcast. She looked up to find the witch in the door to the briefing room, which also doubled as an office. “Yes?”

“Colin’s awake now.”

Hermione didn’t freeze up, but she grew tense. “Thank you,” she pressed out. Turning to John, she added: “I’ll be back. Check the transcripts we received for more information about crimes. But don’t mention that Greengrass and Davis only joined Malfoy after their parents had been killed by us.” That kind of information wouldn’t be conducive in motivating people to oppose the Death Eaters.

Hermione knew it should be obvious that people, especially purebloods, would want to avenge dead family members, no matter what those had done to deserve their fate, but not everyone realised that. Or was willing to risk such reactions. But in order to win this war, the Death Eaters had to be fought and killed, or those monsters would murder more innocents. Even if it meant they’d have to fight their children as well - better to do it now, than in ten years.

She followed Sally-Anne down to their Infirmary - not as well-equipped as it should be, but so far it had been good enough. Until the Creeveys had been struck by unknown dark curses.

“He’s being brave,” Sally-Anne said, unasked. “But… I saw him stare at his leg, and… he’s not doing well.”

Hermione nodded. She could imagine the horror of seeing your limb shrivel up, become a dead thing hanging on your body. It was thoroughly unnatural - any muggle doctor would realise that at once, after seeing it.

Which meant that the Creeveys would have to very carefully cover themselves when venturing into muggle London. And she didn’t want to imagine how their parents would react.

And it was all her fault.

The smile on Hermione’s face when she entered the Infirmary was forced. Both brothers were awake now. Colin turned towards her, one hand on Dennis’s arm - the good one. “Hermione!”

“Hi Colin, hi Dennis.” She ignored Dennis wiping his eyes and putting on a brave face.

“Hi, Hermione.” Dennis’s voice still shook.

Hermione was painfully reminded of the fact that he was barely fourteen - too young to fight in this war!

“Did we get them all?” Colin asked.

Hermione nodded. “We captured or killed all the targets, and even more Death Eaters when Seamus left a bomb during our retreat.” She dropped a picture down on Colin’s bed. “That’s Malfoy, dead.”

Their faces lit up, and both peered at the picture. Hermione winced when she heard Dennis whisper “Yes!”
“Do you have a recording of his execution?” Colin asked, eagerly even.

“We just took pictures, no video,” Hermione said.

“Ah… OK.”

It wasn’t OK though. Why hadn’t she thought of recording it? As gruesome as it was, it would have made the two boys feel better.

“Did… did you find out what curse hit us?” Dennis asked suddenly, looking up from the picture.

Hermione shook her head. “I and others are working on it. But so far we haven’t found anything, just a hint that it might have been a curse from a houngan.”

That caused both of the boys to wince. “Voodoo?” Colin said, shivering. Of course he’d know what a houngan was, even if he couldn’t list all the laws of Transfiguration!

“It’s just a hint, it might be wrong. We’re still at the start of our research.”

Colin took a deep breath. “Would… would it be easier if we cut it off and got a pro… an enchanted limb?”

Did the boys think they’d be a burden? Hermione shook her head. “We have the time, don’t worry about it.” She hoped she was not lying.

Colin nodded. Dennis though… the younger boy pointed with his good hand at his cursed arm, carefully not touching it. “I want it gone! I can’t stand looking at it like that!” He was shivering, but wasn’t crying - yet.

Hermione felt as if she had received a Bludger to the stomach. He wanted the limb cut off? She should have expected that. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “We’ll have to arrange that with a muggle doctor.” They would have to be obliviated as well. “That might take some time. So… don’t give up hope, please.”

Dennis nodded, his lips quivering.

Colin, who was wrapping an arm around his brother, looked at her with an unreadable expression. “I want my leg cut off as well.”

Hermione opened her mouth, to ask if he was just following his brother’s example, but Colin’s gaze hardened, and she shut up. Of course he’d share this with his brother. So she simply nodded. “I’ll arrange it.”

And she’d try her best to find a counter-curse until then.

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**London, Ministry of Magic, December 13th, 1996**

“What’s the situation?” Brenda Brocktuckle asked while she ran towards the Apparition point in the Ministry.

“Robbery of a shop went wrong, apparently. ‘Haley's Hats’, in Diagon Alley,” Martin, sprinting next to her, said. “Owner was still around, and a fight ensued. An Auror patrol heard the noise, and placed Anti-Apparition Jinxes over the house.”
“Why are we responding?” Brenda said, turning the corner. They were on the night shift, but not as a fast response force. There were Hit-Wizards for that!

“The thieves were shouting mudblood slogans while they engaged the Aurors with Curses.”

“Can’t be the Resistance. They’d have gone through an Auror patrol easily,” Brenda said. “But could be another group of mudbloods.” She grinned. Mudbloods arrested were mudbloods arrested. “Did anyone call Parkinson?”

“I didn’t call him,” Martin said.

“Hopefully, someone did,” Brenda said. Their partner would be angry if he missed this… but then, he had taken the day off.

The two Aurors reached the Apparition point, and an instant later, they arrived in Diagon Alley, about 100 yards away from the shop under siege. A group of Hit-Wizards was moving in, from both sides of the shop, sticking close to the fronts so they couldn’t be hexed from the shop without the caster exposing himself to the wands of the third group. Standard tactics, Brenda noted, approvingly.

Standard tactics, she remembered with a sinking feelings, meant that they were known. So… just how good were those mudbloods? Brenda took out her Omnioculars and studied the shop’s front. No sign of any trap there. The other shops’ wards were still up. And the road was free but for the mudholes… the mudholes! The Hit-Wizards were advancing too quickly, no one was checking the mudholes!

She cast an Amplifying Charm and yelled: “Check the mudholes before advancing!”

The groups froze, and one of them pointed his wand at a patch of mud. He disappeared in an explosion that threw his teammates into the middle of the street. A second later, another explosion followed on the other side.

“They trapped the mudholes!” Brenda snarled. Cowards! She rushed forward, Martin at her side, dispelling a few mudholes on the way - though none of them exploded. They were too far away though to do anything when the Hit-Wizards lying in the middle of the street came under fire from the upper floor of the shop.

The rest of the Hit-Wizards tried to provide cover for them, but they were too slow - a Blasting Curse hit the middle of the right side, sending cobblestones flying. Brenda saw one Hit-Wizard, who had just managed to get up, but not cast a Shield Charm, get hit in the head by a stone and fall down again, his face a bleeding mess. Another screamed, trying to crawl with broken legs. The other group of wounded fared better - marginally. One was casting wildly, hobbling towards the next cover, another was still on the ground, but seemed to aim carefully. A green curse - the Killing Curse! - struck the limping wizard, who dropped like a puppet with his strings cut.

The third group of Hit-Wizards was still providing covering fire, but wasn’t having a lot of effect. “Bloody amateurs!” Brenda cursed. She reached their position and slid behind the closest cover. “Hit the shop’s front with Blasting Curses!”

The Hit-Wizard in front of her turned around. “What?” he yelled.

“Hit the front of the shop with Blasting Curses!” Brenda yelled again. She stood up to cast herself, together with Martin. Two craters appeared in the shop’s front, plaster and wood and pulverised bricks dropping to the ground. She didn’t know if she had hit anyone, but the curses thrown at them from the building slacked off for a moment.
The remaining Hit-Wizard in the street tried to use the opportunity, sprinting towards the next barricade. Another Killing Curse missed him by a few feet and blew up a part of the street. But Brenda had spotted the dark wizard now.

“Second window from the left, first floor,” she told Martin, who smiled grimly. A second later, the window was destroyed when two curses hit it. Brenda saw someone moving inside, but her next curse just missed the figure. Then the curses stopped flying at them altogether. She had a bad feeling about this. “Extend the Anti-Apparition Jinxes!” she yelled.

Then the mudbloods sallied from the shop, wands leading and curses flashing. They were brave, she gave them that. Or stupid. Or both. Six of them, against five Hit-Wizards who had just lost seven of their comrades, and two Aurors, all of them in cover. And yet, if not for Brenda’s order, they might have made it - they cleared half the street, curses smashing into the conjured barricades and hitting Shield Charms, forcing more than one Hit-Wizard to keep their head down under the barrage, before the first of them fell - a victim of Martin’s Bludgeoning Curse that smashed their hips.

Brenda saw the rest flick their wands, without a spell appearing - they were trying to apparate. “Blast them!” she yelled, casting a Reductor Curse at the feet of the closest one. The witch screamed when her foot was hit and almost blown off. Two down. A third was hit by two Piercing Curses, one in the throat, the other in the chest. In exchange, one of the Hit-Wizards had caught a Killing Curse. She barely noticed how a curse hit her own Shield Charm.

The rest of the mudbloods were splitting up, trying to outrun the Anti-Apparition Jinxes, Brenda bet. Not on her watch! Her Cutting Curse sliced into the legs of the wizard who had cast the Killing Curse, dropping him in a spray of blood, while another was hit with half a dozen curses at once, or so it seemed, and simply went down.

The last one, though, rolled forward, neatly avoiding another Reductor Curse, then dove behind an upturned cart. Amateur, Brenda thought dismissively, a second before her next spell blew up the cart and sent deadly splinters flying - most of them into the Shield Charm of the last mudblood. The wizard was hurt, but still tried to run, though exposed as he was, a Hit-Wizard took him down with a complicated spell.

Brenda waited thirty seconds, then stood up. “Check the wounded! You two - search the shop and house. Martin! With me, we’ll secure the prisoners.”

She shivered a bit when the tension of the battle left her, but she was smiling widely - for once, they hadn’t been too late. And they had prisoners they could use to find even more mudbloods.

This had been a very good night shift.

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Unintended Consequences

Chapter 22: Unintended Consequences

“When talking about the muggleborn participation in the Second Blood War, most works focus on the Muggleborn Resistance, the group founded and led by Hermione Granger. This is quite understandable, given that their actions were crucial to starting said war, and include some of the most important events of the conflict. However, it would not be correct to assume that they were the only muggleborns taking up wands to fight for their cause - quite the contrary. Being forced to leave the Magical World and go into hiding in muggle Britain had caused many muggleborns to not only resent, but also to outright hate, those they deemed responsible. Only the fear of the Auror response to attacks held many hot-headed muggleborns back. But when news of the efforts of the Resistance and later the Avengers spread, a number felt that they too could make a difference.

Unfortunately, few among the muggleborns had the training and preparation that had made the Resistance so successful, and even fewer still were willing to plan their actions carefully. And even those who did were prone to overconfidence after a first success. The consequences were often fatal.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Ministry of Magic, December 14th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle generally didn’t like working on the weekend, though she was a veteran Auror and knew it was needed, especially in a crisis like this conflict with the Death Eaters and the mudbloods. Today all that didn’t matter though - they had caught two prisoners! Both needed the attention of a Healer, but the witch who had lost a foot to Brenda’s curse would be fine with just the bleeding stopped - she could be treated afterwards. She wouldn’t die during the interrogation. There was no need to bother a Healer for her, especially when it was already past midnight.

Brenda levitated the bound and gagged mudblood into the interrogation room and watched as Martin secured her to the chair. The witch’s trousers were torn and splattered with blood, so Brenda cast a quick Cleaning Charm lest the mudblood dirty up the room, while Martin went to fetch Veritaserum. When the door was opened she grabbed her wand - even if he ran Martin wouldn’t have been back yet.

“When were you going to tell me that you had captured two mudbloods?”

Brenda snorted at Parkinson, who was leaning against the doorframe. “We had the choice of either informing you, or catching the mudbloods. We barely arrived in time to keep them from escaping - the Hit-Wizards certainly wouldn’t have been able to stop them.”


Brenda doubted that the prisoners were members of the Resistance, but held her tongue. Veritaserum would reveal the truth soon enough, and if she actually had caught some of those responsible for the bombing of Malfoy Manor… that’d be a promotion for certain.

Martin arrived, panting. The rookie must have run, Brenda thought, as he handed her the sealed vial.
The prisoner had stopped glaring at them and was now staring at the vial. Brenda saw she was
trembling. The Auror grinned as she approached her - that meant the mudblood was afraid of
betraying others. Which was exactly what she had hoped.

A few spells later the gag was removed and the mudblood dosed. There was no danger any more of
an attempt to bite her tongue off; the witch was faintly smiling and humming. Brenda pulled out a
Dictaquill and started the investigation.

“December 14th, 1996. Brenda Brocktuckle, interrogating a suspect arrested in the robbery of
‘Haley’s Hats’ in Diagon Alley.” She turned to the witch. “What’s your name?


“Blood status?”

“Muggleborn.”

Brenda nodded. As suspected. “Are you a part of the Muggleborn Resistance?”

“Yes.”

Brenda’s eyes widened. She heard Martin gasp. “Were you involved in the bombing of Malfoy
Manor?”

“No.”

“Were any others in the group you were with involved?”

“No. William wished he had been.”

“Who recruited you and how?”

“We were listening to the wireless, reading the newspapers and leaflets… we decided to join the
fight. If the Resistance and the Avengers can fight, then so can we!”

Brenda hissed. That wasn’t an intended effect of her undercover operation. “Did you form your own
group, without any contact with the Muggleborn Resistance?”

“We listened to their broadcasts, and read their leaflets.”

“But you didn’t talk to any of their members.”

“No.”

Brenda sighed. Just some idiots who tried to copy the Resistance then. Dangerous idiots though.
“Why were you in ‘Haley’s Hats’ on Friday, December 13th, 1996?”

“We wanted to teach the pureblood who had stolen it from Ellie a lesson.”


“Ellie was my best friend.”

“Was?”

“She was killed today. I saw her die.”
“What’s her full name?”

“Ellie Pearson.”

“Describe her.”

“Brown hair, shoulder-length. Five foot five inches. She wore brown trousers and a green shirt.”

That fit the witch they had found inside the shop, killed by splinters from the Blasting Curses that had reduced the front of the shop to rubble. Brenda made a small note. “Who stole the shop from her?”

“That pureblood bigot, Millard Macmillan. She had to sell her shop, and he robbed her blind. He paid her a Knut on the Galleon.”

Brenda rolled her eyes. So the mudblood had sold too cheaply, and blamed the buyer. “And then you decided to destroy the shop, so no one could have it.”

“Yes.”

“Who placed the bombs in the mudholes?”

“William.”

“What’s his full name?”

“William Frederick Poole.”

“Muggleborn?”

“Yes.”

“Did he make the bombs?”

“Yes. He read about it, but it took him some time to get it right.”

“Did all of you know about the bombs?”

“Yes.”

“Did you want to kill Aurors and Hit-Wizards?”

“Yes. Ambush them. Make them pay for William’s brother.”

Brenda frowned. “What happened to his brother?”

“He was murdered by Aurors.”

“Killed while resisting arrest,” Martin whispered.

Brenda nodded. That was more likely. “Was everyone in your group at the shop?”

“No. Liz and Marc stayed back. They didn’t want to come.” Milton pouted. “Liz said she was sticking to casting mudholes. As if mudholes did much!”

Brenda smiled. Two more suspects. “Where are Liz and Marc?”
“In our safe house, in London.”

The muggle address didn’t ring any bell, but Brenda noted it down. They’d find it. And they’d find the other two mudbloods. She had the mudblood list all the names and addresses of the other group members, to confirm that no one had escaped from the shop, and questioned her about the layout of the house, before she remembered something. “Did Liz cast those mudholes at the shop?”

“No. She taught us how to, though. She started the mudholes.”

Brenda smiled. That would be a high-profile arrest!

Her good mood didn’t last long though. While they were making plans to search the addresses they had received, Martin wondered out loud: “Do you think there are more like them? More mudbloods preparing to attack purebloods?”

“Merlin’s Balls!” Parkinson looked shocked. “If this is just the beginning…”

Suddenly, having created the Avengers didn’t look like it had been a good idea any more.

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London, Bromley, December 14th, 1996

At three o’clock in the morning, even a muggle neighbourhood was quiet, without pedestrians on the streets, Brenda Brocktuckle noted with satisfaction - there would be no need to deal with witnesses. The street the mudbloods lived in was broader than she had expected as well - and cars lined both sides, in front of small gardens.

“I don’t detect any wards,” Martin said, standing next to her.

“The mudblood told us that they had no wards,” Parkinson said.

“I know.” Brenda’s partner frowned. “But it makes no sense. Why would they leave themselves open to any attack?”

“For their television and computers.” Brenda couldn’t understand why that was worth sacrificing your safety, but as long as it made her task easier, she wouldn’t complain. “Now focus - we’ll enter from both back and front. Take the two mudbloods inside down. The Hit-Wizards will prevent any escape attempts.” She’d have sent the Hit-Wizards in, if not for the fact that the friends of the two targets had killed over half a dozen of them, and Brenda feared that the Hit-Wizards with her wouldn’t be too careful when fighting the mudbloods.

Parkinson and Martin nodded, as did Peter Selwyn, the leader of the Hit-Wizards with them. They moved up to the house next to their target. The lights were on in the house - the mudbloods were probably waiting for their friends. Parkinson went through the garden to the back, Brenda and Martin covered the front. The four Hit-Wizards surrounded the house, two of them on brooms. When they signalled that the Anti-Apparition Jinxes were set, Brenda cast a Silencing Charm on the door, then blew it up. Martin stormed inside, and she rushed after him.

No one was in the living room though, despite the lights burning. Parkinson appeared in the hallway. “Kitchen’s empty.”

They searched the other rooms, but found no one. Martin pointed at an open armoire, with clothes strewn out on the floor. “Looks like someone packed hastily.”
“They’ve fled.” Parkinson growled. “We were too slow.”

“We struck as fast as possible,” Brenda said. “The two fugitives must have expected this.”

“Merlin’s balls! What if this is a trap?” Parkinson looked around. “We need to get out before they blow up the house!”

Brenda shook her head. “I doubt there is a bomb - they can’t know if their friends have been captured, or simply delayed.” She saw Martin’s and Parkinson’s expression, and frowned. “Let’s leave anyway.” There was no reason to stay, after all.

On the way out, she repaired the door. At Parkinson’s questioning gaze, she explained: “They might come back, to check if their friends have returned. We can catch them then.”

“Unless they are watching the house right now,” Martin cut in.

Brenda shrugged. “It’s worth a try.” She’d send a few rookies to stake it out.

She informed the Hit-Wizards, and told them to hide and watch, until relieved, before she apparated back to the Ministry. She had a lot of paperwork to do still.

Hogwarts, December 14th, 1996

‘Muggleborn Murderers Arrested!’

When Harry Potter saw the headline of the Daily Prophet delivered during breakfast, he felt for a moment as if his heart had stopped beating. Had the Ministry caught Hermione? He skimmed the article, with Ron reading over his shoulder.

The article didn’t offer much information. Muggleborns had attacked a shop in Diagon Alley, killed several Hit-Wizards with bombs before being overwhelmed. Two were arrested, the rest were killed.

“Blimey!” Ron whispered, even after casting a privacy spell. “If they had caught Hermione, they’d announce it, wouldn’t they? We’d have been told so too, right?”

“Yes,” Harry said, trying to convince himself as much as his best friend. He looked at the staff table, where Dumbledore was seated. The old wizard smiled at him. That was reassuring. Or should be. Legilimency would be really handy right now, to communicate with the Headmaster.

Around them speculation was running rampant. Harry heard Hermione’s name mentioned a few times.

“Look at McLaggen,” Ron said. “He’s smiling.”

Harry looked down the table. Ron was right - the Gryffindor was smiling while reading the article. That bigot was probably hoping that Hermione had been arrested, he thought. He wanted to curse the git, but controlled himself. Mostly. “Hey, McLaggen!” he yelled. “What’s so funny?”

McLaggen jerked, panic briefly visible on his face, before he glanced at Harry. “Nothing.”

Harry glared at him. “Nothing, huh?” He fingered his wand.

The other student glanced at the staff table. He looked rather nervous now. “Nothing.”
Harry snorted and pointed his wand down the table. McLaggen gasped and threw himself off the bench.

“Accio breadbasket,” Harry said, snickering.

McLaggen glared at him while Ron and many of the other Gryffindors snickered and laughed until the student had left the table.

“What an idiot,” Ron said, shaking his head. “But he has learned his lesson. Malfoy would have been in our face, gloating.”

Harry sighed. “Yes.” The news of Malfoy’s death - his execution - had come as quite the surprise. And a bit of a shock. In hindsight, he should have expected this - Malfoy had been too stupid and rash to survive in the war - but still… when Hermione had told him how the git had died… He shuddered.

“You don’t miss him, do you?” Ron asked, raising his eyebrows. He wasn’t quite serious, Harry knew, but not entirely joking either.

“No, just… Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, well… they were almost part of Hogwarts.” Harry refilled his cup. “Their visits in the train were almost a ritual. And now they’re dead. Gone.”

“Good riddance,” Ron said. “The world’s a better place without him - you know what Hermione told us. What he had done.”

Harry nodded. “Yes. It’s just… it sort of made me realise, really realise, that things will never be the same. Not at Hogwarts, not in Britain.” He took a deep breath. “At first, I thought we’d return things to how they were. Before Voldemort. But we can’t. And we shouldn’t. We should make things better.”

Ron looked at Harry as if that had been obvious to him. He didn’t say anything, though.

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Hogwarts, December 14th, 1996

“I can assure you that the muggleborns mentioned in the article were not members of Miss Granger’s group.” Albus Dumbledore smiled at Harry and Mister Weasley.

“Thank you, Headmaster!” Harry, sitting in front of Albus’s desk, looked relieved. “We didn’t want to use the mirror, not if there was another way… in case the Ministry had it.”

“That would have been bad,” Mister Weasley added.

“Indeed,” Albus agreed. If the boys’ close contact with the Resistance were revealed, or, even worse, his own, the consequences would be dire.

“So… how much of what’s written in the article is true, sir?” Harry asked.

“The article exaggerates the events a bit, but is more or less correct. Two muggleborns were arrested, five were killed. Six Hit-Wizards were killed as well, and more were hurt.” Kingsley had already informed him in the morning.

“Blimey!” Mister Weasley shook his head. “Even with the bombs, that must have been a fight.”

“By all accounts, it was,” Albus said.
“Who were the muggleborns then? Do we know them?”

“I do not think so.” The Headmaster shook his head. He knew them, of course - as he knew almost all younger wizards and witches in Britain - from their time at Hogwarts.

Once again the two boys looked relieved, though they were trying to hide their reaction. Albus didn’t begrudge them for it - it was just natural to care more for friends and family than strangers. “I hope thus reassured, you can now focus once more on your lessons,” he added with a faint smile.

“Speaking of lessons, sir,” Mister Weasley said, “I’ve decided to join Harry for Legilimency training.”

“Very well, Mister Weasley. I will inform you as soon as I have arranged the first lesson.” The boy didn’t say why he had taken this decision, and Albus didn’t ask. What mattered was that Harry would have a good friend at his side during those lessons. This would help him greatly. He smiled gently. “But I think you should now enjoy your weekend.”

The boys glanced and each other, then nodded. Albus was certain they’d meet or at least talk to Miss Granger later. Ah, youth!

Once he was alone again in his office, Albus sighed as he glanced at the Daily Prophet on his desk, his eyes taking in the pictures of the devastated shop and street. After the ‘Avengers’, this seemed to be another muggleborn group following Miss Granger’s example, although with far less success than the two others. All but two had been killed in the fight, together with half a dozen Hit-Wizards, which presented him with a serious problem.

The dead were not much of a problem. As cynical as it sounded, the muggleborns had killed enough Hit-Wizards to counter the Ministry’s attempt to paint this as a great victory in their fight against the Muggleborn Resistance. Especially if Albus let the right people know that these muggleborns had not actually been members of the feared Resistance. That two of them had escaped would help check the Death Eaters attempts to use this to influence others at the Ministry as well.

No, the problem he was facing was what to do about the two survivors who had been arrested. If they went to trial they would be executed. That was a certainty. Tom’s supporters in the Wizengamot might not be in the majority any more, but neither were Albus’s allies, and those outside both camps were quite firm in their stance towards ‘muggleborn murderers’.

However, Albus could save the two. That was, if not a certainty, a very likely result of the preparations he had made after Martin Cokes had been executed. But in doing this, he would also compromise his resources, which would prevent him from repeating this feat, should one or more members of the Resistance be arrested in the future. He had alternatives in mind, but those would run a high risk of exposing his own involvement.

Could he let those two muggleborns die just so he retained the ability to save others? He leaned back in his seat, sighing again. Fawkes trilled and flew from his perch to land in his lap, butting his head against his hand. He stroke the bird’s plumage, pondering his dilemma. To weigh one life against another - two, in this case - was not a moral thing to do. All life was precious. And yet, he had done it before, and would have to do it again - such was the burden of a leader during war.

Maybe he should inform Miss Granger. Ask her if he should save the two arrested muggleborns, at the cost of future rescue attempts. Let her decide. Albus shook his head. No, he would not stoop so low as to dump this terrible decision on the young witch. It was his responsibility, and he would live up to it.
And, even though he hated to admit it, his decision was clear. The Muggleborn Resistance had proven invaluable in the war against Voldemort. Their admittedly brutal means had cost the Dark Lord dozens of his most powerful supporters, and the fear they had caused among the purebloods had both preserved and increased his own influence on the Ministry. They were skilled, determined, brave, and Miss Granger had proved that she would not tolerate crimes and atrocities from her own.

On the other hand this new group of muggleborns hadn’t struck at Death Eaters, but at purebloods. And while it was understandable that they would strike at those purebloods who had profited from the muggleborns’ misery, they had deliberately tried to kill as many Hit-Wizards and Aurors they could - and succeeded in part. That was, again, understandable, given the role of the Ministry forces in enforcing the unjust laws that oppressed muggleborns, but Albus was certain that it would also strengthen the Dark Lord’s support in the Wizengamot, for little gain. But most importantly: this new group had failed. They had proved that they were neither as skilled and trained as the resistance, nor as careful in planning their attacks. They had lost most of their strength already after their first attack.

Seen objectively, the Resistance was simply more valuable to the war effort, which would mean less victims in the long run. Albus hated himself for it, but he would not save the two muggleborns. Unless of course Miss Granger asked him to - her cooperation and trust was worth it.

But he didn’t think she would.

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London, East End, December 14th, 1996

Hermione Granger stared at the newspaper during lunch, studying the pictures. ‘Muggleborn Murderers Arrested!’?

“Someone’s copying us!” Seamus exclaimed. “Look at the damage to the street!”

“They were caught, though,” Justin said. “Two arrested, the rest killed.”

“That’s the Prophet. Can’t trust it.” Dean shook his head. “They’d claim we were all dead should we stub a toe during a fight.”

Hermione pursed her lips. She didn’t think that sort of comment was appropriate, given what had happened to the Creeveys. She didn’t say anything, though - she wouldn’t start an argument over it. Instead, she tapped the picture of the crater in the street. “Seamus, what’s your estimate of the amount of explosive they used there? It was hidden in a mudhole, according to the article.”

The Irish wizard peered at the picture, frowning. “Hm… it’s not a good angle. Not enough I’d say, though - some Hit-Wizards survived!” He chuckled at his own comment.

Hermione ignored that as well. She’d work out the amount used for herself then. “They used bombs, but not efficiently, and they were trapped in the shop by the Aurors. They didn’t have lookouts then, and had no escape route prepared. With brooms, they might have escaped.”

“Poor planning,” Justin summed up.

Hermione nodded. She felt more than a bit guilty - if the muggleborns mentioned in the article had attacked that shop because of the Resistance’s example, and the leaflets and broadcasts, then she was at least partially responsible.

“They still gave as good as they got, more or less,” Seamus said. “We should tell people how to build better bombs in the next broadcast.”
“And how to plan attacks better,” Dean added. “Some tactics, too.”

Hermione didn’t wince, though she felt like. “I don’t think we can really teach anyone that through a broadcast.” And she didn’t think the British government would appreciate muggleborns blowing themselves up making explosives - or stealing them. Before Dean or Seamus could protest, she continued: “What we can do is to tell people to prepare carefully and extensively before going off to fight. To train, and plan, and consider their actions.”

“Do you think they’ll be able to train well enough?” Sally-Anne was frowning.

Hermione sighed. “The goal is to keep them training instead of attacking some random purebloods. Our enemies are the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. Not some hat shop in Diagon Alley.”

“Not everyone has mysterious contacts who tell them the locations of Death Eaters,” Dean said.

“Don’t fire if you’re not certain of your target,” Hermione quoted. “We’re not at war with all purebloods.”

“Says you,” Seamus muttered. “Most of them support the Ministry or the Death Eaters.”

“Or both,” Dean added.

“And if muggleborns start attacking random civilians for being purebloods, they’ll just drive more to join Voldemort.” Hermione shook her head. “They’d also be not much better than Death Eaters themselves.”

“It’s not as if we can order them around.” Dean shrugged.

“Well, we could use the broadcasts, but the Ministry and the Dark Lord would be listening in as well,” Sally-Anne said.

Hermione smiled at her. “We can use the broadcasts to give them general advice. Make them focus on keeping safe, and protecting themselves. But we’d have to give out a huge number of targets to prevent the enemy from using our own broadcasts to ambush muggleborns.”

“Well, there’re lots of targets in the Wizengamot,” John pointed out.

“All of them are hiding, though,” Mary said.

“We need to recruit more.” Louise was looking at Hermione. “And we need to find a way to contact the other muggleborn groups.”

Hermione winced. “I know. But contacting prospective recruits is difficult, and sounding them out is slow. I’ve thought of broadcasting an e-mail address, but our enemies would use it to try and infiltrate or ambush us.”

“I’ve been contacted by two older Hufflepuffs,” Justin said. “Through e-mail. But I don’t know if they are purebloods impersonating them, or under duress.”

Hermione felt both angry and hurt that Justin hadn’t told her this before, but told herself she was not exactly telling him everything she was up to either. Still, she would have expected him to mention it.

“We should risk it,” Seamus said. “We can always prepare an ambush of our own.”

“And make the government think we’re a terrorist group?” Tania scoffed. “That’s stupid.”
Hermione cut in before things escalated. “We’ll do what we can to recruit more and get in contact with other groups, but our security takes priority.” She pressed her lips together. “I don’t want anyone else getting cursed like Colin and Dennis.”

She also didn’t want other muggleborns turning this conflict into a war against purebloods. But she was not certain she could prevent that. Even if she wanted to tell people not to fight, she doubted everyone would listen.

For now, though, she had to contact Harry and Ron. To tell them that she was fine, and to arrange a meeting. She needed their help.

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London, Soho, December 14th, 1996

Ron Weasley was constantly keeping an eye on his surroundings while he and Harry walked towards the café where they were meeting Hermione. A few months ago, he’d have done so because he hadn’t been in this area before, and there were quite a few sights to take in. But now he was doing it because Moody had trained him and Harry to always be on their guard.

Hermione, in disguise - black hair this time, straight and shoulder length, was already waiting for them at a table. It was a good location. Both the entrance in front and the backdoor were visible from there, as well as most of the street while a potted plant shielded the table some... Ron shook his head.

“What?” Harry asked.

“I just realised I’ve been thinking a bit too much like Moody.” He snorted.

“Oh,” his friend said. “Right. Constant Vigilance!” Harry added in a low voice in a passable imitation of their demanding and more than a bit paranoid teacher.

Both were chuckling when they reached the table. Hermione stood to greet them, her smile looking slightly puzzled. She was, Ron noticed, wearing a turtleneck and jeans, both tighter than he had expected or remembered. Not that he was complaining. She hugged Harry, then him, and he had to resist the temptation to run his hands down her back when he felt her body pressed against his. He wanted to keep hugging her. Keep her with him. Safe. The moment he had feared that she had been arrested had been one of the worst in his life. Far too quickly they separated, and took their seats.

All of them cast privacy spells after their orders had arrived - you couldn’t be too cautious with them. Ron sipped his soda - another brand he hadn’t tried before today - in the sudden silence.

“So... do you know who those muggleborns were who attacked in Diagon Alley?” Harry asked. Which was, Ron thought, a less blunt way of asking if those had been friends of hers.

Hermione put her teacup down before answering. “No, I don’t. None of the others know them either. I think they were just a bunch of muggleborns who decided to fight.” She frowned. “I should have emphasised planning and preparing, in our broadcasts. Maybe they wouldn’t have been caught then.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ron said. He almost reached out and patted her hand, but grabbed his glass instead. “They should have known better.”

Judging by her impression, she didn’t share his opinion, but she nodded at least. “I hope that their fate will make others hold off launching similar attacks. If this turns into muggleborns attacking random purebloods...”
Ron winced. That would be a disaster.

“But what can you do?” Harry asked.

“Not much.” Their friend pressed her lips together in a familiar manner. She was frustrated, Ron knew - he had caused that same expression in the past. “We could send them against some known Death Eaters or sympathisers, but that would only make them run into ambushes and traps.”

“That might be better than have them attack innocents,” Ron said. His family was pureblood as well, after all.

Hermione nodded, though he thought it was a bit reluctantly. “I’ll emphasise that we are not at war with purebloods, but Death Eaters. Hopefully the more eager will take this to heart.”

Ron didn’t think it would help much. “You need to organise the others. Those Avengers as well.”

She frowned at him. “That’s easier said than done. It’s not as if we can simply call them up and give out orders. Not with the Ministry and the Death Eaters looking for us. Any contact could be an imperiused trap.”

“The Dark Lord has a big advantage there. Groups like Malfoy’s are under his command, whether they know it or not,” Harry pointed out, which earned him a frown as well.

Ron didn’t quite smile, but he felt better knowing he wasn’t the only one making their friend mad. Hermione had told them about Malfoy’s interrogation, and the others’. Fred and George hadn’t wanted to talk about the girls, though.

“Which means attacks on other purebloods will help the Dark Lord recruit even more into his ranks,” Hermione said. “Not that many understand that. Not even among the Resistance!”

Ron glanced at Harry. That sounded like their friend was having some trouble. “Dean and Seamus?” He had heard about them before, after all.

Her scowl was answer enough, even if she stuck to not complaining about her group, or not too much. “I know that we can’t really avoid driving more into Voldemort’s arms when we kill his Death Eaters, but we shouldn’t go out of our way to do it.”

“Good riddance to them!” Ron said. “If they join the Dark Lord, they’re scum anyway.” They had attacked the Burrow, ready to kill his family. He had no sympathy for Malfoy’s friends.

“Well, you can take them prisoner,” Harry pointed out.

“Keeping prisoners requires a lot of guards and effort. We can’t afford that.”

“Dumbledore can,” Harry said. “He’s keeping Nott, Greengrass and Davis, isn’t he?”

“Yes. But those are special cases,” Hermione said. “Rich heirs. He’s planning to drain them of their gold, and hobble their proxies in the Wizengamot. I doubt he would do that for every Death Eater.”

“No need to keep anyone a prisoner when they’ll be executed anyway - or would, if we hadn’t so many Death Eaters in the Wizengamot.” Ron had heard enough about the court from his parents to know how things stood at the Ministry.

His two friends looked grim, but didn’t contradict him while all of them sipped their drinks.

Hermione broke the silence. “I have a favour to ask of you.”
“Sure thing,” Ron said, at the same time Harry said: “Of course.”

Ron saw Hermione smile briefly, then she went on: “Colin and Dennis were cursed, as you know, and they want the affected limbs amputated.”

Ron hissed. That was… Merlin’s arse! They wanted their limbs cut off?

Harry winced, obviously sharing his thoughts.

Hermione slowly nodded. “I hope we find a way to help them before it comes to that, but… I need to know about magical prosthetics. And if they can be fitted to stumps left by muggle doctors.”

Ron felt rather sick at imagining that, but Hermione needed his help. “You want us to ask Moody?”

“Only if the Headmaster agrees. I was thinking of Bill. He’s a Curse-Breaker, isn’t he?”

“Yes. One of the best,” Ron said. Bill was, as far as he knew, too. “He might know how to deal with the curse. But he might need to see the effect for himself.” He bit his lips, then added: “And, he probably knows about amputations and prosthetics as well. Those curses in tombs can be nasty.” There was a reason Mum had exploded when he had told them what he’d do after Hogwarts.

“Thank you.”

Hermione smiled at him, and Ron once again almost reached out to take her hand. But they weren’t on a date. Which reminded him. “We should go on another set of dates.”

“Yes,” Harry quickly said.

Hermione looked surprised, then nodded slowly. “If we have time.”

“Yes, of course.” Ron knew that the question was if Hermione could take two evenings off.

Given how the war was going, he feared that might not be the case.

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London, Soho, December 14th, 1996

Harry Potter was jealous. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t help it. Ron was just too smooth. Proposing another set of dates, offering to ask his big, cool brother Bill for help with the dark curses that had struck Dennis and Colin, complimenting Hermione…

Harry finished his sandwich and refilled his glass. Ron was his best friend. They had gone through so much together. Harry trusted him with his life, and he was certain Ron trusted him with his. It was very selfish of him to hope that Ron would anger Hermione, like he used to. Maybe he would make some ignorant remark about muggles - Harry was the muggle-raised here - or something about Quidditch being better than any muggle sports.

But no… Ron was just being nice, even thoughtful. Where was the Ron from first year? Brave, but not that charming? He just needed his ear pierced for a dragon fang, and a leather jacket, and he’d be another Bill. Well, maybe not that smooth. Still too smooth in Harry’s opinion though.

“I wish we could do more for you,” he said, changing the topic. “We’re safe at Hogwarts and you’re risking your life.”

“You’re training to defeat the Dark Lord, and you’re risking your life deceiving him about
Dumbledore’s actual plan.” Hermione pursed her lips. “You don’t have any reason to feel guilty, or as if you’re not doing enough.”

“We haven’t received our next mission yet,” Ron cut in.

“It just feels as if we could do more.” Harry sighed.

Hermione shook her head, but she seemed to suppress a smile. “You’re doing more than enough. You’re the key to defeating Voldemort. Honestly, it’s already a risk to let you play decoy.”

Now it was his turn to frown. “I’m not going to hide at Hogwarts while you risk your lives.”

Ron wisely didn’t say anything.

“We’re playing it as safe as we can.” Hermione raised her chin slightly.

“Which is not that safe,” Harry retorted. “The Ministry and the Death Eaters are hunting you.”

The witch opened her mouth, then pressed her lips together before answering. “We’re being careful, and working closely with the Headmaster.”

Harry kept himself from saying that that wasn’t a guarantee. He didn’t want to make his friend angry. Angrier. Instead he sighed. “I just worry. What if it’s you next time on the Prophet’s front page? Or,” he added, a second later, “your friends?”

She had noticed his slight pause, and was frowning again. Harry mentally cursed - this wasn’t his day. “We’re planning and preparing far more than this other group, and we’ve taken precautions for such a case.”

Harry wanted to ask what kind of precautions, but he didn’t think pressing the issue was a good idea. “Well, that makes me feel a bit better. I still worry, though.”

“Me too,” Ron added.

Hermione huffed, but she was smiling again. “Honestly! If I made such a fuss each time you do something dangerous…”

“Well, you usually do,” Harry said.

Ron chuckled, and Hermione glared at him again. But the tense mood was gone.

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Hogwarts, December 14th, 1996

He had blown that meeting, Harry Potter thought. He should have been more supportive. Less patronising. Sirius had told him how James had just infuriated Lily when he had tried to act protective. But he hadn’t been able to help it - he hated the thought of Hermione fighting while he stayed safe. Although he wasn’t certain if he hated himself not doing much more than her risking her life. Which was another of his faults.

“Do you think she’ll have time for dating?”

Ron’s question shook Harry out of his rather morbid thoughts. He turned his head to glance at his friend as they were walking through the tunnel from Hogsmeade. He shrugged. “If anyone can make the time, she’ll be able to.”
“If she wants to make the time,” Ron said. “She might also feel she can’t have fun while others are suffering.”

Harry nodded. That fit Hermione. She obviously had had fun on the last dates - more so with Ron, though - so she could expect to have fun again. Harry would have to make a greater effort, though, if he wanted to stay in the running. Maybe he could ask… who could he ask, apart from Sirius? Remus wasn’t a good choice. The man hadn’t had a date in decades. If only Harry had some cool older brothers to ask for advice!

Ron sighed. “Damn war!”

The two continued in silence for a bit. Before they reached the hidden exit though, Ron turned to Harry. “I just wanted to say… if she picks one of us, then I don’t want that to change anything between us, you know? The important thing is that she is happy.” His friend blinked. “Shite! I sound like a wizard from those novels Ginny reads.”

Harry didn’t know what novels Ginny read, but he nodded. “Yes. I won’t be exactly happy if she picks you, but… as long as you make her happy I can deal with it.” He had better get used to this, Harry thought. Sirius had said to play to his strengths, as if Hermione was interested in Quidditch, or was a fan of the Boy-Who-Lived. Or wanted gold.

Ron was frowning. “Mate, I need you to promise me something. If Hermione somehow picks me, don’t do anything stupid, alright? If you go and sacrifice yourself in the war, it’d destroy her. She’d blame herself for it, you know.”

Harry hissed. He hadn’t exactly planned on such a thing, but… he had thought, guiltily, that it would simplify things if one of them died in the war. A dead hero, remembered fondly by the surviving couple…

“Harry?” Ron grabbed his shoulders.

He took a deep breath and tried to sound as if he had never even thought of that. “I promise - if you do the same.”

“It’s a deal, then.”

They shook on it.

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London, Ministry of Magic, December 14th, 1996

“There you are, Auror Brocktuckle. I’ve read your report about your latest arrest.” Bones said as soon as Brenda Brocktuckle entered the office of the Head of the DMLE.

Brenda saw Scrimgeour standing next to Bones’s desk. The Head Auror was frowning, which was rather normal for him, but she thought he looked even less happy than usual. “Yes, ma’am.” She stood straight.

“The Minister was disappointed that those suspects were not involved in the murder of Malfoy.” Bones was frowning, and Brenda suspected that Fudge had suggested to find evidence to that effect. The Minister was known for such attempts to fit facts to politics. Fortunately, both Bones and Scrimgeour were not the kind of people to bow to such pressure - or succumb to temptation.

“I hoped so myself,” Brenda said, “but the results of the interrogations were clear. We’re dealing
with a new group who followed the example of the Resistance, influenced by their propaganda.”

“And by the example of the Avengers.” Bones added. “I gather they were even more convincing than we expected.”

Scrimgeour stood just a bit straighter, while Brenda winced. Neither of them had foreseen that particular effect. Stupid mudbloods!

“But there has been no contact with the Resistance yet, despite this.” Bones narrowed her eyes. “The Minister was quite disappointed about that as well.” When Brenda took a sharp breath, the older witch held her hand up. “He is not aware of this particular operation.”

Brenda relaxed again. If Fudge had been informed about her undercover operation, half the Wizengamot would probably know it a day later.

“But he is correct - the goal of this operation is to infiltrate and eliminate the Resistance, not to incite even more unrest among the muggleborn population.” Bones leaned forward. “I hope you have a plan, Auror Brocktuckle.”

Brenda swallowed. She had a plan, or rather an idea. “Contacting the Resistance has been more difficult than expected. They address their supporters through the wireless broadcasts, but they do not seem to listen to anyone. Purvis and Rickett have been telling their muggleborn contacts that they would like to coordinate their efforts with the Resistance, but no one has known how to. But the arrest of this new group gives us a chance.” Bones was still frowning. “Although I think that the Avengers have to strike once more, and spectacularly, for this to work. And,” she hastened to add, ”they’ll need a broadcast of their own.”

Scrimgeour was glaring at her - with good reason. She hadn’t cleared or even discussed this with him. But Bones had put her on the spot, and Brenda could not afford to disappoint the Head of the DMLE, not with her career already in jeopardy.

Bones ran a finger over her chin. “I see. You plan to present the Avengers as serious competition for the Resistance. A group they cannot ignore, not without risking fragmenting the muggleborns or losing a lot of their influence.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The older witch remained silent for a while. Brenda didn’t fidget, but she wanted to. Scrimgeour, though, simply remained as he was.

Finally, Bones spoke again: “Alright. I don’t like it, but it’s the most promising plan we have.”

That was a rather bad sign of the state of the Ministry, Brenda thought.

The Head of the DMLE continued: “And the Wizengamot, especially the proxies of Greengrass, Nott and Davis, are raising a lot of support to save the kidnapped before they too are murdered.”

Or to see them get killed as a reaction, Brenda added, cynically, to herself. She had some experience with that sort of pureblood family.

“Now… what kind of spectacular attack did you have in mind, Auror?” Bones stared at her.

“In my opinion, no attack on anything will ever equal the destruction of Malfoy Manor,” Brenda began. It wasn’t as if they could let the undercover Aurors kill anyone, anyway. “So I feel that rescuing the arrested suspects from the Diagon Alley attack seems the best way to impress the
Resistance.” Scrimgeour gasped, and Brenda knew that but for Bones’s presence, he would be screaming at her and wonder if she had lost her mind. Bones had grown rigid, but hadn’t said anything yet. “The Resistance has lost one member, Martin Cokes, who was arrested and executed. They were not able to free him. If the Avengers can do that, then the Resistance is likely to contact them just because of that."

“And allow us to ambush them.” Bones nodded. “I’ll authorise this - provided you can ensure that the arrested suspects will not escape for good.”

Brenda met her eyes. “For that, I’d need special authorisation, ma’am.”

Bones stiffened. Brenda knew she was asking for a lot. Special authorisation. Permission to use the Unforgivables. The last time this had been granted to Aurors had been in the last war - which many had started to call the First Blood War. But the Auror didn’t see any other way to ensure that the freed suspects would not actually escape, no matter how the mission went.

“The Minister is likely to grant this, but there will be resistance in the Wizengamot,” Bones said. “But if this goes through your plan is approved. Dismissed, Auror.”

Brenda knew Scrimgeour would be making his displeasure with her going over his head known as soon as he left Bones’s office as well, but she didn’t care too much. Her plan might have been a bit improvised, but it was a valid one.

And having the authorisation to use the Unforgivables wouldn’t hurt either. At least not the Ministry.

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Hogsmeade, December 15th, 1996

Ron Weasley was once again sneaking into the Hog’s Head Inn, but he wasn’t cutting classes for it, this time. His brother was already seated at a table in the back, flirting with the waitress. Ron shook his head. Bill was just too smooth. Too handsome. Too cool.

“Hello, Bill.” He slid into the seat opposite his oldest brother, startling the witch - she apparently hadn’t noticed him. Or anyone else but Bill.

“Ron!” Bill smiled at him, then nodded at the waitress. “A Butterbeer for my brother.”

When the waitress had left, Ron sighed. He’d like to rib Bill a little, ask if Fleur knew he was flirting with other witches, but he’d rather not provoke his brother into pranking him when he needed his help - the twins had learned from someone, after all.

“Girl trouble?” Bill raised an eyebrow.

“Sort of,” Ron said.

Both waited to cast privacy spells until their order had been served - a Butterbeer for Ron; no point in asking for a soft drink here, and a pint for Bill.

“You’ve heard about Malfoy?”

Bill nodded. “Yes. Serves the little Death Eater right - he was among those who attacked the Burrow.”

“Yes. I’ve heard that two of those who captured him were hit with dark curses. Shriveled up the limb
hit, or rather, the limbs withered. Leathery skin, over bones.” Ron took out a few pictures Hermione had given him, and slid them over to Bill. He avoided looking at them - the thought of such a limb dangling from his own body was sickening.

Bill, though, was not affected. He studied the pictures. “It might be a variant of the Living Mummy Curse - which, contrary to the name, kills you once it is done - but I doubt it. That curse doesn’t start with a single limb. Nor does it stop there.”

“The Headmaster thinks it might be a curse from a houngan,” Ron said. He didn’t like the wince that caused.

“That’s bad news. We don’t have any contacts with houngans. Gringotts does do business with them through intermediaries, but they keep their Curse-Breakers out of the Caribbean.” Bill rubbed his chin. “Although we’ve had some encounters with African curses, when we went after the Upper Nile Tombs.”

“What do African wizards have to do with this?” Ron didn’t know much about African Wizards. He knew most of them had been killed when the ICW had intervened, after they had used magic against the muggle colonies.

“Houngans have their roots in Africa,” Bill explained.

“Oh.” That probably explained why the ICW came down so harshly on Africa, Ron thought. “So… do you think you can help there?”

Bill sighed. “I don’t know. I’ll ask around - but I’ll have to be careful.”

Ron knew that - the Death Eaters would know what curses they had used, and if Bill happened to ask for cures to such… hopefully, the caster of that curse had been killed in the fighting. “Of course.” He took a deep breath. “Also… in case there is no cure, what do you know about magical prosthetics?”

Bill looked grim. “A few of my colleagues have them. They’re better than nothing, but… it’s not the same. If you lose your wand arm, you’ll have a better chance to learn casting with your off-hand than to use a prosthetic. And you’ll not run very well with a peg leg, enchanted or not.”

Ron had expected that - he knew that Moody would be even more impressive and terrifying if he hadn’t lost his leg. “They are looking for people who make them.” After a second, he added: “And for people who can, you know, remove the withered limbs without doing more damage.”

Bill nodded. “I have a few addresses. I assume British locations are out.”

“Yes.” Ron confirmed that. “Thank you.”

“No problem, Ron. Though that doesn’t really explain the ‘sort of’ girl troubles you mentioned.”

“Ah.” Ron frowned. “We might go on another date, if we have the time. And I need a few more tips.”

Bill’s smiled widely. “Ah, you’re in luck! I’ve just had the most wonderful date with Fleur.”

Yes, Ron thought, his brother was just too damn smooth. And too damn lucky.

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Albus Dumbledore didn’t know why Cornelius had called a special session of the Wizengamot. The death of Draco Malfoy, and the kidnapping of Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis might be the reason - though Albus hadn’t thought the Minister would want to face their families in the Wizengamot, not after his attempt to claim the arrested muggleborns had been part of that attack had not succeeded. On the other hand, the mere fact that he didn’t know the reason told him something, and he’d be able to deduce more once it was revealed.

The chamber was almost full now, the last members who had been talking outside were filing in. Sirius was looking bored, though Albus knew it was an act. Augustus Malfoy looked angry - though whether it was due to the death of Draco Malfoy, the loss of face the manner of his death and the subsequent revelations had caused, or because this was probably his last session, Albus didn’t know. Eric Greengrass walked stiffly - the man was barely holding together, Albus knew; he had been heard screaming with rage at an Auror when told there was no trace of his niece. Cressida Davis was holding up better, or so it looked like. Albus didn’t feel guilty about causing them pain; they would get their relative back after the war, and they had been supporting the Dark Lord, knowingly or not. He had even less sympathy for Thaddeus Nott. Theodore Nott had been almost as bad as Draco Malfoy; Albus doubted that the young wizard would live to see the end of the war, unless a truly fair trial could be organised.

Cornelius arrived, at last. The Minister was putting up a good front - he was a talented politician - but Albus knew he was very stressed, under pressure from all sides, including Albus himself. Once again, the Headmaster didn’t feel any guilt for adding to the Minister’s burden - if not for his foolish policies, they would not be at this point.

He looked around. Everyone was seated now. Time to begin. “The chair recognises the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge.”

Cornelius stood up, cleared his throat, and started to speak. His voice didn’t show his stress. “Honoured members of the Wizengamot! I have called for this session in response to the events of the last week. One heir of a seat in this very chamber has been murdered, three more have been kidnapped. A few days ago, a band of muggleborn criminals attacked a shop in Diagon Alley, killing several of our Hit-Wizards in the ensuing battle before they were overcome.”

Murmurs greeted his words. Most members already knew about this - Albus doubted anyone had missed the news - but they still had to whisper to each other.

“It is clear that the Ministry’s forces are strained. Artificially so - for while their enemies use the most vile tactics, and dark spells, they are prohibited from using the most effective spells to fight for law and order.”

That caused the whispers to increase in volume. Albus started to frown - he knew where this was leading. Cornelius’s predecessor had used almost exactly the same words for her proposal, back in the last war.

“One once before the Ministry was in a similar situation, in 1980. And the Wizengamot stepped in, and solved it. I hence propose the same solution: To pass a bill that authorises the Ministry’s Aurors and Hit-Wizards to use the Unforgivable Curses for the duration of the current crisis.”

Yells and exclamations drowned out the Minister’s closing words as the members of the Wizengamot voiced their opinions of this proposal. Albus let them vent for a bit, then flicked his wand. An amplified gong cut through the cacophony of voices. “This is the Wizengamot. As tradition dictates, we will debate any proposal in a civilised manner.” A few had the grace to flinch at his
Albus sat back while Amelia explained why this authorisation was needed, in her opinion. The witch was up to something, he knew that. She wanted at least one of those spells available to her department, but which one? Not the Torture Curse, that was obvious. And the Killing Curse, while infamous, was not quite as crucial in battle as many thought - plenty of spells were nearly as deadly, but not forbidden. It had to be the Imperius Curse then. And she hadn’t contacted him beforehand, to secure his support, which meant she didn’t think she could portray this as a move against Voldemort - and thought she could get a majority. He almost smiled. The conclusion was obvious - this was aimed at the Resistance. The Ministry was planning to use the Imperius Curse against them.

And, he added, listening to Eric Greengrass, she might very well get her way. The proxy for Miss Greengrass was passionately pleading to strengthen the Aurors so no more pureblood witches would fall prey to the barbarian hordes. Many, not just Death Eaters and their friends, were nodding.

Bilius Longbottom stood to oppose the bill, but while his arguments had a lot of merit, he focused on denouncing the Torture Curse, pointing out that there was no discernable reason for that vile spell to be used by anyone. Amelia quickly amended the proposal, removing the authorisation for that spell, to further approval.

Voldemort’s supporters drew their clues from Augustus Malfoy, who supported the bill. This caused a few of Albus’s friends to oppose it on principle, but not enough. Albus didn’t speak up - he was not about to fight a battle he knew he would lose.

But he would inform Miss Granger to be very cautious in the future. And Harry and Mister Weasley. He wouldn’t put it past the Ministry to try and use the two boys against the young witch. Harry had shown in the past that he could throw off the Imperius Curse, but Mister Weasley had not shown such mental fortitude.

Albus didn’t know if their training could remedy that, but he’d tell Alastor to make the attempt. He was certain Tom would do all he could to exploit the opportunities this presented. And, he thought, maybe a visit to Miss Skeeter was in order. Just to put a bit more pressure on Cornelius.

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London, Ministry of Magic, December 17th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle ducked under a protruding pipe on her way through the tunnels under the Ministry. Long, winding, twisted tunnels with ceilings so low, she barely could stand up. Behind her, Martin cursed - he probably had hit his head. He should have been a bit more careful, she thought.

Parkinson chuckled. “Those tunnels are probably made for goblins or elves, not wizards.”

“They might have been built by goblins, actually, as part of the settlement of the goblin revolt in 1759,” Martin said, ever the Ravenclaw. “The plans we found seem to indicate that.”

“If you can call a couple of sketches by a drunk wizard on soiled parchment ‘plans’,,” Parkinson said, scoffing. “I still say we should just frame one of Shacklebolt’s team for this. We have the spells to do so, now.”

Brenda was tempted to remark that he seemed quite proficient with the Unforgivables, but held her tongue. To divide themselves while hunting the mudbloods would be foolish. Besides, the Ministry just legalised two of the three curses, so they couldn’t be that bad. And it would be better if an experienced wizard cast the Imperius on the two Mudbloods, Milton and Smith. They could not
afford to mess this up. “You know what Bones ordered. No killing, no framing anyone in the Ministry. This has to look like Purvis and Rickett did it all by themselves, using knowledge gained as Aurors before they quit in protest.”

Parkinson grumbled, but didn’t complain again as they continued through what was once an escape tunnel. An escape tunnel built by the very species the Ministry had fought the most wars against - Brenda wondered what the Minister who had ordered this had been thinking. Unless it had been a trap aimed at the goblins - they had passed a few old wards that didn’t react to wizards or witches.

The tunnel changed direction again, and she sighed. Not even goblins would build something as twisted. It was probably the result of a magical accident during the remodelling. Then she blinked. There was a dead end? Before she could curse the map they had, though, she spotted the outline hidden under dust and dirt. A door, right where it was supposed to be. And if the map was correct, it led straight to the sewers of muggle London.

A spell had the door unlocked, but it took a few repair spells to actually open it - the whole thing had been rusted shut. The stench behind it was the sewers, indeed. Though… Brenda took a step outside, then sighed. “We’re in a goblin sewer.”

Martin and Parkinson shuddered. She glared at them. “You know our orders: We are to map out the entire route.” Besides, a Bubble-Head Charm and a Cleaning Charm would deal with the stench and dirt. Brenda wouldn’t let a bit of excrement ruin her career.

Which, she thought, was quite an apt thing to say.

“ affluent

“I thought dragon dung was a highly valuable fertilisers!” Brenda said, grinding her teeth. “Why are the goblins wasting that by dropping it into the sewers?”

“Not all dragon dung is actually good fertiliser,” Martin said. “Some is rather toxic to the soil. There is a subspecies of a…”

“We’re wading through poison?” Parkinson cut in, sounding as sick as Brenda felt.

“Not poison, it’s just too acidic for most plants,” Martin explained.

“Acid?” Parkinson’s voice rose another octave.

“Cut it out you two!” Brenda snarled. “We’re almost done.” She turned to Martin. “Take some of it with you; we might want to use it to make the evidence for this look more authentic.”

When she thought of Dawlish having to go through this, with at least half his team, once Purvis and Rickett had finished, she grinned. If only she could install a camera to take a picture! Maybe if she waited in the office… no, her team had to be away from the Ministry when this happened, to not be linked to it.

Dawlish would catch the blame, again. It was just fair - he wasn’t catching anything else.

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“They entered through an old escape tunnel from 1759, and made their way to the holding cells. They stunned the guard on duty, freed the two suspects, and escaped the same way they had
Albus Dumbledore, sitting on a seat in the Minister’s office, was not paying much attention to John Dawlish telling him what he had already read in the report Kingsley had sent him. The breakout of the two arrested muggleborns last night had gone off without a hitch, as far as he could tell. No one hurt, a clean escape.

He would be happy about it, if not for the fact that the Avengers - they had left a big ‘A’ inside a circle on each cell door - had used the same route he had planned to use should one of Miss Granger’s group need to be sprung.

Now he had to prepare an alternative. He had a plan already, but that one was too likely to end up with his involvement made public. A desperate measure. Albus sighed. Dawlish winced. He smiled at the man. Kingsley had also sent him pictures taken of the Auror after his return from the pursuit - Cleaning Charms could only do so much, if not cast expertly. “My apologies - it does not look like this is your fault at all.”

“Not everyone shares your view, sir,” Dawlish grumbled. “Brocktuckle is livid; the two suspects she arrested escaped.”

“This is a catastrophe!” Cornelius said. “Once the public hears of this…” He shook his head. “Unacceptable! This is simply unacceptable!”

“This has to be the work of traitors!” Dawlish said. “They knew exactly where to go.”

“Former Aurors or Hit-Wizards, probably,” Amelia added. “We’ll go through the names of those who left the Ministry in the last year.”

“Left, or were forced out,” Albus added, smiling softly.

“If they turned traitor it was obviously a good thing they were let go!” Cornelius said, huffing. “Now, we need to discuss how to present this to the public.” The Minister glanced at Albus. “We cannot afford to look like fools! Not now, not with both Death Eaters and those muggleborns fighting us!”

The Headmaster smiled, nodding slowly. “Indeed. We cannot have people think that arrested suspects can easily escape from our cells.”

Cornelius looked surprised, but Albus knew that the pressure to speed up trials, or skip them altogether and move suspects directly to Azkaban, would only increase should this be publicised in a sensational manner. As would the numbers of suspects killed while resisting arrest.

“But I think the Daily Prophet will show the usual caution in reporting this.” They’d better, he thought, or he’d have to visit Rita again.

Albus noticed that Amelia seemed to be slightly annoyed at him, even though she hid it well. He wondered if she was planning to replace Cornelius, and would have liked a scandal to damage his reputation further. Unless there was another reason for her reaction - but why would she want this blown up all over the front page of the Daily Prophet?

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, December 19th, 1996

The Dark Lord Voldemort checked his appearance again. He wasn’t quite used to wearing a mask as
if he was one of his own Death Eaters. But if he was recognised tonight, then Dumbledore might be alerted, and this could ruin his plans.

The Headmaster could not know of his presence. Not until it was too late.

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Chapter 23: Red Holidays

‘The attack on ‘Haley’s Hats’ in Diagon Alley would have been a rather unremarkable event, despite the relatively high casualties on both sides, if not for two things: The arrest and the subsequent escape of two muggleborn attackers. It had been the first time since Martin Cokes that the Ministry had managed to arrest a muggleborn who had been fighting them as part of an organised group, which was a feather in the cap of the arresting Aurors and did improve Ministry morale - if only for a short time. It can also be seen as the main cause for the Resistance’s subsequent change of policy towards muggleborn supporters, as their broadcasts started to focus on actual advice for fighting their enemies instead of more general propaganda, in an obvious attempt to avoid another such defeat.

More important, though, was the fact that the attack also demonstrated a significant change among the muggleborn population. More and more muggleborns, especially but not exclusively the younger generations, were willing to take up wands - and were not particularly concerned whether they were raised against the supporters of the Dark Lord, the Ministry, or just purebloods in general. The Second Blood War was entering a new phase.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn


When she heard the alarm, Brenda Brocktuckle jerked. Ever since she had helped plan and organise the escape of the two mudbloods, she had been nervous. Other than her team, no one but Bones and Scrimgeour knew about the undercover mission. If she had made a mistake, and left some evidence, then she would be seen as a traitor by the investigating team. Normally, that wouldn’t worry her too much. At worst she’d spend a short time in a cell, until Bones intervened. But tempers had been on edge for weeks now, and Dawlish’s people were so angry about the escape, if they thought she was a blood traitor, Brenda might very well not survive the arrest.

Martin was already at the door to their office and peered out, wand drawn. No one tried to hex him, and Brenda joined him at the door. Outside, a dozen Aurors were rushing towards the exit. Shacklebolt’s team, she realised.

Brenda looked at Peter Flint, who was filling out forms at his desk. “What has them rushing out?” she asked.

The man who hadn’t been out in the field in a decade or longer looked at her, shrugging. “Death Eaters are attacking a family in East Sussex. Shacklebolt’s on the case.”

Death Eaters were not their problem, Brenda thought. She nodded at Flint and returned to her office. Parkinson had taken the evening off, earlier, and for a moment she wondered… then she shook her head. He wouldn’t be that stupid. Or at least he’d be too smart to get caught.

Outskirts of Peacehaven, East Sussex, Britain, December 19th, 1996
The Dark Lord Voldemort waited patiently, watching the lone house through his Omnioculars.
Given the average response time, Shacklebolt should have arrived by now, but Dumbledore’s chief
spy in the Ministry was cagey, and would not rush in, despite the ongoing attack on the Pinsey
family’s home. He might even suspect a trap.

But would he suspect that the attack had already happened this afternoon, without any alert leaving
the house, thanks to a well-placed Imperius? Voldemort didn’t think so. Patrick Pinsey had been a
thorn in his side in the last war, until his death, and while the rest of the family hadn’t lifted a wand
against his men, they were still blood traitors. Which was why he had picked them out for his plan.
And had them stunned and bound in the basement of the muggle house he was occupying. Outside
their own home, at the very edge of the town, a few of his followers were attacking the wards. They
didn’t know the house was empty, of course - the attack had to look genuine, after all. And his more
expendable followers, hoping to earn a Dark Mark tonight, were not the best actors.

He studied them through the enchanted drapes. They were doing better than he had expected. He
might have to intervene to slow them down, if Dumbledore’s pet Auror dragged his feet any longer.
Shacklebolt was no coward, and he was no Seer. He shouldn’t be able to spot the trap at all. And a
family under attack was the perfect lure. Or, Voldemort thought, had Dumbledore’s men become so
ruthless as to be willing to sacrifice innocents at the mere suspicion of a trap? Maybe he should have
left one of the Pinseys inside the house, imperiused to scream for help… but no. His followers had
interrupted the Floo Network, and the yells wouldn’t carry far. More importantly, it would endanger
his plan.

Suddenly, spells hit the Death Eaters watching the rear of their group. Or not watching the rear, as it
seemed - the Aurors had managed to sneak up on them. Voldemort sneered. He had chosen his
followers for this mission well indeed.

He watched dispassionately as the half a dozen Death Eater recruits were cut down by spells - just a
few of them Stunners - while wounding one, possibly two Aurors in return. Granted, they were
surprised and outnumbered, but the Dark Lord had higher standards for his followers, even
discounting the fact that had they been sufficiently attentive, they wouldn’t have been surprised. And
none of them even thought of fleeing by broom, or doing anything more creative than slinging curses
at the enemies. No walls, no transfigured or conjured creatures… He sighed.

The uneven combat was over within five minutes, and the Aurors started securing the few prisoners.
Voldemort watched as a tall, dark-skinned Auror walked up to the wardline. He held his hands up,
facing the house. Voldemort smiled. That no one was coming out right then wouldn't make him
suspicious - not after the trick the Dark Lord had played on Augusta Longbottom.

All of the Aurors were close enough now. Voldemort picked up the small remote and pushed a
button. The Pinseys’ home and surrounding area vanished in an explosion. The shock wave from a
ton of explosives going off cracked the fragile muggle glass of the window the Dark Lord was
standing behind, and fragments from the bomb’s casing flew every which way. When the dust
started to settle, he saw that the house had been destroyed as well. As planned.

Dumbledore’s main contact to the Aurors, dead. A dozen blood traitors in the Ministry gone with
him. All killed by a muggle bomb. And since it had been an old German aerial bomb, the Statute of
Secrecy would not be in danger. He shook his head, briefly remembering the Blitz.

There was just one thing left to do. He walked to the entrance to the basement, where he had put the
Pinseys. They were awake by now, but still held by his spells. He could see their eyes move in panic
when they saw him enter, wearing a mask and dark clothes.

He smiled, and crouched down in front of them. “Hello. You’ve probably heard the explosion. I’m
sorry to say that your house was destroyed, but it was necessary - we killed dozens of Death Eaters and lackeys of the fascist Ministry today! Your wands are upstairs. Please do not do anything foolish after I end the spells holding you, alright?"

He stood up and flicked his borrowed wand, dispelling the full Body-Bind Curses on the family. While they hugged each other, he apparated away. Dumbledore would have a devil of a time trying to clear this up.

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Outskirts of Peacehaven, East Sussex, Britain, December 19th, 1996

Albus Dumbledore stared at the crater that had swallowed half of the Pinseys’ house. And Kingsley together with his entire team. And it was his fault. Albus had asked his friend to serve as bait. To lure the Death Eaters out in the open. He had been convinced he had the Dark Lord’s measure. Kingsley had trusted him, had been depending on him. And he had let him down. Him and all his Aurors.

Albus had known that Tom had been raised as a muggle orphan. That he would have known about muggle weapons. And yet he had utterly failed to predict this trap. In his arrogance, he had assumed that the Dark Lord wouldn’t stoop to using muggle bombs. Not when he had claimed for decades to fight for pureblood culture and values. Kingsley had been expecting magical traps and ambushes, not… this.

Aurors were sifting through the rubble and ruins, recovering bodies. And parts of bodies. Hit-Wizards secured the area, wands out. Muggle-Repelling Charms kept witnesses away, and a Confundus Spell had dealt with the muggle police already.

He saw that Amelia was walking towards him, a scowl on her face. He knew what she’d say. The setup was obvious, but he doubted she’d understand.

“Albus.” She was curt, controlled, hiding her anger. For now.

“Amelia.” He nodded at her. “It is a tragedy. I heard the Pinseys were unharmed though. A small consolation.”

“A tragedy?” She scoffed. “A crime, Albus. Committed by muggleborns. The same muggleborns you went to such great lengths to protect!”

“I honestly doubt that this was the work of the Resistance.” Theoretically, it was possible that another muggleborn group had done this, of course. A more radical one. But Albus doubted that. They would have had to know about a Death Eater attack in advance. And not even Albus’s best spy had access to that knowledge.

“Who else would use a muggle bomb? We’ve investigated: No magic was used to do this.” She pointed at the crater. “Don’t try to blame the Death Eaters for this, Albus. We’ve recovered several bodies wearing their robes and masks.”

“The Dark Lord is not above sacrificing his own for a plot,” Albus said.

“And would he leave a family of blood traitors alive? I’ve spoken to them. They were overpowered by a wizard wearing muggle clothes and a muggle mask.” Amelia shook her head. “Your theories aside, all of the evidence points at muggleborn culprits.”

“But why was the Ministry alerted then? Generally, Death Eaters are not that sloppy. Why did the Pinseys have enough time to use the Floo connection, but not to flee?”
The witch frowned. “The Pinseys did not alert the Ministry. They were attacked and stunned in the afternoon.”

“I see. So, the Ministry was deliberately alerted to lure the Aurors into this trap.” Had Tom missed that? Albus wondered.

“Yes.” Amelia was narrowing her eyes.

“That does not sound like muggleborns. They would know that the Aurors responding were not followers of the Dark Lord.” Albus smiled.

“The muggleborns hate the Ministry as much as the Death Eaters,” Amelia said. “They probably wanted to kill two nifflers with one spell.”

“They are aware that not everyone at the Ministry shares the bigoted views of the Wizengamot’s majority.” Albus met her eyes.

“I doubt they care. The two we arrested recently simply wanted to strike at purebloods they blamed for taking advantage of them.” Amelia sniffed.

“I do not think so,” Albus said. But he knew many would - even among his allies. And even some among his Order. Which would make what he needed to do even more difficult. But with Kingsley and many of his hand-picked Aurors dead, Albus had to act swiftly before the Dark Lord exploited this.

Amelia shook her head, no longer hiding her disgust. “You still defend them? Even after they killed your pet Auror? I didn’t think you’d go that far, Albus.”

“If you expected me to fall for the Dark Lord’s lies like a naive youth, then you might not know me as well as you think.” Albus smiled gently - as if he was talking to a student.

Amelia clenched her jaws together before answering. “If you’re convinced that you’re always right, then you’re not nearly as smart as you think you are.”

He inclined his head towards her. “I know that I am not always right.” He looked at the crater again. “This tragedy would prove that, even if I had forgotten.”

“How so?” Amelia stared at him.

“I should have expected the Dark Lord to use such means, and I should have warned against it.”

She scoffed again. “You’ll never change, will you?”

He sighed. “I have changed a great deal during my life.” Often painfully, too.

Amelia’s expression showed that she didn’t believe him. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about that. ‘I’ve work to do.’ She turned on her heel and strode away, leaving Albus to stare at the grisly scene again. And ponder how he could handle the repercussions of this.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 20th, 1996

“Good evening, Sirius,” Albus Dumbledore said, stepping out of the fireplace in Grimmauld Place. “Have you heard about the attack in Peacehaven?”
“Nymphadora arrived half an hour ago.” Sirius sighed. “She looked rather shocked.”

With good reason, Albus thought. She had wanted to join Kingsley’s group for some time, but as a metamorphmagus, her talents had been in such high demand, she had not been assigned to any permanent team or task force. Which, in hindsight, had saved her life. “I have to talk to her.”

“No one else left at the Ministry?” Sirius asked, opening the door for him.

“No one as well-placed among the Aurors,” Albus corrected him. Even before this tragedy, he hadn’t had enough supporters in the Ministry, in case things turned violent.

“She’s my cousin. Practically my niece, Albus. Despite her… doubts.” Sirius said, without looking at the Headmaster.

“I know.” Albus understood what his friend was telling him. But this would have to be Nymphadora’s own decision.

“I’ll ask her to join us in the living room.”

Albus had barely taken a seat when Sirius arrived with the young Auror in tow. Nymphadora looked rather agitated indeed, in the Headmaster’s opinion. And angry.

“Good evening, Nymphadora.” He stood up and nodded at her.

“Headmaster,” she said, curtly. She didn’t tell him to call her ‘Tonks’, and her expression - exaggerated by her metamorphmagus talent - looked grim.

“You have heard about Kingsley’s death,” Albus said.

“Killed by muggleborns, according to the Aurors investigating it.” The young witch folded her arms and glared at him.

The old wizard nodded. “I’m afraid to say that they are wrong. This was a trap by the Dark Lord’s forces.”

“Bones told us you’d claim that.”

He sighed. He had expected Amelia to spread her view of the situation in her department, but to go as far as to discredit him? “Amelia is blind when it concerns muggleborns. Of course she’d jump to conclusions without considering the evidence.”

“There is plenty of evidence!” the Auror said with a rather mulish expression.

“But no proof of muggleborn involvement.” He held up a hand to stop another passionate counter-argument. “I can assure you though that this was not the work of the Muggleborn Resistance. They use different bombs. Something which should have been mentioned in the reports you heard - provided they detected that.”

“They only mentioned muggle explosives.”

Sirius snorted. “Typical of them.” The wizard had, Albus knew, a rather poor opinion of the department that had sent him to Azkaban without trial or proof of a crime. “They don’t jump to conclusions, they apparate to them.” When the Headmaster raised an eyebrow and Nymphadora looked confused, Sirius added: “Well, you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Albus agreed. “And I also know that for quite a number of Aurors, facts are not as important
as personal beliefs. Or orders from their master.”

“Bones isn’t the type to follow anyone’s orders. Not even the Minister’s!” Nymphadora huffed.

“Amelia follows the orders of the Wizengamot, in the form of the laws they pass. It would be an admirable trait in a Ministry employee, if not for the fact that the Wizengamot is riddled with Death Eaters and their sometimes unwitting allies.”

Nymphadora didn’t meet his eyes when she mumbled: “I’ve read up on the Nazis. The Ministry wasn’t going that far. Werewolves have had to register for decades, and they were not killed.”

Sirius snorted. “In the 70s, there were three different bills that proposed to imprison all werewolves so they could not fight for the Dark Lord. Two of them proposed to hunt down and kill those who were not surrendering themselves.”

“What?” Nymphadora stared the wizard.

“I was with Remus at Hogwarts. I paid attention to such things.” Sirius stared back until she looked away.

“To be fair,” Albus added, “the bills were all defeated soundly in the Wizengamot.” Because those who sympathised with the plight of werewolves, those who supported the Dark Lord, and those who knew that it would push more werewolves into the arms of Voldemort all voted against it.

“And they wouldn’t have been defeated if there had been a handy atrocity depicted in the Prophet.” Sirius shrugged.

“You don’t know that!”

“Please,” Albus interrupted the beginning row, “there is an important matter to discuss.” When both looked at him, he continued. “No matter who was behind the trap that killed Kingsley and his team, the Dark Lord will not hesitate to exploit the opportunity this has created. Almost all of the prominent and skilled Aurors sympathetic to our cause have just been eliminated. And as Nymphadora proves, many of the remaining Ministry employees who oppose the Dark Lord have developed doubts about supporting muggleborns. The Ministry has been rendered vulnerable to a coup.”

Nymphadora gasped. “You expect a takeover of the Ministry by Death Eaters?”

“Half of it already answers to him,” Sirius said. “Bunch of scum.”

“I expect him to make the attempt,” Albus corrected the young Auror. “But, with your help, and the help of friends of mine, we can prevent him from succeeding.” It wouldn’t be prudent to mention that among those friends he counted the Muggleborn Resistance. Sirius already knew that, of course - or expected it.

“My help? What do I have to do?” Nymphadora asked, and Albus was pleased to discover that she was as eager to fight the Death Eaters as before. Of course, she knew that her entire family would be killed if the Dark Lord won.

“Thanks to your special talent, you can pass for any Ministry employee, allowing you to visit every department without raising suspicion - with the exception of the Department of Mysteries,” the Headmaster started to explain. “There are a number of devices that I need you to hide at key locations.”

Not many knew that among the trinkets Albus had collected over the years and stored in his office
were quite a number of very exotic and often very lethal items.

“Of course, Headmaster!” Nymphadora nodded eagerly. Albus wondered if she realised that those devices might very well cause collateral damage. Especially if the Death Eaters used the Imperius Curse.

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Hogwarts, December 21st, 1996

Harry Potter sighed when he saw the owls arrive during breakfast in the Great Hall. He knew what was coming - Sirius had informed him the day before about Shacklebolt’s death. The other students though, many of whom would be taking the Hogwarts Express later, to return to their families for Christmas, or Yuletide, as some purebloods called it, didn’t.

He unrolled his own copy of the Prophet and stared at the headlines while the noise in the Great Hall grew so loud, he had trouble understanding Ron’s comments.

‘Muggleborns Bomb Aurors! A Dozen Killed in Bloody Ambush!’

“Look at the size of that crater!” Ron said, directly into his ear.

At least the article hadn’t been written by Skeeter, Harry thought. Still, the gist of it was clear: Evil muggleborns - at least the Prophet didn’t call them mudbloods in print yet - had attacked both Death Eaters and Aurors, killing all of them with a bomb. Although the author didn’t quite call for all purebloods to close ranks, no matter their political views, until this threat was dealt with. He just hinted at such an ‘obvious decision’. Harry shook his head. “The Dark Lord’s using muggle bombs now...” He turned to look at Ron, casting a privacy spell before continuing: “What are the odds Sirius and everyone else will try to sit on us during the holidays so we’re not at risk from a similar trap?”

“Blimey!” Ron shook his head. “They won’t let us do anything.”

Harry nodded grimly. He was aware of the danger, but he loathed being safe and hidden while everyone else was risking their lives. Wouldn’t him staying hidden risk Voldemort discovering the Headmaster’s real plan to defeat Voldemort?

“Potter!” A loud voice interrupted his thoughts.

He looked up and saw Dan Fawley, a seventh year Gryffindor, was glaring at him. Harry dropped the privacy spell. “Yes?”

“Why did your muggleborn friends kill my aunt? She was an Auror, not a Death Eater!” Fawley was shaking.

Harry took a deep breath as the table fell silent. “That wasn’t done by muggleborns, but by Death Eaters.”

“Are you dumb, Potter?” McLaggen cut in. “The Death Eaters don’t use muggle weapons!”

Harry glared at the bigot. Of course the arse would try to capitalise on this opportunity.

Ron snorted. “The Death Eaters will use anything and anyone. Have you forgotten how they claim to protect purebloods, and yet attacked far more purebloods than muggleborns?”
“Purebloods who helped the muggleborns,” McLaggen spat.

“Really?” Ron scoffed. “Neville’s grandmother helped muggleborns then? Do you know her voting history?”

“Don’t drag my family into this!” Neville had stood up and was glaring at the redhead.

For a moment, no one said anything, then Ron muttered: “Sorry, Neville.”

Harry used the brief silence to address Fawley. “Your aunt worked with Shacklebolt, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“She was hunting Death Eaters then. Why would the muggleborns go after Shacklebolt’s team?” Harry shook his head. “They’re not dumb.” Everyone knew who he meant with ‘they’.

“It could have been an accident,” Fawley said. “They wanted to kill Death Eaters, but the Aurors arrived too quickly.”

“Do you honestly think the muggleborns have spies among the Death Eaters that let them know of planned attacks?” Harry shook his head emphatically.

“And the Dark Lord would sacrifice his own men for such a trap?” McLaggen wasn’t finished.

Ron shrugged. “Who says those were his men? An Imperius, and you’d wear the robe and mask happily. Maybe even without an Imperius.” Harry’s friend sneered at McLaggen, who had gone pale with anger and shock.

“You… you…”

“Yes, I said it.” Ron scoffed. “If you’re spewing the Dark Lord’s drivel here, then I’m calling you out for it.” He turned to look at the rest. “You, and anyone else.”

The Gryffindors seemed to accept that, though with some hesitation, as far as Harry could tell, and started to settle down again. He saw that the other tables were still quite agitated. Several Ravenclaws were yelling at Luna, until Flitwick intervened. Sprout had sat down at the Hufflepuff table, right in the middle.

“I’m glad most of us are heading home today,” Ron said. “Gives them time to cool down.” He sighed. “Even if, you know, it’s not home.”

Harry nodded. The destruction of the Burrow had been a blow to the Weasleys, and to himself as well. “We’ll have lessons anyway. And training.”

“Don’t remind me! Moody will be able to be even nastier!” Ron said, but Harry thought his friend sounded more eager than apprehensive - just like Harry himself felt.

They wanted to do their part in the war. And it would hopefully be easier to meet Hermione during the holidays.

*****


Shacklebolt was dead. Killed in a mudblood trap, together with his entire team. Brenda Brocktuckle felt like shaking her head each time she saw the empty desks in the offices when walking past. He
should have known better, the damn muggle-loving fool! You couldn’t trust those animals!

The sound of a few scrolls hitting the floor and a muffled yelp made her turn around. The rookie, Tonks, had apparently stubbed her toe on a desk. Brenda snorted. If the half-blood were not a metamorphmagus, she’d have never made it into the Corps. Too clumsy. And, she added, too much of a muggle-lover. One of the last well-known muggle-lovers in the Ministry, after Shacklebolt’s team had been wiped out. The rest of the Corps either knew just how dangerous mudbloods were, or at least didn’t voice their opinions. But Brenda thought that even those who were on the sidelines of the conflict would not stand mudbloods killing their fellow Aurors.

She watched the witch fumble around for the scrolls that had fallen to the floor, and returned to her own office. Parkinson was sitting on his chair, reading the Prophet. Her earlier suspicion that the Auror might have been involved in the attack had obviously been wrong, seeing as he had not been killed.

Martin was there as well, reading a report. Brenda craned her neck and caught the title - it was a copy of the Peacehaven incident report.

“Do we have that report officially?” she asked, mildly curious - everyone knew that such information spread through the Corps like Fiendfyre through a forest, despite regulations. As long as you didn’t flaunt your knowledge too openly, no one cared. It was a miracle that the secrecy surrounding her own mission had held up so far. Of course, she added with a slight amount of guilt, with Shacklebolt’s team dead, the odds of the mudbloods getting a warning were much reduced.

Martin nodded. “I received it from Scrimgeour, so we are kept aware of the latest mudblood tactics.”

Parkinson snorted, and Brenda turned towards him. “Hm?”

“Nothing,” the Auror said, folding the Prophet up. “I’ve just had an amusing thought.”

Brenda didn’t think there was anything amusing about the news - unless you were a follower of the Dark Lord. But even if that was the case, half a dozen Death Eaters had been killed in that trap as well. Parkinson was an odd one, indeed. He was also one of the few experienced and smart Aurors left in the Ministry though. Pushing him on this wouldn’t serve any purpose. Nor, Brenda added, would it be smart, given that the balance of power inside the Corps had shifted decisively with Shacklebolt’s demise. She had a career to think of.

Martin put the report down and slid it over to her. She skimmed it - there was nothing new. “More and bigger metal splinters,” she noted aloud, “than with earlier bombs. That’ll be a bigger strain on Shield Charms.” Shock waves were easier to deflect than such projectiles.

“Given the size of the blast, no Shield Charm would have been able to stand up to it anyway,” Martin said.

“What a comforting thought!” Parkinson shook his head. “Incidentally, what’s the status of our mission?”

Brenda checked that the privacy spells were working, before answering: “I just received a note. They are trying to make contact with the Resistance through some new sort of muggle mail.”

“Tracking charms on the envelope? I’d think the mudbloods would expect that,” Martin said.

“Not if they are confident that we wouldn’t use muggle means. But it doesn’t matter if you simply track the muggle delivering the mail.” Parkinson grinned. “Even if they have a dropbox somewhere, someone has to fetch the mail.”
Brenda shook her head. “Apparently, this sort of mail cannot be tracked by magic.”

“What?” Martin looked up. “How is that possible?”

“It’s a sort of wireless broadcast.” At least that was what Brenda had understood. “Probably related to that television they have so much trouble with.” Their neighbours still hadn’t found whatever mistake the muggles had made with their construction.

“Ah.” Martin nodded. “We’ll have to trust that the two decoys will follow orders then.”

Parkinson chuckled. “Not like they can resist those kind of orders.”

“Not unless they are the Boy-Who-Lived,” Martin added.

The older Auror scoffed. “That’s some stupid rumour. A mere boy cannot resist the Imperius. Especially not one cast by the Dark Lord.”

“He defeated him as a baby. It’s quite possible that he can resist all the Dark Lord’s spells,” Martin, ever the Ravenclaw, retorted.

“They are not the Boy-Who-Lived,” Brenda cut in before an argument could start, “They are just some mudblood scum. They’ll do what they have been ordered to.”

They had to - a lot was riding on this mission. Such as Brenda’s career.

*****


“Wow! Half a dozen Death Eaters and a dozen Aurors, with one bomb!” Dean said, half-hidden behind the latest Daily Prophet.

“We got more of them at Malfoy Manor,” Seamus said, reading over his friend’s shoulder.

Hermione Granger pursed her lips. She had read the article already. And she had talked to Harry and Ron last night. “It’s very likely that this was done by Death Eaters,” she said, trying, but failing, to avoid glaring at the two wizards.

“What?” Seamus stared at her.

“The Aurors killed were the ones hunting Death Eaters,” Hermione pointed out. “With them gone, the risk of the Dark Lord taking over the Ministry has grown considerably.”

“He already controls most of it,” Dean said. “And the rest would rather follow him than risk their lives - or their positions.”

“Bloody Aurors deserved it anyway. They were hunting us as well,” Seamus added. “If they and the Death Eaters kill each other off, we win.”

Hermione frowned when the Creeveys nodded at that with eager expressions. At least Louise and Jeremy seemed to share her opinion - but then, they probably knew decent Hit-Wizards as well. No matter how tiring and repetitive it was, she had to step in again. The Resistance would not start to treat all purebloods and Ministry employees as Death Eaters. Not as long as she had anything to say about it. “The purebloods and half-bloods fighting the Death Eaters are not our enemies.”

“They work for the Ministry, which is hunting us,” John said.
“And those responsible will pay, once the Dark Lord is dead. But the Aurors who died haven’t been hunting us. Shackleton was working for Dumbledore,” Hermione said.

“The Headmaster hasn’t done that much for us,” Seamus said. “He talks well, but what has he done?”

“He keeps the Ministry and the Dark Lord in check.” Hermione wished she could tell them everything Dumbledore was doing in the war. What she knew about, at least. “Without him, the Dark Lord would be far more active. And I’m certain that he’s doing more than just talking.”

“Is that a guess, or do you know that?” Dean asked.

“I heard some things from my friends.” The Resistance already knew that Hermione was regularly talking to and meeting Harry and Ron.

“What kind of things?” Dean leaned forward slightly, handing the Daily Prophet over to Seamus.

“Private things. I don’t tell them what you’re doing either.” Hermione glanced at the frowning wizard.

“You better not be telling them,” Seamus mumbled.

Dean held her gaze for a moment longer, then shrugged. “It’s up to Dumbledore, then, to keep his people from getting killed. It’s not our problem.”

Hermione was about to retort, when Justin arrived, followed by Sally-Anne. Seamus made a crack about being busy in bed, which earned him a glare from Sally-Anne. Justin, though, ignored it. “I’ve received an email from the Avengers,” he announced. “Or from people who claim to be the Avengers. They want to meet us, to coordinate attacks.”

While everyone seemed to be talking over each other, Hermione was already pondering how to meet the other group safely. The Avengers appeared to be both skilled and resourceful - the kind of allies the Resistance needed.

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Outside Rawtenstall, Lancashire, Britain, December 21st, 1996

Daphne Greengrass woke up with a start. For a moment, she was confused, staring at a plain grey ceiling. That wasn’t her room. Then she remembered. The attack on Draco’s house. The flight. The interrogation. And the potion… Draught of Living Death. She was a prisoner of the blood traitors.

“Good morning. Or rather, good evening.”

She turned her head and glared at the smirking Weasleys - Fred and George - standing in the door of her cell. For a moment, she wanted to say nothing. Ignore the blood traitors until they left. Face their mocking with the dignity of a true pureblood.

But she wanted to know how long she had been dead to the world. How much time had passed. Fred didn’t look older, so it couldn’t have been that long, could it? She ground her teeth. “What date is it?”

“Winter Solstice,” George said.

Ten days then. If he was telling the truth. There was no point in trying to remain silent after she had
already started to talk to the traitor. “Why did you wake me up?” They had already forced her to sign over as many assets of her family fortune as she could control without her guardian.

“There’s a new bill being discussed in the Wizengamot,” Fred answered her. “Harsher punishments depending on your blood status. You know, things the Dark Lord demands. We want you to write a letter to your uncle, asking him to abstain from the vote.”

She snorted. “That sounds familiar. Will you torture me as well, if I refuse?” She hoped that she sounded braver than she felt - they could do anything to her. She was their prisoner, bereft of her wand. And she dreaded what tortures the twins could think of, after she had seen and experienced their pranks.

“If you do write the letter, you’ll be able to celebrate the Winter Solstice,” Fred said. “Within certain limits, of course.”

Daphne could imagine those limits. “A burning candle, placed in my cell?” She scoffed. Although a letter would let her family know that she was still alive. Give some hope to Astoria. And she would not have to drink that draught again, and be dead to the world. She shuddered at that thought, despite her efforts to show no emotion to her captors.

George must have noticed, since he grinned. “A bit more than that. If you write the letter convincingly, you and Davis get to celebrate together, under the open sky.”

Daphne hissed. “For blood traitors, you know our culture well.”

They shrugged, at the same time. Eerie. “We were taught the traditions. We just don’t follow them.” George said.

“What? Your family is a pureblood family!” Daphne stared at them.

“That’s just coincidence,” George said. “We married half-bloods and muggleborns in the past.”

“Why don’t you follow our traditions? What made you turn your back on your own culture?” Daphne asked. This was more than just stalling for time, now.

“It’s simple: It’s not our culture,” Fred said, shrugging.

“What? Your family is a pureblood family!” Daphne stared at them.

“That’s just coincidence,” George said. “We married half-bloods and muggleborns in the past.”

“That happens if you marry for love, instead of for gold,” Fred added sneering at her.

She glared at him.

George sighed. “Anyway - once one of our ancestors married a muggleborn, the Weasleys were excluded from the celebrations held by the Old Families. And of course that meant we were not marriageable for those families either.”

“There were exceptions, of course. Gran was a Black, but she was cast out of the family when she married Grandfather.” Fred spread his hands. “Pureblood bigots, you know.”

Daphne had heard about that scandal - Cedrella Black had married Septimus Weasley. Her parents had sworn that no daughter of theirs would ever make such a mistake.

George cleared his throat. “So, the Weasleys mingled with the half-bloods and the muggleborns.
And they were not exactly into the Old Gods. Especially not the muggleborns. Which meant we grew up with Christmas, Easter, and Halloween.”

“For generations,” Fred cut in. “I think without Gran we wouldn’t really know much about the traditions either.”

“And,” George said, sounding slightly annoyed, “We’re not the only family. Many other families were excluded in the past for marrying a muggleborn or half-bloods, and then they turned away from the traditions. And we’re not the only family that didn’t return to the old ways, once we happened to be a pureblood family again for a generation or two.”

“But why didn’t you return? Others did!” Daphne had met new pureblood families at the celebrations.

“We’re not suck-ups,” Fred said. “And we’d have been cast out anyway as soon as we married a muggleborn. So, why bother?”

“Apart from that, it’s as I said: It’s not our culture.” George shrugged. “No one but a few stuck-up families takes it seriously any more. For the rest, even if they attend a celebration, it’s just a party.”

“What?” That couldn’t be! The others had to have their own celebrations, Daphne knew. Just because they didn’t attend the exclusive gatherings didn’t mean...

“Why do you think we celebrate Halloween and not Samhain at Hogwarts? Christmas, and not Winter Solstice?” Fred grinned. “Dumbledore knows the majority of the students don’t care about the old celebrations.”

“That’s the mudbloods’ fault!” Daphne yelled. “They want to destroy our culture!”

The twins glanced at each other.

“I’ll fetch the letter,” Fred said. “Keep an eye on her.”

George nodded. Once his brother had gone, he shook his head. “Your culture’s already dead. It’s tainted by bigotry, and associated with the Dark Lord. Once he’s dead, people will drop the traditions in droves, just so they’ll not be mistaken for Death Eaters.”

“No!” Daphne shook her head wildly. She didn’t want to hear such lies. Purebloods wouldn’t do that. They would prevail. They would win this war! They had to!

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Daphne looked up at the night sky, craning her neck. The stars shone brightly above her, and she could feel the bonfire’s warmth in front of her. And if she kept looking up, she wouldn’t see the walls of her prison.

Next to her, Tracey took a deep breath. “If only Theo had written the letter as well… it’s not as if they would listen to us. They know we’re prisoners, and writing under duress.”

“Yes.” They had spoken the prayers and wishes together. It had been the smallest Winter Solstice celebration Daphne had ever seen or heard of. And they didn’t have their wands, so they hadn’t been able to properly pray. But it had been moving anyway. Now they would wait until the fire had burned down. Then they would be taken back to their cells, and drink that draught again.

“Did they talk to you about our traditions?” Daphne asked.
“Hm? No. They just said what they’d let us do,” her friend answered.

“Do… do you think we should let mudbloods celebrate with us? Should have, I mean.” Daphne kept looking up.

“What?” Tracey scoffed. “They don’t care for our traditions. They don’t understand us either. They should stick with their muggle rituals, and leave us to celebrate our traditions properly.”

Daphne closed her eyes and mumbled some agreement.

“Did the twins offer to attend? To mock us? They’re blood traitors.” Tracey sounded angry.

Daphne was still not looking at her friend. “No, they didn’t. They don’t celebrate Winter Solstice.”

“That’s why they are blood traitors!”

Daphne didn’t answer, but kept staring at the sky.

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London, Soho, December 22nd, 1996

Just about all shops and most cafés were decked out in Christmas decorations. The waiters in the café Hermione Granger was sitting in even wore hats like Santa Claus’. But the hot chocolate they served was very good. Which was why the witch was meeting Dumbledore here - he’d appreciate the treat. And so did she.

An old, distinguished looking clean-shaven gentleman with a bowler hat and an umbrella, wearing a thick but elegant coat, approached her table. She had her wand out and pointed at him under the table, even though he was wearing a bright red pin on his tie - the agreed-upon sign.

He didn’t comment, simply sat down and smiled at her. “Good afternoon, Miss.”

“Good afternoon, sir.” Her wand flashed, casting privacy spells. “I’ve taken the liberty to order for you already,” she said when his eyebrows rose.

“Efficient as always, Miss Granger.” He smiled. “You might wonder why I asked to meet you while everyone should be with their families, celebrating.”

Everyone should, indeed. But not everyone was. The Creeveys didn’t want to have their parents see them in their current state. Justin thought his parents might be too well-known to risk visiting them. Sally-Anne thought he might not want to present her as his girlfriend, as she had told Hermione, who had been forced to spend an hour assuring the girl that Justin wasn’t like that. And Hermione would be feeling guilty for meeting her own parents while others couldn’t meet theirs. Some holiday!

She didn’t say that though, but nodded, smiling. “I assume it’s about the death of your Aurors.”

“Perceptive as expected.” He smiled, as if she had just answered a question at school. “Indeed. Their loss is not just a personal tragedy - many of them were dear friends - but they also weaken the Ministry’s capability to resist the Dark Lord.”

Hermione took a sip from her chocolate, to mask her expression. Did he intend to…?

The waitress arrived with a tray full of hot chocolate and cakes. The old wizard smiled at the woman, then at Hermione. When he took a sip from his cup, his smile widened. “Delicious. I shall make certain to revisit this café.”
“What is your plan to prevent a takeover of the Ministry?” Hermione asked.

He set the cup down. “I’ve taken certain precautions. Items have been placed in concealed locations, certain goblin-made ones among them.” He smiled. “The gold donated by our prisoners is being put to good use. I’ve informed my friends and cautioned them to be alert. But Kingsley and his friends were among the most experienced combatants of the Order.”

He intended to. Hermione pressed her lips together, preventing her first thought from being voiced. A bit calmer, she said: “Do you plan to have the Resistance fight in the Ministry, should Death Eaters attempt a violent takeover?”

“As reserves, to deal with, shall we say, concentrations of Death Eaters, and prominent leaders. There are still Aurors and especially Hit-Wizards loyal to the Ministry.” Dumbledore smiled.

“Which means they’ll attack us as well,” Hermione said in a flat voice.

“That is a risk, yes. But I believe that should you be needed, gratitude for your help will outweigh other orders. Gratitude, and a healthy dose of fear.”

Hermione snorted at that. “Even if that works, there are my friends to consider. A number of them are not fond of the Ministry.”

“I am aware of that, Miss Granger. But should the Dark Lord take over the Ministry, the consequences would be far worse, and many more Ministry employees would die - at the hands of Death Eaters, or as curse-fodder sent against you and your friends.” He sighed. “That the Wizengamot has granted the Aurors and Hit-Wizards permission to use the Imperius Curse in the line of duty makes such ploys even easier for the Dark Lord’s followers. Both your friends as well as mine are in danger of being put under that vile spell, and forced to betray their allies.”

She had taken precautions against that - some at least - but his points were valid. She slowly nodded. “I will need to discuss this with my friends, sir. The matter is… delicate.”

He smiled. “Of course. With some luck, you’ll not be needed anyway - I am working on both increasing the training for my remaining friends in the Ministry, as well as hiring more Hit-Wizards.”

“That would be preferable,” Hermione said. She didn’t think it would work, of course - if the Headmaster had enough friends in the Ministry to beat the Death Eaters back, the war would have gone far, far differently. And he knew that as well.

She sighed. “There is another thing. I know you are busy, but I wondered if you had made any progress finding a counter-curse for the Withering Curse.”

Dumbledore’s expression grew sad. “I’m sorry, but with the recent events, I have had no time to dedicate to that research.”

She nodded. She hadn’t expected anything else. This was turning out to be a rather sombre holiday.

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**London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 23rd, 1996**

Ron Weasley was feeling a tad nervous when he entered the ‘Eastern Salon’, as Sirius called the room on the first floor, facing - as evident - east. He and Harry would have their first Legilimency lesson. The first of many - the Headmaster had told them that contrary to earlier plans, he’d teach them over the holidays.
It didn’t take a genius to realise that Dumbledore was stepping up their training because he was worried about the Dark Lord’s next step. And that meant things were not going at all well in the war. At least the Weasleys staying with Sirius and Harry for the holidays meant that Ron’s mum had taken over the kitchen, and the food was, everyone agreed, far better than the usual fare.

Dumbledore hadn’t arrived yet. Sirius wasn’t home either - the Wizengamot was busy debating the latest ‘travesty of justice the Death Eater scum’ among the body were proposing, as Harry’s godfather had put it this morning. Ron sighed.

“Having second thoughts?” Harry asked.

“No. Just wishing we were not at war.”

“Don’t we all!” Harry snorted. “We sound like old men.”

Ron chuckled, but it wasn’t funny. He sighed again. “Remember last Christmas?”

Harry nodded. “Things had started back then.”

“But it wasn’t that bad, yet.” Ron shook his head. “Hermione saw it coming. If we had joined her…”

“She didn’t want us to join her. She wanted us to finish our education,” Harry pointed out.

“She didn’t want us to risk our lives, you mean.” Ron knew their friend. “We’d have done the same, in her place.”

“But would she have gone along with it?”

Ron winced. “She’d have come with us, no matter what we thought about it.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, she would have.”

“We should have done the same,” Ron said. “No matter what she wanted us to do.”

“Yes, we should have.”

Ron sat down on the floor, his back against the wall, and closed his eyes. They should have. He should have. They hadn’t, though. He hadn’t. And now it was too late. They hadn’t the sort of training the Resistance had gone through. Moody was a great and evil teacher, but they didn’t cover guns. Or bombs. And Ron was quite certain that Dumbledore wouldn’t let Harry join the Resistance anyway. Not when he needed to learn how to defeat Voldemort with his mind. Ron might be able to join the Resistance, but that would leave Harry without either of his best friends. And Ron had sworn, two years ago, to never let Harry face such trials alone again. And he’d keep that vow.

The door opened before either of them said anything else, and Dumbledore entered.

“Good evening, Headmaster,” both boys chorused, jumping to their feet.

“Good evening, Harry, Mister Weasley. Or maybe that should be ‘Ron’, seeing as you will be rummaging through my mind, if all goes well,” Dumbledore added with a smile. “You cannot get any more familiar than that.”

Ron, in the process of sitting down himself, blinked. Having the Headmaster call him by his first name, like Harry, was… he nodded quickly. “Of course!”

“Very well, Ron.” The old wizard smiled again, and took a seat in one of the old armchairs. “Now,
before we start, is there anything else you would like to discuss? You might not be in a state to do so once we finish.”

That sounded ominous. For a moment, Ron had second thoughts again. Then he sat up straighter. He was a Gryffindor. Harry needed him. He’d do this.

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir. We were wondering if we could ask Moody about his prosthetics. Without, you know, revealing that we are in close contact with Hermione.”

“Ah.” The Headmaster slightly shook his head. “Alastor certainly suspects that already. But there is no need to prove his suspicion - I know who made his eye and leg for him. Although I do hope that the two Creevey brothers are not actually planning such drastic measures.”

Ron winced. Harry didn’t say anything, but the old wizard sighed. “I see. I have an address in my office, I will send it to you later. It’s a foreign specialist, and apolitical.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“It’s the least I can do. Though I reckon I might also help enchant the prosthetics, once they are made. I did so for Alastor as well.”

Ron smiled. That would certainly help a lot. But to have a wooden leg or arm, enchanted or not… he shuddered.

Harry cleared his throat. “I was also wondering if we will still be hunting Horcruxes. With the Dark Lord using bombs, I mean.”

“I think it is impossible for the Dark Lord to hide bombs in the places he could hide a Horcrux in. Not only are they heavily warded, usually, but an explosion would likely destroy the Horcrux as well, rendering the protection moot.”

That made sense to Ron. “So…we’d be safe enough?"

“I think so, but further studies of potential locations will be needed, to avoid undue risk.”

Ron smiled, and glanced at Harry. It was dangerous, but they’d be doing something concrete, soon enough.

The Headmaster nodded and continued. “Now, Legilimency. Many think it is the art of reading someone’s mind, though that is not entirely correct. It’s far more akin to navigating a strong current, in the night, with only your skill in Legilimency to act as a lantern. Or to fit together a puzzle made with dozens of pieces which do not connect easily with each other. Your training in Divination will help there - you have learned to interpret and deduce from small clues.”

Ron’s smile grew strained. Neither he nor Harry had learned much in that class.

Dumbledore continued, as if he hadn’t noticed their reaction. “But the connection is rather loose. Legilimency is a unique skill, and few ever learn it. The mind is not organised as a library - not even Miss Granger’s. It’s more a maelstrom of thoughts and memories, real and imagined. And for a beginner, both will look alike. We will cover that later, for now, you’ll learn how to cast the spell, and enter a mind. Or in my case, a part of my mind I deliberately left open for you to practise on.”

The Headmaster raised his wand. “The movements and incantation are rather simple. Let me demonstrate.”

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Ron saw Harry collapse, holding his head after his attempt to enter Dumbledore’s mind. “That looks like someone entered his mind, not the other way around.”

“In a way, it is - the minds are touching. It is not unheard of for a strong mind to push back, and invade the invader’s mind.” Dumbledore nodded at him. “Your turn, Ron.”

Ron took a deep breath and raised his wand, aiming it at the Headmaster’s forehead, then focused his mind, as instructed, as his wand flashed. “Legilimens!”

For a moment, his field of view narrowed so much, he thought he had gone blind, then it expanded, and he felt like falling through a tunnel covered with walking, talking life-like portraits. Dozens of snippets of talks assaulted his ears at the same time and hundreds of people seemed to surround him, talking to him, staring at him, talking about him, or ignoring him… and he kept falling.

He flailed his arms, trying to stop his fall - it worked in dreams - and he slowly started to float. Shaking his head, he began to focus on one picture. It was Hermione, he realised, sipping tea in a café. He couldn’t hear what she was saying though, the noise from the other scenes was too loud. And growing louder. He turned his head, shouting “shut up!”, to no avail. And when he tried to focus on the café scene again, it was gone, replaced with some unknown teacher at Hogwarts, yelling at him and waving his wand wildly.

Ron recoiled, and the scenes started to whirl around him while the noise grew louder and louder. His ears started to hurt, and dozens of scenes flitting this way and that flashed before his eyes. He was starting to grow dizzy from all the movement. And his ears. Merlin, his ears!

He came to kneeling on the floor, hands clamped over his ears, panting. That had been… horrible. He looked up, exchanging a wry smile with Harry, who was sitting in an armchair.

Dumbledore sounded pleased. “Very good, Ron. That was rather smooth and relatively painless for a beginner.”

Ron blinked, then gaped. That had been ‘relatively painless’? He was not so certain any more if he wanted to find out what the Headmaster considered ‘painful’.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 24th, 1996

Harry Potter was in a good mood when he descended the stairs towards the kitchen in Sirius’s and his home the morning after his first Legilimency lesson. It was Christmas Eve, his head didn’t hurt any more, he was making good progress according to the Headmaster, and he’d do something useful in the war soon.

His good mood lasted until he entered the kitchen, and saw Sirius standing at the table, staring at a note. His godfather looked grim, no trace of humour visible. Molly was at the stove, and wiping her eyes, mumbling under her breath. And Ginny looked pale and sad.

“What happened?” Harry asked, instead of a greeting.

Sirius turned towards him. “Tonks sent me a note. Voldemort murdered Augusta Longbottom. Her head was found in the Wizengamot Chamber this morning.”

“Before we left Hogwarts, Neville told me he’d do the right thing, what his parents and gran would expect him to,” Ginny said, sniffling. “He knew this would happen.”
“The poor boy!” Molly exclaimed, tears filling her eyes again.

Harry felt like he had been punched in the gut. Neville’s last family, gone. And he had treated the boy like… he shook his head. He’d have to apologise.

“His proxy voted against the new blood laws in the Wizengamot. They were passed anyway, but the Dark Lord probably wanted to make an example out of her,” Sirius said.

Harry hissed through his clenched teeth. To sacrifice his own grandmother like that… he didn’t know if he could do this. What if Sirius was taken hostage? Or Ron? Or Hermione? If that happened… he didn’t know what he’d do, but… he had a sudden thought. “Someone needs to keep an eye on Neville. He might try to get revenge.”

“Against the Dark Lord?” Sirius asked.

“Against anyone he thinks is following the Dark Lord,” Harry said. He didn’t add ‘It’s what I’d do’, but judging by the sharp look he received from his godfather, Sirius had caught that anyway.

“I’ll inform Albus. He is close to a few of the Longbottoms’ relatives,” the Wizard said.

While Sirius scribbled a hasty letter, Harry sat down at the kitchen table. He wasn’t hungry any more, but he forced himself to eat something, if only to not worry Molly any further. He suddenly snorted, startling Ginny who had been sitting there, hunched over, and nibbling listlessly on a toast. “Sorry,” he said, forcing a smile on his face. “I just thought that just as I can’t really celebrate Halloween without remembering my parents’ deaths, Neville will not be able to celebrate Christmas without remembering his gran’s murder.”

“If he’s celebrating Christmas anyway, and not Yuletide and the Winter Solstice,” Sirius said. “The Longbottoms are an Old Family.”

Harry rolled his eyes at his godfather. “Then he will not be able to celebrate Yuletide without remembering her murder.” Then he realised that Sirius’s words were exactly what Hermione would have said, and sighed. Some holiday this was turning out to be!

*****

The mood had improved somewhat by the evening. Molly’s excellent meals - she had cooked a veritable feast for dinner - and Sirius’s antics with Remus and the twins were mostly responsible for that. Tonks was late, but added her own brand of humour, despite being exhausted - she had been pushing herself, according to her mum, accumulating overtime.

Still, it was a rather subdued affair, in Harry’s opinion. At least compared to last Christmas. He had to admit he was biased, though - that Christmas had been the first he had celebrated at Sirius’s, and now his, home. He had slipped out of the living room, unnoticed, and was now sitting on the couch in the library. He imagined Hermione sitting at the desk, stacks of books on both sides, scribbling furiously as she took notes from two or three tomes at once. She should be here, he thought. Here with him. Not hiding in muggle London, hunted by Aurors and Death Eaters.

Suddenly, his side was hit by a Stinging Hex. He was halfway off the couch and had his wand drawn before he realised Sirius had cast it. “Whoa!” his godfather said. “Moody’s been training you well. Apart from you not noticing me stepping into the room, and not reacting until I hexed you.”

Harry scoffed, and sat down on the couch again. “We still can hardly hit him in practice.”

“Even the Headmaster might have trouble, despite Moody’s peg leg.” Sirius sat down next to him -
or rather, let himself fall on to the couch in an almost sitting position, then wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulder.

They sat like this for a while, not saying anything. Sirius looked around, then suddenly stood up. “I’ve got it!”

“What?” Harry said, startled by the sudden movement.

“Your last present! I’ll fetch it at once! It’ll be a surprise!”

And his godfather left the library in a hurry, leaving Harry to shake his head in confusion. Then he chuckled. That had been so like Sirius, or like he should be. Although… would Sirius prank him on Christmas Day?

Harry groaned. Of course he would.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 25th, 1996

For a present for which Sirius had dragged Harry Potter out of bed at an ungodly hour - he, Ron and Sirius himself were the only ones currently up - the thing his godfather had pressed into his hands looked decidedly unremarkable.

“A sock?” Harry asked, bewildered, holding up the colorful garment, trying to make sense of it. “All that to give me a sock? A single sock?”

“It’s a very special sock, and it’s for you two!” Sirius grinned, showing so many teeth, Harry was reminded of his godfather’s animagus form.

“What?” Harry blinked. Had Sirius gone around the bend? He glanced at Ron, who was staring at the sock with his mouth half-open.

Sirius nodded. “You have to both be touching it together. The activation phrase is … I’ll tell you once you are touching it. It looks like you’d blurt it out otherwise.”

“What?” Harry repeated himself. It was too early to think clearly.

“Blimey! It’s a Portkey!” Ron exclaimed.

“A Portkey?” Harry’s eyes widened. “You’re sending us away?”

“Not far, and not for long - I’ll expect you back … tomorrow morning, at the very latest.” Sirius grinned widely, then handed Ron a flat box. “I don’t think you’ll need all of it, but it’s better to have it and not need it than the other way around.” He grabbed Ron’s hand and put it on the sock. “Now grab it. If you say “Padfoot!” it’ll activate - both to get you there and back.”

“Those are… contraceptive potions!” Ron said. “And muggle money!”

Harry blinked. Was his godfather sending him to some brothel? He saw the wizard transform into a dog so dark, it looked like a Grim, and took a deep breath. “Padfoot…”

And then the portkey activated.

The room Harry and Ron landed in didn’t look like the entrance hall of a brothel, to Harry’s relief. It looked like a muggle hotel room. An expensive muggle hotel room. What had his godfather been
thinking?

“Harry! Ron!”

A very familiar voice interrupted his thoughts, shortly before he found himself in a hug, and short brown hair in his face. Then Hermione released him, and hugged Ron.

“Sirius called me last night, interrupting my evening with my parents - I met them in the hotel here, you know, on Christmas Eve, under a fake name - and he said I’d better not have plans for today, he’d send me something in the morning. But I’d have never thought…”

While their best friend told them her story in rapid-fire sentences, Harry exchanged a smile with Ron. This time, Sirius had found the ideal gift.

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Chapter 24: Ambush

‘While some historians consider the attack on ‘Haley’s Hats’ the most important event in the week before Christmas 1996, citing its importance for the following developments among the muggleborn population, it is my opinion that the death of an entire Auror team assigned to track down and arrest the followers of the Dark Lord is far more important. The attack on the shop in Diagon Alley was merely the first visible sign of the changes happening among muggleborns while the loss of so many enemies of the Death Eaters in the Ministry was the direct cause of several events that shaped the war.

It is thus with some puzzlement that we find that, even now, there remains doubt among historians about who exactly was responsible for the bomb that took the Aurors’ lives. While I have to admit that both the Muggleborn Resistance and the Dark Lord had good reasons to deny their culpability, and their denials therefore can not be trusted implicitly, the details of the bombing show several key differences to other attacks by the Muggleborn Resistance. And while, as one colleague of mine postulates, this could theoretically be a deliberate act to cover up their involvement, this would also require the attack to have been deliberately aimed at the Aurors - a decision that, frankly, lacks any sense and for which there is no supporting evidence. It is my conclusion that the attack was a well-planned and executed so-called ‘false-flag’ operation by the Dark Lord’s forces - possibly with the help, willing or not, of a half-blood or even muggleborn familiar with muggle explosives.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, City of Westminster, December 25th, 1996

“And that’s Trafalgar Square.” Hermione Granger pointed at the famous Nelson’s Column. “It was named in honour of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, where Britain defeated the combined fleets of Spain and France. Admiral Nelson was mortally wounded during his victorious battle.”

Harry looked impressed while Ron looked slightly confused. “Did the muggles fight everyone on the world? That’s yet another war they fought. I thought we had a lot of goblin rebellions, but this… was there a year the muggles weren’t fighting a war anywhere?”

Hermione sighed. “Unfortunately, I don’t think so. Though Britain has been at peace for a long time now - mostly.” To change the topic - they had been taking care not to talk about their own war, and this was straying a bit too close - she pointed at the giant Christmas tree on the square. “A tree has been donated by Norway every year since 1947.” She looked at the birds occupying a lot of the square and frowned. “The pigeons are a plague. People keep feeding them, which makes their numbers grow, even though everyone should know how damaging they are to the area, especially the statues.”

“I could eat a whole flock of them right now,” Ron said.

Hermione blushed in slight embarrassment - she had been more or less dragging the boys around since morning. “We can take a break in one of the cafés nearby.”

Ron didn’t quite sigh in relief, but his smile said enough. Harry’s slightly too eager nod didn’t help her bout of guilt either. “My treat,” she quickly added. Which set off a short discussion about who
had the right to invite the others that lasted until their orders arrived, and eating took precedence over talking - for Hermione as well, as she found herself quite hungry.

“So, where will we be going next?” Ron asked, breaking the silence.

“I’ve ordered you around long enough,” Hermione said, only half-jokingly. “What would you like to do?” That seemed to surprise both of them, so she quickly added: “I mean it. Let’s do what you want to do, not what you think I want to do.”

“Well… I don’t know that much about muggle London,” Ron said. “What about watching a movie?”

“Sounds good,” Harry quickly agreed.

“Alright. Let’s get a newspaper and see what movies are currently being shown.” Hermione flagged down the waiter. She couldn’t help noticing that this looked like a date - movie, then dinner. Not that any of the three of them had mentioned anything about the dates they were planning so far.

She didn’t know if that should worry her or not.

*****

London, East End, December 26th, 1996

It was a very happy Hermione Granger who returned to the Resistance headquarters in the morning. She entered the kitchen, and waved at Sally-Anne, who was brewing tea. “Good morning!”

Her friend looked surprised. “Welcome back, Hermione.” In a slightly amused tone, she added: “You must have really missed your parents.”

Hermione nodded. “It felt good to forget the war for a day or two.” They had had a very enjoyable evening, playing a few muggle board and card games after dinner, but mostly talking. About anything but the war and dating.

The other witch shook her head. “Did you actually not even think about it?”

“Well…” Hermione grinned. “Not as much as usual.” Which was true.

Sally-Anne chuckled. “Good for you. You had me worried there.” She sighed. "Justin’s been busy mailing those ‘Avengers’. They seem to really want to meet us. Or rather, the two muggleborns they saved want to join us.”

Hermione frowned. On one hand, it was understandable that the two survivors wanted to join the Resistance - it was their best option to take revenge, or so it would seem. On the other hand, why wouldn’t they want to stick with the Avengers? Or why wouldn’t the Avengers want to recruit them? They had saved them, after all. There could be plausible reasons for that, of course - but she didn’t like it. And since the Ministry was now authorised to cast the Imperius Curse… “We’ll have to be very careful when meeting them. It sounds a bit… odd.”

“Yes!” Sally-Anne said, nodding emphatically. “Justin said so as well, and he’s been the one mailing them.”

“We’ll have to decide if we want to meet with them in London, where they can’t start too much trouble, if it turns out to be a trap, or in some out of the way safe house, where we have more options.” Hermione rubbed her chin. She’d usually favour the second option, but after Shacklebolt,
they might expect that. It would be a hard decision.

Sally-Anne chuckled again. “You’re already planning, before taking your coat off.”

Hermione chuckled herself, though if she was honest, it wasn’t a good thing how easily she fell back into the role of a guerilla leader.

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Young’s Ram Brewery, Borough of Wandsworth, London, December 28th, 1996

Hermione Granger sipped from her tea cup, sitting on a conjured chair in the middle of a decrepit room that looked like it had been pillaged by vikings a few times, or used as a spot to hang out by teenagers. Not that the rest of the building, and its neighbours, looked any better.

After some thinking, she had decided to meet the Avengers and the survivors of the other muggleborn group in London, in a derelict brewery. It provided enough cover and advantages for them to set up a tight perimeter, and a few surprises. There were no muggles nearby who’d be in danger should it come to a battle, but it was in London proper, which meant any wizards attacking would have to be careful lest they endanger the Statute of Secrecy. And since it had been a brewery, there were well-sized sewers, making it easy to arrange a few escape routes. Just in case.

Every member of the Resistance but the Creeveys were present, most of them hidden and spread out. Colin and Dennis had begged to be allowed to come as well, but she had not given in - although they were monitoring communications within the group. Hermione didn’t think that would be needed, but it gave them something to do that would hopefully not let them feel useless.

Next to her, Justin, standing and looking out of the small window, sighed.

“Please don’t start again,” Hermione said.

He turned to frown at her, but didn’t say what he had been about to say.

Justin had wanted to take up a position on top of the chimney towering over the area with his rifle, but Hermione had vetoed that. It was too exposed, in her opinion. And he had been the primary contact with the Avengers, so he should be present for the meeting. Instead, John was on a muggle building overlooking the area, disillusioned and with a light machine gun. Dean would be acting as his spotter, bodyguard and broom rider if needed. The boys wanting to play sniper had grumbled at that, but even they had had to admit that a sniper wouldn’t do much against enemy brooms.

Her friend knocked on the conjured steel plate that they had stuck to the wall so it covered the empty window looking into the main hall, then disillusioned it - an innovation born from John’s continuing attempts to disillusion their broadcasting van. “Do you think it’s a trap?”

Hermione shrugged. “I hope not, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.” She had read the e-mails several times, and they were just a bit too pushy. In the Avengers’ place, Hermione would have been a bit more cautious - and a bit more respectful too. Although the Avengers had been rather reckless in their actions. Breaking into the Ministry to free arrested muggleborns? That was impressive. And yet… why hadn’t they done anything else at the same time? Even if she had been determined not to kill people, Hermione would have used the opportunity to leave a few surprises for the Minister, and his employees, and embarrass them so much, they’d be busy dealing with internal rivals for a while.

Seamus arrived. “Everything’s set.” He grinned. “The old brewing tanks will work perfectly for this!”
She smiled at him. “Good work.”

“I’m almost hoping this turns out to be a trap,” he said. “Just to see what happens.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

He frowned at her cup. “Drinking tea in a brewery?”

“It’s a former brewery,” she retorted.

“Even worse. No respect for the dead!” He grinned, and even Justin chuckled.

Boys! She finished her tea and vanished the cup. According to her watch, it was about time for the meeting.

As if he had heard her thoughts, Dean reported over the radio: “Four people are walking towards the gate. I don’t see anyone else, so far.”

“Four people, as they said and we agreed upon,” Justin said.

Hermione pushed the button of her headset. “Sally-Anne?”

“Nothing on this side,” the witch answered. She was with Mary and Tania, hiding on the other side of the building. The reception was a bit spotty with all the metal and walls between them. Using their enchanted earrings would avoid that - but they hadn’t found a way to make versions that worked with more than one pair. “The jinxes are still up as well.”

Which meant no one could be sneaking up on them while disillusioned, or apparating right on top of them. Brooms of course were not hindered, and could stay out of range of the jinxes and still be at the brewery in a very short time. They had reinforced the walls and roofs as well - just in case someone decided to drop a bomb on them. And to contain Seamus’s surprise, just in case.

“They’re entering the area now,” Dean reported.

Hermione fought the urge to bite her lower lip and tapped her radio button again. “Louise, lead them inside.” If this was a trap, then the two former Hit-Wizards would be facing four enemies. But if it was a trap, they’d likely not spring it right now. They’d want to wait until they met her. Hermione knew that she was the one the Ministry wanted more than anyone else in the Resistance.

“Bubble-Head Charms,” she said, standing up and casting one herself, before leaving the room. Justin and Seamus followed her, the Irish wizard splitting off as soon as they were in the hall - He’d be watching from the side, with his rifle ready.

Justin remained at her side, though they were far enough apart so they’d be able to move freely. And there was cover close by. Contrary to where their visitors would be standing. Hermione’s hand dipped into her pocket, gripping the small remote control.

They had done all that was possible to prepare, she told herself as the door at the other end was opened, and two wizards and two witches, all wearing common muggle clothes, entered, with Louise and Jeremy at their back. Their visitors looked nervous, or so Hermione thought - but then again, they would likely be nervous as well if this wasn’t a trap.

She frowned when she realised that she was now convinced that this was a trap. Such assumptions could ruin a lot if she was wrong, she told herself. And yet...
She kept her hand in her pocket and raised the other when the four were about ten yards away. Within the range of her privacy spells. “Hello. The Avengers, I presume?”

They stopped walking, and the man on the right nodded. “Indeed. I’m Daniel, she is Doris.” He pointed at the other two. “Those are the ones we saved from the Ministry’s cell. Mary-Jane and Brad.”

Hermione nodded at them. “I’m Hermione Granger. This is Justin Finch-Fletchley. You wanted to meet us.”

She saw Daniel’s eyes widen when she introduced herself, and how he glanced at Doris, for just a second. Either they were not quite so confident any more, or…

“Ah, yes. Brad and Mary-Jane wanted to meet you, to join you,” Daniel said. “We wanted to meet you so we can coordinate our attacks. It would be heavy if we wrecked each other’s plans accidentally.”

Before Hermione could answer, Dean’s voice rang in her ear: “Brooms in the air!”

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Borough of Wandsworth, London, December 28th, 1996

Brenda Brocktuckle studied the decrepit muggle buildings from the roof of a muggle building nearby. It was far larger than she had expected when she had heard it was a brewery - just how much beer did muggles drink? Although it had been abandoned, so who knew what the owners had thought. The tall chimney worried her - it would make a perfect spot for a guard. Muggle guns would be effective if used up there as well - though not as precise at that range, or so she had been told. Of course, if her plan worked there wouldn’t be any fighting, not here at least. The two imperiused mudbloods would be recruited by the Resistance, and lead the Aurors to their base while the two undercover half-bloods would leave. Brenda snorted - she wasn’t that lucky. But she had contingency plans.

“Rickett and Purvis are entering the main building,” Martin announced, unnecessarily - she could hear the mudblood guards greet the group at the door through the enchanted mirror Purvis had in her pocket.

Brenda grunted in reply, staring through her Omnioculars. One mudblood on the chimney. Two had been at the door, ushering the undercover group inside. Where were the rest? Disillusioned and spread over the area? No. They’d be inside the building. At windows. Ready to flee at the slightest danger - that was how the Resistance operated. They didn’t stand and fight; they hit and ran.

“Nervous?” Parkinson asked. “Don’t you trust your plan?”

She scoffed. “It’s a solid plan, but the mudbloods are slippery criminals.”

Parkinson shrugged. “The only ones who can mess this up are the two half-bloods.”

He was correct, but that wouldn’t help Brenda if the mission failed - it had been her idea. Her plan. She had picked the two undercover Aurors as well. The Ministry expected results, even more so after she had made them lose face with the fake escape of Milton and Smith. If this failed, then her career was over. She’d probably be sent to guard Azkaban.

She huffed. She wouldn’t fail. She had a dozen Aurors and two dozen Hit-Wizards ready to apparate in on her command. She wished she could have had them deployed in advance, but that would have
endangered the mission - even with Shacklebolt’s team wiped out, you couldn’t trust everyone, not even in the Corps.

She heard Rickett’s voice through the mirror. “Hey… I hope this is not your base. It’s in desperate need of some repair work.”

The mudbloods snorted, but didn’t let any information slip. Brenda hoped Rickett didn’t overdo it - though the Avengers were supposed to be cocky and reckless. The two former prisoners made a few comments about how it was still better than Ministry cells. Brenda tried to tune them out and focus on anyone, anything else she could hear. She wished she had a way to watch what the two Aurors were seeing.

She heard a door open with the sound of shrieking metal. One of the mudbloods, a wizard, said: “After you.”

“Wow, that’s Hermione Granger!” Purvis said, sounding like an awed schoolgirl.

Brenda drew a hissing breath. Granger! The mudblood who had killed her partner. The leader of the Resistance. The most wanted mudblood in Britain. Here, in the brewery. The witch had guts, to come in person. Brenda hoped that meant her plan was working.

“Should we call the others?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” Parkinson hissed. “Let’s get the scum.”

Brenda hesitated. The plan was to let the Resistance recruit the two mudblood moles. Having the Ministry forces charge in was just the contingency plan. But… if she managed to capture or kill Granger, then the Resistance was done for anyway - without their leader, they’d either break up, or make mistakes and get killed. But if she sent the Aurors and Hit-Wizards in, she’d endanger Rickett and Purvis. They were half-bloods, and they knew the risks, but...

The two unwitting moles were prattling in hushed voices about Granger. She heard Rickett say: “That must be Finch-Fletchley.” Their mail contact. Another important member, as far as they knew.

Suddenly, the chatter and whispers cut off - she couldn’t hear anything any more. Not a sound. Privacy spells, she realised. But why would the mudbloods cast the spells in the middle of a secure building? There was no way anyone could listen in from afar, and if they suspected an eavesdropper close by… they suspected a trap, Brenda realised.

“Merlin’s arse,” Parkinson spat. “It was a trap. They knew.”

“No… they didn’t know,” Brenda said. “But they suspect something is up.” Could Rickett and Purvis fool them? Talk their way out? She shook her head. They were half-bloods, not mudbloods.

She took out the other mirror in her pocket. “Flint! Attack! Granger is in there! We have two undercover Aurors there as well, Daniel Rickett and Doris Purvis. They’re wearing grey coats and black trousers.”

Brenda pulled her own broom out and mounted it while she heard Flint shout to the response force to apparate.

“They won’t exactly stop to check who they are cursing,” Martin said, already on his own broom.

Parkinson shrugged. “The half-bloods are probably already stunned - or dead.”
They had barely started to fly when dozens of broom riders appeared in the air above the brewery.
“Anti-Disillusionment Jinxes,” Brenda muttered. But they had expected that.

Then she saw one of the broom riders - an Auror - jerk, and fall off his broom, his Shield Charm shattered. Then another screamed, veering wildly, trying to steer his broom for a few seconds before rolling over and falling as well.

She hadn’t seen a spell… guns! “They’re shooting at the broom riders!” she yelled. But where were they? The chimney was clear…

The attackers were now flying evasively. That should save most of them, Brenda thought. They were either diving down to the muggle building, to charge inside, or climbing up to keep the mudbloods from escaping with brooms - Anti-Disillusionment Jinxes worked both ways.

But where was the damn mudblood with the gun? They had to be outside the Jinx’s range.

Another broom rider was hit and went down, screaming. But Brenda had seen from which side his shield had been hit. “They’re on top of the tall muggle building!” she yelled into the mirror. But the distance… she hadn’t expected them to be that far away.

Flint reacted at once. “Avery! Take your group and take the bastard out!” Five broom riders changed direction and flew towards the muggle building.

“The roof’s withstanding Blasting Curses,” she heard another Hit-Wizard yell.

“Use transfiguration!” Flint ordered.

“Brains of a Flobberworm,” Brenda heard Parkinson curse. “We should have taken more veterans.”

Then Brenda and her group hit the area covered by Anti-Disillusionment Jinxes, and the Auror hoped fervently that the muggle with the gun would shoot at Avery’s group, and not at hers.

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Young’s Ram Brewery, Borough of Wandsworth, London, December 28th, 1996

Hermione Granger was diving behind the prepared cover - steel walls anchored solidly in the reinforced floor - as soon as she heard Dean’s warning, casting a Shield Charm before she hit the ground. She bruised her shoulder, but bit down on the pain, rolling and coming up with her wand aimed.

Louise and Jeremy were stepping back out of the room, but their wands were flashing, spells flying at the four visitors.

Daniel was yelling, waving his wand and something else around. “They’ve seen through ou…” Two bursts from assault rifles cut into him. He dropped both his wand and the other thing while he was falling down on his knees, and Hermione saw a mirror hit the ground before the traitor collapsed, blood pouring out of his mouth.

Her own Piercing Curse shattered the Shield Charm Doris had just finished casting. They had been as surprised as the Resistance, she realised - but they had been ready for an attack as well. A second later, Justin’s Cutting Curse hit her, slicing into her side. Before she could scream with pain, her body jerked from the impact of several bullets and she fell down, blood spreading in a pool beneath her.
Seamus shot both in the head before starting towards them from his hiding spot. The two other muggleborns - the freed prisoners, if that was not a lie - were already down, stunned or killed by Louise and Jeremy. Justin moved forward to check on them. “It was a trap - the Imperius?” he asked, kneeling down.

That was a possibility, Hermione knew. Or they were imposters, and the real Avengers were dead or arrested. But they’d have heard about that, she thought. It was as or more likely that the Avengers had been a false flag operation from the start.

“He’s dead, but she’s just stunned,” Justin announced. “Do we take her with us?”

Hermione was tempted, but she needed more information. “Strip her completely - they might have tracked them with magic tied to her clothes.” The Resistance had done that, after all, to find some hiding purebloods.

“The broom riders are landing, they couldn’t get through the roof,” Dean announced over the radio. “We’ve shot down several of them, but they spotted our position, and a group is flying towards us.”

“Apparate out as soon as you can. We’re withdrawing,” Hermione ordered. “Seamus - prepare your surprise. Everyone else - fall back to the basement!”

The Irish wizard whooped with glee and rushed off while Justin vanished Mary-Jane’s clothes, then ran his wand over her body. “Nothing inside her that I can find.”

“Alright.” Hermione waved her wand, and cast a Full-Body Bind Curse, followed by conjuring a blanket to wrap around the witch, securing it with tight conjured ropes. “Leviate her!” she told Justin. “Let’s move.”

They hurried out of the room, through a side door, to the reinforced stairs that led to the basement. Sally-Anne arrived with Tania and Mary, who took up positions at the entrance of the stairs, to wait for Seamus.

Hermione led the group down, to the basement. They had reinforced the floor above them as well. Louise and Jeremy aimed their wands at a massive steel plate, right before Hermione vanished it, revealing the tunnel they had created beforehand.

The two former Hit-Wizards descended, wands out. Shortly afterwards, Hermione heard Louise’s voice through the radio: “All’s clear here. No hidden enemies.”

The attackers hadn’t found the escape tunnel then. This tunnel, at least - they had another one prepared, just in case. Hermione pushed the button on her radio. “Seamus, do it.”

A giddy “Yes!” was her answer. A minute later, Seamus, Mary and Tania rushed down the stairs.

“They’re breaking through the windows in the first floor,” Tania announced.

“We have ten minutes until it’s ready. Timer’s running,” Seamus said.

Hermione nodded at them. “Let’s move then.”

She let the others descend the stairs, then followed them. Once she was down a floor, she turned around and sealed the entrance with conjured concrete, three yards thick - better safe than sorry.

*****
Brenda Brocktuckle let out a relieved sigh when she landed in the area of the brewery and had a solid wall between her and the mudblood with the gun. Ahead of her, Aurors and Hit-Wizards were casting spells at the building, breaking in. They were taking far more time than expected, though.

“The mudbloods have reinforced the walls and roof,” Martin said, “but the windows are a weak spot.”

Brenda blinked, then pulled out the mirror. “Flint! Do your men see anyone? Is anyone fighting you?”

It took a while for the leader of the response force to answer. An eternity, in Brenda’s opinion. “No, we have seen someone running inside, but no one cast at us.”

Brenda paled. “It’s a trap!” she screamed, at the mirror, and at the Aurors she could see floating near the windows, jumping inside. “Get away!”

She saw people scramble out of the windows, waiting for the building to blow up. It didn’t. Aurors and Hit-Wizards rushed away from the building, gathering right at the edge of the area of the Muggle-Repelling Charms, which coincided with the walls forming the area’s border. Brenda had rushed out, taking cover on the other side of the wall.

Minutes passed. Flint walked up to her. “What’s going on? We were just told to be ready to help an operation out.”

“Undercover operation,” Brenda said. “Our team was meeting the mudbloods inside, but they were discovered.”

Flint cursed. “And we were too late…”

“They could still be alive,” Brenda said.

“I’ll go and check.” Martin was already moving.

“Wait!” Brenda yelled.

Her partner turned around. “Someone has to check.”

‘Not you’, Brenda wanted to say. But she didn’t.

Martin grinned. “And you’re the commander.” Which meant she couldn’t risk her life.

“Selwyn, Hupwinkle - go with him!” Flint ordered.

The two Hit-Wizards looked unhappy, but followed Martin, entering the building through a broken window on the ground floor. Brenda saw a few other Aurors - brave or stupid - step closer.

“The air’s smelling funny!” one of them yelled.

Brenda’s eyes widened. “Bubble-Head Charms!” she yelled, casting one herself.

Then her world turned into fire.

*****

London, East End, December 28th, 1996
Hermione Granger sighed and turned away from the muggleborn witch - Mary-Jane - who was sitting on the chair, smiling brainlessly under the effect of Veritaserum. That had been a chilling interrogation.

“So… it was a setup. She and her friend were imperiused to betray us,” Justin said, once they had stepped out of the room. “The question is: Were the Avengers imperiused as well?”

The witch shook her head. “I doubt that. We know when they arrested Milton’s group. They wouldn’t have expected the jailbreak; we didn’t even consider it. To imperius Milton and Smith in anticipation of such an attempt seems too far out for the Ministry.”

“They could have arrested them during the attempt.”

“And then decided on the fly to use the opportunity to hunt us?” Hermione pondered the idea, but dismissed it. “That sounds a bit too complicated for the Ministry.”

“It’s not impossible though.”

“But very hard to keep a secret.” Even after Shacklebolt and his team had been killed, Dumbledore had many sources within the Ministry. “I think if they had arrested the Avengers, they would have announced that success to everyone.”

“But why would they have waited so long to contact us, if the Avengers were undercover Aurors from the beginning?” Justin asked. “That’s rather patient for a Ministry in need of some victories to keep the confidence of the purebloods.”

“Maybe they thought we’d be less suspicious of them if they had a longer history of fighting the Ministry.” Hermione shrugged. “We know they had a communication mirror, and were talking to someone, right when the broom riders attacked.” It wasn’t impossible that they had been imperiused as well, of course. Just unlikely. And it would mean they hadn’t killed three, but just one victim of the Ministry.

“We have to be even more cautious when recruiting,” Justin said, sighing.

Hermione nodded. “Yes.” That was a good policy anyway.

“At least we hit them hard in return - John saw the fireball before he and Dean apparated away.” Justin grinned briefly.

Hermione snorted. “We hurt them, yes. But even more people will think we killed Shacklebolt’s team.”

Justin winced. “That’ll make trouble for our allies.”

“Some,” Hermione said. “But overall I think the loss of all those purebloods eager to hunt us down will help us more than it’ll hurt us.”

“Unless that drives the Ministry into joining the Dark Lord.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s a possible consequence, but the Ministry was in danger of being taken over anyway, by force even.” She sighed. “Others will handle the Ministry.” Hopefully. “We need to sort out how to help Mary-Jane; we need to free her from the Imperius.” And she knew only one way - Thief’s Downfall.

“You think the goblins will refuse to help us?”
“Or betray us; they are greedy and hate all wizards,” Hermione said. “I’ll look into it though.” She hoped Dumbledore could pull some strings.

“She’s not going anywhere,” Justin said. “The others are celebrating. They’ll not like to hear we killed one innocent victim.”

“We had no choice,” Hermione said. Though privately, she wondered if that would cause a few of the Resistance members to reconsider their bloodthirsty views. Probably not, she thought - they’d simply blame the purebloods for this again. She couldn’t fault them for that - she did the same, after all.

The witch patted the enchanted mirror in her pocket - she had to inform her friends, and through them, Dumbledore, of what she had learned.

*****

London, St Mungo’s, December 29th, 1996

She saw the flames shoot out of the windows of the hall, turning into a huge fireball that engulfed the entire building. She saw two broom riders disappear in the flames before they could even scream. Another was turning his broom to flee, then threw up his hands right when the flames reached him. She saw an Auror on the ground wave his wand, whatever spell he was casting showing no effect before he, too vanished in the fires that filled the courtyard. She saw the flames rushing towards her, turned to dive behind the wall, away from the flames, but knew she was too slow. Then the flames reached her, surrounded her, and she burned, screaming...

Brenda Brocktuckle woke up screaming. She had been… she wasn’t dead? She looked around. She was in a white room, in a bed. Hospital bed, she realised. The familiar smell reached her nose. St Mungo’s.

Panting and shivering, she ran her hands over her body. She wasn’t dead. She didn’t hurt. Merlin, she was alive.

“Auror Brocktuckle?”

Brenda whipped her head around. A wizard in the robes of a Healer was standing in the door to the room, smiling at her. “Yes?” she managed to say.

“I’m glad to see you awake.”

He looked tired, and his smile was even less sincere than usual, Brenda thought. She took a deep breath. “What happened?”

His wince told her enough. “As far as we can reconstruct what happened, your shield charm kept the flames from directly touching you, but the heat still burned you, and set your robes on fire. If not for the quick help of your partner, you would have likely died.”

“My partner? Martin Runcorn?” Brenda gasped. Martin had survived!

“Runcorn?” The Healer looked puzzled. “No, I mean Auror Parkinson.”

Parkinson. Of course - the man had been standing behind the wall. Under cover, sort of. Martin had been inside the building, when the bomb went off. He wouldn’t have survived. She closed her eyes. The Healer kept talking. “You had a Bubble-Head Charm as well, contrary to others. We’re not yet
certain how, but it must have contributed to your survival. The burns were easily treated, once we had you here. Your hair can be restored as soon as you have fully recovered.” The man was going through the motions, she realised. Either he had been doing this too often already, or…

“How many survived?” she asked, looking at him.

“I don’t know,” the wizard told her. “I wasn’t informed about that. I can only tell you that including you, we have treated eight Ministry employees.”

Brenda cursed under her breath. Nine. Three dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards in the Response Force. And five in her task force. Avery’s team would have been too far away to be hit, and Parkinson might not have been wounded, but that still left… over two dozen dead. And all due to her plan. All her fault.

She barely noticed the Healer leaving. She was done for. They wouldn’t even let her guard Azkaban, they’d imprison her for this!

“Shorter hair suits you, but this is a bit too short.”

She looked up. Parkinson was standing in the doorway. He leaned against the frame, arms folded, but she saw he was tired as well, and parts of his face looked a bit… spotty. He was wearing his robe though, not a hospital gown like herself.

“I heard you saved me,” she said.

He shrugged. “I put your robe out and healed what I could. I was lucky, barely scorched myself.”

His grin was even more cynical than usual. “You might have absorbed the blast for me.”

Brenda snorted. “And all for nothing. They’ll burn me for this.” Someone had to pay for this disaster, and she was the one who had organised this. She had been in charge.

The other Auror stepped inside and closed the door. “No. They’ll burn Flint, although he was already burned to death.”

“What?” She looked at him.

Parkinson’s grin widened. “You warned him of the bomb. He didn’t pull his forces back far enough. Unlike you, and myself.”

That… Brenda blinked. That was a very generous interpretation of the events. “You reported that?”

He nodded. “We’re the only ones who survived and know what happened.”

“They’ll not believe it. They’ll blame me.” There were too many dead.

“They’ll believe it. I’ve explained it to a few friends.” Parkinson stepped closer and looked into her eyes. “We can’t afford to lose you. We’ve lost too many good Aurors already to the mudbloods.”

Brenda knew he didn’t mean the Ministry. She knew the price she’d pay for this help. She didn’t care though - Granger had murdered another of her partners. To bring the mudblood to justice, she’d do anything.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, December 30th, 1996
Albus Dumbledore smiled politely while he watched the Minister for Magic all but shaking in his
dragon-hide shoes. Cornelius had a good reason, of course - the Ministry’s latest and most cunning
scheme to deal with the Muggleborn Resistance had just failed spectacularly, as Miss Granger had
informed him through her friends.

“Albus! Two dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards are dead! Murdered by the Resistance! In broad
daylight, in muggle London! This is a catastrophe! We have to do something!”

“We’, Cornelius?” Albus looked over his reading glasses at the Minister. “Did I not warn you not to
persecute the Muggleborn Resistance?”

He could almost hear Amelia grinding her teeth. The Head of the DMLE was standing at the side of
the Minister’s desk.

“You said you wouldn’t support murderers!” Cornelius blinked.

“And I do not,” the Headmaster said. “But defending yourself against an attack is not murder.”

“They are mass-murderers, Albus!” Amelia said, trembling with anger, or so he thought. “They
murdered dozens of people! They even killed your own friends!”

“They did no such thing.” Albus looked at the witch and let the least amount of contempt shine
through his expression. “They exclusively attacked Death Eaters and their supporters.”

“They bombed Malfoy Manor and murdered everyone present!” The Minister was trembling now as
well.

“A ball thrown by a Death Eater,” the Headmaster said. Cornelius opened his mouth, but he cut the
Minister off. “Lucius Malfoy was one of the worst Death Eaters, Cornelius. A devoted follower and
the right hand of the Dark Lord. Striking at him was a legitimate attack against the Dark Lord.”

“And the innocents present there? Not everyone there was a Death Eater! Many were simply
purebloods attending a ball!” Amelia bared her teeth. “What do you call killing them but murder?”

“The muggles call such deaths ‘collateral damage’,” Albus said. “An apt name, I think.” Both were
staring at him, shocked. He had to remind himself that they did not truly know him, or what he had
done in the past. He chuckled, mirthlessly. “Everyone knew what Lucius and his ilk stood for.
Anyone attending his ball showed their support for him - or at the very least, their willingness to
accept the Dark Lord. Some would call that treason, even.”

“What?” The Minister gaped openly. “Are you… Merlin, are you saying that they deserved to die?”

“I would not say that,” the old wizard said. “But if they had to die so Lucius and his allies could be
killed, then that was certainly acceptable.” He shrugged. “After Grindelwald’s War, I was sick of all
the bloodshed. The things I had done…” He shook his head. Both were staring at him, and he
chuckled at their expressions. “A few months ago I told you that you had no idea what a real war
was. Did either of you look up what happened in Grindelwald’s War? What I did there?”

Judging by Cornelius’s expression, he hadn’t. Amelia though looked even tenser than before.

He shook his head. “What you call a catastrophe, two dozen wizards and witches killed, would have
been called a skirmish by those fighting Grindelwald. Thousands died in that war.” With a sneer, he
added: “But since they were not British, and most of them were not purebloods of Old Families, I
guess you didn’t care.”
“Muggleborns were the most numerous of those fighting for Grindelwald!” Amelia said.

“And they had good reasons to fight for Grindelwald,” Albus said. Once more, the two were shocked. He sighed. “Why do you think I pushed for equal rights for muggleborns so hard after Grindelwald’s defeat? I know first-hand how people fight who have nothing to lose and everything to gain.” He snorted. “And now you know it as well.”

“But… but… why didn’t you tell us that?” Cornelius looked confused and desperate.

“And let the Death Eaters in the Wizengamot claim the muggleborns are the second coming of Grindelwald? You know how that would have been received.” He smiled grimly.

“You didn’t warn us in private either,” Amelia said, glaring at him.

“I know what you would have done, had I warned you of a muggleborn uprising in the style of Grindelwald.” Amelia would have done her best, or worst, to get the authorisation for a pre-emptive strike. And she would have received it - from the Minister and the Wizengamot.

“You… you protected them! You wanted them to be prepared for this war!” The witch sounded mortally wounded.

“I wanted to avoid this war. I failed. Now I want to win this war. At all costs,” the Headmaster said.

“But then you need to work with us! The Ministry needs you, together we can win this!” The Minister stood up. “We need to join forces!”

“Cornelius!” Amelia glared at Albus while she spoke to the Minister. “He wants the muggleborns to win this war!”

“I want the Dark Lord to lose this war,” Albus said. “And for that, the muggleborns are crucial.”

“You would sacrifice the Ministry to them? Your own country?” Cornelius sat down again, pale and shivering.

“The Resistance has not attacked the Ministry so far, they have only defended themselves. Even though they had good reasons to fight you, they haven’t struck back at you. Yet.” Albus met the Minister’s and Amelia’s eyes. “There is still time to mend fences. To repeal those evil laws, and restore equal rights for muggleborns. Against all of us, together, the Death Eaters would stand no chance.”

“I assume you want the Ministry to pardon those mass-murderers as well,” Amelia said.

“I want the Ministry to stop persecuting muggleborns. That includes the Muggleborn Resistance.” He leaned forward. “Even if you still do not accept that those laws were evil and unjust, and that the muggleborns had the right to fight back, you cannot ignore that you have no choice any more. Unless you want to submit to the Dark Lord, in the faint hope that his most loyal followers will not take revenge against you for their imprisonment on Azkaban.” He saw both of them grow pale at that. “Make no mistake: I would rather ally with the Muggleborn Resistance than with a Ministry that is still pursuing a pureblood agenda.”

The Minister sputtered, intelligible sounds escaping his trembling lips. Amelia, though, was made of sterner stuff. She glared at him. “You cannot defeat the Dark Lord by yourself, with or without the muggleborns. You need the support of the Ministry.”

“You are sorely mistaken, my dear.” He stood up. “It is up to you to decide if you would rather be
Voldemort’s slaves, or accept muggleborns as equals. I advise you not to tarry though - not everyone
is as patient as I am. Or as forgiving.”

Flashing them a smile that was anything but forgiving, he left the Minister’s office.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 30th, 1996

“... and then we found out that the muggleborns we were meeting with had been imperiused by the
Ministry in a plot to trap us! Two people, deprived of their will, turned into puppets, dozens of
Aurors and Hit-Wizards ready to pounce, all because we dared to fight back against the Dark Lord
and his followers, instead of letting them take away our rights through their puppets in the
Wizengamot!”

Harry Potter nodded slightly as he sat in the living room of Grimmauld Place and listened to the
Resistance Radio wireless broadcast. Usually they broadcast on Fridays, but after the Ministry
ambush, they had made an exception - or so Hermione had told Ron and him.

“But we were prepared for such treachery! When the Ministry forces reached the meeting spot, all
they found was death. Let that be a lesson, Aurors and Hit-Wizards: Fight us, fight muggleborns, and
you will die!

“But the just reward for mindless thugs enforcing evil laws aside, those among our audience who are
still in Wizarding Britain are now faced with a lot of questions. And the most important question is:
Will you be next to be imperiused? The Ministry has given its forces permission to use the
Unforgivables - for the duration of this ‘crisis’. Do you trust the Aurors and Hit-Wizards not to abuse
this? To settle scores with old enemies, or to take someone to bed for the night? Who is watching
them? Who is watching you? Anyone wearing the red robes of the Aurors, or the grey ones of the
Hit-Wizards, could take control of you. And once they have what they want from you, they can send
you to die, attacking others.

“Is that how you want to live? In constant fear of becoming an Auror’s puppet?

“We, the Resistance, do not use those vile spells. And yet we have killed more Death Eaters than the
Ministry. So, why are they claiming that they need those spells to fight, when we prove they are not
needed? Why does the Ministry want its forces to use spells so evil, one cast is enough for a lifetime
sentence in Azkaban?

“Ask yourself that next time you see an Auror patrol! But maybe duck out of their way first.”

“Blimey!” Ron muttered, next to Harry. “That’ll be pouring Exploding Fluid into the cauldron. The
Ministry’s going to foaming at the mouth.”

“They already desperately want to kill her,” Harry whispered. Hermione was the number one enemy
of the Ministry. At least of the Ministry that was left, with Shacklebolt and his team dead. He glanced
at Tonks, sitting in an armchair, staring at the floor, one tray with sweets and a glass balanced on the
armrest.

Sirius, sitting in another chair, chuckled. “Quite a speech, but it’s wasted on the pureblood sheep.
They simply don’t want to see what’s going on.”

“They’re afraid of muggleborns,” Remus said, standing at the window. “The Daily Prophet’s been
working on them for over a year now.”
“Well, they certainly don’t need to imperius any of the Prophet’s staff; those are already mindless tools of the Ministry.” Sirius snorted.

Neither of the two men seemed to be looking at Tonks. The young Auror, though, was glaring at them. Then she stood up. “You act as if the Ministry is one big bloc or whatever. You have no idea what’s it like, in the Ministry. No one knows if you can trust your co-worker! There are spies of the Dark Lord everywhere! The Ministry was one miscast spell away from tearing itself up, before the recent bombings.”

Sirius said: “At least you’ve finally admitted who the real enemy is.”

Tonks bared her teeth at him. “I always knew that, you idiot! Mum was removed from the family tree for marrying Dad. Everyone knows I’m no friend of the Dark Lord, and that Bellatrix wants to kill all of us. If not for my talent to change my appearance, I’d have been cursed in the back already.”

“So, have you stopped thinking that the Resistance are criminals?” Harry saw that the three adults present were surprised by him cutting in. But he needed to know if he could trust Tonks. For all that she was family, to Sirius at least, and an Order member - even if he wasn’t supposed to know that - she was still an Auror, working for the Ministry. Which was hunting Hermione.

She glared at him, but he met her eyes without flinching. Between Moody’s and Dumbledore’s training, a young Auror simply didn’t look that tough. What could she do to him that he hadn’t suffered already, and worse, in training?

Tonks looked away first. “I’ve looked into history. The Ministry’s in the wrong.” She raised a finger. “But if anyone says ‘I told you so’, I’ll hex them!”

Harry nodded. It wasn’t easy accepting that the Ministry you had been working for, believing in, was controlled by evil people. And Tonks probably had known most of those killed in the recent bombings; they were not simply numbers to her.

Sirius grinned, and for a moment, Harry feared his godfather would push the metamorphmagus. But the wizard just clapped her on the back. “Good to hear. Now, what have you been doing for Dumbledore? You wouldn’t be risking your life for nothing, would you?”

“That’s none of your business. If the Headmaster wants you to know, he’ll tell you personally.”

Remus chuckled. “She’s not going to betray her orders, Sirius.”

Harry’s godfather pouted while Tonks grinned at Remus. The wizard quickly grew serious, though. “You are in danger, Tonks. Even your shapeshifting won’t help you that much - all they need is to get a superior to call you into their office, and ambush you when you leave.”

“I know that.”

“And yet you still go back there.” Sirius looked as if he wasn’t certain whether he should praise or criticise his cousin.

“It’s important.”

“I hope it is worth the risk, Tonks,” Sirius said.

Harry fully agreed.

*****
London, Soho, December 30th, 1996

Hermione Granger was tired when she sat down in the booth of the pub she was to meet the Headmaster in. The Resistance had trained in the morning, and she had been helping with the broadcast earlier that evening as well. But this meeting was important - she needed help with Mary-Jane.

The Headmaster hadn’t arrived yet, so she picked up one of the newspapers and skimmed it. One article caught her attention - TVs were inexplicably failing in several houses all over London. Brand-new or slightly used, they didn’t work with cable, and sometimes not with a shared antenna either. That sounded like wards interfering with electronics… and that meant wizards. She glanced around, then duplicated the newspaper and stored the original in her enchanted pocket. She’d have to look into this.

The Headmaster, again disguised as a distinguished older muggle gentleman, arrived shortly afterwards. “Good evening, Miss.”

“Good evening, sir.” She flicked her wand and cast a few privacy spells.

“I am glad you were able to meet with me on such short notice,” the old wizard said. “Especially given the circumstances.”

“The failed ambush by Ministry forces.” She wasn’t in the mood for veiled words.

“Indeed. The Minister was trembling with fear when I saw him earlier today.”

Hermione snorted. “I think he’d have reacted the same if there had been a wild puffskein in his office.” Fudge was a morally bankrupt coward, in her opinion.

“Cornelius is not among the bravest wizards, but he is not quite that timid. Although he does find himself in a rather unenviable position, caught between the Muggleborn Resistance and the Dark Lord’s forces.”

“A position he ended up in due to his own choices,” Hermione said, sneering.

“Choices he is now regretting.” The Headmaster sighed. “I explained to him that he has but one option if he does not want to become a prisoner of the Dark Lord, likely given over to those held in Azkaban during his term: He has to stop persecuting muggleborns and repeal those evil laws, as well as pardoning the Resistance.”

Hermione drew a sharp breath. She hadn’t expected that. It sounded a bit too good to be true. “Can he do that? With the Dark Lord’s influence in the Ministry and the Wizengamot?”

“Cornelius has many faults, but he is a capable politician, if a bit too easily led astray by bribes,” Dumbledore said. “The recent murder of Augusta Longbottom has shown to many of the more naive members of the Wizengamot just what kind of man Voldemort is. And the loss of three dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards, with nothing to show for, has undermined confidence in the Ministry - and among the Wizengamot. I do think he can force those changes through, if he calls in some of the favours owed to him and uses his personal knowledge of a few members. It will be a very close vote though.”

Hermione frowned. A faint hope, then - she didn’t think those who had eagerly voted to deprive muggleborns of their rights would risk the Dark Lord’s anger and vote for such a change. On the other hand, Dumbledore was the one with decades of experience in the Wizengamot. He should know better than her.
“There is, however, the risk of an armed takeover attempt by the Dark Lord.” Dumbledore sighed. “The risk has lessened somewhat, with the losses the Aurors and Hit-Wizards most eager to fight muggleborns took in the ambush two days ago, but despite my best efforts, I cannot claim to have found all the sympathisers of the Dark Lord inside the Ministry.”

“And he can bring in outsiders easily with the help of some of his moles.” Hermione bit her lower lip. “Can you stop such a takeover?”

“Unfortunately, the Order is split into many small groups whose members do not know each other. I’ve had some traps and other surprises prepared, but that will not help with the lack of wands.” Dumbledore smiled at her.

She closed her eyes when she realised what he was about to tell her. To ask of her. “I can’t ask them to help the Ministry.” Shaking her head, she added: “Not after the Ministry tried to ambush us. It was all I could do to keep a few of my friends from taking revenge on the Ministry.” If that proposal had been accepted...

“I was afraid of that, Miss Granger. As unfortunate as this is, it’s quite understandable. And yet - if the Dark Lord attempts a coup, he will expose a lot of his spies and moles. The Resistance could deal a severe blow to the enemy, and gain a lot of goodwill with the Ministry. Sooner or later, the war will end, with us winning, I sincerely hope, at which point fences will need to be mended.”

“I know,” Hermione admitted. “But a leader should never give an order they know will not be obeyed.” She bit her lower lip again. “This is an angle that might work - once tempers have cooled somewhat. But we still have two boys with a withered limb each, and one imperiused prisoner.”

The old wizard smiled. “And if I were to help with that, it would generate a lot of goodwill as well, as I understand.”

“If I could tell them you’re working with us, and how, it would certainly help with convincing them to assist you there.” But it was dangerous to spread that knowledge, Hermione knew.

“This might become a possibility, though more like a last resort.” Dumbledore sighed. “Nevertheless, you will be needing access to a Thief’s Downfall to end this vile spell. Fortunately, the Nott, Davis and Greengrass fortunes allowed me to secure two of those devices.”

That would help a lot. “Thank you, sir. It was quite a blow when we realised that we had killed a wizard forced to fight us.”

The Headmaster smiled sadly. “I understand.”

“Have you made progress finding a cure for the Creeveys?” Hermione didn’t want to allow herself to be optimistic, but maybe there was a book in the restricted section of the Hogwarts Library that would restore the boys’ limbs...

“Unfortunately, the current crisis has absorbed just about all of my time.” Dumbledore smiled apologetically at her. “Although I heard that Ron’s brother is working on this problem as well.”

She simply nodded. There was still hope. But the boys were growing impatient.

Hermione really didn’t want to find that they had cut their own limbs off because they grew tired of waiting. Those two were just stubborn and impulsive enough to do such a thing.

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“We’re going to Paris?”

Ron Weasley’s stupid question - the Headmaster had just said that - left his lips before he could reconsider. In his defence, he was completely surprised and he had just spent another hour getting hexed, jinxed and cursed by Moody. At least he and Harry, working together, had managed to hit the retired Auror as well, although they usually had to sacrifice one of themselves to achieve that.

“Yes, Ron.” The Headmaster smiled. “Provided Sirius agrees, of course.”

Ron wasn’t Hermione, but he wasn’t that slow on the uptake. Of course they wouldn’t ask his parents - his mum would never give her permission if she knew about the mission. He snorted, and the old wizard inclined his head, still smiling.

“Great,” Harry muttered, sitting next to Ron on the conjured bench in what had become their training room at Grimmauld Place. “Sirius won’t let me go.”

“He will, if he knows what’s good for him, and you,” Moody said, halting his repairing of the slightly damaged room for a moment. “You’re still far from what you should be, but you’re not useless or helpless any more.”

Coming from Moody, that was high praise. Ron perked up, then deflated a bit - Moody was probably talking about Harry, not them both. He wasn’t as quick or precise as Harry. Not too far behind, but he simply wasn’t as good. But he’d be going to Paris anyway. As long as Sirius agreed to let Harry go, of course.

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“Have you gone mad, Albus?” Sirius all but yelled, jumping up from his seat. “You want to send Harry to Paris as a decoy for the Dark Lord?”

Ron winced at the wizard’s expression, and glanced at Harry. His friend was not looking happy. He understood the feeling - Sirius wasn’t quite as loud or expressive as Ron’s mum, but he certainly was coming close.

“I am sending them to Paris so the Dark Lord continues to think that we’re trying to hunt down his Horcruxes. Should he suspect the real plan, Harry would be in much more danger,” the Headmaster said in a voice so calm, he might be discussing the weather.

“‘Much more danger’? The Dark Lord is certain to have trapped his Soul Anchors! He’s had decades to prepare them!” Sirius was pacing now, like a caged animal. “And you plan to let Harry brave this danger, just to fool the Dark Lord?”

“We do not know if there is even a Horcrux in the Magical Bastille. It is a place well-suited for hiding such an evil object, but it is also a prison as feared as Azkaban. Tom might very well not have tried to use it for his own purposes - after all, even his power has limits, and he is not delusional.”

“Could have fooled me,” Ron heard Harry mutter under his breath.

“And you’re sending Harry to French Azkaban?” Ron could hear Sirius breathe loudly through clenched teeth. Of course that would touch a nerve with the wizard.

“There are no Dementors there. It’s in the middle of muggle Paris, after all, hidden beneath one of their most famous squares. It is well-guarded and protected, but not by those abominations, Sirius,”
Dumbledore said. “And they will be helped along by friends on the continent, as well as Bill Weasley, one of the best Curse-Breakers we know.”

“I don’t trust the French!” Sirius was about to say something else, but Harry had stood up as well.

“Sirius, please. We need to do this.” Harry put his hand on his godfather’s shoulder. “I’ll never be safe as long as he lives.”

The other wizard closed his eyes, then suddenly grabbed Harry and pulled him into a hug. Not quite up to the standards of Ron’s mum, but coming close. “I don’t want you to risk your life, Harry.”

The animagus mumbled something else, but Ron couldn’t make the words out. He saw how Harry stiffened, though, and then patted the man’s back, slightly awkwardly.

The two remained like that, whispering to each other. Ron glanced at the Headmaster, who was simply sitting there, watching with that smile of his, then sighed silently and leaned back in his seat. That wasn’t how things were done at home.

After a while - Ron had kept busy trying to remember a few particularly humiliating training sessions, and going over what he could have done differently in his head, like he did with chess matches, sometimes - Sirius sighed loudly and let Harry go. “Alright. But I’m coming with you. And Remus too!”

One more the Headmaster nodded, smiling slightly. As if he had expected that all along. He probably had, Ron realised.

“When will we go?” Ron asked.

“January 2nd. Not many people will be on duty, so it will be easier to avoid attention,” Dumbledore said.

“Do the French know about this?” Sirius stared at the old wizard. “Does the Dark Lord?”

“I trust the Delacours to keep the visit confidential.” Dumbledore smiled. “Their daughter will be present, and endangering Harry will endanger her as well.”

“Bill and Fleur know what they are doing,” Ron said. “With them, Moody, and you, we’ll be safe.”

“I’d rather have you with us,” Sirius said, glaring at the Headmaster.

“My presence in France, or more precisely, my absence from Britain, would give the Dark Lord free reign to act with impunity. In the current situation, that could prove fatal.” Dumbledore’s smile grew thin. “As much as it pains me, I cannot leave the country.”

“France’s just a few miles over the sea.” Sirius folded his arms.

“The defences of the Bastille will make leaving quickly impossible.”

“Damn the French!” Harry’s godfather sat down in his seat again. “Always complicating things!”

That was, once again, rather close to the reaction Ron’s mum had when Bill told her about his engagement.

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Outside Withernsea, Yorkshire, Britain, December 31st, 1996
The Dark Lord Voldemort sat in his favorite chair, hands folded, with the tips of his index fingers and thumbs touching his face. Dumbledore had visited the Ministry, and now Fudge was apparently starting a rather drastic change in the Ministry’s policy. Voldemort had hoped, expected, that the death of two dozen Ministry employees at the hands of mudbloods would be a boon to his cause. Proof of just how dangerous they were. Proof that he was right and that Wizarding Britain needed him and his followers to be safe.

Instead, this bumbling, corrupt fool was now working on getting the muggleborn laws repealed. No doubt forced to by Dumbledore. Or bribed by Black, on the old fool’s order. He had supporters, of course. A lot of them, in the Wizengamot. But not enough, yet. His gesture towards the young Longbottom had not cowed as many as he would have liked. Or not enough - those who wavered in their support of him, those who tried to avoid joining him, but did not want to join Dumbledore either, might fear those mudbloods more than him. An unfortunate effect of emphasising the danger they represented.

He frowned. If only he could slaughter a dozen or two of the mudbloods! That would demonstrate to Wizarding Britain that he was the only one able to deal with that danger. But the cursed filth were hiding from him.

Which left him with far fewer options. Blood traitors, but they were hiding as well. He shook his head. There was only one target left that wasn’t hiding. Couldn’t hide.

If he couldn’t stop Fudge through politics, he’d have to use more direct means.

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Chapter 25: French Connection

'The Second Blood War was, especially at the beginning, essentially an internal affair of Wizarding Britain, like the First Blood War had been. None of the different factions fighting in the war were supported by other countries or international organisations, although the occasional support by individuals, often due to family ties, was not uncommon. There was even an unspoken agreement not to involve the International Confederation of Wizards, despite Albus Dumbledore holding the post of its Supreme Mugwump.

Nevertheless, several European countries kept a close eye on Britain. The muggleborn uprising undoubtedly impressed and influenced their policies towards their own muggleborn population - not many on the continent had forgotten the horrors of Grindelwald’s War, nor that many of his followers had been muggleborns. No wizarding country wanted to risk pushing their own muggleborns into rebelling, and yet all of them were, sometimes painfully, aware of the example the Muggleborn Resistance was setting. It was thus a very delicate situation the European countries found themselves in, having to tread a fine line between appeasing their muggleborns, and ensuring they would not present a threat to the government should they nevertheless rebel.'

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, December 31st, 1996

Harry Potter glanced at the clock on the wall, which had been enlarged for this evening, while he grabbed another Butterbeer. It was still another hour until midnight. He couldn’t wait for this year to end. It hadn’t brought anything but pain and loss. Well, almost anything. He was now dating Hermione - sort of. She still had to pick between Ron and himself, something he wasn’t looking forward to.

“You idiots!”

“Ack! No!”

He heard Ron suddenly yell behind him and he whirled around, wand drawn, in a slight crouch. When he saw his friend was just hexing the twins - quite thoroughly - he relaxed. The two must have tried to prank Ron, again - they hadn’t taken well to discovering that their little brother wasn’t the ideal test subject or victim any more. Harry nodded appreciatively when Ron had both of them bound on the floor and was ‘finishing them off’ with Stinging Hexes to the forehead. Just as Moody had taught them.

“Ron! Fred! George! What are you doing!”

And there came Molly Weasley, rushing towards her children, loudly sharing her opinion on such antics. At least she wasn’t complaining about underage magic any more, after Sirius had pointed out that the children were much safer if they would not hesitate to defend themselves should they be attacked.

Harry put another lesson from Moody - though one the Auror had not emphasized quite as much as fighting - to good use and slipped out of the room. He wasn’t in the mood to listen to another loud
Weasley row, no matter how entertaining many others found it.

He entered the Black Library, passing through the spells that kept the noise from outside away. He closed the door and took a deep breath. The smell of old books reminded him of the library in Hogwarts, a place he'd always associate with Hermione. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine her sitting at the table, flipping through half a dozen open books, taking notes at a fast pace and chewing on her lower lip whenever she encountered a particularly difficult or challenging piece of information.

He heard the door open behind him, and stepped to the side, his wand sliding into his hand. He winced - Moody’s lessons had affected him in more ways than the obvious. He still kept the wand in hand, though - if not quite aimed at the door.

“Harry?”

He recognised the voice before the girl entered the library. Ginny. “Yes?” he said. “Do they want me back in the living room?”

She flinched, just a bit, and closed the door behind her. “No. I saw you leave, and I followed you. My brothers are being annoying again.”

“Oh.” He nodded. He could understand that. “Ron can handle them, though. They just have to understand that he’s not their favorite easy target any more.”

She looked at him, then snorted. “Good luck with that. They’re as stubborn as Mum.”

“So’s Ron.” Too stubborn to quit, Harry knew. Like himself.

The young witch sighed and leaned against the door, briefly looking at the floor. Then she straightened up, and raised her chin. “You and Ron are still dating Hermione, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.” Not as frequently as he wished, but they were.

“How is that going?” She started to fidget a bit. “I mean… you’re best friends, but competing for the same witch.” She shrugged. “That sounds like trouble.”

“We don’t want trouble. Whoever she chooses, we want Hermione to be happy. And she wouldn’t be happy if we started a feud over this.” She might refuse to go out with either of them as well, if she feared their friendship could be ruined.

“That sounds noble, but I think things usually don’t work out like that,” Ginny said.

Harry looked at her. “Oh? Have you seen that happen?”

“Not directly. I’ve read about such love triangles though.” She blushed a bit.

“Ah, in those novels you like to read?”

“What? How do you know about that?” Ginny was staring at him with a mix of surprise and horror, her mouth half-open.

“Ron told me,” Harry said. His friend hadn’t mentioned what kind of novels they were, just that Ginny read them.

“That git! I’ll teach him not to share my secrets!” The redhead was fuming.
“He didn’t tell me anything, he just said that you liked to read some novels, when we talked about our situation.” Harry wondered why that would have been a secret - Hermione never made any secret about the books she was reading. Quite the contrary. Unless those were the kind of books Sirius had shown him when he had moved in here.

“Ah.” Ginny looked slightly mollified, but not placated. Then she sighed. “How is Hermione doing, anyway? I haven’t heard from her at all.”

Harry wasn’t about to share his friend’s secrets, so he simply said: “She’s under a lot of stress, with the war and the fighting. Very busy too.”

Ginny nodded, as if Harry had just told her something she wouldn’t have known already. “We miss her in the dorms. It’s not the same without her bossing us around. Lavender certainly can’t replace her.”

“No one can replace her,” Harry said, nodding firmly.

Ginny looked a bit pained when she agreed with him.

London, East End, December 31st, 1996

“And here’s to another successful year!” Justin raised his glass, grinning widely.

The assembled Resistance joined him in the toast. Hermione as well, of course - she was leading by example. Even though she didn’t think it was a good year, not at all. She’d have much, much preferred to celebrate the New Year after a boring term at Hogwarts. Not that Hogwarts had ever been boring for her, or her friends. Her best friends, that was.

“Death to the Death Eaters!” Dean was raising his glass now.

Hermione didn’t frown as she raised her glass again. As bloodthirsty as it sounded, she could drink to that. As long as Dean and Seamus knew that not all purebloods were Death Eaters. Reminding them of Allan’s death in her own speech hadn’t helped with that, of course - but there was no way she could have skipped reminding the resistance of their fallen members. Not without raising suspicions.

“To victory!” Jeremy kept it simple.

Hermione took another sip from her glass. Even champagne started to have an effect if you drank too much. And she’d be damned before she let herself get drunk. She was the leader of the Resistance, and couldn’t afford to lose control. But if everyone wanted to make a toast, she’d have to fake drinking soon - and she wasn’t among those who’d be going out and partying in muggle clubs after this, to properly celebrate the new year.

Fortunately, the toasts stopped, and someone turned up the volume of the wireless again. Hermione, and most of the others, preferred muggle music, but the Weird Sisters were a decent band. Or at least, not terrible. And with muggle radio receivers not working right inside wards, the pickings for entertainment were slim. Apart from books, of course.

She checked her watch. An hour left until midnight.

Dean and Seamus emptied their glasses, then waved. “See you next year!” Dean said, grinning, while the two left for their favourite pub. Theirs, and Allan’s, Hermione knew. Mary, Tania and, to
her surprise, John, left together, followed by Jeremy and Louise. Not exactly the rousing team and morale building event she had had in mind when she had planned this.

She sighed and sat down on the nearest couch. Colin and Dennis occupied another. The younger Creevey brother was sleeping already while his older brother looked like he was about to fall asleep any minute. Both of them had drunk too much - they were so young, they shouldn’t have been drinking, she thought, at least not as much as they had, but… she couldn’t have denied them that. Not with their… curse.

There went Colin, slowly leaning on his brother, eyes closed. Hermione hit both with a Silencing Charm.

“Is that the standard wizarding approach to babysitting, or just your own idea?”

Hermione turned her head, and frowned at the grinning Sally-Anne. “I’m just being practical. I don’t want the two to wake up when I levitate them to their room.”

The other witch laughed and shook her head. “I’m still not going to let you babysit my children!”

“What makes you think I want to babysit your children?”

“You volunteered to babysit them?” Sally-Anne nodded at the Creeveys.

Hermione had volunteered to hold down the fort, as Justin called it, while everyone else went to party, because she felt that was her duty as the Resistance’s leader. Last to eat, last to sleep, as the Major had told her. Of course, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to celebrate with Harry and Ron since they were stuck at Grimmauld Place had made the decision more than a bit easier. And she had no intention of babysitting anyone’s children. She didn’t say that, though. Instead she stuck her tongue out at her friend.

Justin, stepping up to his girlfriend and handing her her jacket, shook his head. “I can’t leave the two of you alone, can I?” He chuckled.

“Do you mean me, or her?” Sally-Anne asked, pouting.

“Both,” her boyfriend said.

Justin had probably drunk a bit too much, Hermione thought. “Have fun!” she said, waving at them.

The former Hufflepuff hesitated, and looked at her, then at the Creeveys.

“Go on, you two!” Hermione said, making shooing gestures now, “Enjoy the evening!” When she saw Justin wince, she knew she shouldn’t have implied that she wouldn’t be enjoying her evening. She could claim she’d enjoy a book, but… Justin knew her too well. But he also knew, or should know, that she would not have that much fun without Harry or Ron either. Or both of them - no, he didn’t know her that well. She hoped.

“Are you certain?” Justin asked, but Sally-Anne had grabbed his arm and was already dragging him out.

“I am. Have fun, you two!”

Hermione kept smiling until she heard the door close behind the couple. Then she sighed and closed her eyes. Damn it, she wanted her friends! Or her parents. But when her gaze fell on the Creeveys, she felt guilty again. She hadn’t been cursed, hadn’t had a limb wither away, didn’t have to deal with
a dead arm or leg looking like dried meat. The two were braver than she would be, in their place, Hermione knew.

And she felt guilty for having failed them. Both for not having been able to protect them, and for not being able to find a counter-curse to heal them. She sighed again. There was another option. Harry had reminded her of the silver hand Pettigrew had received from Voldemort, after having cut his own hand off to resurrect the Dark Lord. An instant replacement, apparently. She didn't know how good it was - Pettigrew certainly wouldn't dare to complain to his master - but it was likely that hand was far better than enchanted wood. Liquid metal, as Harry had described it - hopefully it wasn’t mercury. Well, Pettigrew would deserve getting poisoned, she thought.

But what was important was that she knew that such a thing was possible. And if it was possible, it could be recreated. Or reverse-engineered. Maybe Fred and George could help there… the Creeveys wouldn’t be the only ones struck with dark curses. Such a prosthetic could help a lot of people.

The song from the wireless, still playing in the background, suddenly stopped in the middle of the refrain. Hermione frowned, and flicked her wand, turning the volume up a bit.

“... just in: There was a fire attack in Diagon Alley, on wizards celebrating the new year. According to witnesses, it wasn’t Fiendfyre, but several people were burned alive or were rushed to St Mungo’s. People out in the streets are asked to return to their homes until the culprits have been apprehended.”

Hermione drew a hissing breath. It could have been an attack by Voldemort’s followers, of course. But she had a feeling that this had been the work of muggleborns. Probably molotov cocktails. Maybe even homemade napalm.

She closed her eyes. If this had been an attack on random purebloods, then this was bad. Very bad.

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London, Diagon Alley, December 31st, 1996

It was a testament to how badly the war was going, Brenda Brocktuckle thought, that three people burned to death by mudblood scum throwing fire on them and half a dozen more getting treated in St Mungo's for extensive burns was not considered a catastrophe any more, but just another attack. And an amateurish one, at that - bottles dropped from brooms on a group of wizards. Half of them had missed, and either hit the ground, or the warded roof.

“Damn animals!” Parkinson muttered, next to her, staring at the blackened cobblestones. Half of them hadn’t missed, after all. Had covered their victims with fire. The faint smell of burned flesh still lingered.

Brenda knelt down, ignoring her new partner - it wasn’t official yet, but who else would work with her after she had lost two Aurors in less than a year? - and rubbed her fingers over the cobblestones, then smelled them.

“What did you find anything?” Parkinson asked.

“Remains of the liquid that was in the bottles that started the fires.”

“Potions?”

“Or a muggle concoction,” Brenda said, standing up. “I think it was something muggle.”

“An expert will be looking into it.”
Brenda shrugged. The more she thought about it, the more it looked like some muggle weapon - there was no magical residue apart from the water the surviving wizards had conjured in an attempt to extinguish the flames. Apparently, none of the idiots had known the Flame-Freezing Charm. But the smell of the remains... It reminded her of muggle cars. "How did they escape our broom patrols?"

Parkinson shrugged. "It's night, the mudbloods didn't cast spells that would have given away their position, the only ones on duty tonight were rookies..."

Rookies, and disgraced Aurors, Brenda thought. She had been on duty as well. Parkinson too. They were not officially blamed for the debacle at the brewery, and Parkinson's 'friends' didn't heckle or sneer at her, but she'd be first choice for the bad shifts for a while. "Figures." She sighed.

"That wasn't the Resistance."

Brenda rolled her eyes. Of course it wasn't the work of the Resistance; if those mudbloods had attacked Diagon Alley, they'd have wrecked half the street with one of their bombs. She often wondered why they hadn't attacked Diagon Alley, yet. "Probably some mudbloods thinking murder would be fun, like the ones we caught." Caught, and lost again.

"Why were those idiots out in the street anyway?" Parkinson nodded at a body on the ground, covered by a conjured blanket. "Had they forgotten that there are mudbloods out there just waiting to attack us?"

Brenda snorted. Smart people stayed home, or traveled through the Floo Network and by apparition. But there were always those who simply didn't listen. "Probably thought they'd be safe. Or thought this would be a thrill. Or they were too drunk to remember why they should have stayed in the pub."

All that mattered was that they were dead, or burned, or both.

"At least some of them will survive. Without scarring even, according to a Healer friend of mine," Parkinson said. "And it'll serve as a lesson for the public."

Brenda nodded. A lesson that shouldn't have been needed. The British wizards should have learned already that mudbloods were a danger to all purebloods. "That doesn't change the fact that we'll need to catch the scum who did this."

"We would have caught them, if our broom patrol would have been on the quaffle."

Parkinson had chosen the one who'd be blamed for this. Brenda agreed with him - the broom patrol was there to prevent such attacks, or at the very least catch the attackers. For a moment, she felt a bit of sympathy. It wasn't easy - or rather, it was nigh-impossible - to catch a broom rider at night. Not without the help of difficult spells, or expensive enchanted items. Neither of which a rookie was likely to have access to; those who had the skills or the gold would have better posts. Then she shrugged. She had been blamed for things she couldn't have prevented; why should others fare better?

She looked up, staring at the night sky. They'd have to find a way to find broom riders at night. Human-presence-revealing Spells had a paltry range. A bit away, in muggle London, fireworks shot into the air. Muggles! They were celebrating, ignorant of the deadly war being fought just next to them.

Brenda blinked. Fireworks... Those rockets flew high, and they packed a punch, as she had found out years ago, when a drunken relative had lit one and then knocked it over before it could fly off. A number of them, prepared correctly, would be able to turn night to day, or at least expose the broom...
riders enough to hit them with other spells. Yes… that should work. The next time those mudblood murderers arrived, they’d receive a deadly surprise.

“Hey!”

The Auror looked at Parkinson. “Hm?”

Her partner pointed at the clock, blackened by soot, but protected from the actual flames by the building’s wards. “Happy New Year!”

Brenda snorted. Happy New Year, indeed.

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London, East End, January 1st, 1997

The other members of the Resistance were surprised by the news of the attack on Diagon Alley, Hermione Granger thought, when they heard about it at the later than usual breakfast. That was a good thing - it meant they were not involved. That had been very unlikely, but it had been theoretically possible.

What wasn’t a good thing was the smiles the news were greeted with.

“Another group is taking action? Yes!” Seamus said with open glee.

His friend Dean nodded, biting into a scone. After swallowing, he added: “That should keep the Ministry even busier. I just hope they don’t get caught.”

“They dropped fire bombs from brooms, I think.” Justin refilled his tea cup, then his girlfriend’s. “So, they would have been safe.”

Hermione frowned. Didn’t anyone see the issue? Granted, they all had been out clubbing and had just woken up, but still... “Tactical matters aside, this could be a very big problem,” she said. “Even worse, this could end in a disaster for us.”

“Huh?” John looked at her. He wasn’t the only one who seemed to be lost.

She withstood the urge to sigh and rub the bridge of her nose. “A group of wizards celebrating the New Year was firebombed from above. Do you think it’s very likely that those were Death Eaters, and that the muggleborns knew that, and knew that they would leave the warded pub in the Alley?”

Justin drew a hissing breath. He had understood the problem then.

“You mean…” Sally-Anne’s eyes widened.

“Yes. It is very plausible that the culprits simply dropped bombs on the first wizards and witches they saw outside.” She narrowed her eyes. “Which means this was an attack on civilians - a war crime, in other words.”

“So what? Those were purebloods,” Seamus said.

The table fell silent. Hermione glared at him. She couldn’t let that slide. “Do you think being pureblood wizards means they are acceptable targets and deserve to die?” she said in the coldest voice she could manage while she felt enraged. “Do you think we should start attacking all purebloods for being purebloods?” She saw him wince, and he started to say something, but she continued, cutting him off. “And maybe we should kill the half-bloods too, it’s not as if we can tell
them apart from the purebloods on sight, can we? Just kill them all, huh? And the children too? Want
to burn down a house and watch them burn? Or hex a baby?”

Seamus was glaring at her. “I didn’t mean that!”

“What did you mean then? That we should act like Death Eaters, attacking others because of their
blood?” Hermione spat. She glanced around the table, noting how many looked ashamed. Even
Dean seemed taken aback. “Because that is what happens if you start attacking purebloods
indiscriminately!”

“You don’t know if those were innocents!” Seamus said. “They could have been Death Eaters!”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, they could have been. It’s entirely possible that this was an attack on Death
Eaters or their supporters, by a group that knew that.” Possible, but unlikely. “But if that was not the
case, then we’re dealing with a war crime - and with muggleborns acting like Death Eaters.”

“It could be a false flag operation, like the bomb in Peacehaven,” Justin pointed out.

“Yes. That is possible as well.” Hermione nodded again. She saw the rest of the group relax. “I
hope, I sincerely hope, that this was not a crime by muggleborns, but either the work of Death Eaters
or an attack on them.” She took a deep breath. “But if it isn’t, then we have a problem.”

Everyone was looking at her now.

“If there are muggleborns indiscriminately attacking purebloods, then we need to deal with them -
now, or later. If we tolerate such crimes, then we’re no better than Death Eaters.”

“It’s war,” Dean said. “Bad things happen.”

“Should we let a captured Death Eater go, because ‘bad things happen in war’?” Hermione scoffed.
“This is not about blood, this is about justice.”

“Do you want us to hunt down and kill muggleborns?” John said, looking almost shocked.

“No. We cannot spare the time or people for such, not while we need to hunt down Death Eaters.”
Voldemort had to die; it was the only way to win this war. “But,” she continued, “we need to make it
clear in our broadcast that attacking innocents is a crime we’ll not tolerate. And, should we discover
such crimes, and the culprits, we need to deal with them.”

While Justin and Sally-Anne as well as Tania, Mary, Louise and Jeremy nodded, Dean and Seamus
looked mulish. Hermione shook her head. “We cannot let such things go, or people will assume
we’re no better than Death Eaters. And if we tolerate such crimes, then we will be no better than
Death Eaters.”

She raised her chin. “I’m not fighting this war so I can become a Death Eater. And neither are you.”

Seamus and Dean nodded, though slowly. Hermione hoped they understood how important this was.

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Hogwarts, January 1st, 1997

Albus Dumbledore sighed, reading the reports Nymphadora had just delivered. He had feared this -
and expected it. With the Death Eaters and most of their supporters in hiding - mainly thanks to the
efforts of the Resistance - muggleborns were starting to lash out at any purebloods they could find.
Unless this was another ploy by the Dark Lord. That was a possibility - after Kingsley’s death, such a plan certainly would fit Tom. And yet… the Dark Lord would likely have arranged a far more devastating attack, to better frame the Resistance. Although, he might count on that being expected, and deliberately use a weaker attack…

The old wizard shook his head. He lacked enough information to find the truth. And, ultimately, it wasn’t even that important whether this was the work of radicalised muggleborns, or Death Eaters acting undercover. After months in hiding, the other muggleborns were likely to follow the apparent example.

And that meant that the war would turn even bloodier as people started to slaughter whoever they could find. Hatred and revenge would spur all of them on, in a rapidly escalating cycle of violence and murder. At least Miss Granger was, according to Sirius, doing what she could to stop this. Albus just hoped it would be enough.

The wards on his office announced the visitor he expected. “Please come in, Severus,” he said, putting a smile on his face despite his thoughts.

“Good evening, Albus.” The young Defence teacher stepped into Albus’s office.

Fawkes trilled, but the young man didn’t react. Ah, pride and self-loathing - Albus wasn’t certain if Severus would ever forgive himself for his past sins. “Please have a seat.”

Severus lowered himself into the conjured seat. “The Dark Lord has yet to trust me with his location, but he has forgiven me for ‘failing to teach Malfoy how to stay alive’, as he put it. But on the other hand, he has yet to summon me to the same place twice.”

Albus nodded. Tom was acting with far more caution than in the last war. “Even if he reused some of his meeting places, we would be hard-pressed to prepare traps in all of them that he would not detect.” What they needed - Albus and his friend both knew - was Voldemort’s home, or base. The location he lived.

“I’ve been ‘cultivating’ Bellatrix. She is one of the Dark Lord’s most loyal and most trusted servants, and he might take her to his home. She hopes so, at least, which is why she was receptive to certain potions I could offer.”

“I am not certain if Tom returns the feelings of Mrs Lestrange,” Albus said. It wasn’t impossible - Tom had been a charming young man in his youth, and many a witch had fallen for him. But the kind of magic he had used to achieve his limited immortality demanded a price, and Albus doubted that Tom’s new body was ‘fully functional’, as the muggles put it. On the other hand, he had known houngans who had turned themselves into far worse things, without losing such earthly desires.

“He might not, but he might still take her with him, to show her his trust.” Severus smiled thinly. “And she’ll trust me. I’ll find his location, even if it’s the last thing I do.” He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile.

Albus nodded. There was another way, of course. Tom was very cautious, but he was still meeting his followers. Severus could carry a bomb with him. Shrunken, he could smuggle it inside. Pull it out, and set it off. The effects of the wards would make triggering it difficult, but not impossible - he had checked. Against anyone else, it would be almost certain to work. But against Voldemort? He knew about bombs, as he had so cruelly demonstrated. He was used to treachery, and would expect it. And he was one of the fastest wands Albus knew. Not even Filius was as quick. Would he be able to vanish or transfigure the bomb before it detonated?
Probably. Albus knew he could do the same, after all. He had tested it, just in case a friend of his fell victim to the Imperius, and Voldemort decided to use this ploy on the Headmaster.

Besides, while the death of Voldemort would be a likely fatal blow to his current campaign, it would be temporary. Only Harry could kill the Dark Lord for good. So far, things had not been as dire as to necessitate such a risky plan. But, the Headmaster added, with a glance at the drawer the report was now resting in, he might find himself in a situation where he’d have to ask Severus to sacrifice himself for such a chance sooner than expected.

He looked at Severus, sitting there, stiff and tense. If Albus asked him to, he would do it. Gladly even.

Guilt was a powerful force. Almost as strong as love. Albus knew that very well. Very well indeed.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 2nd, 1997

“Ah, Paris, the City of Love! The centre of Courtesan culture! Where love is an artform!”

Harry Potter, waiting next to the fireplace in Grimmauld Place, narrowed his eyes at his godfather, who had the silliest grin on his face he could manage without changing into Padfoot. “You know we’re travelling to the manor of the Delacours, right?”

Sirius made a dismissive gesture. “Technicalities! We’ll be travelling to Paris as soon as possible. And those Delacours… mmm!”

“He does know that if he goes after Fleur, then Bill will kill him, and if he goes after Gabrielle, then everyone will kill him, doesn’t he?” Ron asked, leaning against the wall next to Harry.

His friend did not sound like he was entirely joking, Harry thought. He nodded. “Of course he does. He’s just doing this to distract himself from the fact that we’re about to head out on a dangerous mission.”

That earned him a glare from Sirius. “And I was succeeding, until you ruined it.”

“Sorry.” Harry wasn’t that sorry - he still had a slight headache from the Legilimency training with the Headmaster last evening. Or he thought he had a headache; after a few hours of diving through memories, things tended to blur a bit. Things and thoughts. He didn’t remember what he had dreamed last night, just that it had been very, very confusing.

The fireplace flashed, and Harry had his wand out and aimed before a figure stepped out of it. Ron had done the same.

“Ah… good reactions, lads!” Moody grumbled, in his ‘pleased’ voice. “Still too slow to take me on, and you’d have been as helpless as a flobberworm, had I arrived with a Blasting Curse, since you are far too close, but it’s a start.”

Harry shrugged, lowering his wand.

“The room’s too small for that,” Ron said, frowning, “And it’s better to be close and in their face if you can’t gain enough distance.”

“Aye - but where are your Shield Charms then?” Moody shook his head. “You should have cast them already! Constant vigilance!”
Harry was still used to the old Auror, Harry still winced at the volume of Moody’s words. He winced even more when he saw Sirius scowling.

“I was told the two were ready for such a mission. If they are still making basic mistakes…” Harry’s godfather trailed off and glared at the other wizard.

Moody wasn’t impressed, judging by his guffaw. “You weren’t ready either, Black, and you want to come as well?”

“The fireplace is warded,” Sirius hissed in response.

Harry and Ron started to inch back a bit. Just in case the two needed more room.

“And I could’ve been imperiused, lad! Constant vigilance means just that!”

“But if we are always looking and acting like we are about to attack, others will feel threatened. And fear drives many people to making mistakes. Fatal ones, even.” Dumbledore was standing in the doorway, smiling slightly. Next to him stood Remus, with a half-smile on his face.

“Weeds out the stupid,” Moody said, chuckling.

The Headmaster briefly shook his head, though his expression did not waver. He turned to Harry’s godfather. “Sirius, I can assure you that the two boys are ready for this. They might not be the equal to Moody, but they will not be a liability. There are many Aurors and Hit-Wizards who wouldn’t fare well against them.”

Sirius grumbled. “That’s not exactly reassuring. A Puffskein could probably challenge half the Ministry’s recruits in a duel these days.”

Moody laughed out loud. “It’s not quite that bad, but the Ministry’s not getting the cream of the crop these days.” He shook his head. “It was the same in the last war - curse fodder, the lot of them, but a few among them had the talent and luck to last.” He pointed his thumb at Harry and Ron. “Those two would be among them, with a bit of experience and some blooding.”

Harry wanted to say that he had experience, having fought the Dark Lord several times, and having killed already, but held his tongue - saying such things would have had the opposite effect.

“Besides, we’re going to France. That’s a safe country,” Ron said.

“I would not go that far, I think,” Dumbledore said. “While the Dark Lord is not active in our neighbouring country, he has sympathisers there as well.”

“French Death Eaters? Wouldn’t they laugh at his name?” Harry said, snorting.

“No more than once, I think,” Remus said.

“And trust Moony to remind everyone of that particular tidbit!” Sirius said.

“Didn’t you just try to tell us that this was too dangerous for us?” Harry said.

“Well, it’s different when Remus does it,” Sirius said, frowning.

Remus rolled his eyes, and muttered something Harry didn’t catch.

“I trust you will be on your best behaviour while you are in a foreign country,” Dumbledore said. Harry wondered if he had sounded like that when the Marauders had been at Hogwarts and he had
to scold them.

“‘I even know the Old Forms. Mother was quite thorough,” Sirius grumbled.

“Um.” Harry cleared his throat. “Forms?”

“The pretentious rituals pureblood snobs go through when they are trying to inflate their importance.” Sirius scoffed. “No one uses them any more, though.”

“Rules on how to greet strangers and family, how to treat guests… quite fascinating, actually. They date back centuries,” Remus said.

“And they haven’t been used outside some circles for centuries. I bet not even the Dark Lord uses them,” Harry’s godfather said.

Harry glanced at Ron, who shrugged.

“Since you are meeting friends, allies, even future family,” Dumbledore said, with a glance at Ron, “I do not think you shall have to act as if you are entering into negotiations with a rival family.” He gestured at the fireplace. “But best be off now - being late would be rude.” With a smile, he added: “Some things have not fallen out of fashion.”

Sirius, of course, had to have the last word: “Then why do people call it ‘being fashionably late’?”

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Outside Paris, Château De la Cour, France, January 2nd, 1997

“Welcome to my ’umble ’ome!”

Ron Weasley kept smiling, even though he wanted to wince. The home of the Delacour family was anything but humble, no matter what Fleur’s father claimed. Judging by the entrance hall they had arrived in, it was a manor, filled with old and expensive furniture. Maybe a palace even - though to judge that, he’d have to see the outside; Extension Charms meant the size of a building couldn’t be measured from the inside. Bill, who was standing with Fleur next to her father, had been rather vague when he had talked about his visits. Unsurprisingly - Ron’s family was poor, but proud.

The Burrow, now just ruins and rubble, had been a humble home, held together by spells and the hard work of them all. Ron knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn’t help resenting the Delacours for … well, they weren’t showing off, and were friends - and family, once Bill married Fleur...

He shook his head. He had to focus on the mission, not on his family’s lack of wealth and his own issues.

“‘Arry!”

Both Ron and Harry jerked, and Ron almost drew his wand - and wouldn’t that have been embarrassing - as a young Veela slipped around her father and made a beeline for Harry, almost bowling the wizard over when she hugged him.

Gabrielle had grown a lot since he had seen her the last time, Ron thought, grinning. Which made her latching on to Harry and babbling in French cute instead of annoying. Especially since Harry didn’t understand a word of it. The little witch had also received her wand since the tournament, and started to demonstrate all the spells she had learned so far. Which, fortunately, weren’t that many,
seeing as she was still a first year. Quite impressive, though, for her to cast while keeping an iron grip on Harry’s arm.

“Gabrielle!” A loud voice, close to screeching, actually, cut through the babble and chuckling.

The girl’s mother made an appearance, and with a flick of her wand, had the protesting girl floating towards her. She also whispered some words to her husband, probably admonishing him for not having put a stop to this. Just like at home, when Dad would indulge Ginny, Ron thought.

While Harry rubbed some circulation back into his arm, the group followed Mister Delacour to a salon where food and drink waited for them - quite attentive, in Ron’s opinion.

“I ’ave informed the Commandant de la Bastille that I’ll be giving a few friends a tour,” Fleur’s father said, gesturing at the trays floating near the seats. “Please indulge yourself!”

“They let tourists tour the prison?” Harry sounded as surprised as Ron felt - he imagined touring Azkaban, and shuddered.

“Not everyone, of course,” Mister Delacour answered. “But I ’ave some influence, and some rules can be bent.” He smiled widely.

“We might need to visit the wardstones,” Remus said. “We’re not certain yet, though.”

They didn’t have to visit, Ron knew that - it was just a decoy operation. But they had to act as if this was their best plan.

“I will see what I can do. We might need to ’ave a few guards with us, though.”

“That will not be a problem,” Remus said.

Ron agreed - guards were good. Unless they were traitors - but Voldemort wouldn’t have that many spies in France, much less in their most secure prison, would he?

“Are there any monsters in the Bastille?” Harry asked. “Like Dementors?”

Ron knew Harry was asking not for himself, but for his godfather. If Sirius had a lapse…

“No.” Mister Delacour sounded quite disgusted. “We do not use such foul creatures. The cells of the Bastille are covered with wards, lined with cold iron, reinforced with all the spells we could think of - there is no need to torment our prisoners to keep them from escaping.” He chuckled. “It would be rather difficult to place such monsters there, seeing as our prison is in the ’eart of muggle Paris.”

Some Death Eaters would probably consider that a fate worse than death, but it sounded like a much better system than Azkaban, Ron thought. More expensive, of course. Which meant that the British Ministry of Magic wouldn’t switch unless, or until forced to. He saw Harry pat Sirius’s shoulder, and the older wizard grab Harry’s hand for a moment, and looked away. That felt a bit too personal to watch.

“Who is guarding the prisoners? Aurors?” Ron asked, mostly to distract himself.

“No, our Gendarmes are not serving as prison guards. We have specially trained people for that.”

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. “Hermione would love it if Britain had the same system.”

His friend nodded. “We’ll tell her about it.”
Paris, beneath the Place de la Bastille, France, January 2nd, 1997

Hermione wouldn’t like the Bastille, Harry Potter thought, walking behind Mister Delacour and the Warden of the Bastille. The Prison was completely underground, prisoners and guards both missing daylight, and the tunnels they were walking through were damp and gloomy.

As were the prisoners - he could hear some of them moan or mutter in their cells. This wasn’t a modern prison; this was a medieval dungeon, he thought. They had even seen the torture chamber - which, to Harry’s relief, wasn’t being used any more, but was still being kept ready to use since technically, murdering the Duc, the ruler of Magical France, was still punished by being tortured to death.

The laughter of the warden during his explanation - he spoke English, although with an accent of course - hadn’t endeared the man to Harry. He couldn’t help but think that the French wizard reminded him of Umbridge - a sadist just waiting for the occasion to indulge himself.

He gripped his wand more tightly - the tunnels lacked sufficient lighting. People needed to use their wands to light their way, which would reveal their position even when disillusioned. Moody had griped about that some, but had acknowledged that it might help in case there was an attempt at breaking out.

His eyes fell on a wall, where words had been scratched into the stones. “Mort au directeur!” He frowned and stepped closer, cocking his head to the side to see if he could make out more.

Then the words disappeared in front of him, and the warden stashed his wand. “I’m deeply sorry, we ’ave some regular vandalism by our ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” Harry hadn’t noticed any.

“Many people were executed in ze Bastille. Some of zem stayed after death.” The man smiled as they went down yet another stairway. “Now, ’ere is our second to lowest level, and our most secure. The worst prisoners are incarcerated here. Dark wizards.” He sneered. “Zey do not even leave zis place after death - zeir bodies are buried in our catacombs.” He didn’t ask if Sirius could escape from those cells - Sirius’s answer when he had asked that for the first time, in the upper levels, had not been pretty.

“Catacombs?” Harry had a bad feeling about this, but he had to ask - he had felt a shadow of Voldemort since he had entered the prison, but he hadn’t sensed where it was coming from. But it had grown a bit stronger, now. Or so he thought.

“Yes. Small, but we don’t need more - not many criminals are as bad as to merit imprisonment even after zeir death.” The warden smiled.

“I trust that this is a symbolic imprisonment,” Sirius said. “And that their souls pass over.”

“Of course.” The warden nodded. “Although I like to imagine ze worst monsters being imprisoned ’ere forever.”

Harry believed that at once.

Remus shuddered - the wizard had been ill at ease ever since they had passed the section where unregistered werewolves were being kept. He wasn’t unregistered, Harry knew, not since he had been outed in their third year, but to think he could have ended up in a place like this for hiding his
condition…

“There is a cemetery in Azkaban as well. Many prisoners are forgotten by their families, and their bodies are not claimed after their deaths,” Sirius said.

“I think we should take a look at those catacombs,” Harry said. Judging by the looks that earned him, not many shared his opinion.

Well, tough for them - he was risking his life here, and he was the one struggling with a headache! And the pain in his legs from walking for hours was amplified by his modified Supersensory Charm as well.

Even the smarmy warden hesitated, before nodding. “Of course. Please follow me.”

Another staircase down. Harry briefly leaned close to the walls. They were covered with scratched threats to the warden. The man didn’t notice, and Harry doubted anyone but Moody noticed them without specifically looking for them - how Moody managed to function with what had to be a sort of Supersensory Charm constantly active, Harry couldn’t imagine.

Another turn, and he hissed when the pain started to grow worse. There was definitely a Horcrux there.

“You alright, lad?” Moody asked, in a whisper the others would miss.

He nodded in response. He had gone through worse. Especially in training. They reached a large door, and the Warden fiddled with an ancient-looking key.

“Zis is ze lowest level, or part of it. The wardstones are in another room, of course, unconnected to zis room.” The warden pushed the door open. “Behold ze catacombs of ze Bastille!”

Harry drew a sharp breath, mostly due to the increasing pain - the view itself was not too overwhelming. Lots of niches, with cheap-looking coffins in them. Or bags, linen bags, all of them covered with a thick layer of dust, as was the floor, though fading footsteps could be seen there. There was no smell though, other than dry dust.

He slowly moved to the sides, and then ahead. The pain grew when he headed towards the far wall. He nodded at Bill, who looked grim, then started to wave his wand around.

“Monsieur?” The warden sounded alarmed.

“Beel’s just checking for curses,” Fleur said with a smile. “’e’s a bit overprotective of me.”

The wizard chuckled. “Well, I can assure you that zere’s nothing to fear ’ere - none of the guards have ever been ’urt when burying a prisoner.” He stepped forward and spread his arms. “Zese prisoners ’ere are not dangerous any more!”

“But the curses are,” Bill said, in a strained voice. “There is a curse on that coffin back there.” He pointed at a coffin in the middle of the rows.

“What? What kind of curse?” The warden turned to look at the coffin.

“I don’t know. The coffin is under some kind of transfiguration. It looks simple, but I’m certain that it’s a complex one.” Bill shook his head. “I haven’t encountered this type of curse yet.”

“I think it would be best if we call in a few more Curse-Breakers,” Mister Delacour said. “Do you
agree, Monsieur le Directeur?"

The man shook his head, then nodded. “Of course.” Suddenly, he pointed his wand at the door and cast a spell at it Harry didn’t know. He fell down, struck by four stunners and a Bludgeoning Curse courtesy of Moody, a second later.

“That was a sealing spell!” Moody barked. “Forget that coffin, and get that door open, lad!” the old Auror bellowed at Bill.

Bill’s answer was lost in the noise of dozens of coffins opening and linen bags being torn.

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“Inferi!”

For a second, Ron Weasley stared with horror at the monsters tearing their way out of linen wrappings and wooden coffins. Then training took over. He cast a Bubble-Head Charm - you couldn’t trust the air in confined places if you fought there - and stepped up to Harry, who was just about to do the same. Either he had been slower than usual… Ron shook his head. Harry had had to cancel the Supersensory Charm first, or he’d be taken out by the first wound.

“Seal the other half of the room off!” Moody bellowed while his wand spat fire at one monster that had slid free of the remains of its coffin and was walking towards them. Ron turned to conjure a wall, together with Harry. They weren’t the only ones - solid stone filled the room, wall to wall.

That still left them trapped with two dozens of the monsters. Ron cast a Shield Charm. Bill was slinging spell after spell at the door, but there was no effect as far as Ron could tell, not with the quick glance he spared, before setting an Inferi afire that had just rolled out of its niche, then cutting its legs off with another curse. It started thrashing on the ground, setting another alight. A third charged at him, but Harry blew it back with a Reductor Curse, covering him as they had trained to.

The room was rapidly filling with smoke, and while their Bubble-Head Charms kept them breathing, it was becoming harder to spot the enemies. At least for anyone without an enchanted eye.

Moody was in a frenzy, cutting down monsters left and right. “Fall back, we need to seal more of them off!”

Harry and Ron obeyed at once, falling back towards Bill and Fleur, who were now working together on the door. Ron sent a creature that looked to be more bones than dried meat back with a Bludgeoning Curse, and Harry conjured a cage around it, trapping it. Sirius and Remus were close by, but Mister Delacour…

Fleur’s father had been moving to the downed warden and had been surprised by two of the monsters. Both were burning, but he was cut off now. Ron saw him casting at one monster, trying to open a path, but another smashed into Mister Delacour, hands turned to claws glancing off the French wizard’s Shield Charm. Another was fended off as well, then the shield failed, and a third raked its claws over the wizard’s back.

His scream prompted a yell by Fleur: “Papa!” Seconds later, an enraged transformed Veela charged the Inferi, fireballs flying from her hands at them. Half a dozen of them were struck and caught fire - they had to be as dry as tinder, Ron realised - but they were still moving, and still attacking Mister Delacour - and now Fleur as well.

“Depulso!” Harry yelled next to him. The Banishing Curse threw one Inferius into another, pushing
both away from Fleur, into the thickening smoke from their burning brethren.

Ron followed Harry’s example, though he only hit one the monsters. Another reached Fleur, but the witch dodged its grasping arms and slid over the floor. More curses hit the ones attacking - striking - at Mister Delacour.

“Accio Antoine’s robes!” Ron heard Bill yell, and from amidst the fight, Mister Delacour shot out, and towards Ron’s brother. Ron didn’t know if the man was still alive - he was busy trying to stay alive himself. Covering Fleur had left him and Harry up for an attack by more of the monsters, and if the two of them fell back further, they’d expose Sirius and Remus, who were moving to protect Fleur. Visibility was shrinking, too, with each burning creature.

Ron clenched his teeth and cast a Reductor Curse at the closest Inferius, blowing its head off. Then he cursed himself for his stupidity - they didn’t need their heads. Moody had taught them to always go for their legs first. A Blasting Curse took care of that, but strained his and Harry’s Shield Charms. That was far too close now. Ron wanted to turn and flee, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t leave Harry, or the others. Not that he could flee anyway.

“Don’t waste your time, boy!” Moody, who was holding down one flank all by himself, shouted at Bill. “Open that door or we all die!” Ron didn’t know what Bill was doing, probably treating Mister Delacour’s wounds.

Fleur had managed to reach Sirius and Remus, by jumping or flying over two of the monsters, but she had been hurt as well, bleeding from a gash on her shoulder. And behind her, a dozen burning Inferi were advancing out of the smoke. Remus conjured another wall, but it couldn’t contain them all - two slid around it, and charged him. The werewolf managed to stop one with a Reductor Curse that blew its chest apart, but the other hit him, and dragged him down on the floor, where the burning monster and the struggling wizard rolled around.

Ron saw Sirius jump to Remus’s aid, transforming, before he had to dodge a legless Inferius which had dragged itself towards him. He destroyed it with another Blasting Curse. “Sirius!” he heard Harry yell. Ron didn’t need to check to know Harry was moving to help his godfather.

But that left him to cover the flank - and two more of the monsters were still coming. A Banishing Curse threw one of them back, into the burning remains of another. The second swiped at him, but Ron ducked, pointed his wand at the enemy’s belly and cast a Reductor Curse.

His shield stopped most of the chunks of dead flesh and bones before it failed. Ron turned to check on Harry when he caught something jumping at him out of the smoke. He didn’t manage to evade, and screamed when he was smashed into the stone floor, then again when claws ripped over his chest, tearing his robe and skin. He kicked at the monster and fended off a claw swipe at his face that left his arm a bleeding, hurting mess.

“Depulso!”

His Banishing Charm ripped the monster off him, and sent it up into the ceiling. Ron rolled to the side, over his wounded arm - Merlin’s balls, that hurt! - and caught the creature with a Blasting Curse before it could get back up. Panting, he tried to scramble to his feet, but his arm was hurting so much, he took two tries to get up.

Another of the Inferi was climbing along the ceiling, he noticed, barely visible in the smoke. “Watch out, they’re climbing!” Ron yelled, casting again, trying to ignore his bleeding arm and the pain that seemed to be everywhere.
Harry was at his side again, restoring one of the walls that had been battered down - when had that happened? - while behind him, Sirius dragged Remus, or Remus’s body, towards the door. Harry was bleeding too, Ron noted, from his side.

Next to him, his friend blew a crumbling wall apart, toppling three of the creatures over, before conjuring a new one. But before they were sealed off again, Ron had caught a glimpse of dozens more of the Inferi, waiting to attack.

They would be dying here, he realised. Torn apart by undead monsters. Probably turned into Inferi as well, later. The Dark Lord would like this. Rage filled him. He wouldn’t die like this! He wouldn’t become a tool of the Dark Lord! He started casting at a burning monster still trying to reach them.

“It’s open! Go go go!”

Ron whipped his head around, saw the door open, and was moving at once. Moody was there, covering the retreat. He didn’t see the warden, and didn’t care. Traitors should die. Fleur was levitating her father, or so he thought. Another Inferi pushed itself through a gap, and Ron cast a Reductor Curse at it. He missed, though, and blew part of the wall up, letting the monster charge - but Harry got it with a Cutting Curse.

Then they were past the door, on the stairs, and Moody pulled the door closed, then cast a spell at it.

“That should hold them for a while.”

They still rushed back up a level, and filled the entire stairway with stone before stopping to treat their wounds.

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Chapter 26: Sacrifices

‘As has been detailed, the loss of two dozen Aurors in a failed ambush was a shock for the Ministry, prompting Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge to question his policies. In the same vein, the firebomb attack on a group of purebloods celebrating the new year in Diagon Alley and the following events caused the Muggleborn Resistance to reconsider their latest messages, as evidenced by the first broadcast of the Resistance Radio in 1997. Contrary to some of my colleagues, I do not consider those events by themselves as crucial for the war. Instead I postulate that the consequences of the change in policies those events caused were of critical importance for the outcome of the war. Not only was Albus Dumbledore’s role as a link between the Ministry and the Resistance exposed, but also a possible way to mend the rift between the two factions. It was thus only logical that the Dark Lord would react to those developments.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Paris, beneath the Place de la Bastille, France, January 2nd, 1997

Harry Potter leaned against the wall, next to a prison cell, and gulped down air. Now that he wasn’t fighting for his life any more, he felt each breath hurting the wound in his right side despite the fact that he had stopped the bleeding with a quick Episkey. At least there wouldn’t be internal bleeding since it had been an open wound. It still hurt. He clenched his teeth, and told himself that he had suffered worse in training. At least worse pain. And, he added, looking at his friends, he wasn’t the worst wounded. Not by far.

Mister Delacour… Harry winced. Bill and Moody, the only ones untouched by the Inferi, as well as Fleur, were working frantically to keep the French wizard alive. They were pouring potions into him and casting spells, and Harry didn’t know if they would succeed. So much blood, so many wounds… one leg had been almost torn off, and the arms… Harry looked away when he saw the tears running down Fleur’s face, mixing with the blood from wounds she was ignoring as she struggled to save her father.

Harry’s own skills at Healing were rather pathetic, so he pushed himself off the wall and walked - slowly, carefully - over to Sirius, who was running his wand over Remus’s unconscious form. Sirius himself looked bruised, one eye swelling shut, with several red scratches visible on his face. His thick fur as a Grim must have protected him, Harry thought.

“He’s going to be alright,” Harry’s godfather said, before the boy could ask. “I need to get help now - watch the others!”

With that, Sirius transformed into a Grim and took off, racing to the stairs leading to the upper levels. They had already sent off a Patronus Messenger, but that had gone to the Delacours, and they might be delayed - one didn’t simply walk into the Bastille, much less rush into the prison, even in an emergency.

Harry looked at Remus. Sirius had said he’d be OK, but... the man looked in bad shape, as Moody would call it. Battered and bruised, claw marks dotting his chest and arms, and also burned from wrestling with an Inferius that had been ablaze. And he had taken at least one hit to the head, knocking him unconscious. That was dangerous, Harry knew - Madam Pomfrey had lectured him
often enough about his Quidditch injuries. But once again, there was nothing he could do there.

Harry could help Ron, though - his friend was sitting on the ground, trying to aim his wand at his left arm. “Let me,” he said, crouching down and flicking his wand. “Episkey.”

It took two more castings until the deep gashes in Ron’s arm had closed and the bleeding stopped. “A bit deeper, and it would have taken your arm off,” Harry muttered.

“Better my arm than my face,” Ron said. “And it’s not my wand arm, so it’s the expendable one.”

“You’ve been listening to Moody a bit too much,” Harry said, chuckling. It wasn’t that funny. It wasn’t funny at all. But he’d rather laugh than cry. He waved his wand, and the cuts in Ron’s chest closed as well.

“Thanks.” Ron smiled, tiredly.

Harry knew his friend was still in pain - like himself. He sat down next to him. Neither of the two was looking at the desperate struggle for a man’s life going on right next to them. As long as Fleur didn’t scream, Harry thought, then her father was still alive. That was all he needed, and wanted, to know.

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**Outside Paris, Château De la Cour, France, January 2nd, 1997**

“So much for Harry being safe! All of us are hurt, and Fleur’s father almost died. Might yet die!”

Harry Potter winced at the anger audible in Sirius’s voice. He wanted to say something, but held his tongue - Sirius still hadn’t calmed down, and Harry didn’t want to make things worse.

Moody, of course, had no such concerns. “The Healers in the Hôpital Hermétique aren’t that bad. Delacour wasn’t cursed, so as long as he arrived there alive, he’ll be fine. As will your friend.”

Harry was glad for their privacy spells - even if the Delacours and Bill weren’t at the Hôpital. Moody was a bit too callous when talking about the battle, in his opinion.

The old Auror shrugged. “Besides, neither me nor the lad’s brother got hurt, and neither did you. Scratches don’t count.”

Harry saw Sirius’s hand twitch, and for a moment, he feared that his godfather would start something, but the wizard controlled himself. “We almost died!” he said in a clipped tone Harry had seldom heard from him. “Harry and Ron almost died!”

“They didn’t, though, and they performed well.”

“They’re not bloody Aurors!” Sirius spat.

“Not yet, no.” Moody grinned. “I’m working on that, though. We’ll need good people in the Corps after the war.”

Harry cleared his throat. The two looked at him, as did Ron. “Err… how did Voldemort manage to infiltrate the Bastille like that? I thought it was the most secure place in France.” The Horcrux in Gringotts hadn’t been protected that well.

Moody snorted. “He probably placed the thing there in the 60s, before he started the war. The French were just slacking off back then, with their security, twenty years after Grindelwald.”
“And did he imperius the warden as well back then?”

“Maybe. Wish we could ask him, but…”

Harry winced. The Inferi had swarmed over the unconscious warden. Even if they had not attacked the man, he’d likely would have died when the fires in the room had consumed all the air. He felt guilty about that, and about being glad that the warden had died, and not someone else.

“We haven’t even destroyed the Horcrux!” Sirius said.

“I’ve sent word to Albus. He’ll take care of that,” Moody said. “Some good might come off this too - the French are bound to be unhappy about the Dark Lord putting traps in their dungeon, and almost killing Delacour.”

Sirius ground his teeth, then looked at Harry for a moment.

“I’ll be OK. Go and see Remus!” Harry knew his godfather was torn between watching out for him, and checking up on Remus. But he was safe here, relatively. Safer, at least, than he’d be if Sirius started a fight.

When his godfather had left through the Floo connection, Harry relaxed. At least until Ron, who had been silent so far, spoke up.

“What do we tell Mum?”

Hogwarts, January 2nd, 1997

Albus Dumbledore sighed when he returned to his office. Fawkes, picking up on his mood, left his perch and landed on the wizard’s shoulder, nipping at his ear and trilling softly. The Headmaster smiled at his companion, but didn’t really feel better.

Sirius had - understandably - been livid about the close brush with death Harry had had. Alastor’s gruff words hadn’t helped, of course, but Albus had been able to handle Sirius. Or rather, he had let Harry handle his godfather. Sirius had, after a lengthy argument, caved in. As Albus had expected. The Headmaster wasn’t proud of having manipulated both of them like this, but needs must - Voldemort could not know Albus’s real plan to defeat him once and for all. The Dark Lord had to believe that they were hunting his Horcruxes, as futile as that was. Even if it meant risking Harry.

Albus scoffed. Harry might even be safer now - if Voldemort was convinced that the traps protecting his Horcruxes could kill the Boy-Who-Lived, then he might not make an effort to kill the lad with other means. Of course, if Tom’s other traps turned out to be even more lethal than the one in the Bastille, the Dark Lord might very well be correct. It was all hypothetical anyway - Albus could not trust Tom to be that careless.

The trap had been lethal, but fortunately only the compromised warden had been killed, although Antoine Delacour had come very close to dying, and from what the Headmaster had gathered, it had been a near thing for the others as well. If it had been just Alastor and the boys… he shuddered at the thought, and Fawkes redoubled his efforts to cheer him up.

Albus didn’t know how Tom had managed to hide Inferi in the very heart of the Bastille, right under the nose of the Duc’s Court. The French might have grown sloppy and careless in the time since Albus had fought at their side against Grindelwald. Or the warden had been a more active spy for the Dark Lord than other moles. Or - the most unsettling possibility - Tom might have found a way to
fool conventional detection spells. In his search for a counter-curse to help the two Creevey brothers, Albus had read reports of British wizards being surprised by zombies in Jamaica, during the island’s rebellion. If Tom had managed to acquire the knowledge of the Houngans…

He ran a hand over his beard, smoothing out what Fawkes’s attempts to groom him had wrought. First, this withering curse, now another possible connection. Albus might have to investigate this more closely. The Dark Lord with the secrets of the Houngans at his disposal was a terrifying possibility.

But that would cost time, time he could barely spare. He had to handle the incident in France, and the growing crisis in Britain. The first should not pose too many problems - at least not on the French side. The Duc d’Orléans was livid that one of his closest friends had been almost killed by a trap of a British criminal - and enraged and embarrassed that this trap had been placed inside one of the most secure locations of Magical France. Albus smiled. The French were proud wizards, and after this, even their blood bigots would be very unlikely to lend any aid to Voldemort. Quite the contrary, actually - Magical France would be a very hostile country for the Death Eaters. The Duc was not willing to intervene in England, though - but that was not necessarily a bad thing. Albus didn’t think the Ministry and the Wizengamot would react well to a French intervention - and Tom would call it an invasion in a heartbeat.

The Delacours, of course, wanted blood and would not be content to stay in France. In private, the Duc condoned that, but officially, it was the family’s decision. It didn’t matter, though - their support would be a great boon for the Order - they needed skilled fighters more than anything else, right now.

Which brought Albus’s thoughts to the brewing crisis in Britain. Because of that firebombing in Diagon Alley, and the resulting outrage among the purebloods, Cornelius was reconsidering his decision to stop persecuting and discriminating against the muggleborns. The Order was spreading the rumour that this had been an attack by Death Eaters to frame the muggleborns - which, Albus hoped, was actually the truth; the alternative was far worse - but it didn’t help much. Many purebloods were too afraid, or too angry, to see reason. They wanted revenge.

The Headmaster snorted at the irony - he was certain that the muggleborns shared those exact sentiments. He closed his eyes. Maybe he should arrange for Amelia’s Aurors to catch some purebloods masquerading as muggleborns?

It would certainly deal Tom a heavy blow. But he’d need some Death Eaters to frame for it. And they were hard to come by. Of course, there were alternatives. Not all supporters of Voldemort were marked. Or even following his orders. Some simply shared his goals. They would be cautious, though, since their views were known.

And Voldemort wouldn’t be sacrificing such useful allies for such a ploy. No, he’d use the dregs of his followers, the scum attracted by the promise of riches, and the opportunity to indulge their base desires. Wizards and witches the Dark Lord would not miss.

Wizards and witches Albus would not feel too guilty about using for his plan - no matter if they were working for the Dark Lord, or not.

He petted Fawkes, grabbed a lemon sherbet and summoned a piece of parchment. He had to write to his brother. Aberforth knew his way around such people, and where to find them. More importantly, though, he was, unlike Mundungus, quite capable of capturing them as well. Although a bit of help might not go amiss.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 3rd, 1997

“You what?”

Ron Weasley cringed. His mum had just heard about Paris. Fortunately, the privacy spells on this room in Sirius’s house were very powerful - that yell would have been heard in Hogwarts otherwise.

There had been some discussion about not telling her - Moody had cited ‘operational security’. Both Dumbledore and Sirius had insisted on telling her, though. Sirius probably so he had some help trying to keep Harry safe. Dumbledore… Ron didn’t know why the Headmaster was doing this. He’d be blamed the most. Ron was torn himself. On one hand, he didn’t want his parents to worry about him. On the other hand, he didn’t want to lie to them either.

“While they were on a mission in Paris, they encountered a trap of the Dark Lord. They were able to handle it, although one follower of Voldemort was killed in the process, and Miss Delacour’s father nearly died.” Dumbledore was telling the truth, though he was also being a bit economical with it, or so Ron thought. Or maybe that was diplomatic.

“Ron!”

“I’m fine, Mum!” Ron said quickly, forcing himself to smile.

“Were you hurt?”

Ron hesitated for a moment, glancing at the Headmaster. Should he lie? His mum usually saw through his lies.

“You were!” Apparently, she didn’t need Legilimency to read his thoughts either. “Albus! Are you sending children into combat now?”

Ron cringed. His mum was truly livid. And she had her wand out.

“Yes, he is,” Sirius grumbled.

Ron glared at the wizard, and saw Harry was doing the same.

“We volunteered,” Ron’s friend said.

“You’re too young!” The witch turned to Ron’s dad. “Arthur!”

Ron’s dad didn’t yell, or curse. But Ron knew his expression, even though he had rarely seen it. The wizard was angry. “I would like to know why my youngest son was on a mission for the Order - and had to fight for his life.”

“Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived. He has fought Voldemort three times already, four if you count 1981,” Dumbledore calmly said. “The Dark Lord will not rest until Harry’s dead - preferably killed by his own hand.”

“And you send him out there, where the Dark Lord can get to him?” Molly shook her head. “Are you mad?”

“Yes!” Sirius said.

“Harry is crucial for the defeat of Voldemort. Believe me, I’d prefer to keep him behind Hogwarts’ wards for the duration of the war, if that was possible. But as things are, the mission, despite the danger, was needed to keep him safe.”
Ron heard Harry snort at Dumbledore’s words. “I told Sirius already: I’m not going to hide. I’m going to do what I need to. Just as you all are.” Scoffing, he added: “There is no choice anyway. This fight started even before I was born, and it will end only once one of us is dead.”

Ron saw his mum blink, open her mouth, then close it as the realisation sank in. “Merlin’s Ghost!” She turned her head to Albus. “Don’t tell me…”

“You might say it is fated,” the Headmaster said. Ron couldn’t tell if he was angry at Harry for spilling his secret. “We are doing what we can to help him, train him, of course. Needless to say, this has to be kept secret at all costs.”

“Will you obliviate them?” Ron said, without thinking, earning him sharp looks from everyone.

“You parents know how to keep secrets,” Dumbledore said. “They proved that in the last war, and in this war.”

They knew Occlumency then, Ron thought. And they had never told him. They had never said much about the war - and he and his siblings had rarely asked; they all knew that Mum had lost her brothers to a Death Eater ambush and that it hurt her to think about them.

“But Ron…”

He raised his chin. “I’m not going to leave Harry to face this alone,” he said, as forcefully as possible. He wanted to say that he’d be seventeen and not a child any more in three months, but didn’t. His parents knew that already. “It’s bad enough that we left Hermione alone.” They shouldn’t have listened to her when she told them to stay at Hogwarts, he thought, not for the first time. And not for the last time either.

His mum opened her mouth, but his dad put his hand on her shoulder. “We can’t stop them, Molly,” he said quietly.

“All of them, Arthur,” Ron heard his mother whisper in the sudden silence. “All of my sons going to war. Fighting, getting hurt, getting…” Whatever she had been about to say was swallowed by her sobs.

Ron closed his eyes when his mum started to cry in his dad’s arms. He didn’t want to see that. It was bad enough to hear it. He felt terribly guilty about doing this to his parents - but he’d feel even worse if he let his friends down.

And he knew that trying to hide this from them would have been wrong. He clenched his teeth, then opened his eyes, and walked over to hug his parents.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 3rd, 1997

“How’s your mum?” Harry Potter asked when Ron entered the entrance hall in Grimmauld Place.

“She’s busy in the kitchen,” his friend answered. “Preparing for our guests.”

Harry felt a bit irked at that - this was Sirius’s, Remus’s and his home. Everyone else was a guest. Even if they were staying for a long time. He didn’t say anything, though.

“She’s still not alright with it, of course,” Ron continued. “Can’t blame her, either.”
Harry nodded. “Sirius’s the same.”

“I wonder how her parents feel about the war,” Ron said. He didn’t have to say who he was talking about.

“We can ask her next time we meet her.” Harry wondered how much Hermione had told her parents. And if she felt guilty about worrying them.

Ron nodded, leaning against the wall. “When are the French expected to arrive?”

“Few more minutes.” Harry joined him. His side still ached a bit, and he rubbed his ribs.

Ron snorted. When Harry looked at him, he said: “I just imagined Gabrielle coming with them. Mum would probably personally drag her back to France.”

Harry chuckled. Fleur’s little sister had sworn to repay her father’s injury tenfold - as soon as she came of age. She had been serious too, and it wasn’t really funny when you thought about it, given the circumstances, but the pint-sized Veela had just looked too cute with her wand raised.

“Do you think there’ll be many Veela?” Ron asked.

Harry glanced at him. “I had the impression there’d be a few, at least. They seemed quite close. The family, I mean.” Unlike his own relatives. “Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering if there’ll be trouble.”

“Ah.” Harry thought about it, then shook his head. “I doubt it. We’re not at Hogwarts.” There weren’t that many unattached wizards in Grimmauld Place. And he and Ron were too young. And taken.

For a brief moment, he imagined Ron falling for a Veela. That would leave Hermione for him. He shook his head. He was better than that. But it would still be nice, and leave everyone happy.

Sirius entered the room, took a look at them, and grinned. “Oh… can’t wait for the Veela to arrive, huh? If your girlfriend knew that!”

Harry shot him a glare. “We’re being good hosts, since we didn’t know if you’d be late.”

“Me, late to meet pretty witches? Never!” His godfather’s grin widened, then he leered exaggeratedly.

“I should have brought the burn ointment,” Harry said to Ron. “He’ll need it.”

His friend nodded while Sirius frowned. “Hey!”

The fireplace flared up, and all three wizards took a step forward. Instead of the Delacours, the Headmaster stepped out of the flames. “Good evening, Sirius, Harry, Ron.”

Harry’s godfather nodded. He was still angry, Harry thought.

“Good evening, sir,” the two boys chorused.

“I take it that our French friends have yet to arrive?” Dumbledore said while brushing some soot off his robes.

“They shouldn’t be long now,” Sirius said, looking at his watch instead of Dumbledore.
If the old wizard noticed Sirius’s mood, then he didn’t say anything about it. He simply stood there, waiting. And smiling.

“Did you talk to the French Ministry?” Harry asked, as much out of curiosity as to simply pass the time.

“It is actually the French Court, not the Ministry,” the Headmaster said, “and yes, I did. To the Duc in person. He has agreed to keep the attack a secret, and blame the death of the warden on a curse at his home.”

“Voldemort will suspect something if his agent is cursed,” Ron said.

“He will. And he will discover that you triggered his trap, but survived. And that I tried to hide that. That should convince him that we’re focusing on hunting his soul anchors.”

“Oh.” Ron nodded, as did Harry.

Sirius grumbled something Harry didn’t catch. And didn’t want to.

Then the fireplace flared up again, and Fleur stepped through, followed by Bill. Harry didn’t see any sign of the wounds they had taken yesterday on them. The way they moved - Moody had trained Harry and Ron to pay attention to that - didn’t show any lingering pain either.

More people arrived while Sirius greeted the couple.

“Blimey,” Ron said, quietly enough that Harry doubted anyone but himself heard it. “Must be a dozen of them.”

His friend was correct, Harry thought. And among them, five Veela. No, four - that witch was too plain for a Veela, he thought.

“Welcome to my humble home!” Sirius said, with a sweeping bow. His angry mood seemed to have evaporated in the face of pretty witches. Pretty, smiling and giggling witches.

Harry sighed. He sincerely hoped this wouldn’t lead to trouble.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 3rd, 1997

“The Muggleborn Resistance stands for justice! Our war is not with the purebloods - we fight Death Eaters and everyone else who supports them. We do not attack purebloods for being purebloods! We do not attack those who do not fight us.”

Albus Dumbledore, in disguise, nodded to the words of the Resistance Radio which filled the Hog’s Head Inn. Miss Granger stuck to her ideals.

“We have been persecuted, hunted like animals, simply because we were not born to wizards and witches. Our enemies happen to be purebloods, and loudly claim to fight for pureblood culture and values. It’s only natural to want revenge. To fight back using the same means that our foes use.”

Once again Albus nodded. Far too easy for many, he knew.

“But we cannot! For if we stooped to such levels, we’d be no better than the Death Eaters! Purebloods are not our enemies - Death Eaters and bigots are. Many purebloods risk their lives fighting the Dark Lord’s forces. They defy him just as we do. Blood doesn’t mean anything to them,
nor to us.”

Aberforth, sitting across from him, snorted. His brother was quite the cynic, Albus thought. Or, to be more precise, Aberforth wanted to be a cynic. But the Headmaster was quite certain that his brother had not managed that. Aberforth cared too much, no matter how much he tried to hide it. And, Albus added, catching the other’s glare, he still blamed Albus for much of his pain. Not entirely unfairly, he had to admit.

“Every pureblood killed just for being a pureblood is a blow against us. Each of those murders directly helps the Dark Lord, for the bigots want to make this war into a blood war. They want to turn this war into purebloods against muggleborns. They want to drag us down to their level so all of the purebloods will join them out of fear and hatred. And each time a group of muggleborns decides to go and hurt purebloods, they get closer to their goal.”

Albus wasn’t certain how effective this appeal would be. If it saved even one innocent life it would have been worth it, but he doubted that it would keep every muggleborn from lashing out, or worse.

“That doesn’t mean you cannot fight. There are many purebloods who have, in word and deed, shown their allegiance with the Dark Lord. Those who fight for him, hidden beneath masks, and those who act in his interest while appearing to be independent. Those are our enemies. Those are the ones who want to kill us all. Members of the Wizengamot. Ministry employees. Journalists. And so-called concerned citizens.


Albus closed his eyes. “Proscriptions,” he whispered. Death lists.

“Was that your idea?” Aberforth looked at him.

Albus couldn’t tell if his brother approved of this turn of events or despised it. “I knew about it.” He could have stopped it, maybe. But Miss Granger had been quite convincing - those who wanted to fight needed targets, or they’d seek their own. Albus had his reservations, still - to name people to be killed felt a bit too much like the practice of the Death Eaters.

His brother snorted. “Did you check the names?”

He nodded, slowly.

“And are you afraid you made a mistake, and left an innocent on the list?”

“Not particularly.” He trusted his information. And his spies.

“What’s eating you then? Are you feeling sorry for the scum who caused this damn war?” Aberforth narrowed his eyes at him.

“Even with the lists being spread as leaflets, people might add names for various reasons. And once the practice of proscriptions has been established, it is difficult to stop. People can turn into a mob quite easily.” Albus knew how quickly an enraged group could turn onto a perceived enemy, and how brutal men could act if they thought themselves justified.

The other wizard shrugged. “The Death Eaters and their bootlickers are reaping what they have sown. Yes, there’ll be some excess, but it’s better than a bloodbath in Diagon Alley.”

“Which might still happen anyway.” Both of them knew about Mister Baker, after all. The former
member of the Resistance would not be the only muggleborn who had ‘gone over the edge’, as Kingsley used to call it. Albus felt a brief pang of sorrow, thinking of his dead friend.

“Oh, yes. But it’s a bit less likely now.”

That was true. And Miss Granger’s influence on the muggleborns had grown again, Albus thought. This would be a great boon for a negotiated peace, should the opportunity present itself. He nodded.

“But you didn’t visit me to listen to the Muggleborn Wireless. What do you want, Albus?” Aberforth asked in a harsh voice.

“I need a few of those people who were just named. Alive, and reasonably unhurt.” The Headmaster almost smiled when he saw Aberforth’s eyebrows rise. “I need them to keep the Dark Lord from using those attacks for his own goals.”

His brother stiffened for a moment, then nodded.

Albus had expected that. Even if Aberforth liked to claim that Albus was manipulating people and plotting without care for those his plans hurt, his younger brother was no stranger to such ploys himself.

Something, the Headmaster knew, his brother blamed him for as well. And not entirely unfairly.

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“... Brenda Brocktuckle, Auror, …”

Brenda Brocktuckle, sitting in their muggle flat next to the wireless receiver, gasped. Those mudbloods… no, that mudblood had dared! Called out to the other mudbloods to murder her! For a moment, she felt fear. To be singled out like that… like others who had been murdered. But she fought the feeling down. She was an Auror! A veteran Auror! Not some Ministry clerk trembling in her Madam Malkin’s special offer boots! She grinned grimly. So, Granger felt it was personal as well. Good.

“Wow, the mudbloods really did it - they openly declared their intentions to murder every pureblood who does not bow to them!” Parkinson, sitting next to her in that infuriatingly casual manner of his, with his arm propped up on the table, was shaking his head in what looked like cynical amusement, Brenda noted. “I wonder if they list me as well.”

Brenda narrowed her eyes, she was certain that the other Auror wouldn’t be jealous if the mudbloods didn’t list him as a target, but… Ah! “Since you’re not that prominent, it means they might have spies inside the Auror Corps.”

“Or someone in the Corps has loose lips,” Parkinson said, “and is talking to a spy.”

Brenda sighed. “Right.” Office gossip, the bane of investigations - in more than one way.

“... Malcolm Parkinson, Auror, …”

“Ah, there I go. The mudbloods do know of me!” Brenda’s flatmate definitely sounded amused now. She didn’t share the sentiment. “It’s not a good thing.”

He shrugged. “It’s not as if the mudbloods can find us, or anyone else on the list who’s smarter than
the average Flobberworm.”

Brenda shook her head. “Some might not even know that the mudbloods want them dead.” After all, Brenda wasn’t a Death Eater herself, yet she had been listed. And some people on the list might not be as cautious as they should be.

“Well, they’ll find out soon enough from the Prophet. Although it might be better if the Prophet didn’t print the mudblood list. We wouldn’t want to help them spread their propaganda.”

“If you don’t publish the list, the people will find out themselves. And might endanger themselves in the process.” The chance was small, though, Brenda knew that - the mudbloods would plaster their damned leaflets all over Diagon Alley, as usual.

“Hm… if the published list would be a bit altered, we could make some trouble for the blood traitors. Put some of them on it.”

Brenda laughed. “That would be funny!” She doubted that any mudblood would attack them - they would have the original list - but it might make some of those traitors reconsider their stance.

“Speaking of funny, how goes your plan to stop the next attack from fire-dropping mudbloods?”

Brenda narrowed her eyes at him, but Parkinson gave no indication that he thought her plan was stupid. “I’ve met some setback - apparently, Zonko’s can’t deliver the fireworks I need.”

“And the Weasleys won’t speak to you, much less sell to you.”

Brenda nodded. “I can’t even buy through a middleman since I need a special order.”

Parkinson rubbed his chin. “You might have to talk to the Unspeakables.”

Brenda sighed. “Bothering them for a joke shop item…” She pressed her lips together. She didn’t like talking to the members of that department. She didn’t know anyone who did.

“Do you have another idea to stop the mudbloods?” The other Auror shrugged. “Short of checking if someone created a spell for that, and never bothered to share it…”

Brenda stared at him. “If I hear just one joke about this from another Auror…”

“My lips are sealed!” he said, quickly, but with a faint grin. “But if that fails, I might know someone who can help you, but it would be…” he trailed off.

She knew what he meant, or rather, who. But she wasn’t certain she wanted to go that far, yet. She shook her head and switched the wireless to the Ministry channel. They were playing music, of course - as if the mudbloods had not just challenged Wizarding Britain. The witch ground her teeth, then summoned a bottle. She needed a drink to deal with this. And the stupid muggles were doing something to the house too - at least they were working during the day, and not when she was home.

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Hogwarts, January 4th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, putting the letter he had just read on his desk. One Horcrux destroyed. He smiled at the man sitting across his desk. “Do you know the contents of this letter, Mister Delacour?”

Marcel Delacour, younger brother of Antoine Delacour, shook his head. “No. My niece insisted no
one could know. She is very ‘eadstrong, and loyal.” He sounded both bemused and annoyed.
“Although, I must confess I am a bit vexed zat I’m not to know why my brother almost died.”

“It is for your own safety, and for the safety of others” Albus said.

The younger wizard nodded, but his smile could not hide that he didn’t like it. It could not be helped, though - the Headmaster had to make the effort to hide this, or Voldemort might see through his ruse.
“Do have to say once again how grateful my friends and I are for your help. It takes a brave soul to face the Death Eaters.”

The French wizard waved his left his hand in an intricate gesture. “Bah. After zis attack on my brother, ’ow could we not take up wands? We’re French, after all. We stood firm even when ’alf of France ’ad fallen to Grindelwald. An uncle and an aunt of mine were killed fighting ’is hordes, and we paid back that debt as well.”

Albus remembered what had happened after Gellert’s defeat. The revenge the victors took on those who had fought for his old friend had been bloody and brutal. He still wondered if he should have let them kill Gellert, if it had meant that his followers would live. Less, though, these days, after those who had been spared after Tom’s first defeat had joined the Dark Lord again. The Headmaster was certain that this time, mercy would be in short supply, again. He kept smiling, though, and nodded.
“Indeed. And now another Dark Lord is trying to rise, in Britain, this time.”

“’e tried before, and failed,” Delacour said. “’e’ll fail again. We’ll make certain of it.”

Albus almost shook his head. French elan! It seemed that those who had fought and bled in Grindelwald’s War had not passed on the lessons learned to their children. Although he was grateful for their eagerness - he needed their help. With the Delacours and the d’Aigles, he could meet Tom’s forces without the Resistance, should his enemy try to take over the Ministry by force.

Something that seemed to be less likely these days than Albus had thought. Even Miss Granger’s broadcast wouldn’t change much - many purebloods were scared, even though they were not on the list, and had no reason to fear they’d be on it. But they were slowly realising that if the Death Eaters lost the war, then Britain would change - and many might not like that.

Out loud, he said: “And we appreciate your help, very much. Between the Ministry’s corruption and the Death Eaters, we are hard-pressed.”

“And you ’ave to deal with the muggleborns, don’t you? They are the main enemies of the Dark Lord.”

Albus nodded, a bit slower. The Delacours were no bigots - Fleur marrying Mister Weasley was, if not proof, still a clear indication of that - but France hadn’t forgotten that muggleborns had rushed to Gellert’s banner. The press in Paris had been quite dramatic in their reports too. There had been subtle inquiries from Magical France about the danger of the British muggleborns ’spreading their attacks and efforts to other countries’. That had before the incident in the Bastille though. “They saw the signs before many others, and were ready for the war. Unlike the Ministry.”

“They started the war, so some say at least.” Delacour kept smiling, but his eyes had narrowed just a tiny bit.

“Those who say so are wrong. It was obvious that the Dark Lord planned to weaken his enemies, before murdering them.” Albus met the man’s eyes. “That plan failed, thanks to the Muggleborn Resistance’s initiative. The Ministry will not admit it, but without the muggleborns, they would have fallen to the Dark Lord already.”
“And yet they still fight them.”

“That policy is about to change.” Or had been - Albus had to pressure Cornelius some more.

Delacour shrugged. “As long as they are not attacking us or ours, then we should not have a problem.”

“The Resistance will not. Unfortunately, there are some muggleborns who have gone too far in their desire for revenge, and are attacking any purebloods.” Albus didn’t think those behind the fire bombing would stop. They had gone too far, and would know it. “Rest assured that they will be dealt with, when found.”

The man’s smile grew wider, though a bit more cruel as well. “Very well. We’re currently visiting the landmarks in Britain, so we can apparate easily to wherever we’re needed.”

“Very good.” Albus knew they were training as well, with the Weasleys, and also with Sirius and Remus. With Alastor added, that would give Albus close to twenty well-trained wizards to react to an attack. “Do you need anything?”

The French wizard made a show of mulling this over, then shook his head. “No, I do not think so. Our ’ost has been most gracious.”

Sirius would have been, Albus thought, given the number of pretty witches who had come to Britain. The Headmaster just hoped this would not lead to problems with the rest of the French.

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London, Soho, January 3rd, 1997

Hermione Granger wasn’t tapping her foot - not quite; she had stopped herself twice so far - but she was frowning. Her friends were… well, they were not yet late, she amended, after glancing at her wristwatch. Even if it felt as if they were late. She took another sip from her tea, then set the cup down so quickly, some tea was spilled. There!

Harry and Ron were just entering the café, looking around for her. She saw Ron smile when he spotted her and nudge Harry. She looked them over carefully while they made their way towards her through the café. Both were moving a bit more slowly than usual, or so she thought. No, it was true. They were moving like after one of those violent Quidditch matches, or training. They had been hurt worse than they had told her through the mirror!

Something on her face must have given her thoughts away, since both boys were wincing when they reached her table. For a moment, she was taken aback, then she stood up, shaking her head, and went to hug them - maybe a bit harder than normal.

Once they had ordered and cast their privacy spells, she stared at both of them. “Just ‘some scratches’, hm?”

Ron grimaced. Harry looked sheepish, but said: “There were scratches. Among other things. But nothing really bad - the Healers had no trouble.”

Ron nodded.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Madam Pomfrey had no trouble putting you together either, after your many mishaps.” She took a deep breath. She couldn’t get angry. She couldn’t tell them about the Resistance’s missions in advance, and neither could they tell her.
“Well…” Ron started, “I’m sorry. We’re sorry. We didn’t want to make you worry.”

“And now I’m worrying even more,” she said, “when you’re on a mission.”

“Which makes us even,” Harry said.

She glared at him, but he didn’t flinch. And as much as she hated to admit it, he was right. Sighing, she looked down. To his credit, he didn’t rub it in. “Still, both of you were hurt.”

“Yes. Moody was good, but… there were too many. Of the Inferi, and of us,” Ron said. “Moody held one side by himself. But the others… Fleur’s father tried to save the warden, who had sprung the trap on us, and most of the rest were hurt saving him. It showed that we hadn’t trained together, all of us I mean.”

“Ah.” Hermione nodded, even though she wanted to cringe. Inferi - animated corpses. Most spells wouldn’t do much to them, nor would bullets. They were a bit slow, but trapped in a room with them… She forced herself to stay calm. “So… Bubble-Head Charms, then you set them on fire?”

“Basically,” Ron said. “But they were tricky - some climbed over the walls, and even along the ceiling. Remus didn’t mention that when he taught us, so maybe that was something Voldemort added.”

“Noted.” Hermione and her friends might have to deal with that as well, once they attacked a base of the Dark Lord. “How was the trap triggered?”

“The warden did it. Probably imperiused - he was killed by the Inferi as well. Locked us in the crypt when they started to move.”

“The crypt?”

“The place they buried, or rather, stored the dead prisoners,” Harry said. “The man said some prisoners wouldn’t even leave the Bastille in death. I hope he didn’t mean that literally.”

Hermione nodded, but given that the British Ministry punished some criminals by having a monster suck out their soul, she wouldn’t put it past the French to imprison souls as well. Another thing that would have to change, once this war was over. Dementors would have to go. “You did well, then.” Sirius had told her so already, between rants.

“We stayed with Moody, as long as possible, and did what we trained for. The others were rushing into the middle of the monsters,” Harry said, shrugging.

He probably felt as if he had done less than he could have, Hermione thought, just because he hadn’t foolishly risked his life.

“Well, we did good. Moody was even praising us. In his own way,” Ron said.

“He might have said that just so Sirius and your mum wouldn’t curse him.” Harry snorted.

The other boy shook his head. “No, Moody wouldn’t care. He’d probably think it was good training if they attacked him.”

While both boys chuckled, Hermione wondered just how hard their training was, and how good they were, compared to the Resistance and herself. At least it seemed as if they had weathered their first battle well enough. She wouldn’t ask about the nightmares she was certain they had.
Ron broke the short silence that followed. “So, we listened to your broadcast. Do you think those who attacked Diagon Alley will stop?”

Hermione sighed. “No, I don’t. I don’t even know if they were muggleborns, and not Death Eaters, or imperiused.”

“Sirius said they didn’t find any ties to Voldemort,” Harry said.

Hermione had known that already. It didn’t mean there weren’t any, but… “Yes. I hate the thought, but I think those were muggleborns.” She took a deep breath. “They already crossed the line, and they may think they have nothing to lose now.” Or they might simply not care - such atrocities were common in wars, especially in civil wars. “The list may sound impressive, but most of those people will be hiding. We struggle to find them, and those other groups won’t have our resources.”

“Shite,” Ron muttered under his breath. Hermione didn’t bother to call him on it.

“They really might be imperiused, or Death Eaters in disguise,” Harry said.

“Hopefully.” And they would be, if the headmaster’s plan succeeded, the young witch knew that. “How did Sirius and your parents react?”

Both boys sighed and glanced at each other.

“As expected, then,” she said. Sirius and the Weasleys were very protective of their children. Or godson, in Sirius’s case.

“Yes,” Harry said, before taking a big sip from his soda.

“Dumbledore handled it, though.” Ron sounded as if that was one of the Headmaster’s greatest feats. And, given the tempers of both Sirius and Mrs Weasley, he might even be correct, she added to herself, with a smile.

“At least Sirius is now distracted by the French witches staying at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said. “He was getting far too protective.”

Her friend sounded annoyed, but Hermione didn’t think he really minded that his godfather cared so much for him. Quite the contrary. So why would he be in that mood? She almost smirked when she found an answer. “Are you worried about getting a stepmother?”

Harry jerked and stared at her. “What?”

“Children often have trouble when their parents remarry,” Hermione said. Sirius was the closest person to a father Harry had, after all.

“It’s not that,” her friend said. “I just think he is overdoing it.”

“Four Veela, mate,” Ron added with a grin. “And one other hot French witch. Of course Sirius is distracted.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. While she wasn’t that concerned with appearances, or so she liked to think, she was not certain that she would like to hear too much about Veela and ‘hot French witches’. Especially not if said witches lived with Harry and Ron. She huffed and said: “I hope you didn’t stare at them.” The witch clearly remembered his reaction to Fleur in their fourth year.

Ron quickly shook his head. “I didn’t drool, if you mean that. But I doubt there is any man in the
house who did not stare at them at least once. Well, not Dad.”

Harry sighed. “Sirius said we should familiarise ourselves with them, so we don’t mistake them for an enemy in the middle of a fight.”

Hermione scoffed. “Of course he’d say that.” That was exactly what she expected of the wizard. She also noted that Harry hadn’t denied staring either. Well, boys would be boys. And would it be that bad if one of them fell for a French witch? The selfish, jealous part of her thought it would. But she wouldn’t have to choose then, wouldn’t have to hurt either of them if that happened. Although if both boys fell for the prettier, more mature French witches or Veela… She told herself that those witches were adults, and wouldn’t be interested in teenage boys, so the point was moot. Hopefully. “Sirius also said that they were a bit concerned about us,” she said. “About the Resistance.”

“They are,” Harry said. “Dumbledore said he’d explain that you’re our allies, but…”

“They are no bigots, but as Fleur told us, purebloods in France have had bad experiences with muggleborns fighting for Grindelwald,” Ron added. “They are concerned about a repeat of that.”

That sounded a tad bigoted to Hermione, but she didn’t say that. “I see.” Hopefully, that would not be a problem. She didn’t want to imagine Seamus and Dean meeting the French. Well, if there were only French witches and Veela, it probably wouldn’t be that bad… dear Lord, she had to stop thinking like that! The witch took another sip from her tea, and the conversation lapsed.

“Was there any success finding a cure for the Creeveys?” Ron asked, once again breaking the silence.

She shook her head. “No. The Headmaster is looking into it, but…”

“But he’s busy with the war,” Harry finished for her. “And with teaching and training us.”

Hermione nodded. It was selfish, it was cruel, and she felt guilty for feeling like it, but as long as it kept her two friends alive, she was fine with that. The Creevey’s were in no danger of dying right now, after all. They were even safer now, unable to go on missions.

And when Hermione laughed at a joke Ron made she tried really hard not to think about the fact that even if the Creeveys’ lives were in danger, she’d pick Harry and Ron over them.

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Outskirts of Newcastle upon Tyne, Britain, January 5th, 1997

“Your sacrifices are ready.”

Albus Dumbledore nodded at his brother’s comment. Aberforth might be biased, and trying to hurt him, but he was ultimately correct - the three wizards currently stunned and bound in the basement of the safe house would be sacrificed, if not in the way most witches and wizards of Britain understood the term. “Thank you, Aberforth.”

His brother glared at him. “I don’t like this sort of plot.”

“I do not like it either,” Albus admitted, truthfully.

“Could have fooled me. Isn’t that sort of sacrifice just your thing? Sacrifice a few to save many?”

“I trust that the men you picked are not innocents, but those who would harm and kill others for
personal gain.” Albus knew that his brother was quite familiar with those sorts.

Aberforth huffed, but didn’t press the issue. “Not many will believe they were behind the other attack.”

“But it will seed doubts.” And, once the war was won, it would allow the purebloods to blame the Death Eaters for all those attacks, which should help with reconciliation.

“The Aurors still have people who can spot a False Memory Charm. Even one cast by you.”

Aberforth managed to make that sound like an accusation. As if Albus used the charm extensively. The Headmaster didn’t rise to the bait, though. “That will not be a problem. They’ll not be captured alive.”

“How would you manage that? Imperius?” Aberforth stared at him.

Albus narrowed his eyes. As if he’d sink that low. “No. Careful application of the False Memory Charm will ensure they will not plan to survive.”

“That lot might plan to die, but they might mess that up. They aren’t the brightest bunch of chaps.”

“Which is why the actual plan will be mine.” Albus smiled. “They will not survive; trust me.”

Aberforth drew a hissing breath. “You sound quite experienced.”

“Not as much as you might think.”

His brother scoffed and sat down in one of the chairs he had conjured. “Are you even working on curing those two boys, in between arranging murders and traps?”

This time Albus had to make an effort to control his own temper. “Of course.” Not as much as he could, unfortunately - the current crisis took precedence. “It’s not going as quickly as I hoped, that’s all.” Looking into Houngan business was not something even a wizard as powerful as Albus could rush. He stood up. “I’ll handle this then.”

“And I’ll be in my pub, trying to forget what I just helped you do.”

Albus didn’t say anything, simply shook his head once his brother had apparated away.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 5th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort was in a happy mood. Thanks to those mudbloods attacking fools in Diagon Alley, his efforts - or rather, the efforts of his followers in the Wizengamot - to stop Fudge from making a deal with the Resistance were enjoying far more success than he had expected. Just another attack or two, and Dumbledore’s proposal would be buried. That would compensate for the loss of so many of his followers in the Auror Corps, somewhat at least.

He frowned. He still had not made up that loss. Parkinson was dragging his feet - that man was skilled, but too cautious for his taste. Others would have jumped at the chance to lead the Aurors in his service. Parkinson, though, was ‘cultivating’ Brocktuckle - an Auror who had failed to stop the mudbloods for months now. And had been in charge of that failed ambush that had cost him so many of his Aurors. If not for Parkinson’s pledge that this had just been bad luck - after Voldemort had gone over the plans himself - he would have made her pay for that disaster. He still might - there
were various ways to initiate a new Death Eater, after all. Some Bellatrix would greatly enjoy helping him with; the way she could use the Torture Curse impressed even him.

He looked at the report from one of his agents in Paris. His agent in Paris, now. The warden of the Bastille had been killed in an undisclosed accident. He snorted. As if he’d fall for such a ruse. The warden was dead, and Antoine Delacour, future father-in-law to one of the Weasleys, almost died as well? The only thing that could explain that was that Delacour had tried to reach the Horcrux Voldemort had hidden in the Bastille, and the warden had triggered the trap to stop him.

Which meant that Dumbledore was stepping up his game, reaching past the British borders on his hunt. Voldemort was not worried, of course - he had hidden Horcruxes all over the world before he had made his first attempt to take over Britain. Those who do not prepare for a defeat, however unlikely it was, were doomed, after all. But he was wondering if the Boy-Who-Lived had been present as well. Would Dumbledore risk the boy, counting on whatever protection the boy’s mudblood mother had managed to create? He summoned a piece of parchment and wrote a letter to his agent, ordering him to look into the matter. If the boy had been present, then that might mean that his trap had been defeated by Potter’s protection. And that would mean that the boy was a more important obstacle than Voldemort had thought. An obstacle that had to be removed before he could take over Britain. And he wanted to know how his Inferi had performed in battle. They had been an experiment, following his visit to the Caribbean in 1957.

He sighed. But first things first. Standing up, he left his room and took the stairs down to the basement. He checked the circle he had prepared again - it wouldn’t do to make a mistake with such an important task. Then he put a ring down in the middle of it. Not too cheap, not too expensive. Average. Banal even - a muggle wedding ring. Taken from the muggle currently staring at him, and, judging by the way her mouth was moving, trying to say something under the effect of his Silencing Charm. Likely begging or pleading. Pitiful.

The Dark Lord took out his wand, and saw the muggle’s eyes widen as she started to struggle. He shook his head. Why couldn’t she face her end with dignity? This was a sacred ritual, after all.

She should be honoured to give her life so Voldemort would live forever.

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Chapter 27: Cursed

‘Officially, the French wizards and witches taking part in the Second Blood War were volunteers, without any connection to the Court of Magical France. Unofficially, everyone in France and Britain at the time was aware that this was a mission sanctioned by the Duc d’Orléans himself, to avenge the attack on his close friend Antoine Delacour in the Bastille.

There has been much speculation about what exactly happened that day in the Bastille, but all involved have refused to give any details about the event - or died in it. What is known, though, is that Mister Delacour was hurt by a trap guarding a dark artefact hidden there. All involved agree that the Dark Lord had placed it there, an opinion obviously shared by the Duc himself. And yet, dissenting opinions have been voiced, in recent times.

At first sight, the fact that no one among half a dozen wizards and witches who survived the trap was the victim of a dark curse might throw some doubt upon the Dark Lord’s responsibility. Wasn’t he known to have studied the Dark Arts more extensively than anyone else? Why would he not use the darkest curses to protect whatever he had hidden there? And why would he risk offending Magical France in the first place by using the Bastille for this? It is not uncommon for those questions to be followed by speculation that Dumbledore had arranged the whole ‘attack’ to give his French allies the pretext to come to his aid even though Magical France was officially neutral.

Those among my colleagues who support this theory often fail to ask themselves why Dumbledore would have stooped to such a complicated plan if he could simply have faked an attack on the home of the Delacours. If they were his allies and looking for a pretext, they could have easily arranged things. All without taking the very same risks that my colleagues claim would have stopped the Dark Lord. Not to mention that if Dumbledore had wanted to frame his enemy, he would have certainly chosen a dark curse for that purpose.

The only logical conclusion is that the Dark Lord was responsible for the trap that almost cost Antoine Delacour his life and brought his family’s wands into the war on Dumbledore’s side.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, Diagon Alley, January 5th, 1997

“Why are we on the night shift, again?” Parkinson asked.

If she hadn’t been disillusioned, Brenda Brocktuckle would have raised her eyebrows at her partner. As it was she didn’t answer. He knew as well as she did that they were on this shift for two reasons. First, they had survived where two dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards had not, under their command - well, Brenda’s, but Parkinson had been in her group. And second, if the mudbloods attacked again, it would be at night.

Instead she lifted the Omnioculars she had managed to procure from the DMLE archives, where they had been stored as evidence for twenty years, and scanned the sky again from their vantage point, on the roof of a house at the start of the Alley.

“And why are we here? In the cold, on a roof, one slip away from breaking our necks?”
Once again, Brenda didn’t want to answer. They had spells against the cold, and were sitting on brooms with Cushioning Charms. But if her partner continued to gripe, then they might be heard by mudbloods before Brenda could spot them. The moon was waning, and without the Omnioculars, it would be a hopeless task. Even with them, it was easy to miss a broom at a distance, with a disillusioned rider. But she would be damned if she gave up, not now, not when the mudbloods were targeting her personally!

Just as she was about to tell him to shut up for the fifth time, she caught something flying over Knockturn Alley. A few adjustments, and she saw it more clearly. A broom rider! And anyone riding a broom to Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley was a suspect even if they were not at war with mudbloods - they would have to fly over muggle London, which could endanger the Statute of Secrecy. But at night, and nowadays? Brenda would bet what was left of her career that this was a mudblood.

Was betting her career, she realised, when she pointed him out to Parkinson. Then she saw two more flying next to the first. None of them were disillusioned, but that was hardly surprising - even among the Aurors, few had mastered that spell.

Brenda had, though, as had Parkinson. And she had a Human-presence-revealing Spell cast as well, showing her where Parkinson was, as long as he stayed in the - sadly, rather short - range of the spell. Which she doubted he’d manage - they hadn’t been working together that long; even Martin - she felt the pain of his loss again - had not been good enough.

Still, it would suffice to stop three mudbloods. Unless it was a trap.

For a moment, she hesitated. Traps and ambushes was how the Resistance fought. If they were waiting for them… She shook her head, even though no one could see her. The Resistance wouldn’t be that clumsy.

“I'll get the one in front,” she said. “You take care of the jinxes.”

“Alright,” Parkinson answered.

Then they were off.

Contrary to her expectations, Parkinson stuck close to her on the approach. But shortly before they were in range of spells he veered off. She couldn’t pay much attention, though - the mudbloods were pulling out small things, probably the bombs. Brenda ground her teeth and aimed her wand. Just a bit closer, to be certain to hit… Now!

Her Bludgeoning Curse hit the lead mudblood in the chest, and the man was thrown off his broom. He fell down, screaming and flailing, and she saw the bomb drop as well. Both hit the roof below, and Brenda heard the bomb go off.

The Auror was already turning around, climbing to dive at the remaining mudbloods. She wasn’t an expert, but she knew the basics of broom combat.

The two mudbloods seemed to panic, looking wildly around for her. One of them was suddenly hit by a Cutting Curse, or rather, his broom was, and started to go down as well. The other dived down, evading Brenda’s own curse at the last moment - he too seemed to know the basics of broom combat.

It wouldn’t help him, though. Thanks to Parkinson’s Anti-Apparition Jinx, the mudblood couldn’t escape - and she had altitude on him. Her next spell missed, but he jinked to the left, as expected,
losing more speed. She was gaining. And he was low enough now so he’d survive a fall - she needed at least one arrest. Another spell flew past the man, and when he pulled to the side and up, the bristles of his broom touched the roof underneath him.

Brenda was still diving, wand out, but she pulled up as well, leveling her flight, and the mudblood flew right across her - and into her next spell. The Bludgeoning Curse blew him off his broom, and he fell down on the roof, five yards below him, then skidded over the wet shingles until he slid over the edge and fell another story down into a dark courtyard.

Brenda followed, descending quickly, then jumped off her broom. The culprit was lying on his back, legs bent at unnatural angles, but he was still conscious, and glaring at her. His hands were empty - he must have lost his wand in the crash.

“You’re… not… taking me… alive…” he spat out.

Brenda’s eyes widened and she stunned him at once. Despite this, she saw black liquid dribble out of his mouth - poison! She fumbled for one of the bezoars on her with her left hand and countered the Stunner with her wand, but by the time she opened his mouth to push the stone down his throat, he was already dead.

Grinding her teeth, she stood up, kicking the barrel that had been broken by the man’s fall. A swish of her wand shrunk the corpse, and she mounted her broom again, to look for her partner and the other mudbloods.

As she rose out of the courtyard, she saw that not all of the buildings in Knockturn Alley had had the required wards against fire, not even half a year into this war - flames were shooting out of the burning roof of the building the first mudblood had fallen onto. Parkinson was flying nearby, and shooting water at the fire with his wand.

Brenda briefly closed her eyes, sighing - they couldn’t get lucky at least once, could they? - and then went to join him. Working together, they should be able to save the rest of the buildings until the other Aurors arrived.

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Hogwarts, January 5th, 1997

“Albus! Hogsmeade is under attack! Multiple wizards on brooms!”

Albus Dumbledore had been about to go to bed when his brother’s voice from the fireplace stopped him. Hogsmeade, under attack. If this was a diversion, meant to draw him away from Hogwarts - or simply to occupy his attention, freeing the Dark Lord to strike at another target without having to fear his intervention… He shook his head. He couldn’t leave Hogsmeade to those attackers on a simple possibility.

A wave of his wand created a shimmering, gleaming phoenix, floating in front of him. “Sirius, Hogsmeade is under attack. Gather your group and the Delacours and meet me at the Hog’s Head Inn!” Albus said while Fawkes cocked his head, watching his transparent double until it flew away, towards London.

Albus created another Patronus Messenger. “Alastor, take the boys and come to my office. Alert me at once, should there be news of another attack!”

That done, he grabbed Floo powder and entered his fireplace.
A second later and lightly covered with soot - Aberforth should clean his fireplace better - he stepped into the inn. Unlike during his other visits, his brother’s ‘friends’ were not drinking in excess, but standing at the windows and doors, wands out. Aberforth was standing in the centre of the room, organising the defence. “More allies will arrive shortly,” Albus said, passing his brother and leaving the inn. He had to take stock of the situation as soon as possible. It could be an attack on a Death Eater cell, or an attack by Death Eaters. Or it could be muggleborns attacking purebloods.

Outside, he was faced with an - unfortunately - familiar view: Screaming people were fleeing their homes while others rushed into houses. The Aurors on duty tried to gain control over the panicking mob at the same time as they were also attempting to fight back, failing to achieve either goal. And from the air, almost invisible in the dark sky, fire bombs were dropping on roofs and streets - and on people. It seemed that Miss Granger’s broadcast had not reached those it had been meant for.

Twenty yards away, a cylinder hit the street right next to a family and burst into a fireball that engulfed all of them before they could react. In seconds the Merriweathers - Albus recognised them; their youngest daughter was in Ravenclaw - were on fire, screaming as they tried to put out the flames. One of them, Albus couldn’t tell who, managed to conjure water, but that wouldn’t help with those flames.

The Headmaster flicked his wand, and the water was transfigured into clay. Another flick and the clay was enlarged, and a swish had the entire family covered in the clay. Albus pressed his lips together while he saw the three people struggle - the clay was not just smothering the flames, but preventing them from breathing as well. He didn’t like to do this to them, but it was the quickest way to save them from burning to death.

After more than thirty seconds, he vanished the clay, revealing the burned but alive family.

“Fawley!” His voice cut through the noise of the battle, enhanced by magic, and he saw the Auror jerk. “Get those people to St Mungo’s, now!”

The Auror - Gryffindor, graduated two years ago - rushed to the Merriweathers. Albus didn’t know and didn’t care if the boy had even recognised him - those people needed help, and Fawley wasn’t doing any good trying to cast spells from the ground.

Albus spent a few more seconds covering the nearby roofs with clay, then conjured a few dozen bats, made them glow with a spell the Weasley twins had invented for a prank, and sent them up in the air. It didn’t matter if the attackers were disillusioned or simply dressed in clothes matching the night sky, the bats would find them, and mark them with their own bodies. He made a mental note to advise Miss Granger to stop dropping the Resistances leaflets from brooms; his trick would quickly spread.

As the bats spread out, then started to converge on the broom riders in the sky, people started to rush out of Aberforth’s pub, wands ready - Sirius’s cell and the Delacours had arrived.

“The bats will follow all brooms in the air.” Albus pointed up. “Mister Delacour, ensure they cannot apparate away, and cut them off from fleeing by broom, but be careful not to curse each other.” He saw one broom rider trying to evade the bats. “Sirius, take your group and cover the ground. The people need help, and there might be some enemies on the ground as well.” Unlikely, but possible.

The two groups hastened to follow his orders - they knew better than to argue. As the French spread out, the Veela taking to the air, Albus started to cast at the closest enemy he had discovered. Or rather, near and in front of the man’s broom.
Hitting a speeding broom rider was difficult even for him; sending a spark into a conjured cloud of Knallgas, as Gellert called oxyhydrogen, was easy. The explosion didn’t throw the man off his broom - he had likely stuck himself to it - but he was pressing his hands against his ears, and his broom almost crashed.

And he had become an easier target. Albus next spell cut the broom in two and barely failed to cut off the man’s leg. He screamed as his broom turned into dead wood in an instant, but Albus caught him with a Levitation Charm before he had fallen more than twenty yards, and stunned and disarmed him with his next spells.

He needed at least one of them alive, to find out who was behind this attack. And, he added to himself when he saw another broom rider crash into the ground, followed by fireballs, the French didn’t seem to be in the mood to take the enemies prisoner.

The floating body of the broom rider reached him. Muggle clothes, and muggle-style cloth mask. Albus winced. A flick of his wand rolled the mask up, revealing the man’s face. The Headmaster knew the man.

Felix Smith. Gryffindor, graduated four years ago.

Muggleborn.

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Hogsmeade, Britain, January 6th, 1997

“Alright, is everyone ready?” Felix Smith asked, sliding his wand into its holster.

“Are you really certain we should be doing this? You heard the Resistance.” Bess looked at him. “They said we shouldn’t attack random purebloods any more.”

Felix scoffed. “They had to say that, but it’s just politics. They don’t want to lose Dumbledore’s support. But do you really think they mind what we do? They blew up Malfoy Manor, and not all of those who died there were Death Eaters!” A group of muggleborns who had killed so many purebloods couldn’t really be against killing more of the bastards, Felix thought. It simply made no sense.

“But why are we risking Dumbledore’s support then?” Bess wasn’t giving up. The witch could be very stubborn, as Felix knew from their time at Hogwarts.

He smiled. “We aren’t. He’s not supporting us. He doesn’t even know us. We’re just doing our part in the war.”

“They said we’re helping the Dark Lord if we do this.”

He scoffed again. “As if! The purebloods are already on his side - did anyone help us when they started to hunt us?”

“Some did.” Bess crossed her arms.

“Some, yes. But did that help Teddy?”

Bess flinched. Felix nodded. Teddy had been their friend, since Hogwarts. And he had been murdered by Aurors in Diagon Alley. And no pureblood had helped him. None of them had cared
about a mudblood. But they’d care now.

“Besides, we’re not attacking random purebloods - we’re attacking known supporters of the Dark Lord. Selwyn and Flint.”

“They are not on the list.”

“The Resistance is not perfect. They can’t know all Death Eaters. Have you forgotten how those two sneered at us when we entered their shops?” He shook his head. “Trust me, even if they’re not marked Death Eaters, they are helping them. Maybe with gold, maybe with information.” He smiled. “But if you still are not certain you can do this, you can stay here. Ricky, Mark and I can drop the bombs by ourselves.”

Bess shook her head. “No, I’m coming.”

Felix beamed at her.

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Albus Dumbledore closed his eyes as he ended his Legilimency spell. As he had expected, these muggleborns hadn’t been forced by Tom to do this. They had chosen to do this. He sighed. And now two of them were dead, both killed by the Delacours, or rather, the d’Aigles. The prisoner, Smith, would soon join them - the Wizengamot would show no mercy to muggleborns caught attacking purebloods. Nor, he added, muggleborns caught doing anything that could be seen as supporting the Resistance.

He sighed and looked around. Half a dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards were watching him. The Ministry forces had arrived just in time to mess things up. They had almost attacked the Veela in the air, if Albus hadn’t quickly intervened. And while they didn’t dare take Smith off his hands, their presence prevented Albus from taking the steps needed to deny Tom another propaganda victory.

“Albus!”

And now Amelia had arrived. She wouldn’t be intimidated by him, or rather, not enough to keep Smith out of her hands. He turned towards her with a tired smile. “Good evening, Amelia.”

She nodded at him, looking at the muggleborn prisoner. Albus had treated the worst of the man’s wounds, but he was no Healer. “You took a prisoner.”

“I did.”

“And your ‘friends’ killed two more.” She didn’t quite glare at him, but it came close. “Foreign friends, or so I’ve heard. Friends the Ministry didn’t know about.”

“I was not aware that the Ministry required us to register visitors.”

She bared her teeth and glared at him. “Don’t mince words, Albus! We’re not talking about visiting friends, we’re talking about foreigners fighting in our war! My Aurors almost attacked them because they didn’t know about them!”

As if on cue, Marcel Delacour approached them, a wide smile on his face. The French wizard looked like he had just stepped out of his home for an evening in town. Not a single hair was out of place. And he had heard the witch, since he said: “It was a good thing they didn’t, since that would have gone badly for them.” He bowed. “Marcel Delacour, at your service, Madam Bones.”
Albus saw Amelia’s eyes widen when she realised just who his ‘foreign friends’ were. He wondered if she had truly not expected this. She did school her features at once, though, and even managed a smile, although a rather empty one. “You have a rather high opinion of your friends, Mister Delacour.”

He shrugged. “The British Aurors we saw fighting were not very effective. Although I assume the best were held in reserve.”

He had better cut in, Albus thought. The French were fine fighters, but they knew it as well. And their opinion of the British Ministry was likely influenced by Sirius and his friends. He cleared his throat. “One attacker was captured, two killed. There was a fourth, who I assume escaped?”

Delacour nodded, his smile slipping a bit. “Unfortunately, yes. One of them managed to evade us long enough to fly out of the area covered by the Anti-Apparition Jinxes.”

Which wouldn’t have been that difficult, given the circumstances, even counting Albus’s own spell. But Amelia looked satisfied. At least as much as the stern witch could be, he thought. The Headmaster nodded.

“We’ll be taking the prisoner off your hands now.” Amelia stared at him, daring him to deny her.

“I recognised him. Felix Smith. Muggleborn. It seems he and his friends didn’t listen to the Resistance.”

“And you stopped them.”

“Of course, Amelia. I’ll not let criminals attack the innocent, no matter their blood.”

That should, coupled with the attack by purebloods disguised as muggleborns on Diagon Alley, negate some of the political capital Tom’s allies would gain from this fight.

Albus hoped it would be enough.

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London, Ministry of Magic, January 7th, 1997

Brenda Brocktuckle was both tired and annoyed when she finally returned to the Ministry. The only reason she was not complaining about it was that Parkinson had been whining about it already and she refused to show the same attitude. They had spent an hour dealing with the fire the mudbloods had started, most of it due to the residents hindering their efforts in their panic - the scum living there feared the Aurors as much or more than the mudbloods.

But they had saved the buildings adjacent to the burning house, and and they had caught the mudbloods responsible for the firebombings! That should impress the Head Auror. But when she left entered the Auror offices, she saw that far too many of her colleagues were around, and far too alert as well, for this time of the night.

She grabbed the first rookie trying to hurry past her. “What’s going on?”

“There was an attack on Diagon Alley, followed by an attack on Hogsmeade! More attacks might be expected - this could be a general offensive!” The rookie Auror said.

“What?” Parkinson stared at the young witch. “What happened in Hogsmeade?”
“Dumbledore personally killed all attackers but for one whom he took prisoner!”

Brenda blinked. Dumbledore, killing mudbloods? She shook her head. There was a more urgent issue to settle. “Why weren’t we informed? We were at the attack in Diagon Alley?” If that had been a deliberate act she’d make someone pay; if those attacking Hogsmeade had instead reinforced Diagon Alley…

“I don’t know! I’ve just been following my orders - securing a perimeter around the village, then returning to the Ministry with the prisoner.” The rookie looked nervous now. “I’m expected down in the cell area.”

Brenda released her, angry with herself. She was a veteran Auror; she shouldn’t act like a rookie. She shook her head and looked at her partner. “Busy night.”

Parkinson had recovered as well. “Yeah. If Dumbledore has started to kill mudbloods…”

“We might finally be able to find them and wipe them out,” Brenda finished for him. “But why would he suddenly betray his friends?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out!” Parkinson said, and walked off.

Brenda shook her head as she continued towards their office. Her partner was off gossipping again, leaving her with the paperwork. But at least he’d find out everything they needed to know about the latest office politics.

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“We killed purebloods?”

Brenda nodded at Parkinson. “They identified the attackers we killed. All of them were purebloods. Knockturn Alley residents too, one had prior convictions.” She glanced at her watch. Their shift was ending soon.

Parkinson frowned, sitting down at the desk he almost never seemed to use. “Does that mean that we didn’t foil a terror attack on purebloods? Was that just some Knockturn Alley scum trying to burn down their competition?”

Brenda shrugged. “It could have been an attempt to frame the mudbloods.” She studied Parkinson, watching for a reaction.

He frowned. “That’s… possible, I guess.”

Which probably meant he’d have to ask the Dark Lord. If he dared. “Dumbledore at least claimed that,” she said.

The other Auror snorted. “Dumbledore also disproved his own theory when he captured that mudblood in Hogsmeade.”

“It’s not actually disproven. Just because there is a group of mudbloods attacking random purebloods doesn’t mean there can’t be an attempt to frame them as well.”

“How many know about this anyway?” Parkinson asked, a bit too casually.

“By now? Half the Aurors in the building. That sort of news spreads fast.” Brenda had seen the Auror who had told her head straight to the break area afterwards. She smiled cynically when her
partner frowned - he probably had hoped to suppress this evidence. “Dumbledore requested a copy of the report as well.” And she doubted anyone in the Ministry would refuse the man. Not if half the things Parkinson had heard were true.

“Well, I think it was just some criminals using the mudbloods as a cover,” her partner said after a few moments.

“Those kind of criminals don’t suicide to evade arrest. And I’ve heard that the Dark Lord’s recruiting heavily.” Brenda didn’t quite smirk. Parkinson had been more subtle than she had expected, but he was trying pretty hard to recruit her for the Dark Lord.

“Well, it’s all speculation.” Parkinson shrugged. “I doubt we can prove it one way or the other. We can’t ask the Dark Lord if he recruited them, after all.”

Brenda joined her partner in a brief cynical chuckle. She knew enough about politics that this would make waves in the Wizengamot. Hopefully enough to finally bury the proposal to come to an agreement with the Resistance. To think anyone would want to let the mudbloods who had murdered so many purebloods get away with it… the mere possibility turned her stomach.

Granger would pay for what she had done.

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London, East End, January 7th, 1997

“... the attackers were stopped by Ministry forces before significant damage was done to the village. According to witnesses, the Chief Warlock personally arrested one attacker. The Minister for Magic was not yet available for a comment, but...”

Hermione Granger, who had been about to spread some jam on a piece of toast, clenched her teeth while the Wizarding Wireless announcer - she didn’t think the Ministry mouthpiece deserved to be called a journalist - continued with this morning’s news. That wasn’t a good way to start the day. The other Resistance members sitting at the breakfast table looked like they shared her thoughts. Most of them, at least.

“Dumbledore’s fighting muggleborns? Arresting them?” Seamus said. “Did he turn on us?”

“He didn’t. They said that he defended Hogsmeade against an attack,” Hermione said.

“He fought for the Ministry, and against muggleborns. How could he tell that they were not attacking Death Eaters?” Dean asked.

“We don’t have any Death Eaters listed in Hogsmeade,” Justin said.

“Doesn’t mean there aren’t any,” Seamus said. “We can’t know everything. Not even Hermione.”

The young witch pursed her lips. That last remark would have been a friendly joke, even a compliment, if Harry and Ron had said it. Coming from Seamus, though, it was almost an insult.

“We can’t know everything, no. And we can’t trust the Ministry’s lies. I’ll look into this, and get the truth.” It was possible that another group had found Death Eaters in Hogsmeade. Possible, but not that likely, she thought. Not under the nose of both Dumbledores. It was more likely that some muggleborns had decided to attack the village since the majority of the residents were purebloods.

“He’ll tell you a fine story that explains it all, but that doesn’t have to be the truth,” Dean said. “And working with the Ministry? The same Ministry that tries to kill us all?”
“That’s Ministry propaganda,” Justin said.

“So is the claim that this was an attack on the town, instead of a single building!” Dean shot back.

“We don’t know what happened, so we shouldn’t make any assumptions.” Hermione pressed her lips together.

“Assumptions like that Dumbledore is on our side?” Seamus snorted. “How do you even plan to find the truth with all those lies going around?”

“I plan to use multiple sources to verify each account.” She stared at him until he looked away.

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London, Greenwich, January 7th, 1997

“I miss meeting you at home,” Sirius said, sitting down.

“I do as well,” Hermione Granger said, pushing a menu over the table. They were early for the lunch crowd, but the restaurant was filling up quickly.

The older wizard perked up. “You do?”

“Because I could meet Harry and Ron there.” Hermione had to chuckle at Sirius’s exaggerated crestfallen expression. “Though I’ve heard that you’re quite fond of your new guests.”

“Well…” Sirius grinned. “Who wouldn’t be fond of Veela?”

“Heterosexual witches,” Hermione said.

“Ah, yes. I can imagine that. Melanie told me that other witches were often jealous of them.” Sirius nodded sagely. Hermione tried not to react, but her expression must have given something away, since his smile widened. “Oh, don’t tell me you’re jealous of Veela!”

She glared at him. She wasn’t jealous - she didn’t even know those witches - but… Hermione sighed. She was jealous. She wasn’t ugly, nor plain, as Rita Skeeter had once claimed, but she wasn’t the prettiest witch in her year.

She made a mental note to work on her poker face since Sirius grew serious and reached over the table to pat her hand. “Don’t fret, Hermione. I’m just joking. Remember, Harry didn’t go all gaga over Fleur.”

She wanted to say that Ron had shown a rather more pronounced reaction to the presence of the Veela, but refrained from doing so. Her friend had matured a lot since then. So she made a noncommittal sound. Besides, her friends were back at Hogwarts, now. Although they would still be travelling back to Grimmauld Place for some training sessions.

Apparently, it wasn’t enough for the older wizard. “Seriously, girl, don’t worry - the boys are not interested in the Veela, or not any more than normal for boys their age.” Which was not reassuring at all, Hermione thought. Sirius went on: “But more importantly, the girls are not interested in boys. Not even in the Boy-Who-Lived.”

That was more reassuring, Hermione thought. Although she wanted to protest that her two friends were not mere ‘boys’ - she remembered Harry’s reaction to Fleur calling him ‘little boy’ in their fourth year. She didn’t, though. Instead she raised her eyebrows at the wizard. “I assume this is
where you try to impress me with stories of your conquests? By all means, go ahead. Given the latest news from the war, I could do with some laughter.”

Sirius huffed. “If you’re acting like that, then I’ll keep the secrets of French love making to myself.” Then he grinned. “Joking aside, how are your other friends doing? I assume they didn’t like what they heard.”

Hermione winced. “Most didn’t, and a few took it rather badly. What exactly happened?”

Sirius sighed. “The Headmaster called us late at night. Hogsmeade was under attack. When we arrived at the Hog’s Head Inn, Dumbledore was already there, sending up conjured glowing bats to mark the attackers for the Veela, who took to the air.”

Hermione hissed - if that spell spread, then the Resistance would have to change their broom riding tactics. Although bats could be dealt with by high-frequency sounds… she’d have to ask Dumbledore if they could test that.

“The French engaged the broom fliers, and we - my group and I - searched the village for attackers on the ground, helped put out the fires, took care of the wounded, until the Ministry forces arrived.” Sirius grimaced. “There were no enemies on the ground, but the burned people…” He shook his head. “Apart from the one Dumbledore captured, two more were killed, one escaped.”

Hermione nodded. A group of four, attacking a target in a village - bad odds, if the element of surprise was lost. It looked as if the attackers had lingered for too long - an amateur mistake. Blinded by bloodlust, maybe. She frowned. “Were the attackers really muggleborns? And did they attack random purebloods?” And, she added silently, did the Headmaster know that when he engaged them?

“Well, Dumbledore told us that he read the mind of the prisoner he took, before the Ministry took him - Bones herself was there - and apparently, that was a muggleborn group who wanted to attack Adalbert Selwyn and Frederick Flint.”

Hermione winced. She knew the shops those two men owned. Most muggleborns didn’t buy anything there after their first visit. To assume that those two were Death Eaters was a bit much, but they certainly approved of the discrimination against muggleborns. Approved, and took part in.

“There were burning people in the street, though,” Sirius said. “Families, children among them - the attackers were using some nasty stuff water wouldn’t put out.”

Hermione pressed her lips together for a moment, so she wouldn’t curse. That was what she had feared. “They either had truly terrible aim, or they didn’t care. Or,” she added, “they wanted to hit the purebloods - any purebloods.”

Sirius nodded. “Dumbledore said they didn’t care about who else they hit, as long as it was a pureblood.”

The witch nodded. She could accept that, but would the Resistance? “So, one survived. And one will be executed.”

The wizard nodded. “Unless there’s some miracle, but…” He looked at Hermione and shrugged.

She nodded. She wasn’t about to ask the Headmaster to use whatever precaution he had taken to spring a captured Resistance member from the Ministry’s custody on a wizard who had been burning down random civilians - whether or not he were a muggleborn.
She just hoped the rest of the group would share her opinion.

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London, Ministry of Magic, January 7th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore’s customary polite smile was more forced than usual when he walked to the office of the Minister for Magic that afternoon. While Sirius’s report from his meeting with Miss Granger was cautiously optimistic - the young witch shared Albus’s view on the matter - Albus didn’t think everyone in her group would have the same opinion. The Ministry certainly had painted the whole battle as if there was a close alliance between itself and Albus’s Order. Which was far from the truth.

Cornelius was alone, which was a surprise - Albus had expected Amelia to be there already; the stern witch knew that the Minister was a bit more suggestible than one would expect from the leader of Wizarding Britain.

“Allbus! Here you are! Great news!” Cornelius beamed at the Headmaster.

Albus raised an eyebrow. “I would rather say that the events of last night were tragic in nature. A number of people died, many of them quite brutally.”

“Oh.” For a moment, the Minister seemed surprised, then he nodded, almost solemnly. “Of course, the deaths are a tragedy. So many who should still be alive, killed so senselessly!”

Not so senselessly, Albus thought - at least one of those battles had been carefully planned. He nodded, though - agreeing on general things with Cornelius made influencing him easier. “Indeed. One child died before my eyes.” He shook his head; his sorrow was honest, although he was thinking of the effects of that on the trial.

“But at least two groups of murderers were dealt with! And the public has seen that the Ministry can protect them!” The Minister was beaming again.

“Those who believe the Daily Prophet, at least,” Albus said. “Their account of the events of last night might be a bit misleading, I believe.” He allowed some of his annoyance to creep into his voice.

Cornelius cleared his throat and smiled weakly. “I would say they were a bit optimistic, maybe?”

Albus inclined his head. “Maybe. It depends on the policy of the Ministry - or, to be precise, on its change.”

Cornelius took a deep breath. “You know that the attack on Diagon Alley had a rather negative effect on those plans. Many Wizengamot members who were in favour of repealing the muggleborn laws changed their opinion. I’m certain you are aware of that as well.”

“Some,” Albus said. “But not everyone. And I am certain that a sizeable number of them can be persuaded to change their opinion again, with some effort.”

“Less than you expect, Albus.” The Minister shook his head. “The people are not willing to grant any concession to those who attack them.”

“Oh?” Albus narrowed his eyes. “That is quite a surprising development. A bit more than a year ago, there was widespread support to granting a lot of concessions to exactly those who’d threaten and attack British wizards and witches; namely, the Death Eaters.”
Cornelius coughed. “Err, that’s…”

“…an entirely correct description of the appeasement policy, Cornelius.” Albus’s smile lacked any humour.

The Minister blushed. “What happened in the past doesn’t change the fact that in the current climate, there is no majority to be found to grant the muggleborn anything; that’s something even those who support such a change agree upon.”

“And how much do you think the current climate would change if I were to publicly announce that I can no longer support the Ministry as long as it discriminates against the muggleborns?” Albus said.

Cornelius gasped. “But… you can’t!”

“You may be assured that I very well can do this. Or did you think I was joking when I warned you a week ago?”

“But…” The Minister fell silent, apparently at a loss for words. “But…”

Cornelius gained a respite thanks to Amelia’s arrival. “Amelia! Albus is threatening to publicly call the Ministry out as criminal if we don’t change the laws on muggleborns!”

The Head of the DMLE stared at Dumbledore.

He met her eyes. “If the Ministry will not change its laws, laws that were passed on behalf of the Dark Lord, I might add, then I cannot support it.” He smiled. “I said it before, and I will say it again: I will rather ally with the Muggleborn Resistance than with a Ministry that is still pursuing a pureblood agenda.”

“Even if it drives the Ministry and the British people into the Dark Lord’s arms?” Amelia asked.

“If they would rather join him than accept muggleborns as equals, then they already are in his camp,” Albus said. He was forcing this, he knew, but with the recent attacks, he feared the Dark Lord might gain too much of an advantage if Albus let him exploit this.

Once again, both gaped at him. He chuckled, which seemed to further confuse them. “Is it that hard to believe that I am willing to risk facing the Ministry and the Dark Lord’s forces together?”

After a moment, Amelia said: “It seems rather foolhardy.”

Albus laughed out loud. Both were staring him now. “As foolhardy as facing Grindelwald when he had conquered much of Magical Europe?” In that conflict, too, Albus had waited too long, but for other, even worse, reasons.

Amelia scoffed. “I see.”

Albus was tempted to ask if she did, really, but simply nodded.

“But you have to see that is currently impossible to find a majority in the Wizengamot who will support what you ask for!” Cornelius said.

“Is it really?” Albus said. He knew that it was difficult, but Cornelius had been confident of success before the attack on Diagon Alley. “Even if the only alternatives are to either face me, or the Dark Lord?”

“Would you really lower yourself to the same level as the Dark Lord?” Amelia asked. “Put yourself
“If the law is evil, breaking it becomes a good man’s duty,” Albus said. “I have already let this go on for far too long.” Neither the Headmaster nor the Ministry had been ready for a war when the Dark Lord had returned, but Albus often wondered if he should have pushed for war anyway, forced Cornelius’s hand as he was doing now. Voldemort wouldn’t have been that prepared either, after all. But if he had done so, would the Resistance have formed anyway? He doubted it. Without the Resistance, the Aurors would have had to take the brunt of the fighting, and they were of limited reliability.

“That’s easy to say, Albus, but harder to do,” Cornelius said. “What will happen if the Wizengamot sides with the Dark Lord? What about Hogwarts?”

That had been the main reason Albus hadn’t pushed this yet. Hogwarts. His school. His students. If the Ministry turned on him, they’d be in danger. But he had no choice any more. “Hogwarts will remain as it is. I will not allow anyone to threaten the students.”

“But will you remain Headmaster even if you are waging war?” Amelia said. “Even if you are fighting the Ministry, and many of your student’s families?”

“Yes. I will not let people who have chosen the Dark Lord’s side have any power over my students.”

“That would bring the war to Hogwarts,” the witch said. “You’d risk endangering the children you claim you want to keep safe.”

“If I left, war would come to Hogwarts - the Dark Lord would not spare any of the children whose families oppose him. And the muggleborns…” he trailed off. “No, I will not let the Dark Lord or his helpers get a hold of the children.” He smiled, cynically, when he added: “Which is another argument that might persuade some Wizengamot members to do what’s right.”

“You’d take their children hostage?” Cornelius gasped.

“No. But you might remind them that I would never use their families against them. Something the Dark Lord has done in the last war, and in this war as well, as Augusta’s murder proves.” Albus glared at the man. He had already made preparations, if worst came to worst, and the school came under attack.

“You will not be able to keep this under wraps if you plan to use this argument on the Wizengamot. The news will spread like Fiendfyre to the public.”

Amelia was shaking her head, but Albus thought she was beginning to realise that he would not budge. And it wasn’t as if she had an alternative - Tom would not let her live, if only to placate those of his followers he had freed from Azkaban. Sirius was no Death Eater, but his opinion of the DMLE, and of Amelia was rather extreme. Actual Death Eaters would be even worse.

He smiled. “I am not planning to keep this secret. I will tell them and anyone who asks that I will fight those who attack the innocents, no matter their blood. And I will add that I will consider anyone who supports blood-based discrimination as a supporter of the Dark Lord. Which includes the Ministry.”

“That will…” Cornelius was shaking his head. “The people will be in an uproar, Albus! Frightened, scared, angry!”

“I rather think they will be, yes,” Albus said. “But then again - sometimes, such a shock is good for them. Compared to what the muggleborns went through, it’s not even that bad.” They were not
about to be persecuted for being born, after all.

“That’s rather callous of you, Albus. Not everyone is a hero.” Amelia frowned at him.

“I am well aware of that, Amelia.” He shook his head. “But everyone can see what is right and what is wrong. Even those raised in bigoted families will spend seven years at Hogwarts, apart from their parents, surrounded by other students and teachers from all sorts of backgrounds. Those who did not see how vile those laws were chose not to.” And he didn’t really feel bad for shocking those who looked away and ignored the muggleborns’ plight. Even though he had to admit that he should have made more efforts to teach the students that bigotry was wrong, some basic truths were obvious to everyone. Or should be.

“There is no dissuading you from this, is there?” Cornelius said. He was sitting hunched over in his seat, and almost pleading with his eyes.

Albus didn’t answer that. He didn’t have to.

“You might need to talk with a few members in person, Albus,” the Minister continued. “They will not listen otherwise.”

The Headmaster nodded. It seemed Cornelius was, finally, working on their problem, instead of trying to avoid it. “I will do whatever is needed, of course.”

“What about the prisoner you took?” Amelia asked.

“What about him?”

“Will he be covered by this ‘change of policy’?” The witch stared at him.

Albus had been weighing this question for quite some time. Felix Smith hadn’t started out with a plan to kill all purebloods. But he had not cared if he killed any either. And he had picked his targets for rather petty reasons, too. The Headmaster shook his head. “He attacked random purebloods for being purebloods. He didn’t know or care if they were Death Eaters. That’s not the same as defending yourself, or attacking Death Eaters.”

And, he thought, with some guilt, executing him would help in persuading the purebloods that they would be protected from muggleborns wanting to take revenge. At least those who had done nothing, of course.

Albus wasn’t planning to save any of those who had supported the Dark Lord.

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Hogwarts, January 9th, 1997

Usually, the delivery of the Daily Prophet wasn’t an event that he was looking forward to, Harry Potter thought. Today was an exception, though. Today everyone in the house was waiting for the article covering ‘Dumbledore’s finally making a stand against the Ministry’, as Sirius put it. Followed by his wish that it wouldn’t be a final stand. Harry still didn’t understand why some thought that sort of joke was funny.

“What’s keeping the owls? We could have taken the Floo to the Cauldron and bought a paper already,” Ron said.

“Well, of course - the Floo’s much faster than flying,” Harry said.
Ron rolled his eyes at him. “Well, you know what I mean.”

Harry nodded, grinning. He was half-heartedly poking at the sausages on his plate. Ron was showing more of an appetite, but both were craning their necks whenever they thought they heard something. And trying not to grab their wands - Moody’s training and the fight in Paris had left an impression.

Harry was still dreaming of the Inferi, an unstoppable wave of them, rushing him. And Ron had nightmares too, he knew that, though neither of them had talked about it. Even though a number of the adults had offered to listen. Hermione would berate them for it, they knew. But… Harry didn’t want to talk about it. Not now. After, he told himself, after the war he’d talk about it.

Finally, the owls arrived, entering the Great Hall and spreading out. Usually, Harry would be looking for Hedwig, her white plumage easy to spot among the brown owls, but not today.

“There!” Ron pointed at one owl banking towards them, a rolled up newspaper in its talon. Ron had the money ready and was putting it into the purse tied to the owl’s leg while Harry grabbed the Daily Prophet, almost toppling the bird over when one string wasn’t quite free when he pulled. A bit of sausage mollified the angry bird, a quick cleaning charm took care of the spilled tea, and they could finally read the newspaper.

*Albus Dumbledore challenges Ministry! Repeal the muggleborn laws, or fight him, Dumbledore says!*

The article itself - not written by Skeeter - was less sensational, they found out, but given the topic, that didn’t mean much. It stated that the Headmaster had sent the Ministry an ultimatum - either the Ministry stopped any discrimination of muggleborns, or he’d consider them followers of Voldemort, with all that entailed.

“Blimey!” Ron said, shaking his head. “We knew it was coming, but still… look at the other students!”

Harry looked up and saw that at all the tables, even the half-vacated of Slytherin, students were loudly discussing the news. He glanced at the staff table, where Dumbledore was calmly eating breakfast, and talking to McGonagall. Not all of the teachers looked like they had known about this, either. Of course, Harry knew that some might just be able to hide their surprise better. Moody’s training had covered more than just fighting, after all.

“Bet you that all of those who support this don’t think what it might mean for Hogwarts,” Ron said.

“The staff have realised that,” Harry said. “McGonagall looks angrier than in our first year.”

“Well… we’ll need to step up the training of our house,” his friend said. “Focus on running away.”

Harry nodded. “The Headmaster will have an evacuation plan already. But it never hurts to have alternatives.”

“Unless you can’t decide what to do,” Ron quoted Moody.

Harry glared at him. “You know what I meant.”

“Yes.” Ron smirked.

They were even again, Harry thought. He glanced at the Daily Prophet. There was another article, detailing the trial of the muggleborn captured in Hogsmeade, and whether this development would
affect it or not. The article claimed it would not - that Dumbledore had captured the criminal himself and condemned his actions. Harry had already known about this as well.

He wasn’t certain how he felt about it, though. Hermione had told him that she didn’t care for people who attacked random civilians, no matter if they were muggleborns or purebloods, but…

He couldn’t help wondering how many purebloods would see the difference between Felix Smith and Hermione Granger.

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London, East End, January 9th, 1997

“... and if the law is evil, breaking it becomes a good man’s duty. Or, if he has the power to, repealing it, Albus Dumbledore was quoted by the Minister,” Seamus was reading out loud from the Daily Prophet.

Hermione Granger glanced up from where she was halfway through the third page of her own issue. She saw the wizard was shaking his head, and already knew what was coming.

“All those fine words, and then he condones the execution of the captured muggleborn?” Seamus scoffed.

Yes, what she had expected.

“The trial’s not been held yet,” Justin said. He had been reading over her shoulder.

“So what? They were probably just waiting for his go-ahead, we know they will kill us if they capture us!” Seamus didn’t have to say why - no one had forgotten Martin Cokes.

“We don’t murder random purebloods,” Hermione said. “The Wizengamot might not care for that difference, but the Headmaster won’t let them execute us. If this succeeds, then they’ll pardon us as well.” She held a hand up when Justin tensed up. “We can discuss the legal ramifications of such an act after we have stopped Voldemort.” Especially where accepting a pardon meant accepting that one had committed a crime.

Justin grumbled, but good-naturedly, at having been forestalled. Sally-Anne hugged him from the side. Hermione felt a pang of… not jealousy. Envy. She wanted her boyfriend near her too. Once she had picked him. If either of them still wanted her as a girlfriend when she finally made up her mind. Or heart, in this case.

“So, we ignore the murder of one muggleborn? Will we ignore the murder of others too? Martin’s?” Dean asked.

He wasn’t as loud and rash as his friend, Hermione knew, but shared the same views, which made him more of a pain in the butt, usually. “There’ll be a reckoning, once we’ve beaten the Dark Lord.” With Voldemort gone, Dumbledore would be able to order the Ministry around. Especially with the Resistance as a threat in case they didn’t follow his lead.

“So what? I bet there’ll be a ‘general amnesty’ for all survivors. Maybe some ineffectual ‘truth commission’.” Dean sneered. “I want justice for our deaths!”

“And we will get it.” Hermione stared at him. “We won’t forget, and we won’t forgive.”

And they wouldn’t make the same mistake others had made in 1982.
Hogwarts, January 10th, 1997

“Please have a seat,” Albus Dumbledore said when Severus entered his office. The younger wizard sat down stiffly, as usual. Fawkes looked up from his perch and trilled soothingly, but Severus just tensed up even more.

“How did your meeting with the Dark Lord go?” Albus had been concerned when the other wizard had been called away at short notice, so to speak. That was often a bad sign.

“He was in a mixed mood,” Severus said. “Angry at having been surprised by your announcement, but pleased by it as well.”

“Pleased?” That was worrying, Albus thought.

“He said you were desperate. That only the threat of imminent defeat would push you to take action.” Severus’s face showed no emotion, but Albus knew the man was worried as well.

“He is mistaken, then.” It was true that Albus’s hand had been forced, but the situation was not quite as dire as Tom was thinking.

“He was also angry at the news of French involvement.” Severus’s voice held a tinge of amusement now. “Should the Dark Lord win, France will face some trouble.”

Albus nodded. That was information he’d pass along to the Duc at once, in strict confidentiality, of course. If things were not going according to plan, this might propel the French into providing more direct support in the war - it was easier to beat the Dark Lord while he still was fighting British wizards, after all.

“He has also reminded me of the need to gain your trust, and mentioned that the curse on my current position might not be lifted if I disappoint him.” Severus didn’t show any sign that he was disturbed by this threat. But then, the man had wanted to teach Defence, for years, despite knowing about the curse.

“I see.” Albus leaned back. “A quite compelling incentive, or so he might think.”

“In order to gain his trust, I need to be able to offer him more than some observations I make at Hogwarts.”

Albus knew that. “I will see that you can provide him with crucial information.” Although he’d have to ensure that whoever took part in that operation would be aware of the risks. “Was he gloating about my inability to break the curse?”

“Yes.”

That Albus hadn’t been able to break the curse - that for quite some time, he had not even been able to determine that there was a curse - was irritating. While Albus was not quite as knowledgeable about the Dark Arts as Tom was, he was very skilled in dealing with the Dark Arts. Discovering that his knowledge fell short in this matter had been a humbling experience. Just about everything he had tried had failed. Some methods seemed to have worked, only to be revealed as failures when another year had passed. It had been as if the curse was as hard to defeat as its caster. Fortunately, it was impossible to create a Horcrux for a curse.

Although… there were rumours Albus had found, when researching the withering curse cast on the
Creevey brothers, on ‘undefeatable curses’. Rumours he might have cause not to dismiss as quickly as he had thought.

Severus was still waiting, he realised. Albus smiled. “Rest assured that I will be working on dealing with the curse once and for all.”

It looked like he’d have to investigate the houngan angle more thoroughly. It wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on them anyway - they might try something, with him occupied fighting Voldemort.

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Decisive Dates

Chapter 28: Decisive Dates

‘At the time it was published, Dumbledore’s ultimatum for the Ministry was considered by many as a turning point in the war. It is an understandable view, given the limited knowledge available to the public at the time. Here was one of the two most powerful wizards in Britain making a stand and forcing the Ministry to choose between allying with him, or with the Dark Lord. Many must have been thinking that if the Ministry sided with Dumbledore, if it was working with the Muggleborn Resistance, then certainly the outcome of the war was decided. Who could stand against those three forces if they were united?

And yet, as I will demonstrate, for all its publicity, Dumbledore’s declaration was just the inevitable conclusion of his actions to date. He had opposed the muggleborn laws from the start, and he had been advocating to repeal them for as long as they had been in effect. As we know, he also opposed the prosecution of muggleborns, with some notable exceptions. It was therefore only logical that he’d use more forceful means to make the Ministry change its policies when his more subtle methods had failed, since his ultimate goal was never in doubt.

However, even with just the information available at the time, it should have been obvious that the Ministry falling in with either side would not be decisive. The Ministry was not a unified force, but riddled with spies and agents for the different factions, and any official change of policy or alliance would not change that. Not without a bloody fight, at least.

At this point, however, I have to discuss another ramification of Dumbledore’s ultimatum: Ironically, it put him in the same situation as the Dark Lord he was opposing - outside the law. For just as his enemy had already done, Dumbledore too was no longer working within the boundaries of the law, but used the threat of naked force in an attempt to make the Ministry submit to him. That was quite a marked difference to his actions in Grindelwald’s War, and in the First Blood War.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Ministry of Magic, January 10th, 1997

When she entered the Auror Offices, Brenda Brocktuckle felt as if she walking through a Dragon preserve dripping with cow blood. And it was all the fault of Dumbledore! First the mudbloods called her out as a Death Eater - which she wasn’t! She hadn’t even met the Dark Lord, nor anyone who’d admit to following him - and now Dumbledore had denounced the Ministry’s muggleborn laws as evil. Laws she had spent months enforcing - as was the duty of any good Auror! And now this was suddenly a crime? She ground her teeth and opened the door to her office with more force than usual. If not for the Cushioning Charm placed on the wall, the door would have slammed into it.

Parkinson still noticed. “I see you’re as fond of this new style of politics as others.”

The witch scoffed. “When ‘breaking the law becomes a good man’s duty’, what do you need Aurors for?” She sat down on her chair.

“It’s more than that,” Parkinson said. “If you call one law evil, and it sticks, where will it end? Is it evil not to share your food if someone is hungry? If one law is broken without impunity, then the whole body of law is weakened. If you can threaten the Wizengamot into passing or repealing laws
with the threat of force, then all our laws and policies are no longer voted upon, but dictated at wand point.”

For a moment, Brenda was tempted to ask if that was not exactly what the Dark Lord wanted. But that would have antagonised Parkinson, who was the best and maybe only friend among the Aurors she had left, not to mention her flatmate. And the Dark Lord hadn’t done anything to her. Mudbloods, though, had killed two of her partners, and Dumbledore was trying to protect them from their deserved punishments. So she nodded. “Not that those fools who think the world of the Headmaster will ever admit that.”

“Sheep who blindly follow their leader, and they’ll only realise that he has led them into an Acromantula’s nest when they are already caught in the web.” Parkinson snorted. “I’d say they deserve it, but they’ll try to drag us down with them.” The Auror grinned. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not too terribly fond of pardoning mudbloods who murdered our friends.”

“Neither am I.” It would feel like failing her partners once again, Brenda knew.

“Well… what did Dumbledore say? ‘If the law’s evil, breaking it becomes a good man’s duty’? Maybe we should heed his own advice, should the Ministry end up following him. Although prevention is always better than a cure,” he added, looking at her with that feigned casual interest she had come to know.

She knew what he was hinting at. Knew what his friends were planning. It was certainly illegal. Some might even call it treason. She knew all that.

But she nodded anyway.

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London, Soho, January 10th, 1997

Hermione Granger was feeling guilty. Going on a date - two dates - while the fate of Wizarding Britain was hanging in the balance was selfish. Very selfish. But, the young witch told herself, not for the first time, rest and recreation was important for a soldier in a war. Justin and Sally-Anne had told her so. Sally-Anne had even threatened to march her out of headquarters at wand point if Hermione ‘tried to be all stupid’.

And there wasn’t much she could do right now to influence the purebloods in making their choice. In fact, as she had been told by Dumbledore, it would be best if the Resistance didn’t do anything right now. Not even a supportive broadcast. Although the Resistance Radio would still broadcast, as it usually did on a Friday evening. But when it came down to it, it was the purebloods’ decision whether they would follow Dumbledore, or join the Dark Lord.

Hermione hoped they would join the Headmaster. She was sick of being a wanted fugitive. Even though hiding in muggle Britain was almost perfectly safe, there remained pure random chance. She ran her hand over her wig. It wasn’t the best disguise, but it would hopefully fool anyone stumbling on her. And she could probably spot a pureblood before they spotted her. Even, she added with a glance at the colourful crowd in the café she was waiting in, in Soho.

The door opened, and she looked up, but it was a couple, not Ron. She glanced at her watch. She had arrived too early, as usual. But better being early rather than late. It allowed her to take stock of her surroundings as well. Plan escape routes. She briefly closed her eyes and sighed. Even while she was about to go on a date with her best friend, she was thinking like a soldier. No, a wanted fugitive, she corrected herself, smiling wryly. She doubted she’d be able to break the habit either. Not that she
could afford to.

“Is your boyfriend late?” the waitress asked, in a sympathetic tone as she served the tea Hermione had ordered.

“No. I’m early.” Not that it was any of the woman’s business, Hermione thought.

“Ah. You just looked so sad. Far too sad for a pretty girl on a date.”

Hermione forced herself to smile. “I was just thinking about a story I read. It had no happy ending.”

“Ah.”

The waitress probably thought she was overly emotional, or just being silly, but she left her in peace, which was what Hermione had wanted. The door opened again, and this time it was her date. Hermione smiled when she saw Ron enter. He cut a fine figure in his shirt and trousers. Casual, but well dressed. She was wearing a short skirt and leggings herself, with a turtleneck.

She stood up and hugged him, letting her hands travel briefly over his back, enjoying his closeness.

“You’re looking good,” Ron said, smiling at her when they separated.

“You too,” she said. She noticed his eyes briefly roam over her, lighting up, and felt pleased. Sally-Anne’s idea of shrinking the turtleneck just a bit had been a good one, she could admit that. Just as she could admit that she liked seeing Ron watching her like this. Especially with four French Veela living at Grimmauld Place.

“So, what do you have planned for today?” she asked when they had taken their seats, and the nosy waitress, who was smiling far too much now, had taken Ron’s order.

“Dinner, movie, dancing.” He smiled at her. “Nothing fancy, just the two of us, spending time together.”

“A classic date then,” she said, nodding in approval.

“It’s classic for a reason.” He grinned. “No need to be different just to be different.”

She saw that he relaxed just a bit - had he been nervous? Had he feared she’d expected something else? The waitress brought Ron’s soda and refilled her tea, interrupting their conversation.

“Dumbledore’s covering for you again?” she asked.

“Yes. Harry’s receiving another private lesson, just without me being there, for a change.”

“How are those lessons going?” She didn’t want to talk about Harry while on a date with Ron, but her friend was taking the same lessons.

“The Headmaster said we’re progressing at a nice pace. But…” He sighed. “I know Legilimency training can’t be rushed, the headaches are bad enough as they are, but the longer we take, the longer the war goes on.”

“Yes.” Hermione knew what he wasn’t saying - the quicker they finished, the quicker Harry would be facing Voldemort.

“I wish I could do more,” Ron said, clenching his teeth. “I’m training just like him, but I won’t be able to help him when… you know.”
“I know.” And she knew both of them hated feeling helpless. Harry… it had always been him who had been facing Voldemort. Alone. She had been left behind, or petrified.

Ron broke the silence after a while. “I made reservations at an Indian restaurant. Bill recommended it.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t ask Parvati or Padma, they’d have wondered why I wanted to know.”

“And they would have likely recommended a wizard restaurant,” Hermione said.

Ron shook his head. “I don’t think there is an Indian restaurant in Wizarding Britain.”

Hermione didn’t know. But then, how could she know? She hadn’t grown up in Wizarding Britain. And she hadn’t spent that much time in Wizarding Britain, outside Hogwarts, either. She sighed.

“Do you dislike Indian food?”

“I like it.” She smiled. “But I just realised how little I know about so many parts of Wizarding Britain.”

“Ah.”

Ron looked just a bit… disappointed? Nervous? Did he fear that this meant she was picking Harry over him, since Harry had grown up in muggle England? Hermione shook her head. “So much still left to learn and discover.”

He nodded. “Same for me, with muggle Britain. It’s fun to find new things, though. New food, new movies, new clubs, tonight at least.” The boy smiled at her. “Once the war’s over, I can show you more of Wizarding Britain.” If they won, of course. If they lost they’d very likely be dead, Hermione knew that. Ron went on: “I’m starting to forget how it was before the war.”

Hermione chuckled with him, though both knew he wasn’t just joking. She took a deep breath. This was just the opening she needed to discuss this.

“It won’t ever be the same again, you know.”

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Ron Weasley looked at Hermione. “What do you mean?” Was she talking about their friendship, after she made her choice?

“Wizarding Britain. It won’t be the same as it was before the war.”

“I reckon that,” Ron said. “Those laws will be gone. The Dark Lord will be gone. The Death Eaters will be gone.”

“Not all of them.” She was shaking her head. “Like last time, some will flee, or go into hiding.”

“They’ll lose all their power, though,” he said. Dumbledore would see to it. His parents had been talking about it.

“Maybe.” He saw that she was pressing her lips together for a moment, before she continued: “There are a lot of purebloods who don’t follow Voldemort, but don’t really like muggleborns.”

Ron scoffed. “Idiots.”

“Idiots, yes. And bigots. But there are a lot of them around. We can’t lock them all up either - not just for not liking muggleborns. And they have money, and influence. In the Ministry, as well as through
their businesses.” She was pushing the teaspoon around in her cup. “They’ll keep their thoughts to themselves, for a while at least, but they’ll not accept us. And sooner or later, they’ll try to run things like they did before - by purebloods, for purebloods, maybe with a token half-blood and muggleborn for show.”

Ron frowned. “They can try, but things were changing before the war already. My family were considered blood traitors for decades, after all. It’s mostly the rich, the Old Families, who are like that.”

“But they have the power. Gold, influence, properties. What happens once Dumbledore steps back or dies?”

Ron hadn’t really thought about that. The Headmaster had been around all his life, and his parents’ lives. To imagine a Britain without him… what could they do without Dumbledore? He cursed under his breath. “I didn’t think about that. But we’re not powerless. Look at my family. We’re poor, but Dad has a good job at the Ministry. Bill’s a highly paid Curse-Breaker, and marrying Fleur Delacour. Charlie’s working with dragons, which also pays very well.” It had to, given the risks, but he didn’t have to mention that. Hermione had seen how dragons were handled, at the Tournament’s first task. “The twins’ shop is doing well, even though we’re in the middle of a war and they’re known blood traitors. Percy’s working hard at the Ministry.”

“You forgot yourself.” She was smiling at him.

He tensed up. He hadn’t anything to show for. Not like his brothers. He wasn’t a hard worker. Or a really talented wizard.

She must have guessed his thoughts, or known, since she grabbed his hand. “You’ve been fighting against Voldemort for years.”

He had. And he was good at fighting. Not as good as Harry, but close enough. He nodded. “I guess I can go and become an Auror, and hunt the Death Eaters who are hiding.”

“But that’s not what you really want to do, isn’t it?”

Once again he nodded. “I want to play professional Quidditch.” He saw her frown, just for a moment, like she usually did when he and Harry were talking about the best sport in the whole world, and grinned. “I don’t know if I am good enough, though.”

“And if you can’t play Quidditch professionally?”

What would he do if he couldn’t realise his dream? What he usually did. Go on and do something else. “I could become an Auror. I’m good in a fight. And all the training we’re doing would help with that work as well.”

“If they let you into the Corps.”

“They’ll have to.” He grinned. “After all, we’ll have won the war.”

Hermione chuckled at that. “Push as many of our friends into positions of power, while the bigots are still reeling?”

He shrugged. “It’s a good plan.”

“Yes.”
He raised his eyebrows at her, though with a grin. “Shouldn’t you be telling me not to abuse my influence like that?”

She shook her head. “As you said - we need all the power we can get, even after we win this war. We’ll have to make dead certain that Britain won’t ever turn back into this... cesspit of bigotry and ignorance, not even after Dumbledore is gone. We’ll need lasting reforms. Lasting and drastic reforms, which is very difficult to achieve.”

“Are you planning to enter the Ministry as well, then?” He was curious what Hermione wanted from her life. She was good at tackling difficult challenges.

She sighed. “If it’s possible.”

Ron frowned. That sounded… unlike the Hermione he knew. “Why wouldn’t it be possible?”

“I’m the most hated witch in Britain, among purebloods at least. Even if we win this war, a number of people will will want to avenge their family members, those the Resistance killed.” She snorted. “All of us are facing that, but I’m the leader. I’m the face of the Resistance. Those purebloods will never forgive me.”

He hissed. “Shite.”

For once, she didn’t call him on his language. Instead she nodded. “And my family will be at risk as well. My parents, and my partner. Or husband.”

Ron thought that that sounded familiar. He grinned. “You’re not trying to tell me you’re too dangerous to be with, are you? Remember how we reacted to Harry trying to pull that off.”

She chuckled, but grew serious quickly. “No, I’m not. And what if I have children?”

He hadn’t considered that. It was one thing to risk himself, and his family was Gryffindor to the core, but children?

Hermione snorted. “Not that I’ve been planning to have children anytime soon.”

“But eventually?”

She sighed. “I haven’t really thought that far ahead.”

“Oh.” He guessed that that meant she wasn’t planning to have children for several years after the war.

Hermione looked at him. “What about you?”

He took a moment to answer that. “I… I haven’t really thought about having children either, to be honest. I simply assumed that I’d marry and have children, because, well, that’s normal.” When he saw that she was frowning, he added, maybe a bit quickly: “At least normal in my family. I didn’t really think about it.”

“Harry’s parents married shortly after finishing Hogwarts and quickly had him,” Hermione said.

“Yes.” Ron wondered if Harry wanted children. His friend wanted a family, he knew that, but would the Boy-Who-Lived want to have kids? And how soon?

But the more important question was, Ron thought, whether he wanted children.
“Let’s talk about something else,” Hermione said, breaking the sudden silence.

He shook his head. “No, no.” He had to clear that up. He couldn’t let her think that he wanted her to have children as soon as the war was over. He took a deep breath. “I was surprised by the question, that’s all. I really didn’t think about this. Not before, and not now, with the war and all.”

She nodded, a faint grin on her face. “Not many are thinking that far ahead.”

“Well, Ginny was planning her marriage to Harry when she was seven years old,” Ron said, and regretted it at once. That was close to betraying what his sister had told him in confidence. When Hermione laughed, he quickly went on - he didn’t want to tell her that Ginny still planned to marry Harry. “But I think all of us will have to deal with that - the hatred and the threat of purebloods wanting revenge. I’m a blood traitor since birth, Harry’s the Boy-Who-Lived, and we’re your best friends.” He smiled thinly. “Everyone knows that they can hurt you through us.”

He saw that she was biting her lower lip. “I guess that’s true,” she said, a bit reluctantly.

“I don’t know that much about kids,” he said - he had been the second-youngest, after all, and never had to babysit Ginny, “but I’d rather not have children until...” He almost said ‘... until they can grow up safely’. Instead, he said: “But I don’t want to have children until I feel ready for that kind of responsibility.” With a grin, he added: “Which will take some time; can’t simply curse the little buggers if they annoy you.”

“Ron!” She was shaking her head, but she was smiling.

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Hermione Granger watched Ron as he made his way through the packed club to the bar, to fetch two more drinks. Dinner had been nice. Good food, pleasant ambiance, a family style restaurant. They hadn’t talked about politics or relationships, but had mostly exchanged stories from their respective childhoods. The movie had been a romantic comedy. Nothing worth an Academy Award, but a perfect choice to forget the war and everything else for two hours.

When her friend was skirting the edge of the dance floor, a girl bumped into him while she was dancing. Hermione saw her turn around, probably to mumble an apology, and then noticed how her face lit up in a smile. She couldn’t hear what the girl was saying, nor Ron’s reply, but when she saw Ron smile at the blonde, then turn away, and the girl pouted, she felt rather pleased. It was strange what love could do to her - she wouldn’t have thought she could be that... petty? Before. Or that possessive. Even though Ron technically wasn’t her boyfriend, since she still hadn’t been able to choose. But he wasn’t available, not to a Veela, nor to a blonde tart who bumped into people because she didn’t pay attention to her surroundings when dancing.

She sighed. She didn’t know for certain if Ron really didn’t want to have kids as early as most purebloods seemed to have them. But his reason, that he didn’t feel mature enough to be a father, rang true. Ron wasn’t the most mature boy she knew. Although knowing that he wasn’t quite ready to raise kids was a sign of maturity in itself. Heck, she didn’t feel ready to have kids, and she liked to think that she was rather mature for her age - certainly more mature than some wizards twice her age. Like Sirius. Although Harry’s godfather had the excuse of having spent a decade in Azkaban.

Ron was at the bar now, talking to the bartender. He was fitting in well with the muggles, she noticed once again. A far cry from how his parents acted, or had acted, when Hermione had seen them. Her parents would approve of him, she thought, then giggled. They weren’t about to marry, they were trying to find out if they should have a relationship.
She saw Ron turn around, and start towards their table, two glasses in his hands. He did look attractive, his shirt and trousers fit him as if tailor-made - magic, probably - and he had been filling out in the last years. Dishy, some of her muggle friends would call him. Maybe next time they should go swimming, she thought. She’d like to see how Ron looked in speedos. And Harry too, she added.

“Here!” Ron held out her drink.

“Thank you.” Hermione took it, then raised her glass to her friend before taking a big sip. Then she shook her head. She should enjoy the evening, have fun, forget about the war, and all of this… whatever her relationships were.

“Let’s go dancing!” she said, and emptied her drink.

As if on cue, the music changed to a slow song and Ron opened his arms.

It was shaping up to become a great date.

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Hogwarts, January 11th, 1997

Harry Potter, sitting in the Headmaster’s office, told himself that he was just covering for Ron while he waited for his best friend to return from his date. They were thought to have special lessons with the Headmaster, so it would be weird if they didn’t return together.

And yet, he knew he’d stay up even if he didn’t need to. He wanted to know how Ron’s date had gone. Not because he was jealous. Just curious. And maybe a bit… alright, he was jealous. Ron’s last date had gone well, considering that it had been cut short due to the attack on the Burrow. Harry could tell from Ron’s mood afterwards, when they had talked about Hermione, and from the fact that Ron hadn’t been really nervous for this date, which meant he had had reasons to be optimistic. And confident.

Harry on the other hand was quite nervous. His first date with Hermione hadn’t been bad, but it could have gone better. Sirius had said that he had been trying too hard - as if Harry hadn’t acted on his godfather’s advice when he had planned the date!

He glanced at the book in his lap, ‘The Art of Magical Warfare’. As far as such books went, it was a good one - not boring, easy to understand, and focused. But he hadn’t really read much in the last hour, after Dumbledore’s actual lesson had ended. Shouldn’t Ron be back already? Dinner and whatever they did afterwards couldn’t take that long, could it? His own date… well, it had lasted about as long, now that he thought about it. Still, he was wondering, despite not wanting to, what his two best friends were doing. Were they kissing? Harry and Hermione had kissed on their date, but would she have kissed Ron as well? Probably, he thought. She would have thought that was just being fair.

Which meant she’d be kissing Ron again, today. Probably had, already. If they had gone into a nightclub, then they would have had ample opportunities to kiss. Or go further - Harry had stories about what happened in those clubs. And not all of them from Sirius. He sighed again. Hermione wasn’t the kind of girl to do that. But if she did, would she be doing it with him tomorrow - no, it was now later today - as well?

Harry wasn’t quite certain if he wanted that. Part of him wanted to, and go further. They were at war, and he could die on the next mission. He’d rather not die a virgin. But he didn’t want to have sex just to have had sex. And sleeping with a girl Ron was sleeping with as well… he shook his head. That
would never work, not even with Hermione. He frowned and closed his eyes.

“Are you wondering what your friends are doing right now?”

Dumbledore’s voice startled him. He had almost forgotten that the Headmaster was there - and it was his office! He cleared his throat. “Did you read my mind?” Without him noticing, despite him having learned Occlumency? If that was possible, then Harry wouldn’t last long against Voldemort.

The old wizard chuckled. “No, I did not. Sometimes, a person’s thoughts are written on their face. Although it helps that I am aware of your situation.”

Harry winced. The Headmaster knowing about his love life, or lack thereof, was embarrassing. The only worse person to know about this… well, Sirius already knew. He didn’t want to talk about this. “Are you going to tell me not to worry? They are out there, just the two of them. They don’t have any backup.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No. While the odds of any enemy not only stumbling upon them, but also recognising Miss Granger are almost nonexistent, they are just that, almost.” The Headmaster paused for a second. “But if I do not miss my guess, you are worried about something else.”

Harry looked away. That was even worse - the Headmaster knew of his jealousy. He felt petty and stupid.

This time, the Headmaster sighed. “Ah, love - the source of so many great, and so many terrible things. Some say love is fickle, but I prefer the term ‘unlimited’ - you cannot control who you love.”

“Hermione thinks she can,” Harry said.

“If she does, then she is mistaken. Although I would think her actions so far as not so much aimed at controlling her feelings, but finding them in the first place.”

Harry shrugged. Whatever the reasons, it meant that Hermione would pick Ron or him. And Harry wanted her to pick him.

“It may sound callous to you, or even uncaring, but no one can control love. To be in love is not a contest you can win or lose,” Dumbledore said, petting Fawkes.

Sirius had said something else, but that wasn’t the time to discuss his godfather’s views. “You mean that I shouldn’t be jealous because it’s just dumb luck that decides it,” Harry said.

The old wizard shook his head. “Oh, no. Jealousy is natural. Many are jealous of yourself, for being famous, for example.”

“Like Ron,” Harry muttered. It was unfair - Ron had regretted and apologised for his attitude in their fourth year - but he wasn’t feeling like being fair right now.

“Your friend knows more than most what price your fame has, Harry. And yet I think he is still jealous. We all are, one way or the other, jealous of someone. What matters, though, is to not let our jealousy poison our true feelings.”

Harry wanted to ask who the Headmaster could be jealous of, but didn’t. He simply nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The old wizard smiled and nodded.
London, Soho, January 11th, 1997

Ron Weasley was kissing Hermione again. She was sitting on his lap, hidden from the view of most of the other guests by some handy foliage from a plant, and by the shadows cast by the dim light inside the club. They broke the kiss, and he took a few deep breaths. This was... he didn't have the words for it. Last time, they had kissed as well, but it hadn't been like this. He had just heard about the attack on his home, they had been rushed, worried... not like this.

Hermione was breathing heavily as well. He could hear her, and if he leaned a bit forward, he'd feel her.

"Wow." It was the best he could do, right now.

She nodded.

"Now I hate the Death Eaters even more, for spoiling the end of our last date." For a moment, he was worried how she'd take his remark. Would she scold him for making light of the war?

Hermione didn't. She chuckled. "Another good reason." Then she leaned forward, and they kissed again. Ron felt one of her hands grip his hair and the other move over his back. His own hands were wandering over Hermione's back. He didn't touch her hair - that was a wig. He didn't want to pull it off by mistake. Then he remembered Hermione would have used a Sticking Charm. Still, it wasn't her hair. He missed her wild mane, even though her new haircut was both cute and practical.

When they broke the kiss this time, he was close to slipping his hands under her turtleneck, and she had opened two buttons of his shirt. She was shivering now.

"I think it's time for us to go home."

He nodded, shaking a bit himself. If they continued, who knew where it would lead? Well, he could imagine. And he was tempted. Very tempted. If he leaned in they'd kiss again, he was certain. And they'd go further than that. He wanted to. But they couldn't. Not now. Not when she still hadn't decided. "Yes, let's go home. Before they start to worry."

Neither of them would go home, of course - his own was destroyed, hers abandoned. He'd return to Hogwarts through Sirius's Floo connection, Hermione would go to wherever the Resistance was hiding.

As the two of them straightened their clothes and stood up from their low seats, Ron suddenly had a stray thought: If this war went on for much longer, would those places become their real homes?

He snorted. When she turned to look at him, he shook his head. "Just thinking that we'd better end this war before our quarters turn into our home."

She nodded. "We will."

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When he stepped out of the fireplace in Dumbledore's office at Hogwarts, Ron saw that the Headmaster was sitting behind his desk and Harry was reading in his usual seat. For a moment, he felt guilty for having made his friend wait so long. And even more guilt for what he and Hermione had almost done. He fought the feeling back, though - they hadn't done it, and he hadn't been out that late. His first date had been cut short, after all. "I hope you didn't have to wait too long."
“Do not worry. I have been working, and Harry has been reading since our lesson ended.”

“Yes,” Harry said, putting the book he had been reading back onto the shelf. For a moment, Ron thought that his friend would say anything else, but he didn’t.

“Good night then, you two,” the Headmaster said, smiling.

The two left Dumbledore’s office, and started to walk back to the Gryffindor dorms. Ron kept his wand out - Moody had drilled constant vigilance into them, and Hogwarts was full of possible ambush spots. A glance showed him, though, that Harry seemed a bit distracted. He cast a Privacy Spell.

“Mate? Did something happen during the lesson?” Ron had had his fair share of embarrassing or even disturbing moments during his Occlumency training, and if Harry had managed to read Dumbledore’s mind…

His friend shook his head. “No… it’s just…” He shrugged.

“Well, if you want to talk about it, I’m here.” Harry was Ron’s best friend, after all - the least he could do was to offer his help. Or just to listen, which helped sometimes.

Harry shook his head. “Sorry. I’d rather not talk about it.”

Ron had to accept that. Experience had taught him that he couldn’t push his friend to talk; the only one who had managed that was Hermione, and only on a few occasions. Ron usually offered to go flying, or organise a pickup game of Quidditch, in such a situation. It was too late at night for either, though. Although some night flying training… no, it was too late, period.

And yet, a bit later, halfway to the dorms, Harry spoke up. “So… how did it go?”

“It went well. After the movie, we went dancing again.” He couldn’t help but smiling widely at the memory.

“Ah.”

That had sounded a bit… off. Ron looked at his friend.

“Well, there was no Death Eater attack to ruin it this time.”

“Oh, yes,” Ron said - maybe a bit too strongly, since Harry was now glancing at him.

“I thought your first date went well.”

“It did.” Ron nodded. “But this one was better.”

They went up a stairway, but halfway, it started to move. Neither of them talked while they were waiting for the stairway to decide on its next location. But as soon as they were in a hallway again, Harry said: “Did you kiss her?”

“We kissed,” Ron said. He looked at Harry, but now his friend was paying attention to potential ambushes. After a second, he added: “Did you? Last date, I mean.”

“Yes.”

Ron had known they would have - Hermione was not the kind of girl to treat either of them differently or unfairly - but to hear it confirmed… He felt a spark of jealousy, and couldn’t make it go
away. Tomorrow, or rather, today, Harry would be on a date with Hermione. They would have fun, they would laugh, probably dance together, and they’d kiss each other. Would they be as close to going further as Ron and Hermione had been today? Had they been as close on Harry’s first date? Ron had felt like in heaven tonight, but now, with the prospect of Harry doing the same with her...

They finished the trip to their dorm in silence.

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London, City of London, January 11th, 1997

When she entered the café, Hermione Granger saw that Harry was already waiting. A quick glance at her watch told her that she wasn’t late - her friend was just even earlier than herself. He looked good too, in dress pants and shirt. Not as casual as Ron had been, but fine in his own way. She had dressed up as well, with hose instead of leggings, and a blouse instead of a turtleneck. He had told her there’d be a dress code, after all, and she’d rather not feel underdressed even if they were not going to see a play again.

He had seen her as well - Ron had said Moody was trying to make them as paranoid as the old Auror was, something Hermione agreed with if it kept her two friends alive - and was standing up before she reached the table. “Hi!” His smile seemed to light up his face.

“Hi!”

She felt him relaxed as they hugged - he had been very tense before. Something she didn’t approve of. She released him, and both sat down. Hermione ordered a tea, as yesterday, while Harry wanted another soda.

“So, what do you have planned for today?” she asked, as soon as the waiter had left.

“Well, I’ve made reservations on the Symphony, from Bateaux London. A dinner cruise on the Thames.”

“Oh!” She had heard her parents talk about those cruises. “That’s the originally French ship, right?”

“I think so,” Harry said, though his slight hesitation told her that he hadn’t known, nor cared.

“I’ve heard good things about them. My parents dined there before.” She hadn’t - she had been already at Hogwarts when the business had started, and there had always been something up during the holidays.

“Here.” Harry pushed a small package towards her. “Just in case.”

She took it, puzzled. What would he… she opened it and peeked inside. There was a vial, and bundle of… “gillyweed?”

Harry nodded. “If we’re attacked, we can escape through the water. The vial is a potion to keep us warm.”

She was impressed. That was a lot of preparation. “Moody’s good for you,” she said, nodding in approval.

Harry winced. “He’s a tough teacher. I almost stunned Neville when he surprised me the other day.”

Hermione bit her lip. Maybe Moody was a bit too paranoid to train her two friends. Out loud, she
said: “How is he doing?”

Harry took a deep breath. “Not well. He’s angry and moody. And always training. He bought a new wand, you know. Said he couldn’t keep using his father’s wand. And he’s very intense.”

That didn’t sound like Neville, Hermione thought. Nor like something that was good for Neville. Still, losing his last close family… “Do you think he’ll do something rash?” Neville attacking Slytherins could be a catastrophe in the current climate.

“We’re keeping an eye on him. With the map,” Harry said.

“Good.” And there were teachers. Not that they had such a good track record, Hermione thought, but at least Dumbledore would be aware of the potential problem for his own plans, now. Or should. She hesitated a second. “Did you tell Dumbledore?”

“I thought…” Harry trailed off, then shook his head. “I’ll tell him once I get back tonight.” He sounded amused and sad at the same time. “I should know better than to assume people know, right?”

She chuckled, without much humour. “You know the saying about what happens if you assume something.”

Harry actually didn’t, so she explained it to him. He laughed quite a bit more than she thought the saying deserved. Boys! Ron would have laughed out loud as well.

“So, you’re taking me on a cruise on the Thames, on a ship from Paris. Quite the romantic gesture.” Hermione smiled at him.

He nodded. “That’s the idea.”

For a moment she wondered if that had been Sirius’s idea. For all his overacting and often crude jokes, Harry’s godfather was quite charming. Ron had relied on advice from his brother Bill, for picking the restaurants at least.

“When do we have to board?”

“Half past seven.” He grinned. “I thought we could visit a museum until then.”

“You know, you don’t have to do everything I like, Harry,” Hermione said. “A date should be fun for both parties.” A relationship didn’t last if one partner was always making sacrifices for the other.

“I wanted to visit the museum ever since I heard about it in school,” Harry said.

“Oh.” Now Hermione felt bad. She had assumed - ironic, after her explanation just a few minutes before - that Harry wouldn’t like to visit a museum, based upon… his attitude towards homework? Was she really that blind, or shallow?

“Hey… I haven’t told anyone that.” Harry smiled and patted her hand.

Hermione winced. That didn’t make her feel much better. Who could he have told at Hogwarts? Ron and her, and only she would have known what it was, and might have organised a trip for him. His family certainly wouldn’t have. Ron would have probably liked to see the museum too - his father would have loved it, but he’d have made a scene in every room. She snorted.

“Hm?” Harry looked confused.
“I just imagined Mister Weasley visiting the British Museum.”

“Ah!” Harry grinned, and the mood lifted. “We can go as soon as we are done here.”

Hermione quickly finished her tea.

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The museum had been fun, Harry Potter thought. He had fudged the truth somewhat, but only a bit - as a kid, he had wanted to visit the Imperial War Museum, not the British Museum. And given that the two of them were currently fighting a war, it wouldn’t have been a good choice for a date anyway.

He was still in a very good mood when they boarded the Symphony, a boat with an all-glass structure. He had made reservations for the most expensive seats, or rather, Sirius had arranged it. Harry suspected that bribes had been involved to get a seat on so short a notice. Probably not compulsion spells, although he wouldn’t put that past his godfather either. But it was worth it. Hermione was worth it, he thought while a waiter led them to their table.

They took a few minutes to order, with Harry relying mostly on Hermione’s knowledge of French dishes from her vacation. Mostly - thanks to their house guests, Harry had become familiar with a few French dishes as well, which must have surprised Hermione, judging by her expression.

“Speaking of French,” she said, once the waiter had served the entrées, “Has there been a change on the ‘stepmother front’?” She was smiling, but she looked a bit tense.

Harry frowned. “No. Sirius is still courting all of them, from what I can tell.” He didn’t know how serious his godfather was - the wizard avoided answering Harry’s admittedly tentative questions with his usual mixture of jokes and embarrassing stories from Hogwarts.

“Well, if Sirius does pick a French wife or lover, you’ll at least eat well.” Hermione shook her head.

“A small consolation,” Harry said.

“Would it be so bad if Sirius found someone?”

Harry took a deep breath. “Not that bad, I guess. But… I feel he’s overdoing it. You know… trying too hard.” Just as Sirius had told him, that was a recipe for disaster.

“Ah. You fear how he’ll feel once the relationship fails?”

Harry nodded. He could imagine how that would feel, and Sirius was still… he hadn’t recovered fully from Azkaban. He probably never would, Harry thought.

“I understand.”

When Harry saw that Hermione bit her lower lip, he tensed up. That wasn’t a good sign.

She straightened, and looked straight at him. He braced himself. “Have you thought about what you want to do after the war?”

He hadn’t expected that question. Or any question, to be honest. For a moment, he was relieved. Then he frowned. “I hadn’t, actually. I just… well, things would be back to normal. Or as normal as it gets for us.”

“Us?” she asked, with a raised eyebrow, but a smile as well.
He knew what she was hinting, but shook his head. “You, me, Ron, and the rest of our crazy friends.”

“I don’t think it’ll be normal for a long while. Things have changed too much.” She was looking at him with an unreadable expression.

He nodded. “Too many have died. Neville… you might not recognise him.”

“I can imagine,” she said. She took a sip from her aperitif. “But even with the Dark Lord gone, and his Death Eaters gone as well, there will be many bigots left. They’ll play nice and act as if they were for Dumbledore all along, but they don’t like muggleborns.”

Harry frowned, but nodded. She was right. Remus had said that that had happened after the last war as well. “We won’t let them get away with it this time, though.” They wouldn’t repeat the same mistakes his parents’ generation had made.

“We can’t really do that much, not without becoming like the Death Eaters. We can’t punish them for their thoughts.” Hermione shook her head and scoffed. “Until they try again to make Britain a country for purebloods by purebloods.”

“Over my dead body!” Harry snarled.

“That’s probably what they’ll do first. Wait until Dumbledore has died, then take out those of us who could stop them.” Hermione looked at him. “That is, if they plan ahead. We’ll be in danger of the families of the Death Eaters taking revenge on us even before that. People trying to avenge a loved one are not rational; they won’t care if they get caught or killed.”

She was painting a rather grim picture of the time after the war, Harry thought. “You mean this war will have been for nothing?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But we’ll have to work hard to prevent that. We’ll need to gather as much power as possible, so even without Dumbledore, the bigots can’t take over again. We need to radically reform the Ministry.” She looked grim now. “Even though lasting and drastic reforms are very difficult to do.”

“You’ll be Minister for Magic then, hm?” Harry said. He was smiling, but he wasn’t joking - he could see her as Minister. She had the passion, and the will, needed. And the talent, of course.

To his surprise, she snorted. “I’m not even certain I’ll be able to work in the Ministry after the war. For the purebloods, I’m the most hated witch in Britain. I’m the face of the Resistance for them. I’ll be the one they’ll go after if they want to avenge their dead.” She grinned, but with a cynical expression. “That will make working in the Ministry rather hard.”

“We can fire all the bigots,” Harry said. “The Ministry needs a purge anyway.” Sirius had often said so.

“We won’t know who’s a bigot. Only the dumber ones will announce it.”

Like Draco, Harry thought. “We can’t let them win, though.”

“We won’t. We’ll do our best to foil them. But it won’t be easy.” Hermione leaned back. “Nor safe. For any of us involved.”

“The war’s not been safe either,” Harry said. “We just have to deal with it.” There was no other choice.
Once again, Hermione seemed to hesitate. “What about our families?”

Harry had only Sirius and Remus. And the Tonkses. And his friends.

“I mean, are you planning to have a family? Children?” She went on.

“Of course,” Harry answered. A family, a real family, had been his dream since forever. His children would grow up happy and safe.

“Many wizards and witches seem to marry and have children quite soon after Hogwarts.” Hermione had a serious expression, which puzzled him somewhat.

“Yes.” His parents for example. And Neville’s.

“They even had children in the middle of a war.”

“Yes.” Was that what she was leading at? “You think that’s not a good idea?”

“Maybe. Although I wasn’t planning to have children anytime soon. The war just gave me an additional reason.” Hermione was now looking straight at him.

“I see.” He didn’t, really. “Do you plan to have children later?”

“Mabye. I don’t know yet. I haven’t really thought that far ahead.”

“You, not thinking ahead?” He chuckled, even though he had to force himself to do so.

“Not that far.”

Which, he realised, meant she wasn’t planning to have kids for several years after the war.

“And you want to have kids earlier.” She smiled wryly.

If not for the talk with Dumbledore last night, he would have wondered if she had read his thoughts. He nodded. “Yes. Like my parents. If they had waited with having kids I would have never been born.” Probably - they would have fought instead of going into hiding, and might have been killed. Or Voldemort would have won.

“Of course.” Hermione was smiling, but she looked sad while doing it. “I guess if you’re willing to have a child in the middle of a war, you wouldn’t wait so you can focus on your work either.”

Harry had to nod at that. Even though he knew she wasn’t agreeing with him. Of course, Hermione’s mum had had her late, close to 30. And Hermione would likely follow her own parents’ example, not his. He cleared his throat. “Well, look at us, we’re not even adults yet in Britain, and we’re talking about children.”

Hermione chuckled, but it felt a bit strained. “Indeed.”

They finished the entrées in silence.

“What a beautiful sight!” she suddenly said.

Harry looked up. They were passing underneath Tower Bridge now. London at night looked great, he had to admit, with all the bright lights shining. “Yes.”
The cruise ended at a quarter to eleven. Harry was smiling when he led Hermione off the ship. "Solid ground under our feet again!" he said.

"Says the Seeker," Hermione said dryly.

"And I'd have to know, seeing as it's my natural enemy when playing."

She laughed at that, even while she was shaking her head. As Sirius had said, witches liked funny wizards. Life was too short to be always serious.

"Now let's go dancing!" he said. He was about to hail a cab when he turned around. "Unless you want to do something else."

"I love dancing," she said, with a smile.

He nodded. He hadn't known that. Neither had she, until she went dancing with Ron on their date. Something that irked him.

"I know this club," he said, raising his arm as he saw a cab drive by.

Fortunately, muggle dancing wasn't as complicated as the dances at the Yule Ball, Harry Potter thought two hours later. All he'd had to do was move more or less in step with the music, the dance floor in the in-club Sirius had found was too packed to do any fancy dancing anyway. And the slow dances were even easier. Then all he had to do was to hold Hermione close. Although holding her that close, feeling her move with him, her body pressed into his... he hadn't wanted to let her go when the music changed again.

"I think it's time to go," Hermione said.

Just as he didn't want to let her go now, even though it was time to leave. They were in a corner of the club, her with her back to the wall, him standing there, shielding her from view. Moody would have punished him for presenting his back to the crowd, but at the moment, Harry didn't care at all.

They had been kissing again, with tongue, like on their first date. Just more often. Not enough, though, Harry thought. Never enough. He wanted more. More kisses. More touches. If they were alone... But they weren't alone. And Ron was waiting in Dumbledore’s office, probably bored and worried as well.

For a moment, Harry didn't care. Ron could wait until morning, if he could stay with Hermione. He regretted his selfish, petty thoughts right away.

"Yes. Let's go."

London, East End, January 12th, 1997

Hermione Granger smiled at Colin, who was taking a turn as guard, as she entered the Resistance’s headquarters.

"Hermione! Had fun?"

"Yes, I had. But I'm exhausted now - we went dancing for hours." She waved at him and went upstairs to her room. She heard others in what had become their living room, playing a game,
probably, but just stuck her head inside to tell them she was back.

She stopped smiling once she closed the door behind her, and sighed. It had been an enjoyable date. Harry was charming like Sirius, honest - unlike his pranking godfather - and he was a good kisser. Like Ron, she thought, though Ron was...

But that didn’t matter, and it was all her fault. Harry wanted a family. And children. Quite soon too, like his parents. He revered his parents - quite natural, since they had died for him. So, why wouldn’t he want to follow their example? Everyone he talked to about them probably told him how great they had been. And the Dursleys… well, he would want a loving family, after living with them. Like the Weasleys.

But most of all, he wanted children. Hermione had realised that. And she didn’t. Not as soon as he wanted to have them, maybe not ever. She frowned and started to change into her bedclothes. They could compromise, of course. But then neither of them would be happy. Both would feel as if they were sacrificing their dream, probably. It could work out. Maybe Hermione would suddenly feel her biological clock ticking as if she was forty - her parents had told her that she had always been very mature for her age.

She snorted. With the war, she was even less likely to have kids in the next few years. She would have to work harder than ever after the war to turn Wizarding Britain into a country she wanted her kids to live in. If she ever had children. And the thought of a child of hers, hurt or killed because of her…

She shook her head. It was silly, anyway. They were teenagers in their first relationship. They shouldn’t be thinking, much less worrying, about having children. Apart from, she added with a snort, keeping all the ways to avoid having them in mind when they had sex. Especially if your lover was from an apparently very fertile family. Sex… she forced her thoughts back to the problem at hand, away from those tempting, lurid fantasies.

No, she shouldn’t be worried about different plans for the future. Teenage relationships often didn’t last. Often, but not always, she added.

But she couldn’t help it. She was not the kind of girl to start anything that she didn’t intend to see through to the end. Entering a relationship that she knew, or was reasonably certain, wouldn’t last was not something she wanted to do. It felt like letting her partner down. Nor did she want to enter a relationship just to fool around for a bit. Outside her fantasies, at least. Those she had when she ran her hands over her friend’s back when they kissed. If they had kissed again, back in that club...

Casual sex, ‘friends with benefits’ - she had thought about that. Thought about, and discarded the possibility. She couldn’t do that. Not with Harry or Ron. Much less with both, as Sirius would probably suggest. There was too much emotion, too much love, for that to work.

It was selfish, she knew, but she’d rather be with a boy with whom she could at least think of having a long-term relationship.

Ron.  

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Chapter 29: Talks and Meetings

‘Even if the war’s outcome had not caused drastic changes in the political system of Wizarding Britain, Dumbledore’s ultimatum would have had far-reaching consequences. The Chief Warlock forcing his will on the Ministry was not something the old system was capable of handling. Although the opinion that this move put Dumbledore on the same level as the Dark Lord, a wizard of great personal power trying to unilaterally make decisions for Wizarding Britain, was thought provocative and inflammatory by many wizards and witches at the time, it is not without merit.

However, those consequences were, for better or worse, long-term concerns. More important for the war were the reactions of the Ministry staff. After months of hearing about the threat of the Muggleborn Resistance, it was no surprise that even among those Ministry employees not affiliated with the Dark Lord’s forces, there were many who reacted with fear to the information that Minister Fudge was planning to pardon them. The recent attacks by muggleborns on random purebloods in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade further reinforced those fears.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Hogwarts, January 12th, 1997

When Ron Weasley saw Harry step out of Dumbledore’s fireplace, saw his friend’s smile, he felt the familiar feeling of jealousy fill him. That wasn’t the face of a boy who had struck out on his date. They had kissed, that much was certain. And Ron didn’t like it.

Ron knew it was selfish, and wrong - no matter what the Headmaster had told him earlier, he shouldn’t be having thoughts like that - but a part of him had hoped that Harry would have a bad date. Ron wasn’t as rich, as famous, or as talented as Harry, nor as important. But he had been able to show Hermione a good time, as Bill called it. Made her smile, and laugh, and hopefully forget the war for a bit.

If Harry had managed to do the same, then there was no way Hermione would pick Ron. He forced himself to smile as he stood up. “We’ll have to finish this match another time, Headmaster,” he said, nodding at the chessboard.

“I might as well concede right now,” the old wizard said, smiling. “I doubt the outcome would differ from that of our previous two matches.”

“Well…” Ron wasn’t about to lie. The Headmaster was a decent player, enough to be a challenge, but not good enough to beat him. “Maybe.”

“You’ve been playing chess?” Harry asked. Ron’s friend was looking surprised. They hadn’t played much chess lately, Ron realised. Harry didn’t like the game as much as Ron did, and he wasn’t exactly a challenge either, so Ron had to handicap himself a lot to have an even match.

“We have indeed. Your friend has proven to be the better player. Probably the best currently at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said.

“Too bad war’s not a chess game,” Ron said. There were too many random elements, too many variables. Chess was easy, too.
“Maybe.” Dumbledore inclined his head.

Ron was tempted to ask what he meant, but it was getting late. They needed to return to their dorms - they had more training on Sunday, and Moody wouldn’t let them sleep in. The thought of what the Auror would do to them if they overslept made Ron wince.

The Headmaster waved his hand. “Off to bed now, you two.”

“Good night, Headmaster,” the two chorused.

The trip back to their dorms was awkward, in Ron’s opinion. He wanted to know what Harry and Hermione had done on their date, but at the same time, he wanted to remain ignorant, wanted to keep hoping that things would not go as expected. He was being selfish, and stupid. Harry would need all the support and love he could get for his confrontation with Voldemort. If he had his heart broken by Hermione, that would only help the Dark Lord. Harry hadn’t that many friends either, and if Ron and Hermione were going out, that meant they’d spend less time with Harry. Another bad thing. Hermione had not much time to spare in the first place to be with them, and if that was reduced further… Ron shook his head. Everything told him that he should step back. Let Harry and Hermione be happy together. Be the bigger man, make the sacrifice for Britain, for everyone who was fighting Voldemort.

But, curse it! Ron didn’t want to lose Hermione! If she picked Harry, which she likely would, then that was fine. Or would be fine. Ron’d be hurt, but he’d get over it. He had a lot of experience with handling disappointment. But to give up, give her up, to make the decision for her, to lie to her… He clenched his teeth together. No, he wouldn’t do that.

It was stupid, and selfish, and a lot of other things, but he loved her. And until she told him she was choosing Harry, he’d keep hoping she’d choose him.

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London, East End, January 12th, 1997

When her alarm clock - mechanical, of course - rang, Hermione Granger didn’t want to get up. She forced herself out of her bed anyway. She hadn’t ever shirked from doing what was needed, and she wouldn’t start on this Sunday morning. She wasn’t looking forward to it, though. She didn’t want to hurt Harry, and yet she would. Would he hate her for choosing Ron? Would he hate Ron?

She hoped, prayed that he wouldn’t. But she couldn’t be certain. Jealousy was a terrible thing; she knew that herself. And Harry was under a lot of pressure - he had to face and defeat Voldemort, according to the Headmaster. And, as much as Hermione hated to admit it, she agreed with that - the Dark Lord had tried several times before to kill the Boy-Who-Lived. Even if the prophecy were wrong, Harry would be fighting him sooner or later.

For a moment, she considered not telling the boys. Keep things going as they were, at least until the war was over. They wouldn’t have much time for dating anyway, with all of them training hard, and fighting. And her decision wouldn’t cause additional trouble and grief for Harry in the middle of the war.

She wouldn’t do it, though. Couldn’t - she didn’t wear her heart on her sleeve like others, but she wasn’t a good enough actress to fool her best friends. They’d know, or, worse, they’d suspect. And they’d doubt her, and themselves. And once she came clean, they’d know she had strung Harry along. None of them deserved that.
She had to tell them, and quickly. In person though, not over the mirror. They deserved that as well. But how and where could she tell them? They would need some privacy for that. And afterwards, Harry would want to leave, probably go to Sirius. The Resistance had safe houses, but those were not meant to be revealed to others, and certainly were not meant to be used for such things.

She made a mental note to check if anyone was using the reserve safe houses to meet with a lover - that was the kind of careless stupidity that could ruin them.

And Grimmauld Place was still hosting a dozen French wizards and witches - and four Veela, she added - as well as several Order members. She couldn’t visit there without endangering everyone. And renting a hotel room… no, that would be sending the wrong kind of message.

Maybe a café. Or a park. A bit cliché, but they would not feel confined. There would be more room for all of them. Privacy spells would keep others from listening in, of course. She pulled out a map of London, to pick a suitable park, when she heard someone knock on her door.

“Hermione? Are you still in bed?”

That was Sally-Anne. Hermione glanced at her clock. She had spent that much time thinking this through? Shaking her head, she said out loud: “I’m up, I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

Technically, training was optional on a Sunday, but usually, most members of the Resistance did train anyway, although not as long as on the other days. And Hermione was usually among the first to be ready. She frowned at her lapse while she slipped into a track suit.

When she entered the living room a few minutes later, she was greeted by wide grins and smiles.

“What?” Hermione said, resisting the urge to cross her arms. That would look too defensive.

“You’ve overslept. Long night?” Sally-Anne’s beaming, teasing expression left no doubt what she imagined Hermione had done last night.

She had to nip that in the bud. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just pondering a few things this morning.”

“Oh.”

Her friend was still smiling, so Hermione added: “Unpleasant things.”

“Oh.” The other witch looked crestfallen. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hermione said. “It’s not the fault of anyone here. Just a few things I have to take care of.” And a heart to break. “Let’s go do our laps to warm up.”

Outside, jogging at a steady pace, she let her thoughts wander again. She told herself that Harry would get over her. Would find someone else. Someone prettier. Someone who’d suit him better. Someone he would be happy with.

She just hoped he would not fall for a girl who just wanted to be the girlfriend of the Boy-Who-Lived, and had no idea what being Harry’s friend meant. If only she was still at Hogwarts, so she could keep an eye on him. She’d have to trust Ron with that, then. And maybe tell Sirius.

Damn this war!
London, January 12th, 1997

Brenda Brocktuckle woke up early, even though she had the day off - the first Sunday in weeks. And, of course, she had the day off at a time when she’d rather be at work, where everyone was trying to find out what their co-workers were thinking about Dumbledore’s ultimatum. And what their co-workers were about to do about it.

She could go to work, of course. Claim she was busy with her case, if anyone asked her. Not that anyone would - she was still a pariah as far as most Aurors were concerned. But if she was there, then she could keep an eye on things. Find out what was going on.

And she might have an excuse not to meet with Parkinson’s ‘friends’, as he called them. Death Eaters, or sympathisers. Up until a while ago, she hadn’t cared about the difference, but now she was hoping there wouldn’t be any actual Death Eaters. It wasn’t illegal to have sympathies for the Dark Lord’s goals. With the Minister about to follow Dumbledore, as rumours claimed, the Dark Lord was the only one doing anything about the Resistance, after all.

But to actually meet with Death Eaters… that was something else. But, she added to herself, maybe not illegal. Not any more, when people were talking about pardoning mass-murderers. Had people forgotten how many people the mudbloods had killed? Why wasn’t anyone proposing a pardon for the Death Eaters?

Because Dumbledore was against it, of course. The Chief Warlock wanted the Dark Lord dead, and he didn’t care if he had to work with murderous mudbloods to achieve it. Or had to betray all the Aurors who had been killed in the line of duty.

Brenda cared. It was not right to let the murderers of her partners go free. That Bones would allow this… She shook her head. She wouldn’t have expected that. The older witch had always stood up for the Corps. Had been one of them. But now? It seemed she was just another politician, going with the flow.

She sighed and got up, heading to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Parkinson would turn up as soon as the tea was ready, as usual - the wizard had an uncanny talent for avoiding preparing breakfast himself. Brenda didn’t really mind - she doubted that a breakfast prepared by him would be that tasty, due to him lacking any practice in the kitchen. Doubly so since this was a muggle kitchen, with all the useless muggle things cluttering up the place. Not even the oven worked right - they had to use a portable wizarding one.

As expected, the Auror entered the kitchen right before the tea was ready. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Brenda said, levitating the tea kettle over to the table.

He grabbed it and filled his own cup, then hers. While he buttered his toast, he pointed at the Daily Prophet on the table, with a picture of Dumbledore on the front page. “Looks like the Prophet’s owners have taken a side.”

Anyone could have told that by the headline, and slanted article. “Probably blackmail,” Brenda said. “He’s bound to know everything about everyone important.”

“Oh, yes. He’s showing his true colours.” Parkinson grinned. “Do you ever wonder how much he did behind the scenes? What he was doing until he was forced out in the open?”

“He’s a politician,” Brenda said. “He was making deals for decades.”
“I meant in the war.” Parkinson bit into his toast. “This war.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was wondering why those mudbloods are so successful. They are ignorant scum, they barely received their N.E.W.T.s, but they managed to kill so many purebloods…” He trailed off, looking at her.

“We don’t know all the members of the Resistance,” Brenda said. “There could be older ones. Former Aurors.” Traitors.

“There could be,” Parkinson conceded, “but even they wouldn’t have access to as much information, classified information, in the Ministry as the Chief Warlock.”

Brenda gasped. “You mean…”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I suspect Dumbledore was working with the mudbloods - or rather, that the mudbloods were working for him. He made the plans, and they executed them. None of Dumbledore’s allies were at Malfoy Manor. And most of the Aurors killed by them in that ambush were good purebloods.”

Brenda hissed. It made sense. If Dumbledore was a traitor, had been a traitor from the start...

“He’s been pushing for a war ever since the Dark Lord returned. He didn’t care at all for a peaceful solution. And when he was having no success even after a year, suddenly the mudbloods go underground, and dozens of purebloods whose only crime was being proud of their heritage were murdered, and he had his war.”

“Against the mudbloods, not against the Dark Lord.”

“Until the riots happened. Awfully convenient again, weren’t they?” Parkinson grinned cynically. “Push everyone, see who breaks… maybe help things along a bit. A spell here and there, and there’s a nice riot. As if the Dark Lord, after asking for peace for a year, would suddenly act like this, when everyone had just seen how dangerous the mudbloods are!”

“Merlin’s arse!” Brenda wasn’t quite convinced, but it made sense. It made so much cursed sense.

Parkinson nodded.

Suddenly, meeting the wizard’s friends didn’t seem like treason any more. Not if the Chief Warlock, and with him, the Minister, had done far, far worse.

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Hogwarts, January 12th, 1997

When he heard the communication mirror’s call right before lunch, Harry Potter feared the worst. An unscheduled call, in war? That meant bad news. Especially if it was Hermione’s mirror, and not Sirius’s. His godfather was more likely to spontaneously call him, and Harry had just spent the last evening with Hermione.

“Ron!”

His friend looked up from the Daily Prophet’s Quidditch section.

“It’s Hermione’s mirror.”
Harry saw his friend jerk - he’d think the same as Harry. Bad news. Best to assume the worst, and
prepare accordingly, he had heard Moody say often during their training.

Ron quickly came over and sat down on Harry’s bed. A privacy spell later, behind the curtains, they
stuck her heads together and Harry touched the mirror.

Hermione’s face appeared, and he was relieved. Whatever had happened, she was alive. And she
didn’t look hurt. She was nervous, though.

“Hermione!” Ron all but yelled.

The witch winced. “Good morning.” Harry and Ron barely managed to say their own greetings
before the girl continued. “I hate to do this, to disrupt your schedule, but… I have to meet you.
Today.”

“What happened?” Harry asked. Next to him, Ron, audibly closed his mouth - he had been about to
ask the same, Harry thought.

“I can’t say it on the mirror. We have to meet. The café we met at last evening, at… is four alright?”

“Yes,” Ron said.

Harry nodded. They had a lesson scheduled, but Dumbledore would understand.

“Good. I’ll see you soon then. Again, I’m sorry for disrupting your schedule.”

The mirror went dark so quickly, Harry wasn’t certain she had heard their goodbyes. For a moment
he stared at his and Ron’s reflection, then he sighed and stashed the mirror. “That was… weird.”
And disturbing.

His friend nodded. “Yes.” He chuckled. “That’s so her, apologising for ‘disrupting our schedule’.”

Harry snorted. “Yes.” He wasn’t really amused, though. He wondered what their friend wanted to
tell them that she couldn’t tell them through the mirror. Suddenly he hissed. There was one thing
people never told each other on the phone. “She’s not pregnant, is she?” He glanced at Ron.

His friend gaped at him. “What? How?”

“Do you want me to explain how it works?” Harry said.

“Merlin’s balls, no!” Ron stared at him. “I meant… how could she be pregnant? Did you?”

“No, no.” Harry said. Apparently, his friend hadn’t had sex either. “Sorry.”

Ron nodded. “But still… what could she want to tell us?”

Harry could think of one thing. And judging by the face Ron made, his friend had just had the same
thought.

“Shite.”

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“Do you think she’s made her choice?”

On the way to the Headmaster’s office, Harry had to fight not to glare at his best friend. He didn’t
really want to think, much less talk about it. Yet he nodded. “Probably.” What else would have caused her to act so… nervous?

“I think so too,” Ron said.

Neither Ron nor Harry asked the next, the logical question, out loud, though Harry certainly was asking himself. Who had she chosen? Him, or Ron? Or, maybe… “You don’t think she’s breaking up with both of us?”

“What?” Ron turned his head to stare at him. “Why would she be doing this, right after the dates?”

Because she’s found someone else, someone better? Harry thought. No, she wouldn’t do that. “Maybe she thinks we all need to focus on the war.”

Ron snorted. “That could be it.”

“You don’t think so, though.” Harry knew his best friend.

“No, I don’t.” Ron shook his head, his wand covering the entrance to a side-corridor they were passing. “Or she’d have acted differently two days ago.”

Harry was tempted to ask Ron how she had acted, but didn’t. This still could be something else. Maybe she wanted to tell them that she couldn’t go on dates for a month or two, because of the war. Dumbledore’s ultimatum had made waves, and Harry knew that Sirius’s Order cell had been preparing for a battle - in the Ministry - for some time now. Just in case, his godfather had said. When Moody had found out that they had been told, he had shouted about operational security.

Thinking of Sirius made him think of his godfather’s favourite solution to solve their love triangle. “You don’t think she’ll ask for a threesome, do you?”

“What?” Ron stared at him, again. “A threesome?”

Harry couldn’t help it - the opening was just too good, and he needed some levity. “It’s when a witch has sex with two wizards at the same time.”

“I know what a threesome is!” Ron growled. “But Hermione wouldn’t go for that.”

“Why not?” Harry glanced at Ron. Sirius had told him once that smart witches were often ‘kinky’, or ‘willing to experiment’. Harry could have done without hearing what James had told his best friend about Harry’s mother, though. “Do you think she’s too…” He searched for the right word. “... too proper for that?”

“No. But if she wanted to do something like that, she’d have dragged us both off to her bedroom long ago. She’s not one to hesitate if she thinks she has found the solution to a problem.” Ron grinned, though it looked a bit forced to Harry.

He nodded. He didn’t think sharing Hermione would work, anyway. It was bad enough to wonder what she was doing with Ron on their date, to know what they were doing, and wondering if she liked him better, and was only with him out of pity, would be worse. And having sex all three of them together… no. No.

They reached the Headmaster’s office, and went straight up - both had the password these days, for emergencies. And this certainly qualified, in Harry’s opinion. Besides, the Headmaster had told them his door would always be open if they wanted to talk. And that was the case here as well. They just wanted to talk with Hermione.
The Headmaster was in his office, and raised his eyebrows when he saw them enter. “I would have expected you to be at lunch at this time. What happened?”

“Hermione called. She needs to talk to us,” Harry said.

“Right now,” Ron added.

Dumbledore pushed his glasses a bit further up his nose with one finger, and slowly nodded. “I see. I would think this could be called a family emergency then? Though I hope that she is not in the family way.”

“She isn’t!” Ron quickly said.

Harry nodded. “We haven’t…” he trailed off. Dumbledore wasn’t the last wizard he wanted to talk about this with, but that didn’t mean Harry wanted to go into details in the first place.

Dumbledore smiled. “Please be cautious, though. While it’s not likely that it is a trap, it is not impossible. Have you informed Sirius?”

“No, we haven’t. We came straight here, after we talked to her.” Harry was wondering why the Headmaster said this. He hadn’t mentioned a possible trap when they had gone on dates. He suddenly wondered if the Headmaster knew what Hermione was about to tell them. And if Dumbledore thought that they’d need Sirius. Or that Harry’d need him. Then he forced himself to relax. Sirius was one of the few who knew about their relationship and meetings with Hermione. Of course he’d be the one to inform.

“Do you mind if I do tell him? Just as a precaution.”

“No, of course not,” Harry said. He didn’t really want his godfather around for this talk, but they were at war.

“Good. You might also wish to eat something. An empty stomach is not a good companion for a serious talk.” Dumbledore smiled, and a few seconds later, two plates appeared on his desk, loaded with food. “Tuck in, please, while I inform your godfather.”

Harry didn’t feel hungry, but he forced himself to eat something. Ron’s appetite wasn’t affected by their mutual nervousness, of course. Or Ron wasn’t that nervous - Harry couldn’t tell.

He was jealous, though. And hoped that he wouldn’t have another, much bigger reason to be jealous of his friend in a few hours.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 12th, 1997

“An urgent meeting with Hermione? And you can’t talk about it on the mirror? Merlin, Harry! You didn’t…”

“She’s not pregnant!” Harry Potter glared at his godfather.

“You asked the same, Harry,” Ron said.

“Oh!” Sirius sat up straighter in his seat facing the boys’ couch. “So, since you came to the same conclusion, what did you do on your date?”

“She’s not pregnant. We didn’t do it, and if we had done it, she wouldn’t know if she’s pregnant
“Are you certain? Muggles have some really good tests for that,” Sirius said. “Lily told me so. It was why she wanted to visit a muggle healer during her pregnancy as well.”

“Yes. They can’t tell that early if you’re pregnant.” Harry was certain that Sirius was misremembering. His godfather’s memories had been affected by his torture in Azkaban, and many of his tales were probably more fantasy than reality. He didn’t want to go into a discussion about muggle medicine and pregnancies right now, though. He just wanted to head over to the café where they would be meeting Hermione. They would be a few hours early, but it was better than discussing their relationship with Sirius.

“Well, if you are certain…” Sirius winced under Harry’s glare, then said: “I’ll be in the area, in disguise, to keep an eye on you. And I want you to take a Portkey. Just in case.”

“You know that if Hermione spots a black shaggy dog around the café, she’ll probably neuter it, right?” Harry narrowed his eyes.

“Merlin’s balls!” Sirius winced. “I’ll not be eavesdropping. But things are, as the Headmaster put it, ‘delicate’ right now. The Ministry’s caught in an internal struggle, with all the Death Eater spies working to sabotage the Minister, and the muggleborns might not be happy about allying with the Ministry either.”

“What? Do you think the Resistance is planning to ambush us?” Ron sounded as shocked as Harry felt.

“No, not really.” Sirius shook his head. “But all it takes is one jealous idiot to ruin things. If one muggleborn is in love with Hermione, he might do something stupid.”

Harry wasn’t quite certain if Sirius was talking about a Resistance member when he was warning them of jealous idiots. He nodded. “But if Hermione takes offence, we’ll blame it all on you.”

He grinned when he saw Sirius’s expression at hearing that.

London, Soho, January 12th, 1997

Ron Weasley studied the menu of the café for the third time, just to have something to do while he and Harry were waiting. They were early. Two hours early, to be exact. They’d have been even earlier if Sirius hadn’t insisted that the two visit Grimmauld Place first. Ron thought the man had been exaggerating the danger from some jealous muggleborn, though. He probably just wanted to make sure Ron wouldn’t make a scene, he added, with a sinking feeling, if she picked Harry. He knew that Sirius hadn’t forgotten how much of a jealous git Ron had been in their fourth year, to both Harry and Hermione. Neither had Ron.

He took a deep breath. If Hermione chose Harry, then he wouldn’t act like that. He’d wish the two of them well, and… probably go and be miserable in private. Maybe nab a bottle of … no, not Firewhisky. Beer though. Real beer. Something to numb himself. That was something Bill couldn’t help him with, Ron knew - his oldest brother had never had to deal with rejection. He was just too charming. Even Fleur, the most beautiful woman Ron had ever seen, had fallen for Bill.

Ron, though, had made his first date mad with his attitude, and hadn’t had much success with the witches since. At least, he thought, his dates hadn’t turned out to be disguised Death Eaters trying to kill him. He had one over the twins, still. And, he added, at least one witch had found him cute,
Lavender. So, even if Hermione chose Harry, he wouldn’t be alone for the rest of his life.

That was what he really feared. Losing his friends. Both of them. If he acted like a jealous idiot, he’d lose them for certain. They weren’t in fourth year any more, they were in the middle of a war. He couldn’t let his friends down because he was feeling sorry for himself. He wouldn’t.

He glanced at Harry. His best friend was folding paper napkins into… whatever they were supposed to be. They hadn’t talked since they had arrived. Ron had been too absorbed with himself, he thought. He cleared his throat. “Harry?”

His friend looked up, and his latest creation acquired a rip. “Yes?”

“I just wanted to say: If she picks you, I’ll accept it. Just, make her happy, mate.” Damn, Ron thought, that sounded stupid. But he wasn’t about to say that he wouldn’t be jealous, since that would be a lie. He would be. Very jealous. “I don’t want this, however it goes, to ruin our friendship.” He chuckled, without humour. “You know I have been a right prick about much less in the past, but… I grew up.” At least he hoped he had.

“Thanks.” Harry took a deep breath. “I feel the same. If she picks you.” He started to rip the napkin into tiny pieces. “I don’t want this to change our friendship.”

It would change, of course. But Ron knew what his friend meant. He just hoped they would manage.

He glanced outside. It had started to rain. Just the weather for this meeting, he thought.

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An hour early was a bit much even for herself, Hermione Granger thought as she walked towards the café. But she couldn’t help it - there hadn’t been anything urgent to focus on back at headquarters, and she had been too worked up to focus on other things. A walk had seemed the best way to calm down, and it would be good exercise as well.

But she had underestimated the British weather. The sudden rain had forced her to either seek shelter somewhere, return to headquarters, or go to the café earlier than planned. She had decided to wait in the café. There would be newspapers to read, to pass the time until the boys arrived. She felt nervous just thinking of the coming confrontation, and took a deep breath to steady herself. An hour reading would calm her down.

Of course, that plan didn’t survive for long either - as soon as she entered the café, she saw her two friends sitting at a table. For a moment she wondered if she had forgotten the time, or had misremembered when they were supposed to meet. But no, it was barely three in the afternoon. Had they really arrived so early? She was still wondering when Harry spotted her and waved.

She waved back and walked over to them, hoping she didn’t look as nervous as she felt.

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Their friend was nervous, Ron Weasley could tell with a glance. She tried to hide it, but she was taking far longer than usual to pick her order. And she was twisting a stray lock of her hair around her finger, although she did that often. He exchanged a glance with Harry while she - finally - talked with the waitress. His friend had noticed as well.

They wouldn’t tell her, or pressure her, of course. They’d wait patiently. Well, nervously, actually, until Hermione was ready to tell them. “I hope that by being early we didn’t disrupt your schedule,” he said when the waitress had left, and grinned at her.
She shook her head. “No, of course not. I was early myself. Although two hours early… I think I only did that once, when a new library opened up in the neighborhood, and I wanted to get the first pick of its books.”

Ron chuckled, and she frowned at him.

“I was ten,” she said, and he remembered her in their first year, looking disapprovingly at him for making fun of her love of books. It was such a cute image, he broke out in a wide smile. She frowned even more, then she shook her head, smiling.

For a moment, everything was perfect. Then she grew serious. “You’re probably wondering why I need to talk to you. In person, that is.”

“Yes.” Harry’s voice sounded quite tense. As tense as Ron himself felt, right then.

Hermione took a deep breath. “I’ve made my decision.” She looked from Ron to Harry and back. Ron held his breath. He knew what was coming, and yet he couldn’t help holding out hope. But he wouldn’t ruin this for them. He wouldn’t act like a jealous idiot. He would…

“It’s you, Ron. I’m sorry, Harry.”

Ron blinked. Him? Hermione wanted him? Not Harry? She was explaining something, but he wasn’t listening. He had been preparing himself for the usual disappointment, trying to be happy for her, and now, she wanted him. Ron Weasley. He felt elated. Happy. He wanted to jump up and kiss Hermione.

Then he heard Harry speak. “I understand, Hermione.”

And Ron felt bad and guilty for being happy.

Harry Potter felt as if he had taken a Bludger to the gut. A Bludger thrown by his best friend. No, that was wrong - Hermione had made her choice. She had chosen Ron, not him. He should have expected that. Ron was funny, easy-going, and brave. Harry had had to ask his godfather how to treat a girl right on a date. And Ron had a future - Harry had a destined battle to the death with Voldemort. Of course she’d choose their friend over him.

“Harry?”

She had been talking to him, he realised. “Yes?”

“It’s not your fault.”

Of course she’d say that. He nodded anyway.

“I think you’ll be happier with someone else, in the long run.” She was biting her lower lip.

He nodded again. What long run? They were in the middle of a war, and he was to face Voldemort himself. He doubted there was a long run for him. More like a long walk off a short cliff. “I need some fresh air.” He stood up before any of his friends could say anything, and left the café.

Once outside he closed his eyes and sighed. The cold winter air didn’t help; it made his eyes water. A big black dog approached him. Sirius. Harry should be angry that his godfather had been spying on them, but he could really use a sympathetic ear right now. He pointed to the closest park. “I’ll be
sitting down there.”

Padfoot made a confused noise, but followed him into the park, before disappearing into the bushes. A minute later, Sirius joined him on the bench he had picked.

“We could go home. It would be more private,” his godfather said.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t feel like going home. And we can watch the café from here. Just in case there really was a reason for your presence.” Other than being there for him to help with his rejection.

Sirius coughed. “Alright.” After a pause, he said: “It’s not the end of the world. Even if it feels like it right now.”

“I really need to work on my poker face,” Harry said. What good was Occlumency if people could read his face?

“Two boys sit down with the girl they love. One stands up and leaves after a while. The best poker face in the world wouldn’t have helped you there.” Sirius shrugged.

“Not that it matters anyway.” Harry sighed. He had been rejected, as he should have expected.

He felt Sirius’s arm wrap around his shoulders.

“As I said, it’s not the end of the world. You might not think so right now, but it’ll work out. You’re still in school, after all, and teenage relationships rarely last that long.” The older wizard chuckled. “I should know.”

“My parents’ relationship did,” Harry said. His father had won the love of his mother, and they were happy together. Until Voldemort.

“Well… they were special.”

“And I’m not.” Harry stared at the ground.

“They didn’t start dating until their last year. Lily rejected James’s advances until then.”

His father was rejected as well, then. Multiple times. But he won the witch in the end. Maybe…

“I know that look, Harry. James had the same look.”

Harry set his jaw and glanced at his godfather. His father had succeeded.

Sirius sighed. “James didn’t win Lily’s heart by chasing her. Matter of fact, that made her dislike him.”

“I wasn’t about to chase her.” She was with Ron, and Harry certainly didn’t want her to hate him for not accepting her choice. Or Ron.

“Pining after her won’t do much good either. There are other witches. You might find you can fall in love with someone else.”

Harry didn’t think so. Hermione was his best friend. There was no witch like her.

Once again, his face must have betrayed his thoughts, since Sirius said: “Didn’t you have a crush on that Ravenclaw in fourth year?”
“That was just a crush.” This, however, was love. He hadn’t really known Cho. He hadn’t even realised she was in a relationship already. Hermione, though, was his best friend. He knew her. He loved her.

“Look, Harry, trust me. You’re still young. Things will change. People will change. You will change. Who knows where we are in a year from now? Maybe you’ll meet a witch you’ll fall head over heels for.”

Harry snorted. Fat chance of that.

Sirius cleared his throat. “Anyway. Just because they are a couple doesn’t mean they’ll leave you out. James and Lily didn’t, either. Leave me or the rest of their friends out, that is.”

Harry really didn’t want to think of Ron and Hermione as his parents. “It hurts to see them like this. And I’m certain they won’t want me to ruin their time together.”

“Don’t be stupid, Harry! You’re their best friend! They don’t want you to leave them. Well, not unless you’re following them around when they’re on a date. Or stumble on them when they’re snogging.”

“That sounds like you’re speaking from personal experience.”

Sirius coughed. “That’s not relevant. Just know that life goes on, and things will work out.”

Coming from a man that had spent a decade as an innocent in Azkaban, that was a remarkably positive outlook, Harry thought. Of course, said man was currently involved with at least one Veela, according to the rumours he had heard. Still, Harry had to admit that losing the witch he loved to his best friend wasn’t the worst that could happen.

Facing the Dark Lord in his mind certainly was worse.

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“That went… about as I should have expected,” Hermione Granger said when Harry left. She hadn’t found the words to make Harry understand that it wasn’t his fault. It was nobody’s fault but her own, for letting this happen. If she had made a decision earlier… she bit her lower lip.

“Poor Harry.”

She looked at Ron. In hindsight, she shouldn’t have told them at the same time. It made the whole situation very awkward. Ron looked like he wasn’t certain if he was happy or sad. If she had arranged for different meetings… First Ron, then Harry… or would that have let them know her decision already? Done was done, she told herself.

“I know how he is feeling,” Ron said.

“You do?” Had he been rejected before? And by whom? Padma, maybe?

“I’ve been imagining you rejecting me for hours.” Ron smiled, although rather sadly.

She hadn’t expected that. He had been so confident and happy during their dates. “You thought I’d choose Harry?”

“Well… yes.”

She could almost hear the unsaid ‘as usual’ following that. “Well, I didn’t,” she said. “I love you.”
She loved Harry too.

He smiled at that, and gripped her hand.

But she saw him glance at the door, through which Harry had left. “Do you want to go after him?” She didn’t want him to go, but she didn’t want Harry to be alone right now either.

He shook his head. “Sirius will take care of him.”

“Ah.” So, Harry’s godfather was watching.

“He insisted on coming. ‘Just in case’, he said.”

Hermione wondered if Sirius had expected her decision. It didn’t matter, she decided. Harry was with his family now. She could relax. She squeezed Ron’s hand, encouragingly. She still felt guilty. Harry’s expression, when she had told him, them... it had hurt her. Not as much as it had hurt him, though.

“What now?” Ron asked.

“When do you have to go back to Hogwarts?”

“I’m not certain. We just told Dumbledore we had to leave.” He grinned. “He was very understanding.”

Hermione wondered if the Headmaster had known about this. Or expected. She had thought leaving Hogwarts would mean less interest in her love life, not more. “I think being back for dinner would be reasonable then.” She nodded. “Enough time for a date.” And for Harry to adjust.

Ron looked surprised, but pleased. Then worried. “I haven’t exactly made plans for a date.”

Hermione smiled. “I’m certain we can improvise.” She signalled the waitress, then took his hand.

She was still feeling guilty for hurting Harry. But she was feeling happy for being with Ron.

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Cheshire, Britain, Outskirts of Chester, January 12th, 1997

If not for the fact that she was currently living in a muggle flat herself, Brenda Brocktuckle would have thought it ironic to meet Parkinson’s ‘friends’ in a muggle town. As it was, the fact that the safest place to have such a meeting was among the muggles was a telling testimony of the threat Wizarding Britain was facing.

She was about to meet Death Eaters or sympathisers. Wizards and witches willing to betray the Ministry to the Dark Lord. She had doubts, still. The Dark Lord had kidnapped and killed Augusta Longbottom. And he had murdered the guards of Azkaban. He had struck against families, and what he had done in the last war… But she didn’t have a choice. It was Dumbledore, working with mudbloods for mudbloods, or the Dark Lord. As much as she hated to admit it, the Ministry couldn’t stand against either of those two, if left alone.

The mudbloods had murdered dozens of purebloods whose only fault had been to attend a ball. Without warning, without remorse. The Dark Lord had at least tried to achieve his goals in a peaceful manner. And he wouldn’t kill her for doing her duty - she had never fought his people, after all.
“They blocked Apparition?” She asked, examining the house as she walked up to it.

“Yes,” Parkinson, walking next to her, said.

“I assume they have another way out, in case the house gets attacked.” Brenda wasn’t about to get killed if the purebloods she was meeting were that stupid.

“Yes.” Parkinson hesitated, but he’d have to know she wouldn’t let this go. “The house has an old escape tunnel.” He grinned. “Not that the mudbloods can find it, anyway.”

“All it takes is one traitor,” Brenda said. “And the Ministry’s not short of those.” There would be a number who were now, faced with Dumbledore taking over the Ministry, considering betraying their allies to cut a deal with the Chief Warlock. They had before, in the last war, after all.

“True. But those we are about to meet we can trust.” Parkinson grinned.

Brenda forced herself to smile. She knew what that meant. No mere sympathisers, but marked Death Eaters. Wizards and witches sworn to the Dark Lord. “Even among those, there have been traitors,” she said, partially just to tweak Parkinson’s nose. The wizard was far too smug.

“Have there?” Parkinson smiled.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Snape. Karkaroff.”

“Both are still alive,” her fellow Auror said. “Which means they have earned the Dark Lord’s forgiveness.”

“They still betrayed him.” And both were hiding behind some of the strongest wards known to wizards - those of Hogwarts and Durmstrang.

“Only after his death.”

Brenda had heard the claim that the Dark Lord had returned from death often, but she remained sceptical. There hadn’t been a body in 1981. The Dark Lord could have fled, grievously wounded and cursed, and taken a decade to heal up. She didn’t say that, though - that would have been foolish.

They reached the door and Parkinson knocked. Brenda caught the curtains on the side moving a bit, and a moment later, the door was opened. “Come inside,” a wizard said. Brenda recognised him - Garey, from the Portkey Office. He was in charge of handing out the Portkeys the Aurors used.

Inside, the house had been expanded with Extension Charms. This was a regular meeting spot, then - or a wizard’s home. Three more people were sitting around a table. Barnaby Bulstrode, Hit-Wizard, and Gerald Avery, another Auror. The third she didn’t know.

“Tristan Nott,” Parkinson explained. “He’s working for the Wizengamot.” He was a member of a cadet line of the Nott family then, Brenda thought. Parkinson gestured at her. “This is Brenda Brocktuckle. I’ve told you about her.”

“We’ve met,” Bulstrode said. Avery just nodded. He had been with them in that fatal trap at the brewery.

“She’s as concerned as we are about the recent developments in the Ministry.” Parkinson sat down, and Brenda joined him. Garey brought tea and snacks. For a clandestine meeting, this was very civilised, Brenda thought.
“Well, of course.” Avery scoffed. “If the mudbloods take over your head will roll.”

Brenda nodded. She knew that. “Just for doing my duty.”

“But are you ready to do what needs to be done?” The man stared at her.

They hadn’t implicated themselves as Death Eaters yet, but Brenda already knew too much. Not that she planned to rat them out - not to a Ministry that was betraying herself, and all the Aurors who had died at the mudbloods’ hands. “I’ve been hunting mudbloods since this war started. Whoever stands with them is a traitor, no matter what the Minister says.”

“Dumbledore’s mouthpiece!” Bulstrode said.

“Spineless traitor!” Garey added.

Nott didn’t say anything, and Avery was still staring at her. Parkinson was silent as well, though seemed at ease, munching on a finger sandwich. She met his eyes. She had faced the mudbloods far too often to back down now.

After a while, Avery said: “We’ll not be facing mudbloods in the Ministry.”

“We’re facing blood traitors,” Brenda said. “Worse than mudbloods.” She sneered. “I’ve been hunting criminals no matter their blood for a long time. And anyone siding with the Mudblood Resistance is a criminal. They killed so many of ours, and now they want to pardon them?”

Avery glanced to Nott, then to Parkinson, before nodding. “That’s what we are planning to prevent. Not just us, of course. A great many more think like us.”

“Other cells.” Brenda knew how such things were organised.

“Yes. We each have our missions, and together we’ll save the Ministry from the blood traitors.”

As everyone nodded. Brenda glanced at Parkinson. The Auror was uncharacteristically silent. She wondered what he was thinking. And plotting.

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London, East End, January 12th, 1997

Hermione Granger was smiling when she arrived back at the Resistance’s headquarters. She and Ron had passed a very nice afternoon. They had taken a stroll through London, talked, visited another café, gone sight-seeing, and kissed. A lot. Almost enough for her not to feel guilty about Harry any more. Ron was a good kisser. A very good kisser, in her very limited experience. She sighed contentedly.

“So it was a good date then, hm?”

She noticed that Sally-Anne was standing in the door to the kitchen, grinning at her.

For a moment, Hermione was tempted to brush the witch off. Her love life was none of her business. But Sally-Anne was the closest female friend she had in the Resistance. The closest female friend she had, period. She deserved better. So she smiled. “Yes.”

“Oh! Tell me everything!” Sally-Anne grabbed her hand. “How was it? And who did you meet?” she added, almost as an afterthought.
Hermione’s smile slipped a bit. The witch sounded remarkably like Lavender and Parvati, right then. “I met Ron.”

“Ron? Ron Weasley?” Sally-Anne looked very surprised. “You’re dating him?”

“Yes.” Hermione stared at her.

“Oh! I thought you were meeting a muggle boy. So, you were meeting him all along?”

Hermione didn’t think it was a good idea to mention that she had been dating both her best friends until today. “We’ve gone on dates before, yes.”

“Three dates this weekend? You’ve been busy!” Sally-Anne giggled.

“You’ve been out with Justin as often,” Hermione pointed out. More often, actually, since those two had far more opportunities to go out. And they could simply spend time together whenever they wanted.

“Well, yes.” Sally-Anne grinned. “But it’s not the same if you do it.”

Hermione was tempted to ask how that made sense, but another voice interrupted her.

“You’re dating Weasley?”

Seamus was on the stairs.

She nodded. “Yes.” Would he make an issue out of it, just because Ron was a pureblood? She didn’t think Seamus had become that extreme, but… she had been fooled by Allan, hadn’t she?

“I would have thought you’d go after Potter,” the Irish wizard said.

She could have said that she had picked Ron. That Ron was the better kisser. That she loved both, but thought Ron would suit her more. But none of that was anyone’s business but hers and her friends’. So she simply smiled. “Well, you’re wrong.”

“It’s risky, dating him.” Seamus was frowning. “He’s still at Hogwarts.”

“We’re not meeting at Hogwarts. We’re meeting in London. Muggle London.”

“Can he even fit in there?” Seamus snorted. “He’s a pureblood, after all.”

“Who is?”

Once more Hermione was interrupted before she could answer. By Dean this time.

Seamus turned to his best friend. “Weasley. Hermione’s dating him.”

“What?” Dean was staring at her. “You and him?”

“Yes.” She sounded sharper than she wanted, daring him to say anything more. What was their issue with her friends anyway?

He grumbled something she didn’t catch, but which caused Seamus to snort, and went into the kitchen.
Sally-Anne tugged on her hand. “Come on, you have to tell me everything!”

As she let herself be dragged upstairs, Hermione mused that Sally-Anne’s reaction was not quite as annoying as she had thought it would be. The girl seemed to be genuinely happy for her.

Unlike Seamus and Dean.

Hogwarts, January 12th, 1997

“You’re so happy that you’re staring at nothing with a silly smile on your face, and Harry’s gone to bed already. Hermione made her decision then.”

Ginny’s voice jerked Ron Weasley out of the memory of the parting kiss with Hermione. “What?”

He glared at her, then glanced around. Had anyone in the common room heard her?

“I’ve cast privacy spells,” his sister said. “So, did she?”

Denying it would have been stupid. “Yes. She told us today.”

Ginny smiled and patted his arm. “I’m glad for you, Ron.”

He stared at her.

She shrugged. “Hey, you’re my brother.”

“And that she didn’t chose Harry is not important.”

She had the grace to blush, smiling a bit, then sighed. “I’ve seen his expression. He’s looking almost as bad as Neville did, right after… you know.” When she noticed his expression, she said: “Not quite that bad, of course. At least he won’t have to see you snog her in common room.”

“I wouldn’t do that to him,” Ron said. That would be cruel. And rather indiscreet as well.

She sat down on the armrest of his seat. For a girl who had just heard that the boy she loved had been dumped, she looked sadder than Ron would have expected.

“What’s wrong?”

“Harry is.” She sighed. “This is not going according to plan.”

“What? What plan?” What had his sister done?

“I thought that if Hermione chose you, Harry would be free to pick me. But he looks terrible.” She sighed again. “He’s really into her, right?”

“Yes.” Of course he was, Ron thought. So was Ron himself.

“And if I offer to help him, everyone will think I’m making a move. Harry will think so as well.” She pouted.

Ron wasn’t certain that Harry was aware of his sister’s interest in him. Others would be, of course. But that wasn’t the point. “He doesn’t need a girlfriend right now. He needs his friends.” Like Ron and Hermione.
“I don’t see you with him right now.”

“We’ve talked already.” Briefly, and not about the real issue.

“Doesn’t seem to have helped.”

“There’s not much that can help him right now. He just needs time,” Ron said.

“My brother, the expert on broken hearts?” She sounded sceptical.

“Sirius said so.”

“Is he helping Harry?”

“Yes.” Or trying to, at least. Ron wasn’t privy to what Harry and Sirius had talked about.

“Well, that’s something.” She stood up. “Not much, but it’s something.”

“What will you do?” Ron asked. Ginny was not the most thoughtful girl he knew. Rash and easy to anger fit her more.

“Nothing.”

“What?” That didn’t sound like his sister.

“If I push him, I’d probably make things worse for him.”

“Not probably. Certainly.”

“Well, yes.” She didn’t look happy about it, but didn’t dispute it either. “So, I’ll wait. Until he is ready.”

“Ready?”

“For a new relationship, of course.”

“Ah.” Ron nodded. As far as plans went, that one was quite sensible. She must be growing up as well. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, then walked to her dorm. Not without glancing at the stairs leading to the boys’ dorms, he noticed.

One potential mess avoided. Unless some other witch made a move on Harry.

Ron wouldn’t like to be nearby if that happened. He sighed, then closed his eyes, and tried to remember Hermione. And her lips on his.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 13th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort read the latest reports from his spies, frowning. Dumbledore’s ties to the mudbloods had had less of an effect on the general population’s view of the old man than Voldemort had hoped for. It wasn’t surprising, he thought, after a glance at the headline of the Daily Prophet on his desk.

‘Dumbledore Promises To Unite Britain Against Its Real Enemies’. 
He snorted - this article lumped his Death Eaters together with the mudbloods attacking Hogsmeade. The irony would be amusing, if it wasn’t sabotaging his own effort to accuse Dumbledore of being behind the Mudblood Resistance. His old enemy was milking the capture of those muggleborn attackers in Hogsmeade for all it was worth, and apparently, the pureblood population was eating it up, thinking he’d keep them safe from everyone. That his Death Eaters had killed more purebloods than mudbloods didn’t help Voldemort’s cause, of course, even though everyone with an ounce of logic would see the reasons for that.

He shook his head. “Well played, Dumbledore.”

At least the Ministry employees were not fooled - they knew the mudbloods would want revenge for their exile, and knew the Dark Lord was their only hope of saving their lives, or at least their positions. Recruitment among them was progressing at a fast pace, although that also opened the danger of traitors infiltrating his cells. It couldn’t be helped, though - he needed as many followers as possible in case his attempt to foil Dumbledore’s plans with political means failed, as it seemed they would.

He pondered mounting another attack on purebloods himself, disguised as the work of mudbloods, then dismissed the idea. It might just drive more of the sheep into Dumbledore’s arms.

No, he had to face facts: With both Fudge and Bones in Dumbledore’s pocket - and he wished he knew what leverage his old foe had on the Head of the DMLE - his own attempts to take over the Ministry through political influence could not succeed. He had to either take it by force, or get rid of the two.

Fortunately, he had a plan that would help with either goal. And the wizard in place to execute it.

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The Calm before the Storm

Chapter 30: The Calm before the Storm

‘In the first weeks of the year 1997, the political part of the Second Blood War was changing drastically. For the first time since the war had begun, Dumbledore’s allies in the Wizengamot and the Ministry seemed on the verge of victory. Minister Fudge and the Head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, both publicly supported his plans, and even the Daily Prophet had changed its stance on muggleborns. Since the Dark Lord had all but controlled the Wizengamot for over a year, it begs the question of how this was possible.

Some of my colleagues suspect foul magic at work. I disagree. In my opinion, the answer lies in the past. Dumbledore had been Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot for decades, and he had been the Headmaster of Hogwarts almost as long. He had known many of the members of the Wizengamot and even more of the Ministry employees since they had started at his school, and undoubtedly was aware of their weaknesses, faults, embarrassing and compromising secrets. This knowledge, together with the efforts of Fudge and Bones, would have been enough to sway key members of the Wizengamot as well as Ministry employees. The Daily Prophet would have caved quickly if under such pressure from both the Ministry and Dumbledore. And once such people had been convinced to publicly oppose the Dark Lord, they were committed, since should the Dark Lord win, they’d face his wrath.

It was a ruthless but effective political manoeuvre, not dark magic, that did this.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Cornelius was looking better, Albus Dumbledore noticed when he entered the Minister’s office. The man was smiling at him, even. “Albus! I’ve just spoken to Maximilian Selwyn! He’ll support our policy!”

Maximilian had better, Albus thought, if he wanted to avoid the revelation of his indiscretions. While not technically illegal, the man’s social standing would be ruined if the public caught wind of his peculiar preferences. There was no need to tell Cornelius that, though. “I am happy to hear that. It’s a very welcome surprise.”

“Indeed! I think that he’s finally seen the light, so to speak, and realised that the Dark Lord will ruin our country despite his claims to the contrary.”

If Albus didn’t know better, he’d think Cornelius had always been an implacable enemy of the Dark Lord. The man was an opportunist of the highest calibre, and probably had already convinced himself that this had been his own decision. But he was also a skilled politician, when he was properly motivated. Such as fearing for his life should Voldemort win. It wasn’t the most moral or elegant method, but Albus would do what he needed to save Britain. He didn’t let his thoughts show on his face as he smiled approvingly at the man. “Maybe. It could also be that Maximilian simply wishes to be on the winning side.”

“That could be it - he always was a bit of an opportunist.” Cornelius nodded sagely.
Albus had to struggle not to laugh.

Fortunately, Amelia entered at that moment, and contrary to the Minister, the Head of the DMLE was not looking happy. He raised an eyebrow. “Good morning, Amelia.”

“Good morning, Albus.” Her expression belied her words.

Cornelius had noticed her mood as well. “What’s wrong, Amelia? I was just telling Albus about our progress in the Wizengamot.”

“Sod the Wizengamot! Half my Aurors are about to attack each other, and the rest are trying to hide in their homes!” The witch sat down.

“Right now?” The Minister gasped.

“Not this instant,” Amelia said, “but it won’t take much.”

“It seems the Dark Lord’s spies are getting nervous then.”

“Not just them. I’ve been approached by a number of Aurors who have arrested muggleborns in the last year, and they are all afraid that the muggleborns will take revenge for them doing their duty.” Amelia looked at Albus. “They need some assurance that this will not happen.”

Albus inclined his head slowly. “I will do my utmost to prevent any revenge being taken. Although I will not protect those who have abused their power. Those who have committed crimes will be punished.”

Cornelius nodded happily, but Amelia didn’t like that.

“And who decides what a crime is? Are we to follow muggle laws?” the witch said, sneering.

“Those who have helped the Dark Lord will not escape justice,” Albus said. “That includes those who have used the opportunity given by those evil laws to harm the innocent.”

“Innocent according to what law, Albus?” Amelia stared at him. “The muggle laws, or ours?”

“Since our laws were passed on behalf of the Dark Lord, they certainly cannot serve as an excuse for what was done to the muggleborns.” Albus met her eyes. “Although those who have followed orders in good faith will not have to fear much.” Though, he added to himself, only because the muggleborn laws did not go that far, yet. “Financial compensation will be enough to compensate most muggleborns for the hardships they endured due to the Ministry’s laws.” With a glance at Cornelius, who was frowning, he added: “The gold needed can be taken from those who followed the Dark Lord. That would only be just.” And would serve to curb the power of a number of Old Families as well. “Those responsible for muggleborns killed while resisting arrest though, and those who relished in hunting the muggleborns…” He spread his hands. “An investigation will determine what exactly happened.” He smiled. “Such things are illegal according to our laws as well, after all.”

Amelia pressed her lips together. Albus was certain that she was aware of just how many of her Aurors were guilty of what he had just said, if not of outright treason. She didn’t like to admit that fact, though, or so he thought. It reflected badly on herself. Justly so, of course - she could have made a greater effort to investigate such claims, at least.

“Desperate people will take desperate measures,” the witch said. “Once they realise what awaits them, they’ll fight against us.”
“I fully expect them to,” Albus said.

“Merlin! You are counting on it!” Amelia gasped.

He nodded.

Cornelius was gaping at Albus. “But…”

“It would greatly facilitate matters for all of us if as many of Tom’s followers as possible exposed themselves by attacking the Ministry, instead of continuing to hide.” It would be far harder to claim that they were unjustly punished if they were caught in the act - or killed. It would also offer those Aurors who had not gone too far the opportunity to redeem themselves.

Amelia glared at him. “It’s all politics, isn’t it?”

He glanced at her. “The passing of the muggleborn laws ensured that.”

Judging by the way she stiffened, she had understood.

Cornelius, of course, had other priorities. “But, are you certain that you can handle such an attack?”

“I am reasonably certain. I have been preparing to counter a coup by the Dark Lord’s followers for a while.” Albus smiled confidently. It wouldn’t do to leave the Minister shaken.

And yet he couldn’t help fearing that he was underestimating Voldemort.

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Hermione Granger knew something was wrong when Seamus and Dean fell silent as soon as she entered the kitchen in the morning. Though, to be honest, she had expected that. Even before she had seen their reaction to the news of her relationship with Ron last evening. As the Major had taught her, she couldn’t afford to let that fester. Especially not after Allan.

So she rolled her eyes at them. “Out with it.”

“What?” Seamus tried to play dumb.

“You have a problem with me. Let’s hear it.” She put her hands on her hips and stared at them.

Seamus looked mulish, but Dean sighed. “We don’t have a problem with you.”

“You have a problem with my boyfriend,” she said.

“Not with him personally. Ron’s an alright bloke,” Dean said. “But your relationship with him is problematic.”

For a moment, Hermione was relieved that they didn’t seem to hate Ron. If they were telling the truth. She cocked her head sideways. “Then what’s the problem?” She had an idea, of course.

“It’s just the fact that the leader of the Resistance is dating a pureblood. That might not go over well with everyone,” Dean said.

Seamus nodded. “Yes. We know him, but most muggleborns won’t. They only know he’s a pureblood, from a prominent pureblood family.”
“The Weasleys are also a prominent blood traitor family,” Hermione said. “They fought the Death Eaters in the last war, and in this war.” Molly Weasley had lost her two brothers in the last war, too. “Remember the attack on the Burrow?”

“No one really knows that,” Dean said. “And Ron… well, he doesn’t know much about muggles, does he?”

Seamus chuckled. “Remember how he asked how to use a fellytone?”

Hermione pursed her lips and controlled her anger. “I’ll have you know that we went out clubbing in London, and no one would have been able to tell him from any other boy. He showed me places.”

“Well, that’s not that difficult,” Seamus muttered.

She glared at him. “What do you mean?”

He snorted, but met her eyes. “You’re not exactly a clubbing girl.”

Dean cut in before she could tell his friend off. “In any case, what matters is that the leader of the Resistance dating a pureblood boy is a problem. People might think we’re following the orders of purebloods. Especially with Dumbledore’s campaign.”

Technically, they were coordinating closely with Dumbledore, but Hermione knew that the Headmaster had a lot of influence on the Resistance through her - with good reason, of course; they couldn’t hope to win this war without his help. Yet, the two boys were correct about some of their concerns.

She sighed. “I can see how that could be a problem.” If the Resistance was seen as Dumbledore’s pawns, they’d lose a lot of their influence on the muggleborns. And that would make them quite a bit more vulnerable even after a victory over Voldemort than Hermione liked. On the other hand, having such visible ties to purebloods could also help a lot. “But it will only be a problem if our relationship is revealed to the public. Which had better not happen - that would endanger far more than our reputation.” And she’d find out who was responsible. Her expression must have given away her thoughts, since both boys winced. “We’ll address this in our next broadcast. We’ll show that we’re no one’s pawns.”

“It might be good if we had another victory too,” Dean said.

“The current upheaval at the Ministry should offer us an opportunity soon enough,” Hermione said. But, she added to herself, not too soon - the policy change needed to pass if they wanted to win this war soon.

The grins of the two boys showed they were not really concerned with that.

But then, that was why she was the leader.

*****


Parkinson was up to something, Brenda Brocktuckle knew that. The signs were minimal, but after sharing a flat with him for one and a half months, she could spot them. He was just a bit too tense, and tried to act a bit too casually, even for him.

Most telling, though, was that he didn’t glance around as often as usual - and these days, all Aurors
kept an eye on their colleagues, just to avoid getting cursed in the back - which meant he didn’t want to be even remotely associated with whatever was about to happen.

She checked her privacy spell, then asked, without directly looking at him. “What’s supposed to happen?”

He didn’t jerk, but she thought there was a hint of surprise in his voice when he answered: “Just a test.”

“What kind of test?” She leaned back, dropping the report she had used as a cover on her desk. The scroll rolled itself up.

“I’d rather you didn’t have to act surprised.”

She rolled her eyes. Stupid useless games. “I already have to act as if I didn’t know you were behind it.”

“So, there’s no need to make it more difficult.”

Brenda glanced at him, and as expected, he was grinning. Typical. She refused to take the bait, though, and simply nodded, and returned to her work. Or what passed for work, these days, with everyone talking about pardoning the mudbloods. And she kept an eye on the blood traitors. Those she knew about, at least. And could recognise. That metamorphmagus could be anyone, she knew that.

An hour later, the door was thrown open. Wands were out in seconds as every Auror reacted, and Brenda found herself not quite pointing her own at Macintosh, a half-blood Auror with an attitude. Parkinson’s was aimed straight at Smith, Macintosh’s partner. Those two had been eyeing her and Parkinson since the morning.

Then Brenda realised Dawlish was standing in the door, blinking. “Someone tried to attack Bones!” he yelled after a second.

Brenda wanted to glance at Parkinson - was that what he had been waiting for? - but she wouldn’t take her eyes off Macintosh. Not until the blood traitor lowered his wand.

“Come on, Trevor!” Smith suddenly said, “We have to check on Bones.”

The half-blood Auror glared at Brenda, then lowered his wand and sprinted after his partner.

Brenda muttered a curse under her breath and sat down again. That had been close. She glared at Parkinson. “We almost cursed each other,” she whispered. And it was his fault.

“I underestimated the tension,” her partner said. “I did my best to diffuse it, though.”

She snorted. “What exactly happened?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know yet. An attack on our boss, I suppose.”

She glared at him again, but he grinned. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

As Parkinson had said, it didn’t take long for the news to spread: Parker, a Hit-Wizard, had tried to kill Bones in her office, but had botched the job, and she had managed to stun him. Rumour was, he had been under the Imperius.
“Imperius or not, he must have been a rather weak wizard to fail like that,” Avery said in the break room in the afternoon.

“Bones is tough,” Parkinson said. “She’s more experienced than most in the corps, and she probably has been expecting an attack for a long time.”

“I heard she has been trained by Mad-Eye Moody!” a rookie Auror Brenda didn’t care enough about to learn her name piped up.

“You’re all wrong!” Sybille Selwyn, an Auror who hadn’t been out in the field for ten years, grinned. “Dumbledore had placed protections in her office. As soon as the assassin entered, the Imperius was removed. Parker turned himself in!”

“Really?” Parkinson shook his head. “Sounds like a tall tale to me. You don’t remove an Imperius that easily.”

Selwyn scoffed. “Shows what you know. The Chief Warlock had made a deal with the goblins; there’s a Thief’s Downfall hidden there!”

“The defective watering charm!” Avery shook his head. “It’s right at the entrance. Bones’s secretary told me that they couldn’t fix it yet, and that’s why they simply added a drying charm. But Fudge has the same ‘problem’.”

“Sneaky,” Parkinson said. “With the cat out of the bag, they’ll probably install those things openly, and have us walk through them on the way in and out.”

“Well, did you really think they’d let us use the Imperius, without taking precautions? The Minister certainly wouldn’t risk getting imperiused; he might have to raise our pay otherwise!” Selwyn grinned at her own joke.

The rest of the Aurors, all of them purebloods, laughed, but it sounded a bit hollow to Brenda. This meant that no Imperius-based plans would work. It would have been fitting to use blood traitors as curse-fodder and scapegoats, but on the other hand, it also meant no one could use those spells on her.

She stood up. “Well, I have a mountain of scrolls to go through. With half the Corps chattering about this, someone has to do the real work.”

The rookie looked lost, but the others understood. They weren’t trusted with investigating this assassination attempt either. Which said a lot about what was in stock for them once the mudbloods were pardoned.

If, Brenda reminded herself, if they were pardoned. They wouldn’t, if she could help it.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 13th, 1997

“Good evening, Albus. Can I offer you a drink? Maybe a glass of wine?”

“Thank you. Yes, please.” Albus Dumbledore said, sitting down on the couch in Sirius’s living room. He was honestly glad for Sirius’s offer - it had been a tiring day, and it was far from over.

“Tonks will be joining us as soon as she can get away from the Ministry,” Sirius said, taking a seat
himself. “And I’ve informed Marcel.”

Albus took note of the familiar address as he nodded. “Nymphadora will take a while longer, I fear - the attack on Amelia has the Ministry in quite the uproar.”

“What exactly happened?” Sirius asked.

“Someone cast an Imperius Curse on a Hit-Wizard and ordered him to kill Amelia in her office.”

“That sounds like a spur of the moment decision by some Death Eater sympathiser,” Sirius said. “My grandparents would have punished any family member harshly for such an attempt.”

Being familiar with the late Blacks, Albus was not certain that Sirius was joking. It wasn’t relevant, though. He nodded. “For an assassination attempt, it wasn’t a particularly skillful or cunning one. But I fear it was more than that.”

“Part of a larger plot by the Dark Lord?”

“Or simply a way to test our defences,” Albus said. Although he couldn’t afford to underestimate Tom.

“Our famous defences. Or ‘precautions’, as you called them.” Sirius wasn’t quite as subtle as he might believe he was when fishing for information.

Before Albus could answer that, Marcel Delacour entered. The French Wizard was in high spirits, or so it seemed, though his smile faltered just a bit when he saw the two men. “Mademoiselle Tonks ’as not yet arrived, I take it?”

Albus shook his head. “She will be busy at work a while longer.”

Delacour sighed in what Albus thought was a very French way, and sat down.

“You have to wait a while longer before getting your proposals shot down again, I think,” Sirius said, chuckling.

“Ah, but we are simply flirting. If I were seriously pursuing ’er, I would certainly act differently.” Delacour smiled.

“Of course.”

Before the two men could discuss the topic further, Kreacher arrived with the promised wine. It was of excellent quality - no matter their views on politics and the law, the Blacks had always had an outstanding wine cellar and liquor cabinet. Not even Lucrezia Black’s reputation as a poisoner in the 17th century had changed that.

A few minutes were spent appreciating the fine wine. Delacour praised it eloquently - and his family had their own vineyards. Unfortunately, Albus was forced to return to the matter at hand quite quickly. “As we were discussing before, I think it very likely that the incident today was ordered by the Dark Lord himself. To test our defences, to sow distrust, to weaken the resolve of the Ministry employees, or for a reason I have yet to think of.”

“A distraction, maybe?” Sirius shrugged.

“While not impossible, I doubt it. Other than the Ministry, there are not many other crucial targets for Voldemort. Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwarts. Hogsmeade is too close to Hogwarts to be
taken even with a distraction, and Diagon Alley is too large to be taken with the help of a mere
distraction. Not as long as Amelia remained in charge of the DMLE.” Albus took another sip from
his glass, then watched as Kreacher refilled it.

“Her death might be his goal,” Sirius said.

“It would make sense,” Delacour agreed. “But wouldn’t such an attack warn her as well?”

“Amelia has been aware of the danger she is in for some time,” Albus said. “No, I think the main
reason for this attack was a test of our defences.”

“You do not seem to be too concerned, though.” Sirius narrowed his eyes slightly.

The Headmaster smiled. “I am not. While the Dark Lord now knows that the Imperius will not work,
or not work well enough, it also means that he’ll not make plans which rely on it. Which means we’ll
not have to deal with it.”

“Ah!” Sirius nodded appreciatively.

“A comforting thought,” Delacour added, “although I can not help but notice that this is just an
assumption.”

“With the Thief’s Downfalls installed, we’ll have reliable ways to protect ourselves against the
Imperius even if the Dark Lord were to still focus on it.” Albus nodded. “Although I do agree that
we cannot rely on him acting in a completely rational manner.”

“Does this change any of our plans?” Delacour asked, setting his glass down.

“Only in details.” Albus was certain Tom would not accept the Ministry reaching an accommodation
with the muggleborns. As long as he thought he had a chance to win with force what was denied
him, he’d make the attempt. The real danger was if he should feel that there was no chance of taking
the Ministry in a coup. Tom would rather see the Ministry destroyed than his enemy. Which was
why Albus had to be very careful with his plans and contingencies. “The Thief’s Downfall will be
moved a bit, so we’ll have to take that into account when we deploy.”

“Telling friend from foe will be difficult, though.” Delacour flicked his finger. “My family is apt to
curse first if in doubt.”

“Which is why Tonks has been taking pictures in my Pensieve of known sympathisers of the Dark
Lord during the last week.” The young witch had worked hard, maybe too hard, on that, and had
taken quite a few risks, using other forms to spy on her colleagues, but needs must.

“There’s Polyjuice,” Sirius said.

“If they rely on that to sow confusion, despite the Thief’s Downfall, then they’ll risk taking curses
from their allies as well. A possible threat, but not a likely one,” Albus said.

“Too many assumptions for my taste,” Sirius muttered.

“Ah, that is combat for you,” Delacour said, a bit too patronisingly, Albus thought. “Chaotic and
unpredictable - like a witch!”

Sirius didn’t take offence, though - apparently, the two wizards were getting along well. “With that
attitude, I doubt you’ll have much success wooing my cousin.”
“Wouldn’t she be flattered to be thought unpredictable? It is a very ’elpful quality in duels and battles.” Delacour grinned.

“It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it that might grate on her,” Sirius answered.

“Might? So you do not know?” Delacour raised an eyebrow.

“Me prying into her private affairs would not be welcomed by my dear cousin,” Sirius said, a bit too nonchalantly.

“Nor by Andromeda,” Albus added, and hid his smile at seeing Sirius flinch. “Now, let us once more go over the likely deployments.”

He had to deal with one troubled love affair affecting his plans already, he didn’t want two of his most important allies discussing their love lives instead of the war.

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“... and by all accounts, the Aurors almost cursed each other when they heard the alert. I listened a bit, to those not under a privacy spell, and everyone I could overhear expected their enemies to attack at any moment.”

Albus nodded at the young witch when she finished her report. “Well done.” He smiled at her, then sighed. “Things are as tense as I feared, after my own visit.” His meetings with Amelia and Cornelius didn’t grant him too much insight into the views of the rank and file of the Ministry, and especially the Aurors - both leaders were biased, in their own ways, and without some other sources, Albus couldn’t trust their views of the situation in the Ministry.

Young Nymphadora smiled and sat down. She looked as tired as Albus remembered - or worse.

“Indeed. Your outstanding work will greatly facilitate our task, once the Death Eaters make their move,” Delacour said. “Many will owe you their lives.”

“Thank you, Marcel,” the metamorphmagus said. Albus saw she stiffened a bit, though.

He cleared his throat. “I think we all have earned some rest now.”

“Oh, yes.” Nymphadora downed the wine Sirius’s elf had served her, and stood up. “As I said, all the trusted Aurors are on double shifts starting tomorrow, so I’ll have to head to bed. Alone,” she added with a glance at the French wizard.

Delacour’s response was a very emphatic sigh, but he still got up and followed the witch out of the room.

“A word, Albus, before you go,” Sirius said when the Headmaster himself was getting up. “About Harry.”

“Ah.” Albus forced himself to smile.

“Hermione dumped him yesterday.”

“So I gathered.”

“Of course you have,” Sirius said.

He was wrong. It hadn’t taken Legilimency to find out; merely observing both boys when they had
arrived after their emergency meeting had been enough. Mister Weasley, torn between happiness and guilt, and Harry, trying to mask his pain - the reason for both was plain as day for Albus. “Although as I understood it, Miss Granger did not so much ‘dump’ him as you called it, but simply made her decision.” At a rather inconvenient time, too, in Albus’s opinion.

“Same thing. Harry was devastated, and I’m not certain my talk with him was enough to help.”

This morning, Harry had looked like he was holding up well, given the circumstances, or so Albus thought. And this evening, he and Mister Weasley were training with Alastor; Albus doubted that either would be able to focus on anything but the training. But teenagers were rather emotional, the Headmaster knew that very well. “You would like to talk to him some more.”

“Yes.” Sirius nodded. “I thought of hiring a Courtesan for him, to distract him from his pain - Marcel assured me he knew the best in Paris, Veela, even - but I think I’ll try talking first. In person, I mean.”

Albus chuckled with him at his joke, feeble as it was. If it was a joke - he wouldn’t put it past Sirius to actually do such a thing. It would be a distraction in any case - and Albus could do without one of those these days. “That should not be too difficult to arrange.” These days, the board of governors didn’t bother him at all any more, not with most of House Slytherin gone and many of their parents dead or in hiding. Compared to the pressure Malfoy had tried to bring to bear on him in the past, it was a very welcome change.

“Thank you, Albus.” Sirius smiled, then sighed. “It’s like James all over again, after one of his rejections, only Lily didn’t go out with anyone else, not seriously, at least.”

Albus wasn’t certain that the last part was true, but there was no need to bring that up. Something else was worth mentioning, though. “Children following in their parents’ footsteps is not always a good thing.” Young Neville certainly hadn’t benefited from his grandmother’s attempts to mould him in the image of his unfortunate father.

Sirius sighed again. “I know. It’s just… Harry looks so much like James, and Hermione… well, she doesn’t look like Lily at all, but appearances aside, she’s a stubborn, brilliant muggleborn witch. And scary when she wants to be. It would have been like another chance, you know?”

Albus understood the feeling - very well, in fact. But he also knew how dangerous it was. “I believe that it is best for children to choose their own path.”

“Yeah, well - it’s not as if Harry can do that either, with the Prophecy and all.” Sirius snorted and refilled his glass. “He has known he’ll have to fight the Dark Lord to the death for months, and now the girl he loves chooses his best friend. Merlin’s balls, grown men might break under that pressure!”

Albus knew that as well. Although her courage to make such a difficult decision before things went on for too long was admirable, Miss Granger’s sense of timing left a lot to be desired. While the Headmaster greatly valued honesty, he would not have minded if the witch had let things be for a bit longer - until after Tom was dealt with. A broken heart was a far less serious condition to treat when the person afflicted wasn’t about brave mortal danger. But such was the folly of youth.

So he nodded. “I will keep an eye on him, Sirius. And so will Harry’s friends, I believe.”

“Of course they will. But it might do more harm than good if everyone is trying to act as if nothing had changed when things have definitely changed.”

Sirius didn’t say it, but Albus was certain that the wizard knew this from personal experience. When
James had finally managed to win Lily’s heart, it had affected his friendship with Sirius, Remus and Peter as well. Sometimes, Albus wondered if Peter might not have succumbed to temptation if James had still been focused on leading his friends.

He banished the thought; it was in the past, and the current situation was quite different. For all the similarity in their looks, Harry was very different from James. Trying to treat him like his father would spell disaster.

Fortunately, Sirius seemed to have realised that.

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London, January 13th, 1997

“What was that this morning?” Brenda Brocktuckle asked Parkinson as soon as the two of them had arrived in their shared muggle flat.

“Hm?” Parkinson looked at her as if he was confused.

Brenda kept a lid on her temper with some effort. She had good self-control, usually, but they were working against the blood traitors who were trying to take control of the Ministry, and they couldn’t afford any mistake. “The attack on Bones. That didn’t look very well-thought out. A single imperiused Hit-Wizard?”

“Ah, that wasn’t an attack. That was a decoy.” Parkinson had that smug grin on his face again.

“And what did it achieve?” Brenda knew her fellow Auror and now co-conspirator would not have been quite as smug if it had not worked.

“It showed us the defences of Bones’s office, of course.”

That might mean that Bones was the target of the group she was now part of. Or the whole attack on Bones was a decoy for something else - Brenda had no illusions about how much loyalty she could expect from the Dark Lord; if it served his plans, he’d sacrifice the entire cell. Maybe not Parkinson, the smug wizard seemed too skilled in this plotting. “And alerted her, so she’ll focus on protecting herself, and the Minister.”

“Exactly.”

She nodded. “And what will my task be in this?”

“We need to be prepared to exploit this, once the opportunity arrives.”

“Or when the order arrives,” Brenda added. She didn’t think the Dark Lord trusted Parkinson so much as to allow him to choose when to start a coup.

His smile slipped just a bit. “Yes.”

So he wasn’t quite as secure of his position as he tried to appear, Brenda noted. Which meant her own position was even worse than she had thought. Not that it could be helped - if the mudbloods won, she would be even worse off. “So, what do you have planned to do that?”

Parkinson’s smug smile returned. “I have a couple ideas.”

As Brenda listened, she forced herself to remember that what Parkinson was planning was aimed at blood traitors, people who’d sell her out to the mudbloods, and not at fellow Aurors.
It helped a little. And war was a dirty business anyway.

Hogwarts, January 14th, 1997

The tension between the two boys in his office was obvious, Albus Dumbledore thought, looking at them sitting in front of his desk. Mister Weasley kept glancing at Harry, who was staring straight ahead, focusing on the wall behind Albus. Granted, he had a few delightfully mysterious devices placed there, but this wasn’t Harry’s first visit to Albus’s office.

The Headmaster sighed and smiled. “I suppose I should treat this as an opportunity to train you when you are distracted.”

Harry jerked, then winced. “Sorry, sir.”

“Sorry,” Mister Weasley said.

“Ron could go and use the time to … for other things. In London,” Harry said.

“I’m not leaving you, mate!” his friend blurted out. “I told you, we’re in this together.”

“That was before…” Albus saw Harry press his lips together.

“That doesn’t change a thing. I’m not going to let you face this alone.”

“I’m not facing Voldemort today, just the Headmaster,” Harry said. “And should the Dark Lord make an unscheduled appearance, then I’ll be certain to call you as soon as possible.”

Mister Weasley clenched his teeth at hearing that, but didn’t answer right away. After a moment, he all but hissed. “We’re not going to let you sacrifice yourself.”

That was what he was fearing, Albus thought. He cleared his throat, and both boys looked at him as if they had forgotten his presence. Alastor would be quite mad if he knew this. “A noble sentiment, Mister Weasley.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m the one who has to face the Dark Lord in my mind” Harry tapped his temple. “And no one else can join us in here. Not even with Legilimency.”

“And yet on that particular battlefield, knowing your friends support you can be decisive.” The old wizard smiled. “Not to mention that, as Filius will happily confirm, even duels are won with your mind, not your wand.”

“I don’t think he meant it quite that literally,” Harry said.

Mister Weasley snorted, then winced, then seemed to sit a bit straighter. “No matter what, we’ll not let you face Voldemort alone.”

“Nor leave me alone,” Harry muttered, but for a moment, he seemed to smile. He shook his head. “Well, we better get on with the training then.”

Albus nodded, and prepared himself to let the boy enter his mind.

Harry Potter wiped some sweat from his forehead while he slumped back in his seat. That had been a
very intense session. Dumbledore hadn’t pulled any punches. Now it was Ron’s turn to batter his mind against the Headmaster’s defences until he had a headache, and Harry could relax. Relax, and think about his life again.

Sirius had said that life went on, but Harry wasn’t really feeling like it. He glanced at his friend, and frowned. Ron was trying to act as if nothing had changed. As if he and Hermione weren’t a couple, and Harry was the third wheel. The odd wizard out. As if Ron wouldn’t rather be with her, than with Harry. If all of them were together at Hogwarts still, they’d be sneaking away to snog, Harry thought. And then he remembered kissing Hermione, and clenched his teeth. It had been one of his most cherished memories, Patronus grade, and now it was just a painful reminder of what, of who he had lost. If he ever had had it, her, in the first place, and she hadn’t just taken pity on him… he shook his head. His friends were better than that. It wasn’t their fault that Hermione had fallen for Ron. Harry would have done the same, if he had been in her place. And if he had been a girl.

He banished that thought as well. Things were as they were. And in a way, his fight had become a bit easier. He knew now that even if he died, his friends would have each other. It took a bit of the pressure off him. He didn’t have to survive the battle, as long as Voldemort died as well. He knew better than to voice that thought to anyone, of course. Sirius would be devastated, and probably try to grab him and run to Magical India or wherever. And Ron would never let him out of sight again, and Hermione… she might rig up some way to monitor him from a distance. Or just lock him up - the girl could be a tad too ruthless when she thought it was needed.

The point was moot anyway, since he had no idea if suicide attacks were even possible with Legilimency. It wasn’t as if the things the Headmaster was training him for had been done before.

He smiled wryly. He wasn’t exactly planning to die, or wanting to. But if anyone had to die, Harry would rather have that one be him, than any one of his friends. That had been true even before Hermione had made her choice, which probably meant it was a good thing she had picked Ron. His friend was more sensible.

Or should be. Ron had had some rather daft ideas about sacrifices himself, in the past, Harry remembered. And Hermione… she had decided to start a guerrilla war with less than a dozen people, rather than go and hide. He shook his head and chuckled. Yes, all of them were crazy. And his friends didn’t even have the excuse of having a link to Voldemort’s soul in their head. Harry must be contagious, he thought.

His good mood faded again when he thought of the Dark Lord once more. The Headmaster kept praising his progress, but Harry couldn’t help feeling that this was mostly to encourage him. He was facing the worst Dark Lord in Britain’s history, after all - he’d need a lot more than some lessons to win. He didn’t think being able to outfly a dragon and send dozens of Dementors fleeing with a single Patronus Charm would be that helpful for this.

Although… Harry rubbed his chin as he had an idea. It sounded crazy, and he had no clue if it was even possible, but if it worked…

If it worked, the Dark Lord might just have a very nasty surprise.

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Hogwarts, January 15th, 1997

Ron Weasley watched Harry while they were getting ready for breakfast. His best friend didn’t look as sad any more as he had the day before. He didn’t know what had happened - he had been too tired after Dumbledore’s training to notice anything but the way back to his bed. Well, almost - due
to Moody’s training, Ron suspected that he was watching out for assassins even while asleep. Which, to be fair, was likely a goal of their more than slightly paranoid instructor. Though as painful as the old Auror’s methods were, they were effective - Ron remembered how quickly he had learned the Disillusionment Charm back in November.

“Come on, Harry, I’m starving here!” Ron complained. He wasn’t really starving - he’d had a snack before bed - but it was something he used to say a lot. Before the war.

His friend looked at Ron for a moment, then smiled and nodded. “Can’t have that happen now, can we?” It wasn’t quite as it had been before, but it’d do for now.

The two descended the stairs. Neville had gone down already - as had been usual lately. Their friend was getting up early. And training late at night. Ginny was already up as well, waiting in the common room. Not for them, as it turned out, since she just waved at them.

Neville was in the Great Hall, staring at the Slytherin table. Ron winced at the sight, then nodded to Harry. “Let’s join him.”

Harry briefly looked surprised - he had looked distracted all morning, Ron realised - then nodded. Ron sat down across the table from Neville, even if that meant presenting his back to the rest of the hall. Moody would have his arse for that, but Ron could trust Harry, who sat down next to Neville, to watch his back. And Ron thought that Harry needed to be shown that sort of trust, right now.

“Morning, Neville,” he said as he grabbed some juice and started to fill his plate.

“Morning,” their friend muttered.

Ron suppressed a sigh - Neville was worse than Harry. But with good reason, of course. Ron couldn’t think of anything to say, so they ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Neville drew his wand, and Ron almost hexed him, until he realised that the boy was casting a privacy spell.

If Neville had noticed his reaction, then he didn’t seem to mind. “I want in,” he said, staring at Harry.

“What?” Ron’s friend blinked.

“The special training you two are doing. I want in.”

“Ah…” Ron tried to think of a way to explain that it wasn’t the kind of training Neville thought it was, without revealing the secret.

“That’s up to Moody,” Harry said. “He’s training us as a favour for the Headmaster.”

It was a sign how much Neville had changed when the boy simply nodded.

“It’ll be very hard,” Ron warned him. “And painful.” And Neville would know something was up when they only had lessons every other day, and still went to see the Headmaster without him.

“That’s no problem,” Neville said. “As long as I get the training I need to avenge my family.” He bared his teeth in a grin that didn’t seem to fit the boy, at all.

Ron suddenly thought that maybe Harry wasn’t the one who needed to be watched the most.

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Hogwarts, January 15th, 1997
“Training another?” Alastor sounded dubious. His face didn’t show much of an expression, though, even counting his cursed scars.

Albus Dumbledore nodded. “Neville Longbottom has asked for training.” Demanded it, actually. It was sad that Augusta couldn’t have seen her grandson back then, meeting Albus’s eyes unflinchingly. Although the Headmaster had to admit that Mister Weasley’s concerns seemed justified as well - young Neville looked like he was resolved to get revenge, and he might not be too discerning when it came to his targets. Few of those wishing to avenge their dead were, in this war or any other one.

Alastor’s training would hopefully help with that, Albus thought. Further, having the two boys whom the prophecy once might have applied to, train together, seemed fitting - and might help hide the real plan from Voldemort. Even if, he thought with a great deal of shame, it would endanger Neville. That the boy was likely to endanger himself, if left to his own devices, did not excuse this.

“Longbottom? The whelp wants to avenge his family?” Alastor scoffed.

“Precisely.”

His friend’s good eye narrowed. “Hm. I guess I kind of owe the boy. If I had been a bit quicker… and he’ll be motivated enough to fit in, I guess?”

Albus nodded. He didn’t know if Alastor was talking about the attack on Neville’s parents, or the altercation with Barty Crouch Jr., and it didn’t matter. Neville would get his training.

“But you didn’t call me here just to discuss that.”

His friend knew him well. Albus nodded. “I expect that the Dark Lord will launch a coup, once it becomes clear that he cannot stop the policy change by other means.”

“Tell me something a dumb rookie wouldn’t know.”

“The Ministry cannot deal with it by itself. The number of trustworthy Aurors and Hit-Wizards is too low,” Albus said. His friend rolled his good eye and made an impatient gesture with his hand. The Headmaster didn’t let that hurry him, though - planning shouldn’t be rushed. “So, I have taken a few precautions, and organised reinforcements.”

“Black’s cell, and the French bunch.”

“Yes.” Albus nodded. “There is also a possibility that the Muggleborn Resistance might involve itself.”

“Ah.” The old Auror grinned. “Those rumours were not entirely wrong then, hm? You’ve got your own squad of killers?”

“I have kept contact with a few of my students, even after they left Hogwarts.” Albus had debated with himself about telling Alastor this, his friend was a veteran Auror, after all, but there had been no choice. And Alastor was not quite as enamored with proper procedure and laws as Amelia.

His friend shook his head. “If this ever gets out you’ll have a lot of trouble, Albus.”

Trouble he would be able to handle, provided Tom was dead by then. He shrugged. “But you can see the potential problems their intervention would cause.”

“Aye. That’s going to be one hell of a mess.”
“The Resistance will likely be wearing muggle uniforms.”

“That’ll only help with accidental cursings.”

Albus sighed. “Those who attack them deliberately will have to face the consequences of their choice.” Which would likely be swift and fatal.

His friend snorted. “Ah… I’d have commented how you’d finally admit that we’re fighting a war to the end, but seeing as you’ve ‘kept contact’ with the muggleborns, you’ve been doing that already.” He stared at Albus. “Some claim you’re just like the Dark Lord, wanting to rule Britain and dictate the lives of everyone.”

“Lies spread by Voldemort’s followers. All I wish is for everyone, no matter their birth, to have equal rights.”

“That’ll need a lot of dictating for the bigots,” Alastor said, sneering. “Less if the worst of them are dead, of course.”

There was no need to answer that, Albus might not like it, but he couldn’t argue that conclusion.

“So, you think you’ll need the muggleborn wands so badly you’ll accept the trouble their presence will cause.”

“Yes.”

“You seem rather well informed about the Dark Lord’s plans.”

“Not as well informed as I would prefer,” Albus sighed, “but I do not think I am wrong.” He’d rather overestimate than underestimate his enemy.

“Well, I can handle the lads and lassies, but others will panic anyway. But - will you take the field?” Alastor narrowed his good eye again.

“If I’m not already present in the Ministry, then I’ll only come if the Dark Lord himself appears, or as a last resort.” He couldn’t commit, and leave Tom to attack Hogwarts. If Albus had to leave in the middle of the battle, his allies might think the battle lost, and give up or flee.

Alastor disagreed with this reasoning, but didn’t argue the point. “We’ll make do without you, then. With the Weasleys’ surprises, and our foreign and muggleborn allies, we’ll have the advantage.”

They would have the advantage, Albus knew. Hopefully it would be enough to carry the day without paying too much.

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London, Ministry of Magic, January 16th, 1997

Even though Brenda Brocktuckle had joined a cell of the Dark Lord’s followers, she hadn’t taken action against the Ministry yet. That was changing today. As she stepped out of the fireplace - and through the Thief’s Downfall that had been recently installed there - she was carrying a stack of harmless-looking paper with her. Paper that had been given to her by Parkinson, ‘straight from the Dark Lord’. After he had told her what to do with it, and she had realised just what she was carrying, she had to force herself not to hurry to work and get rid of those things as fast as possible.

Fortunately, she wasn’t the only one under a lot of pressure, and so she didn’t look out of place as
she walked to her office, grabbed a piece of parchment, and went down to Procurement. Parchments, quills, ink, robes, and of course, forms, everything needed for the smooth running of the Ministry could be had here - if you had the correct form.

Brenda had the wrong form - deliberately. When the clerk frowned and fidgeted, she leaned forward on the counter and glared at him. “What?”

“That’s not the correct form.”

“What? Did you change forms again without telling anyone?” She remembered that day well, and had no trouble getting angry.

“No, no… but we need the correct form.”

“Transfigure it then!”

“No, no… that would not last for the mandatory archive period… I’ll have to fetch the form.” The clerk was fussing with his stacks of parchment.

“Summon it, I haven’t all day!” Brenda snarled. “Someone has to work here.”

“That would mess up our filing system!” The wizard looked shocked. He did stand up, finally, and went to look for the correct form.

Brenda let out a relieved sigh, then pulled her papers out, switching it with one of the stacks lined up on the shelf behind the counter with a flick of her wand.

She had done it. She had betrayed the Ministry not just with words, but deeds now. If anyone knew what she had done… but there was no choice. It was treason, or be betrayed.

She still was angry - at herself, at the Ministry, and at the mudbloods - when the clerk returned, and almost ripped the form out of his hands before filling it out hastily.

She didn’t glance at the stack she had replaced, the one under “Ministry Memos”.

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London, East End, January 16th, 1997

“Here are the latest floor plans of the Ministry,” Hermione Granger announced as she spread the plans Dumbledore had had Sirius deliver to her out on the table in the dining room. She had had other plans, courtesy of Sirius, but these were the most recent. The witch addressed the assembled Resistance members. “As you know, the Wizengamot is debating the proposed policy change tomorrow.” The change that would end the Ministry’s persecution of them.

“Yes. But we can expect the Dark Lord to attack it, if the policy change passes,” Hermione said. They hadn’t seriously planned an attack, but Hermione and the others had run a few thought exercises. Especially after Martin’s execution. This was different, though. This time, they could plan with the help of people inside the Ministry.

“Which should render our plans to attack it redundant.” Dean was looking at her.

“Ah!” Seamus clapped his hands together. “We’re going to kill the Death Eaters in the Ministry!”

“We’re going to lend some support to our new allies,” Hermione corrected him, then added: “Which means we’ll be killing those attacking it - the Death Eaters.”
That had most of the group grinning, even Colin and Dennis, who knew they wouldn’t be able to come with them.

“But can we trust the Ministry? What if this is a trap?” Louise asked. “They have tried to lure us into a trap once already.”

“We can trust Dumbledore and his allies,” Hermione said. “The Ministry won’t go against them. Can’t, really.” She looked at the others. “If anyone is attacking us, assume it’s a Death Eater.”

Everyone nodded at that. Hermione didn’t like it - there was bound to be some confusion - but she wasn’t about to risk her friends’ lives just to protect some Ministry stooge who would have arrested and executed them just a week ago, if given the order.

“Alright… let’s go over the plans. The key areas the Death Eaters will try to control are here, the Minister’s floor, and here, the Atrium with the Floo connections and the lifts, controlling access to the Ministry and to the different floors. If we and our allies control this, we can deal with them one group at a time.” Hermione pointed at the different areas, wishing, not for the first time, that she had a Pensieve. At least Louise and Jeremy were familiar with the Ministry.

“What about the Department of Mysteries?” Louise asked.

“I have it on good authority that this is taken care of.” Dumbledore had told her that he had personally made certain of that.

Louise nodded.

Justin bent over the maps. “Covering all those approaches will be difficult.”

“Yes. We’ll have to use machine guns extensively,” Hermione admitted. Sealing the entrances was no option, not when a bit of transfiguration would open them again.

“What about mines?” Seamus asked. “A few Claymores, and anyone trying to come at us is ripped to shreds.”

Hermione shook her head. “Those could hit our allies as well.” She knew that wouldn’t really impress Seamus, though - he didn’t quite understand that not everyone knew as much about the bombs as he did, or Hermione. And he didn’t care about a few dead purebloods, or so Hermione suspected. Fortunately, she had a more compelling argument. “But they’re also a risk for us - imagine someone transfiguring them, or simply turning them around or messing with them through magic.”

The Irish wizard grumbled, but let the matter drop.

“We’re still bringing them, and more explosives - just in case we have to cover our retreat.” If the Dark Lord was about to take the Ministry there was no point any more in trying to protect it. They couldn’t blow it up, not with all the muggles in the area above it, but they could get destroy quite a lot without putting muggles at risk.

Even the Dark Lord would be hampered if the Ministry infrastructure, especially its paperwork, was destroyed.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 16th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort studied the latest reports from his sources, delivered by Bellatrix, and only
as copies of the originals, of course. He knew very well what could be added to a piece of parchment, after all.

It looked as he had expected: His followers in the Wizengamot were unlikely to have enough influence to defeat the proposed changes. It wasn’t quite hopeless, much less impossible to still carry the day - a few of his Death Eaters were leaning on Wizengamot members, appealing to their common sense - but it was unlikely. Dumbledore had outmanoeuvred him, as much as it galled him to admit it.

Which meant the Ministry would turn fully against him. There were enough turncoats who would blindly follow new orders for this to be a significant setback. Not just because the Ministry’s Aurors, together with Dumbledore’s Order and the mudbloods, would be hunting his followers, but also because of the loss of reputation Voldemort would suffer if the Ministry turned officially against him. He couldn’t let the sheep lose their fear of his power.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. He had been preparing for this, his agents were almost everywhere in the Ministry, but it was still a gamble. If he lost the battle… if his followers lost the battle, then that would be an even worse blow.

Unless, of course, the battle caused so much devastation that not even Ministry propaganda could portray it as victory to raise morale.

Well, he had been planning some changes to the Ministry’s appearance after his inevitable victory anyway. And, he added to himself, glancing at the human skull sitting on his desk, there were other options to consider.

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“The Chair recognises the Minister for Magic.” Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore smiled at Cornelius as the other wizard stood up. It had taken some effort, and a few more secrets revealed, but they had managed to secure a majority for the proposed changes. Now all that was left was to counter any attempt by Tom’s followers to derail or delay the session.

And, the old wizard mused, watching the assembly as Cornelius started to read the proposal everyone in the Ministry already knew by heart at this point, he had had decades of practise handling such issues. Formalities would not stop him now. Judging by the expressions on the faces of Augustus Malfoy and his friends, they knew that as well.

Albus just wished he could be as confident in handling the expected response from the Dark Lord.

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Chapter 31: Coup d’état

‘The drastic changes Wizarding Britain had gone through during the last decade of the 20th Century are often attributed to the Second Blood War. However, after careful study, it seems more appropriate to state that the war was the result of such drastic changes. In support of that idea, I point at the fact that the radicalisation of both purebloods and muggleborns happened before the first spell was cast. As was pointed out before, the Muggleborn Resistance was formed months before they launched their first attack, while the core of the Death Eaters had already fought in the First Blood War a decade and a half before. What brought them to war were political changes, mainly the Muggleborn Laws passed in 1995, the groundwork for which had been laid during the preceding years, in response to the Muggle Protection Act of 1992.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn


‘...and that is why I believe we have no other choice than to come to an agreement with the muggleborns.’

Albus Dumbledore was impressed - Maximilian Selwyn was quite convincing. He doubted that many would be able to tell that the man had been forced to support Cornelius’s proposal against his will. Augustus was looking even angrier than he had at the start of the session - the wizard must have been surprised by Maximilian’s change of opinion. Lucius would have anticipated that, Albus thought, and likely would have taken measures to prevent it.

Fortunately, Augustus was no Lucius. He wasn’t the only new member whose lack of experience in politics Albus had exploited in the last few weeks. The Chief Warlock let his gaze wander through the room. The heirs or the proxies of the underage heirs of the Old Families who had replaced those killed at Malfoy Manor were simply not quite as skilled as their predecessors had been. Some had talent, but that was not enough. Not when dealing with someone who had decades of experience in Wizarding Britain’s politics.

Augustus did try to stem the tide, of course. His master would demand no less than his best efforts. Albus nodded at the man with a polite smile. “The chair recognises Mister Malfoy.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! I cannot find the words to describe my outrage at this proposal! Have you forgotten what those muggleborns did? Not only did they scorn those who had, misguided though the attempt was, welcomed them in our society! Not only did they break our laws - laws we passed for the good of us all! No, not content with those crimes, they murdered dozens of our peers, and their families!” Augustus was shaking his head wildly. A bit too theatrically, Albus thought. “They started this war, driven by their jealousy of our sophisticated culture and their thirst for blood! If not for the muggleborns, we would not have suffered so much!” He shuddered. “How can anyone even consider making peace with those beasts? If we did that, we wouldn’t only betray their victims, but we’d endanger all of Wizarding Britain. If we let them escape just punishment for their crimes, then we’d condone their wanton acts of murder. We’d encourage them! If this proposal is accepted, then any murder they commit afterwards will be on our heads! And,” Augustus said with a sneer, “they will murder more of us. You know the lies they spread! You know they blame us for what they did! This proposal is not just foolish, it is outright treasonous! I implore all of you to reject
it!

Albus refrained from shaking his head. That hadn’t been one of Augustus’s better performances. Still, a few members of the Wizengamot might be, with good reason or not, concerned about the muggleborns seeking vengeance. He rose to speak himself.

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! It is no secret that I fully support this proposal of our esteemed Minister for Magic. I have opposed those laws from the start, as many of you may recall, and I can assure you that repealing them is not just the right thing to do, but also the only way to end this war and save Wizarding Britain.” He paused for a moment. “For make no mistake: We are in a war for the very survival of our country - a war against the Dark Lord. Some claim the muggleborns have started this war, but they are wrong! This war was started by the Dark Lord and his followers, decades ago! To those of you who fear the muggleborns, I can but say that the Muggleborn Resistance has never attacked the Ministry. They have killed Aurors and Hit-Wizards, yes, but only when they were attacked or threatened. No, all of their attacks have been aimed at the Dark Lord, and his supporters - and you all know how effective they have been.”

“They murdered my family!” Eric Greengrass yelled.

“Your family died because they chose to attend a ball thrown by Voldemort’s right-hand man even though they knew the Dark Lord had returned.” He ignored the gasps his use of Tom’s nom-de-guerre caused.

“Are you condoning the murder of innocents?”

That caused quite the reaction in the Wizengamot. Albus saw that Xenophilius, sitting in the audience, was scribbling almost frantically. The Chief Warlock stared at Eric. “You know I do not condone such crimes. I have proven that at Hogsmeade, when I personally captured a muggleborn intent on murdering innocents. But I can but wonder how innocent anyone associating with known Death Eaters is. We all knew Lucius Malfoy was working for the Dark Lord - he admitted that he was in contact with Voldemort in this very assembly, when he laid out the Dark Lord’s demands. Why would anyone join him in his manor for a ball, if not to show their support for the Dark Lord?”

There were of course reasons for that, understandable if not very courageous ones. But this was not the time to mention that.

He raised his head. “We are in a war, honoured members of the Wizengamot. A war for the survival, for the very soul of Wizarding Britain. A war the Dark Lord started twenty-five years ago. We can either ally with the muggleborns in this war, and win, or we can throw ourselves at the feet of the Dark Lord, and hope we will be spared and granted a life as his slaves.” He paused again, to let this sink in. “You all know what I will be doing. I did not submit when Grindelwald conquered most of Magical Europe, I did not surrender when Voldemort started this war, and I will not surrender now. No! I will fight the Dark Lord, and all of those who support him, no matter if they wear his mark, or not.” He paused, then added: “An alliance with the muggleborns will also mean that prisoners taken in this war will be treated the same, no matter who captured them.”

He let the Wizengamot members murmur to each other - a few were talking quite loudly, even - while he exchanged a glance with Cornelius. The Minister’s smile had grown a bit forced, but he was holding up well. Amelia’s face showed no emotion, though - he had expected that. This was politics, not justice.

Eric had sat down, trembling - with rage and fear, Albus thought. As far as the wizard knew, his niece was in the hands of the muggleborns, and the Chief Warlock had just offered a way to save her from certain death. Albus wasn’t proud of the deception, but needs must.
This proposal had to pass if this ugly, bloody war was to end any time soon, and if Wizarding Britain was to have a chance to be rebuilt.

He saw Eliane Shafiq raise her wand, and nodded at her. “The chair recognises Madam Shafiq.”

As the witch rose to speak, Albus leaned back in his chair, glad for the Cushioning Charms. This would be a long session.

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Brenda Brocktuckle hadn’t made any progress, hadn’t really done any work so far. Not today. Not with the Wizengamot about to surrender Wizarding Britain to the mudbloods. She still had some hope that common sense and reason would prevail. The Wizengamot members couldn’t be that foolish - the majority of them had voted for the mudblood laws! They had to know that the mudbloods would blame them as well!

But Dumbledore, Fudge and Bones were pushing this. The weak-minded morons in the Wizengamot would follow their lead, too scared by the Chief Warlock’s ultimatum. Brenda clenched her teeth. She wouldn’t let those traitors destroy her country.

And yet… she glanced at the small stack of paper on her desk, ready to be charmed into paper aeroplanes, and thought of the far larger stack down in Procurement, which she had replaced on the Dark Lord’s orders. She didn’t know exactly what curse was on the sheets, but it was a dark one. Parkinson had been nervous when he passed the stack to her.

And she would be responsible for the curse being inflicted on her coworkers. No, on the blood traitors and cowards who’d submit to the mudbloods! She had to remember that this was a war for the survival of Wizarding Britain - and for her own life.

The door to the Auror offices opened, and she looked up, through her own open door, holding her breath. Was that the news she was dreading? It was Parkinson. Her partner entered, then seemed to notice that everyone was staring at him, and held up his hands.

“Don’t look at me like that! I haven’t heard anything from the Wizengamot!” the wizard said.

The Aurors in the room returned to their work, their grumblings forming a background noise until privacy spells muted it. Parkinson walked over to Brenda and closed the door behind him, shaking his head. “I felt like the Snitch at a Seeker meeting,” he said, sitting down at his own desk.

“Everyone’s waiting with bated breath for the Wizengamot’s decision,” Brenda said.

“Idiots. As if there’s any question how this will end.” Parkinson grabbed the Daily Prophet from her desk and unfolded it. “Another article praising the Chief Warlock’s virtues… I wonder what kind of leverage Dumbledore has on the Prophet’s owner,” he said. “Do you have The Quibbler?”

“I don’t read that,” Brenda said. The Quibbler? That mix of crazy theories and imaginary animals?

“You should. It’s really funny. Crazy, but entertaining.” Parkinson grinned. “The headline of the last issue claimed that the so-called Nargle-infestation in the Ministry was being dealt with by foreign pest control.” He chuckled.

Brenda rolled her eyes. Parkinson was acting too nonchalantly again. “You know, you’re acting a bit suspiciously by not seeming to care about today’s session. Everyone else is.”
She saw him frown for a moment, then his grin returned. “But it’s me - I’m not everyone.”

“And we’re all very grateful for that.” More than one Parkinson would be intolerable.

The Auror laughed. After a glance at the door, he grew serious, though. “It won’t be much longer.”

She looked at him. “How do you know that?”

He just grinned again. She couldn’t tell if he actually knew this, or was simply guessing. So she scoffed, and turned her attention back to the scroll she had been trying to read.

“Are you ready to do what’s needed?”

She looked up and stared at him. “You know me. I’m ready.”

He met her eyes for a moment, then nodded. “Just checking.”

“You’re nervous.”

He chuckled. “Maybe a bit. It’s going to be a tough fight.”

“If the Chief Warlock’s still in the Ministry when you start it, then it’s going to be a short fight.” Unless the Dark Lord came in person to face Dumbledore. Brenda wasn’t certain if she wanted to be anywhere near the Ministry should those two duel.

“Dumbledore will not be present. Measures have been taken to ensure this.”

She narrowed her eyes and studied his face. She knew him well enough by now. That wasn’t just bravado. Parkinson was certain. Brenda nodded. “Good.” She didn’t know what measures had been taken. And she didn’t really want to know - there was just one thing she could think of that would keep the Chief Warlock from rushing to help the Minister.

A threat to his students.

Brenda told herself that the Dark Lord would either have thought of something else - he had to know about Dumbledore’s weaknesses - or that he would not actually kill children.

But she couldn’t help remembering that most of the students who were sympathetic to the Dark Lord’s cause had left Hogwarts months ago.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 17th, 1997

Hermione Granger entered Grimmauld Place with her wand in hand, although pointed down at her side. She didn’t really expect a trap - if she didn’t trust Sirius she wouldn’t be coming to his house in the first place - but months spent hiding and fighting a civil war had taught her to be ready at a moment’s notice. Something, she thought with a snort, that would serve her fine this day, if the Headmaster’s worries should turn out to be on the mark.

“Hermione! Welcome to my humble home!” Sirius greeted her with a wide smile at the door.

“So much for my disguise,” she muttered, resisting the urge to scratch under her wig. She removed the sunglasses, though.

The older wizard made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Bah! With the policy change that’s
certain to be approved according to Albus, no one in their right state of mind would dare attack you.”

“Unless they want to sabotage said policy change,” Hermione countered.

“Well, no one in my house has such plans,” Sirius said, looking pointedly at her wand. “If they had, there would have been far better opportunities in the past.”

It was a good enough explanation, and Hermione holstered her wand. “Let’s hope so.” She hadn’t met Fleur more than a few times, during the tournament, and she didn’t know the Delacours staying with Sirius at all. And she knew that the French had not forgotten how many muggleborns had fought for Grindelwald. She’d have to trust his judgement, which was a bit harder than trusting him.

And there was the matter of her choosing Ron over Harry. Sirius would do anything for his godson, and Hermione had hurt Harry. She hadn’t wanted to, and she had tried her best to soften the blow, but…

She told herself she couldn’t afford to worry about that. If the Headmaster was correct, then they were facing an attempted coup in response to the Ministry’s policy change.

“You don’t look happy,” Sirius remarked halfway to his living room.

She looked at him. “I’m not happy. We have to plan a major mission in a few hours - a mission where half the forces involved are not familiar with each other, much less have fought side by side before. It’s an indoor assault, with lots of civilians around, among whom the enemy will be hiding. We’ll be hard-pressed to spot the Death Eater spies, and unable to trust anyone but ourselves.”

Sirius snorted. “You don’t mince words.” With a grin, he added: “On the other hand, the Death Eaters will have to expose themselves, and we’ll get to kill them. The Dark Lord’ll lose a lot of his followers, and a lot of popular support as well. And any dead civilians we can blame the Death Eaters for.”

That wouldn’t make killing civilians any more acceptable, but Hermione knew better than to argue that with Sirius. The wizard held a grudge against the Ministry for his unjust imprisonment in Azkaban, and had only contempt for the Ministry employees unwilling to fight the Dark Lord. An attitude he shared with many of the Resistance members. She sighed. This would be a bloody day. She just hoped none of her friends would be among the casualties.

They reached the living room and Sirius entered first. Maybe he didn’t trust his French allies not to curse her either? Hermione shoved those thoughts away as she followed him: It might simply be that people were tense - she didn’t know how she’d react if an unknown person surprised her in the house either.

Inside, a handsome middle-aged wizard and a stunningly beautiful witch - a Veela, Hermione realised at once - were sitting on the couch. Remus was standing near the bookshelves, apparently checking out the tomes there. Since he had been living here for over a year, it looked like a rather awkward way to avoid talking to the French to Hermione. Or maybe she was turning into Moody.

“Marcel, Vivienne - Hermione Granger. Leader of the Muggleborn Resistance and the most feared witch in Britain! Hermione - Marcel Delacour and Vivienne d’Aigle.”

Hermione sent Sirius a glare, then smiled politely at the French. “Enchantée.” She held out her hand.

“The pleasure is mine,” Delacour said, dropping a kiss on her hand.

The witch smiled at her. “Enchantée.”
After a moment of silence, Sirius pouted. “No comments about how you expected her to be taller? Or look more dangerous?”

The French wizard smiled. “We French know that a beautiful woman is the most dangerous.” The Veela - Sirius’s girlfriend, Hermione thought, since he stepped up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist - giggled.

“Too true,” Sirius said. “Though in our current situation, it’s a very good thing we have so many beautiful witches among our ranks. As Hermione just summed up on the way here, we’re facing a coup by Death Eaters, our forces have no experience fighting side by side, and we will not be easily able to tell our enemies from the civilians. At the start at least. We’ll order all civilians out of the Ministry. Afterwards, anyone not with us will be treated as an enemy.”

“Will the Ministry go along with this?” Such an order would look like a coup by Dumbledore to some, she suspected.

“We’ll call it an evacuation.” Sirius shrugged. “Can’t say anything against that.”

“Well, you could - but who’d listen to you? After this battle, I doubt many will raise their voices against the victors.” Delacour shrugged nonchalantly.

“Whoever the victor will be,” Hermione said.

“Do you doubt our victory?” Delacour didn’t quite sound mocking, but Hermione found his overly surprised manner more than a bit patronising. “That would be surprising coming from the witch who has bested the Ministry and the Death Eaters so often before. You also seem to assume that your group will be called in, though as I understood the Chief Warlock, you’re our reserves, to be summoned in case we should not be enough to win the day.”

“I’m aware of the dangers of overconfidence,” Hermione said. “I’d rather be prepared and not be called than called in without being prepared. Our successes were the result of careful planning. Planning which we might not have enough time for today.”

“Then let’s get started!” Sirius said. “I need to be back in the Wizengamot in an hour. This is my lunch break.”

“I’ve brought plans of the Ministry.” Hermione pulled the copies out from her enchanted pocket. “We’ll need to control the Atrium, to keep the enemy contained and split up. The Wizengamot and the Minister as well as the heads of the departments will need to be protected as well - or evacuated.” A few of them she wouldn’t mind see dying, but not if it meant Voldemort won. “And there’s the matter of avoiding friendly fire.”

“Friendly fire?” Delacour looked puzzled, as did the Veela. Vivienne, Hermione reminded herself - Sirius seemed very close to her.

“Preventing our forces from mistaking each other for the enemy.” Or at least removing the easiest excuses for some ‘accidental’ cursing. On both sides.

“Ah!”

“We’ll be in uniform,” Hermione said. “Every Resistance member will be dressed the same,” she went on, drawing her wand and pointing it at herself. A few flicks and swishes later, she had transfigured her clothes into the uniform the Resistance favored. The green pattern wouldn’t be much of a camouflage inside the Ministry, but it’d make them easy to recognise.
“Like Aurors, just green. And muggle,” Delacour said.

“Yes.” She sounded a bit terser than she wanted.

“And sexy!” Sirius added. Whether he was just being himself, or trying to add some levity Hermione couldn’t tell, but she glared at him anyway.

“We’ll also need passwords. We don’t know each other, and there’s not enough time to get to know everyone. On the other hand, changing the colour of a robe is easy, and our uniforms would not be too hard to duplicate either.” She thought it was obvious that the Order and their French allies would have to pick a colour for their robes as well. “If you doubt someone, challenge them with ‘Thunder’, to which they’ll answer ‘Flash’.” Nice historical examples, though Hermione doubted any pureblood would know of them.

“You’ve given this a lot of thought,” Delacour said, with a bit more respect, or so she thought.

“It’s basic muggle military training.” And common sense, but stating that might be too inflammatory.

“I also suggest you don’t pick a dark colour for your robes. Too easy to mistake for a Death Eater robe.”

“Of course.” Now the French wizard sounded a bit peeved.

Sirius cleared his throat. “I’d say we use red and gold, but the Aurors are red already, so maybe we’ll have to settle for yellow - like gold, not badgers - for our robes. That settled, we’ll enter the Atrium. Dumbledore has no secret passage for us to use, unfortunately.”

Hermione doubted that. It was more likely, she thought, that the Headmaster was saving such knowledge for the future. They had to secure the Atrium first anyway, so entering there made the most sense.

Of course, the Dark Lord would know that as well. And he was an enemy they couldn’t afford to underestimate.

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**Hogwarts, January 17th, 1997**

“You know, the weather’s nice for flying, and I’m the last to say we shouldn’t fly when we can, but… aren’t you curious about the outcome in the Wizengamot?”

Harry Potter heard Ron’s yell, and looked over his shoulder. His friend was behind him, Ron’s own broom not quite able to keep up with his Firebolt, even when Harry was flying in a looping Seeker pattern. For a moment, he was tempted to simply keep flying. Forget the whole war, Ron and Hermione’s relationship, everything. To just enjoy the sky, the wind, the feeling of flying…

He slowed his broom down, though, and slid to a stop. He knew what Ron really meant, but couldn’t have said - yelled - without a privacy spell. Not even as high above Hogwarts as the wards allowed. The question of whether or not Voldemort would launch a coup at the Ministry. Whether Sirius and Hermione would have to fight the Death Eaters, maybe even the Dark Lord himself, today. “I was going crazy waiting for news,” he said as soon as Ron floated next to him on his broom.

“Ah.” Ron understood that, of course - Harry’s friend had not been able to sit down for longer than a minute in the Gryffindor common room. His wand moved in a familiar pattern. If not for the wind,
Harry would hear the familiar, too familiar, low buzz of a privacy spell. “You know, if you sneak off
to the Ministry, Sirius and Hermione will kill you, and then me for not stopping you.”

Harry snorted. “I’m not planning to.” He wasn’t a fool.

“Good.”

“I’ll just stay at Hogwarts, safe and out of the way, while our best friend and my godfather fight
Death Eaters. Again.” Harry didn’t try to hide how bitter he felt about it.

“Yeah.”

“I feel so goddamn useless!” He was a Gryffindor! He shouldn’t be hiding and staying safe. It was
the house of the brave and the bold.

“You’re the key to his defeat. You’re anything but useless,” Ron said.

Harry snorted. “Which is why I’m not allowed to fight until it’s just me and him.” And if the
Headmaster thought he was ready. Which would probably be… sometime past his N.E.W.T.s, Harry
thought. At least it felt that way. He hadn’t even had the time to talk to Dumbledore about his idea,
yet.

“Well… even if you were not the Boy-Who-Lived, we wouldn’t be allowed to skip school to fight
the Death Eaters.”

“Would we care about what we are allowed to, and what not, though?” Harry looked at his best
friend. His other best friend. “If it were only our lives at stake, and not, you know?”

Ron snorted. He knew the answer to that as well as Harry did - they’d do what was right, and damn
the consequences. Just like Hermione. Harry winced. Thinking of her hurt, still. Sirius said it would
get better, he’d find another girl, but he couldn’t see that, not at all. And he didn’t want anyone else.
He wanted her.

Ron didn’t say anything. He was just there, waiting. He had been acting like that ever since that day,
Harry realised. Being more quiet than usual, more ‘understanding’. As if Ron walking on eggshells
around Harry would somehow make things better. Make them hurt less.

Harry scoffed. Curse it, he was feeling sorry for himself. He should be better than that. Know better,
too. There was a war going on. People might be fighting and dying today, even. People he knew. He
sighed. “Want to throw a few hoops? To keep your Keeper skills up?”

“Of course, mate!” Ron said.

“Alright, then…” Harry trailed off, blinking. Had that been… he reached up and touched his scar. It
wasn’t hurting, but it was… he felt like it was putting pressure on his forehead.

“Mate?” Ron sounded puzzled. And worried.

He had good reason to, Harry realised, as the pressure grew.

“Voldemort. He’s near Hogwarts.”

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Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997
The village town had recovered from the mudbloods’ attack last month, the Dark Lord Voldemort noticed, standing on a nearby hill looking down, hidden by charms. It wasn’t a surprise - the ignorant animals had not used any dark curses, instead resorting to muggle means. While destructive, those left no damage magic couldn’t deal with - provided someone made an effort.

And such efforts had been made in Hogsmeade. Not just because as Britain’s only exclusively wizard village it held a special status in the Ministry, but as it was so close to Hogwarts, Voldemort’s old foe would have ensured it would not reflect negatively on his school.

Which was precisely the reason Voldemort was here. It was a place he knew Dumbledore would defend, against anyone, even the mudbloods he so loved. The Dark Lord snorted. If not for the detrimental effects it had on his own plans, he’d have greatly enjoyed the irony of the old wizard having to fight mudbloods in defence of purebloods.

It didn’t matter now. He looked at his watch. The debate would be winding down soon, as per his instructions his followers would stop resisting the inevitable. The smarter among them would leave at once too. Those who didn’t would hopefully curse an Auror or blood traitor in the back at least. He didn’t need to worry about them any more; Britain’s fate would be decided by wands, not votes. Today, if all went well. And, since his spy had informed him that Dumbledore’s familiar had had a burning day and wouldn’t be available to transport Voldemort’s enemy around, the day seemed to favour him indeed.

As if fate had read his thoughts he felt a slight twinge, three times, through the link with his Dark Marks. The signal Malfoy had been told to give, once the vote was through with the expected result.

He turned to Bellatrix, who was waiting at his side, a step behind him.

“Milord.” She stood straight and faced him. Tense. Eager. She reveled in carnage, and today, she would get her fill. He would prefer her at his side, but she was his most feared follower, and just the sight of her would drive the cowards in the Ministry to flight - and ensure that none of his own followers would falter and desert.

“The fools at the Ministry have spurned me for the last time. Go to your forces and be ready to storm the Ministry on my command!”

The dark witch saluted him with a beaming smile, almost shivering with delight, and apparated away.

Voldemort looked at the forest behind him, where the half a dozen Death Eaters who’d join him in his assault on Hogsmeade were waiting, and raised his wand. As he started to rise into the air, flying with his magic alone, the six wizards followed him on their brooms.

Towards the unsuspecting village.

*****


Albus Dumbledore watched as the lit wands were counted. The result was obvious, if not as obvious as he would have liked - a number of the members obviously were more afraid of the muggleborns’ revenge than of Voldemort’s rule, even if they were no friends of the Dark Lord either, or so Albus thought - but procedure had to be followed, of course. Especially in the Wizengamot - the Headmaster had no intention of letting Tom’s pawns challenge this vote on the grounds of formal mistakes. If only Mayfield would count a bit faster.
Finally, the man turned to Dumbledore and announced the result: “Twenty-seven ayes to twenty-two nayes.”

“The proposal is accepted with twenty-seven in favour and twenty-two against,” Albus announced with a quick Amplifying Charm. Applause and muttered curses filled the room. A beaming Cornelius was shaking hands with Amelia, and coming over towards Albus. Other members were standing up, leaving already. Albus thought some of them probably were going to lock themselves in their hidden homes. Or, he added to himself, to do their master’s bidding.

“Allus! This is a great victory! In the face of danger, Wizarding Britain, divided by circumstances, is uniting again!” Cornelius said as if he was addressing the press and not the wizard who had planned all this with him. And forced him into it in the first place.

Speaking of the press… Albus saw Xenophilius walk towards him. Barnaby Merryweather from the Prophet was a bit behind, apparently held up by Petra Selwyn.

Cornelius had spotted the owner and chief editor of The Quibbler as well, and Albus caught his wide smile slipping a bit. Xenophilius tended to have that effect on many politicians with a weak sense of humour, the Headmaster thought with a wry smile. He rather liked the man, and his magazine was a delight to read for someone with an open mind.

Before he could address the man, though, a glowing white stag appeared in the hall, coming straight at Albus. While the Wizengamot members present gasped in surprise, Harry’s voice rang through the chamber:

“Headmaster! He’s attacking Hogsmeade!”

Albus felt a chill run down his spine. He had expected an attack like this - Tom would react, and either Hogwarts or Hogsmeade were the most obvious targets, with Albus bound to defend both of them. But to hear from Harry, and even before Amelia was alerted by the Aurors in the village…

What was the boy doing, and more importantly, where was he?

This could be a diversion, or a simple terror attack. Or a trap for him. Most likely, Tom was ready for all three possibilities - the Dark Lord was certainly as cunning as a Slytherin could be.

But there was no choice - with the village, and now Harry at stake, Albus had to intervene, and quickly. He turned to Cornelius, but his words were meant for Amelia, and for Sirius, who had made his way towards the Headmaster. He ignored the questions of the Minister and others about the Patronus Messenger. “The Dark Lord is attacking Hogsmeade. I am the only one able to stop him, so I have to leave at once. Send what help you can, but be aware that there might be an attack on the Ministry in the making as well.”

He saw Sirius and Amelia nod, and apparated away. He had a village to save.

*****

Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

“It’s him.”

Ron Weasley would have liked to say something snarky. Something sarcastic. Anything to show that he wasn’t more afraid than he’d ever been before. Not counting his visit to the Acromantula colony, of course. But all he could say was: “It’s Voldemort.” And they had known that from the start, when Harry had started to sense the Dark Lord - if it had been a Soul Anchor, Harry would have needed a Supersensory Charm to track it to Hogsmeade from Hogwarts.
“Yes.” Harry wasn’t cracking any jokes either.

Below them, the Dark Lord was floating above the village, sending curses down on whatever poor souls were in sight. Six Death Eaters on brooms were flying nearby, adding their own spells to the mayhem.

“Expecto Patronum! Headmaster! He’s attacking Hogsmeade!”

Harry’s voice made Ron whip his head around just in time to see a glowing white stag speed away. “Shite!”

“He had to know,” Harry said.

“Yes. But now the Death Eaters know we’re here. Move!”

As Ron had feared, one of the Death Eaters was pointing up. A glowing stag flying through the sky was hard to miss, no matter that both Ron and Harry were disillusioned, and out of range of the Human-presence-revealing Spell, as Moody had taught them.

But they were already changing position - another thing the old Auror had drilled into them. And the Death Eaters would have a lot of trouble trying to spot them, much less catch them in the sky. Especially with Ron and Harry able to see them coming. They could fly away, to Hogwarts, before the Death Eaters even came close, and any time the Death Eaters spent chasing them was time not spent on cursing the people in Hogsmeade. Or the Aurors who had been patrolling the town - Ron saw a pair of wizards in red robes fall to the ground, struck by curses from above.

They could do this! Ron thought. Then he noticed that the Dark Lord was flying straight at them. How…

“He can sense me,” Harry yelled. “Scatter!”

Acting on reflexes born from hours of drill, Ron had darted away before he realised what Harry was doing. His friend was diving to the ground. Trying to lead the Dark Lord away from him. He was already out of the range of Ron’s Human-presence-revealing Spell, but Ron could see Voldemort just fine. And the half a dozen Death Eaters about to help their master, too.

Harry was good, but outflying the Dark Lord, and half a dozen Death Eaters? Even disillusioned and on a Firebolt, that was a tall order. Especially if Harry was not thinking too clearly.

Ron took a deep breath and started to dive at the closest Death Eater, wand out.

He didn’t have a Firebolt, and his broom was meant for a Keeper, not a Chaser or Seeker, but he was starting from a high altitude, and the Death Eater below him was not watching the sky any more. Ron was closing the distance fast - very fast. The wind tore at his robes and hair, and he had to squint his eyes to keep the man in sight. He grunted as he pulled on the handle, adjusting his course to cut the Death Eater off. Almost. Almost. Now!

“Reducto!”

His spell hit the dark wizard’s broom, right in the rear, blowing it up. The splinters were deflected by the man’s Shield Charm, but that didn’t matter - out of control, the screaming man crashed straight into the ground, and his shield shattered on the cobblestones of Hogsmeade’s main street. As did the dark wizard.

And Ron had to struggle not to follow him. His broom wasn’t made for Wronski Feints. He pulled
up with both hands, almost crushing his wand against the handle. He managed to pull out of the dive at the last moment, then had to veer hard to his right to avoid crashing into Zonko’s.

As he shot up over the joke shop’s roof, the facade behind and below him disappeared in an explosion. It looked like they were no longer ignoring him. And he was in the range of their Human-presence-revealing Spells.

Ron really would have loved to own a Firebolt right then.

*****


“The Wizengamot’s voting now!”

Brenda Brocktuckle wanted to curse the rookie who had just entered the Auror offices. She wanted to know the result, not the time of the vote! She still hoped, even though she knew it was unlikely, that the Wizengamot would come to their senses. She looked at the scroll in her hand and tried to focus on her work again.

“They accepted the proposal!” Another Auror, another rookie, entered, all but yelling the news.

Brenda noticed how the rest of the Corps reacted, especially those who cheered. Traitors! She noticed she was gripping the parchment in her hands so hard it was tearing up, and she had to mend it with a quick Mending Charm. She also noticed Smith and Macintosh staring at her through her open door. Smith was smirking, even.

“Dumbledore has left the Ministry.”

Parkinson’s voice made her jerk. “How do you know?”

“I just received the signal to launch the aeroplanes,” the wizard said. “We’re up.”

Brenda stiffened. That meant she would have to trigger it. Send those things out. She stood up and nodded. They were blood traitors, she told herself while she drew her wand and touched the paper stack on her desk.

The Auror watched as the paper folded itself into a small aeroplane and took off towards the door. Towards Procurement.

The spell was cast. Literally. She was committed now - if the Dark Lord lost this battle, this war, she’d perish with him. Just as Parkinson had wanted, as his grin told her. And as she had known.

And she strongly suspected that if the Dark Lord’s forces lost this battle, she wouldn’t survive. Parkinson wouldn’t want her to betray him, after he took care to set her up as the one launching those cursed papers.

Before she could dwell any more on that thought she saw a swarm of paper aeroplanes enter the office. The planes she had launched.

“Ah! The official results I bet!” the rookie who had annoyed her earlier said, and made a grab at one of the aeroplanes.

Brenda’s eyes widened. If that idiot… The aeroplane nimbly avoided the clumsy lunge, and she started to breath again.
Then the idiot aimed his wand and summoned the thing. “Yes!” he said, starting to unfold it.

“Brown! Couldn’t you wait a minute longer?” Another Auror said.

“No, I couldn’t!” The rookie grinned.

Then he screamed, staring at his hands, which were stuck to the paper and shriveling up rapidly.

More screams erupted from other Aurors, those Aurors - blood traitors - with desks and offices closer to the entrance. But others were not quite as gullible, or simply too far away for the aeroplanes to reach them before they noticed what was happening. Smith and Macintosh hit most of the paper aeroplanes still in the air with a fire spell.


It was a weak bluff, but with everyone panicking and the cursed traitors screaming like banshees, it was enough. Brown’s partner turned on Macintosh. “What did you do to him?”

Macintosh started to protest his innocence, and was probably about to blame her when Brenda hit him with a Bludgeoning Curse that smashed him into his own desk. She hoped the breaking sound were the traitor’s bones.

Then she had to duck as everyone still standing and uncursed seemed to start casting at once, and spells flew everywhere. Parkinson ducked back into their office, but Brenda saw a Blasting Curse fly past her, through the open door. A second later, an explosion sent a cloud of dust and splinters out of the door.

Part of Brenda hoped that her partner had been able to cast a Shield Charm in time. And part of her hoped he hadn’t. But mostly, she wanted to kill Smith. Macintosh’s partner was sending curses at her, blowing up the desk she was hiding behind, but not before she had cast her Shield Charm.

She rolled behind the desk of Fitzroy, and transfigured it to stone just in time for the next spell to hit it. She couldn’t move now, not without exposing herself, and even a stone desk wouldn’t last that long.

Another rookie stumbled into her field of view, yelling even though she seemed unhurt. Panicking, Brenda noted. Suddenly, she knew what she could do. Had to do. She aimed her wand.

“Imperio!”

*****

Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

Harry Potter knew he had made a mistake. He should have flown straight back to Hogwarts as soon as Voldemort had detected him. But to flee like that, to leave the villagers to their fate… He was a Gryffindor, not a coward. His parents had defied the Dark Lord three times.

And it should have been easy to escape them anyway, on his Firebolt. He knew just how difficult it was to hit a moving target. But the Dark Lord’s presence, so close, was messing with his head - between the pain and the vertigo, his flying was so hampered that even Draco might have had a chance at the snitch were this a Seeker duel.

On the other hand, his erratic flying had probably made Voldemort miss with a curse or two as well. He took another corner, ducking his head as part of the wall behind him exploded - the enemy was
getting smarter. While hitting a moving target was hard, especially a disillusioned one, hitting the area such a target was flying into was considerably easier - if they judged his course correctly.

He pulled up for a quick dash over the roof of a one-story house - with more of a security margin than he was used to. Behind him, the building’s wards flared up as spells rained down on it. He turned hard to the left, then once again, darting into a side alley, and barely managed to pull up enough to clear the cowering wizard there, before he shot out into the main street again. A broom rider crashed into it about a hundred yards up ahead, and Harry’s eyes widened. Had some Aurors survived and rallied? Or had help arrived? Then he noticed a familiar marker fly past him, far too close to the ground. Ron.

He should have known his friend wouldn’t do the smart thing and go fetch help! Hermione would kill him if something happened to Ron because of Harry’s stupidity! He glanced up for a moment, and saw that three of the Death Eaters were moving away from him. Presumably after Ron. Clenching his teeth, he pulled up in front of a dead end, then turned it into an Immelmann.

That had been a bad idea. Instead of a half-roll, Harry ended up rolling several times before he managed to steady himself, and some of the spells were coming too close now. And the Dark Lord seemed to be gaining. But Harry was on a Firebolt. Even hindered like this, he was far faster than Voldemort.

He sped up. This was not unlike playing Quidditch in a storm. And he was the youngest Seeker in a century. He could do this! As long as he could avoid crashing into roofs, walls or the ground.

Another glance showed that Ron was still being chased - or so Harry assumed; he couldn’t see his friend, just the pursuers. If he fled now, the Dark Lord might go after Ron. He cursed - where were the Aurors? Or Dumbledore? Or anyone?

Weaving through the central back alley of Hogsmeade, he glanced back. There was no sign of Voldemort. Had the Dark Lord given up?

Suddenly, he heard a screeching sound from above. Looking up, he paled. A giant bat was flying above him - no, diving at him. The thing was as large as a dog, and headed straight for him. Harry should have expected this. Moody had told them that a trick rarely lasted before the enemy either copied it, or found a defence, and the Headmaster had used that weeks ago.

And the screams from that monster were not doing anything for his vertigo either. This was looking worse every second, Harry thought.

Then he saw the second giant bat. And the third. In front of him. And above. He tried to turn into a side alley, but all three of the monsters screamed, and his ears seemed to burst. He lost control of his broom, or rather, of himself, and slammed into the wall next to him, sliding along it for ten, twenty, thirty yards before coming to a stop at the next corner.

Groaning, he tried to untangle himself from his broom, but his right arm didn’t seem to be working, no matter how much he tried. And it hurt. His right sleeve was gone, as was some of his skin. He was bleeding too, but couldn’t think straight enough to do something about it. And, he belatedly realised, he was no longer disillusioned.

He saw movement nearby, and managed to turn his head. Voldemort. “T-Tom.” he managed to say with ringing ears. If the Dark Lord said anything, Harry couldn’t tell. The monster seemed to be laughing, though. With good reason, of course - Harry knew he must look ridiculous, on the ground, half-deaf, and with a broom stuck to his arse. If not for another sticking charm, he’d have lost his glasses.
Still, he’d die fighting. He gripped his wand tighter and started to aim. If their wands interacted like in the graveyard…

Voldemort wasn’t aiming his wand at him, though. He was smiling, and pointing at him, and glancing up.

Harry looked up. All three giant bats were diving at him.

*****

London, East End, January 17th, 1997

“... and twenty-two votes against. The Minister’s proposal has been accepted by the Wizengamot!”

Hermione Granger took a deep breath while the Wizarding Wireless announcer was talking about the proposal’s details again. The rest of the Resistance cheered loudly. All of them were in uniforms and ready to go, even Dennis and Colin, who would most assuredly not go into combat today. Hermione didn’t feel like cheering. This was what they had been fighting for - or rather, part of it. After more than a year suffering under the Ministry and the Death Eaters, the muggleborns wouldn’t simply accept the status quo ante again. Never again.

“You don’t look happy,” Sally-Anne said.

Hermione had a brief flash of déjà vu. Sirius had made the same comment earlier. “Voldemort will attack the Ministry for this. The question is just when he’ll do it.”

“Do you think he’ll attack right now?” Justin sounded sceptical.

Everyone was listening to her now, she noticed. Hermione sighed. “It would fit his style. Immediate retribution. Scare everyone into obedience.”

“So? We’ll crush his forces.” Seamus grinned.

“He’s probably been planning for this for some time,” Hermione said.

“So have we,” Dean said.

“Not as thoroughly as I’d like. And we haven’t trained at all with the Order or the French.” Hermione frowned.

“We don’t need them!” Seamus said.

“The French were as optimistic when I met them,” Hermione said. “But we can’t afford to underestimate the Dark Lord.”

Even Dean nodded at that, while Seamus frowned. “We should just blow the whole place up. That would fix the Ministry.”

Hermione glared at him. He looked away and muttered that he had just been kidding, but she wasn’t quite certain that he had been. Before she could press the issue - they really couldn’t afford such ‘jokes’ when working with the French and the Order - the mirror in her pocket vibrated.

There was only one reason for Sirius to call her right now. She pulled it out and activated it.

“Hermione? Death Eaters are attacking the Ministry!” Sirius sounded far less optimistic and calm than over lunch. She could hear screams in the background. And explosions. “We have no contact
with the Aurors. The Hit-Wizards are cut off, and from what we heard, fighting against each other. They cursed paper aeroplanes, which have struck many down with withered limbs, so don’t let them touch you!”

“How’s the situation in the Atrium?” Hermione asked.

“We don’t know. We’re holed up in the Wizengamot and the Minister’s floor.”

So they would have to go in blind, and with enemies holding the ground. Hermione glanced at Seamus. He wasn’t looking that optimistic any more.

“Alright. We’re on the way.”

She turned the mirror off and addressed the Resistance. “You all heard him. With the Atrium probably held by the Death Eaters, we’ll not go in through the Floo connections.” She had another route in mind. But they had to contact the Order and the French, first. And hurry.

*****


The Aurors had been authorised to use the Imperius, Brenda Brocktuckle told herself when the rookie got up and started casting at Smith. Besides, she just needed a distraction. She stood up, just in time to see the blood traitor hit the girl with a Cutting Curse that sliced deep into her throat. The distraction cost him, though - she caught him with a Piercing Curse that broke his Shield Charm, and another that punctured his head. She was about to move to the rookie to still the bleeding when another traitor attacked her. The fool was using a fire curse inside, but fortunately missed her. Someone else - she didn’t see who - stopped him with a few banished spikes, but when Brenda reached the wounded rookie, the girl was already gone. Dead. Because of her. No, because of Smith.

She crawled back towards the remains of the door to her own office. Parkinson might need help. More spells hit the wall above her - someone was rather sloppy with aiming, she thought. She reached the door, and peered inside. Her desk had been blown up, as had been part of the shelves. Parchment and rubble covered the floor. She couldn’t see Parkinson, though. Not from her position.

She could just leave him. He had set her up to take the fall, after all. But he had also helped her. Saved her career, maybe her life. And he was, for good or ill, her partner. And you didn’t let your partner hang. Ever.

She took a deep breath, cast a Shield Charm, then jumped through the door. She landed hard on the rubble, the parchment doing nothing to cushion her fall, then rolled to side. A few spells flew through the door, but they looked like stray spells rather than aimed. Now where was Parkinson?

There! She saw a leg peak out behind the remains of his desk. She made her way to him, using the debris as cover. He was still alive, but unconscious. A few quick first aid spells later, she managed to wake him up.

“Huh?”

He wasn’t quite as smooth as usual when waking up from being knocked unconscious, Brenda noted. “Stay down. We’re in our office. You were hurt by a Blasting Curse.”

He cursed under his breath and summoned his wand. “Who was it?”

“No idea. That bastard Smith was attacking me.”
“How are we doing?”

“That idiot botched the trap, so the traitors could put up a fight.”

An explosion outside that sent some dust into the room underlined her words.

Parkinson groaned and got up. “Time to end this then.”

In for a Knut, in for a Galleon. She nodded.

Outside their office, the situation seemed under control. A few traitors had managed to hole up in the Head Auror’s office - Scrimgeour hadn’t been in; last Brenda had heard he had been with Bones in the Wizengamot - but a few Blasting Curses had ended that.

Gerald Avery was there, in ripped robes and bleeding from a cut on his forehead. He was smiling, though. “We did it!”

“Is the Atrium secure?” Parkinson snapped. “Our reinforcements are arriving. We need to move!”

Avery protested. “That wasn’t our objective! Another group’s handling that!”

Parkinson glared at him. “And do we know if they succeeded? If we don’t control the Atrium then we can’t hold the Ministry! Move!”

Needless to say, Avery was the first to enter the Atrium. Just in case the blood traitors controlled it. To Brenda’s relief, that wasn’t the case. Though she couldn’t help but feel unease at seeing Death Eaters, in their black robes and masks, spread out in the Atrium. She was one of them now, she told herself. Or at least an ally.

She told herself that again when she saw the enemy leader walking towards them.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

*****


“Is everyone ready?” Hermione Granger asked, looking at the Resistance and Order members gathered around the phone booth that hid the lift to the Ministry for Magic. She didn’t trust the Muggle-repelling Charms completely, not with all the CCTV-cameras around, so they had put up a tent to hide the entire booth, and the Resistance members had disguised their uniforms and weapons as worker’s coveralls and tools.

Her group nodded, as did the Order and the French, the latter a bit slowly, though. They hadn’t liked Hermione taking charge, not even when Sirus had told them to over the mirror, but they hadn’t had many choices. The way this coup was going, they dearly needed the Resistance. At least there hadn’t been much backchat regarding her plan - the French didn’t care much about collateral damage as long as it was limited to the British Ministry, and the Weasleys had been rather ruthless ever since the Dark Lord had had the Burrow attacked.

“Situation below?” She glanced at the twins.

Fred - probably - looked up from mirror he was staring into. “Unchanged. They’ve taken up positions around the different entrances, covering them with their wands.”

“No signs of any prisoners,” his brother added. “At least any that our bugs can spot.”
Good enough for her conscience. “Seamus?” Hermione looked at the Irish wizard.

He smiled at her. “Charges are set!”

“Drop it!” She nodded at Bill.

The Curse-Breaker flicked his wand, and the lift whose enchantments he had taken over started to descend.

Hermione pointed her wand at the open shaft and filled it with solid stone down to the upper floor.

Thirty seconds later, she felt the ground tremble a bit, and heard the twins whistle. “Our bugs are gone. The bomb went off.”

Hermione dispelled the seal on the shaft. One of the twins stepped up to it upended a box over it. Dozens of different small objects - far too many to have fit into it - fell out and down the shaft.

Seconds later, screams filled the shaft while the collected products from the twins’ shop started going off.

Hermione turned to the her group. “Go!”

The Resistance had had their brooms ready and dove down the lift shaft, one after the other, Hermione among them. They were greeted with a scene straight out of a nightmare. The first shaped charge Seamus had placed had blown open the shaft’s wall on the Atrium’s level. The second shaped charge had sent thousands of ball-bearings into the Atrium. Any wizard or witch standing near the lift doors had been shredded. The Atrium was filled with fireworks and enchanted figurines that ran all over the place, screaming curses in a dozen languages.

Mary and Tania had set up light machine guns, firing at a few stumbling figures in the back who fell, one after another. Louise and Jeremy were moving forward under that cover, towards the Floo connections, followed by John, Dean and Seamus. Justin and Sally-Anne were with her. Behind them, the French descended, levitating down.

Hermione saw Delacour’s eyes widen when he touched the ground. She quickly addressed him. “Go and cover the stairs and other lifts! We need to relieve the others in the upper floors!”

While the Delacours and the d’Aigles moved forward, followed by the Weasleys and Remus, and covered by Tania and Mary, Hermione turned to Justin. “Secure the lift!”

It wouldn’t do to repeat the mistake their enemies had just made, after all, and get attacked from the rear while assaulting.

Taking out the Death Eaters in the narrow hallways of the Ministry would be dangerous enough.

*****

Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort felt elated. He hadn’t seen Dumbledore yet, despite Selwyn reporting that the old wizard had left the Ministry minutes ago - though he was certain the old wizard would arrive; he had to - but he had finally caught Potter. The only one who ever had withstood his Killing Curse, down on the ground in front of him, broken and bleeding. Brought low, in a delightfully ironic twist, by a spell Dumbledore had first used against mudbloods.

Voldemort had improved on the spell, of course. Made the bats bigger. More dangerous. They
wouldn’t just spot and mark enemies, they’d hurt them with their screams, and kill with with their claws and teeth. Such as the Boy-Who-Lived was about to experience.

The Dark Lord wasn’t about to use his wand on the boy, and risk another fiasco. Potter might be immune to his Killing Curse, or to any of his spells, but he could easily be hurt by other means, as his Quidditch career had demonstrated.

Voldemort looked at the three conjured giant bats circling above them, then pointed at the boy. The beasts dove at Potter, mouths wide open, screaming in anticipation.

And crashed into a shield that had suddenly sprung up around the boy. Had Potter found the wits to… no!

“Letting others do your dirty work now, Tom?” Dumbledore asked, in a mild tone as he stepped out of the shadows of a side alley.

Voldemort didn’t answer. Instead his wand rose, and battle was joined.

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Battle of the Ministry

Chapter 32: Battle of the Ministry

‘The events following the Wizengamot’s vote on January 17th, 1997, were crucial to the entire Second Blood War. Unlike earlier attacks, the Battle of the Ministry was not a raid, where the attacking forces would hit and run, but an assault to take and hold the Ministry building - a location the British Ministry could not afford to lose. More important, though, is the fact that all main factions of the war - the Death Eaters, the Muggleborn Resistance, the Order of the Phoenix and their French allies, and of course the loyal Ministry forces - were involved, and with all the strength they could muster. In many ways, it was a pivotal event of the war.

In a similar way, the Duel at Hogsmeade, while not as famous as the duel between Dumbledore and Grindelwald, was the first time Albus Dumbledore and the Dark Lord clashed in personal combat. It represented a marked change in tactics for both wizards, who had, until then, avoided each other.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore deflected Tom’s curse with a conjured slab of stone. “Temper, temper,” he chided the Dark Lord with more confidence than he currently felt, while he banished dozens of pebbles towards his enemy. A flick of his wand turned them into razor-sharp spikes right before they crashed into his enemy’s Shield Charm. The acid they released upon shattering was stopped as well, and splattered over the ground. He had expected that, of course - but Tom would still have to treat it as a threat, or risk falling prey to an alchemical concoction Albus might have slipped into it.

And that gave Albus the opportunity he needed. While Voldemort rose into the air and shot to the side, avoiding the smoke rising from the patches of acid, the Headmaster conjured another barrier in front of Harry, then summoned the boy’s clothes, and with them, Harry himself. Just in time, since the barriers shattered an instant later under the curses Tom sent at them, drowning out the boy’s surprised yell. Rock shards peppered the quick shield Albus had conjured to protect both himself and his young charge.

Another quick spell told Albus that the boy was hurt, but was in no immediate danger of dying - discounting Voldemort, of course. But Albus wouldn’t be able to fight as well as needed to while he had to protect Harry. Something his enemy would certainly attempt to exploit.

Was already trying to exploit, Albus corrected himself as he saw the air around him starting to shimmer. With a swish of his wand, he dispersed the air with a gust of wind, then made the cobblestones raise in a wave that carried him and Harry away before what other dark spells his enemy had cast could take effect.

Tom had disillusioned himself in the meantime and taken to the air, but Albus’s spell showed his position, and the Headmaster sent a whirlwind of conjured rock and metal at the Dark Lord, which absorbed the dark curses sent at him and Harry and forced his enemy to evade. Another stone wave took Albus and Harry to the edge of the village. It was a gamble, but he didn’t think that Tom would expect him to use the same spell twice in a row.

He was correct, as it turned out - in the spot he had just vacated, twisted spears shot out of the
ground, then exploded. Albus countered by conjuring a flock of bats and sent them at Tom. They
couldn’t really harm him, but once again, Tom wouldn’t know that. But sooner or later, Albus’s bluff
would be called.

“My wand arm’s broken,” Harry said through clenched teeth. Albus quickly fixed that - enough, at
least, to let the boy cast spells. Once more, though, this cost him - Tom had already dealt with the
bats. To Harry’s credit, the boy cast a Shield Charm himself as soon as his arm had been whole
again.

Albus was tempted to apparate, but his enemy would have blocked that already. If only Fawkes had
not had a burning day! Hopefully, Filius and Minerva would arrive soon, and deal with the Jinxes
preventing magical travel. Aberforth should be here already, he lived in the village. And Tom knew
that, so why was he holding back… ah! Albus saw three Death Eaters on brooms fly towards him.
Two more were trying to disengage from chasing young Mister Weasley, but apparently were
finding the task harder than expected. Moody was a good instructor, Albus noted.

And he had talented students, Albus added when he saw Harry, despite his wounds, raise his wand
and cast Piercing Curses at the attacking Death Eaters. The spells missed, but forced the three
wizards to break off their attack and start casting from a greater distance. That meant their curses
were not quite that dangerous to counter. For him, at least.

“Stay behind me!” Albus said and stepped in front of Harry. He blocked a Killing Curse with
another quickly conjured slab of marble and let his Shield Charm deflect the Entrail-Expelling and
Reducer Curses the other two had cast while his wand flicked back and forth, weaving a web in the
air made up of thin wire. One of the Death Eaters flew straight into it, screaming as the impervious
metal cut into him. It didn’t kill him - but it made him slide off his broom when his wrecked hands
slipped. The other two veered off, and Albus managed to clip the broom of the closer one with a
quick Cutting Curse. Bereft of half its bristles, the broom went out of control, and the man vanished
behind the next roof. Harry meanwhile had slid around Albus and was casting spells at the Dark
Lord himself.

Unfortunately, Tom was too skilled to let Harry stop or even distract him, as Albus noticed when he
suddenly found himself surrounded by darkness. Freezing darkness - the spell was rapidly siphoning
off any heat inside its area. Insulating himself and Harry wouldn’t work, and he had a hunch that
Tom had also prepared for the usual counterspell.

But Albus was among the best Alchemists of his age. He moved his wand with clammy fingers,
creating a ring of two compounds around himself and Harry.

The immense heat that was generated by the two compounds reacting with each other singed his and
Harry’s skin despite their Shield Charms. He heard Harry scream in pain and winced - he hated to do
this, but it was the best way to shred the dark spell.

The resulting explosion threw up enough dust to hide the two from view and let Albus transfigure
the ground beneath himself and Harry into a carpet, then use a Levitation Spell to fly out of the
cloud. He managed to treat some of Harry’s new wounds before Tom sent more spells at him, and
Albus was forced to drop off the carpet right before it was ripped to shreds by a volley of Cutting
Curses. Since he had conjured a wall to block more curses, his own landing was quite a bit harder
than he could afford and he felt his ankle twist on the cobblestones.

He quickly sent a volley of various hexes mingled with Piercing Curses at Tom, then used the time
that had bought him to numb his ankle before he had to meet Killing Curses with conjured stone and
metal again. One almost got through while he blocked another aimed at Harry.
He had to escape, Albus knew - or at least, let Harry get away so he would not have to split his attention. But Tom knew that as well, and would be waiting for any opening to either kill the boy, or himself.

“Can you fly?” he bit out, replacing walls and other obstacles as fast as they crumbled and exploded under Tom’s assault. Rock shards and other debris were hitting his Shield Charm constantly now, weakening it. But if he recast it, he’d fall further behind on his other defences.

“I lost my broom,” Harry said while casting curses at Tom. As before, the Dark Lord didn’t let that faze him, and the few curses Harry managed that would have hit his enemy were stopped by a Shield Charm.

“Take mine!” Albus yelled, pulling the shrunken broom out of his pocket with his free hand.

Another Death Eater joined the lone survivor of the first wave, and for a moment, Albus feared for Mister Weasley. Fortunately, a quick glance showed him that the young wizard was still fighting - and holding his own.

He conjured a flock of harpies to keep the two Death Eaters busy, but he hadn’t been quick enough - Tom had used the opportunity to conjure dozens of snakes around Albus and Harry. Venomous ones, of course. And resistant to transfiguration, too.

And while the snakes slithered towards him, fangs gleaming, Tom had risen above him, and was now casting Killing Curse after Killing Curse at Albus and Harry. Albus couldn’t block them all and deal with the snakes before they reached Harry and himself.

*****


Brenda Brocktuckle was glad for the order to secure the Floo Network Authority. She’d be able to put a few floors between herself and Bellatrix Lestrange, who was leading the assault against the Wizengamot and the Minister’s floor - the dark witch was crazy. Parkinson had volunteered them for the mission, which meant he probably shared her opinion. He was a smart wizard after all.

She felt apprehensive anyway. They hadn’t heard anything from Beatrice Avery, who should have secured the Floo Network with her own group. And there were a lot of blood traitors in the Ministry. They had taken control of the Auror offices, but a few of the Aurors working for Dumbledore and the mudbloods were not accounted for. One of them was that rookie Black. That metamorphmagus could be impersonating anyone.

The small group with her and Parkinson had almost reached their goal now - just another few hallways. A door to the left opened, and a witch stumbled out, useless withered arms dangling at her side. She saw them, her eyes widened, and she tried to run back where she had come from, but the masked Death Eater on point hit her with a Cutting Curse that sliced deeply in her leg. She went down, screaming, her arms flailing as she started to bleed out.

A Piercing Curse to the head cut her screams off. Brenda glanced at Parkinson, who had cast the spell.

“She was cursed by the Dark Lord, so she was a blood traitor.” The Auror shrugged. Almost as an afterthought, he added. “And it was quicker this way.”

“Door’s locked!” announced the first Death Eater.
“Well, open it!” another yelled. “Lestrange is not a patient witch!”

Parkinson frowned. “Hold it! Everyone take cover! Not you, Filigan!”

The Death Eater was probably glaring at the Auror behind his mask, Brenda thought. She didn’t care - she was taking cover near Parkinson, behind an upturned desk transfigured to stone, far to the back. She was too old to risk her life opening doors.

Filigan wasn’t that cocky any more, and yelled the incantation. “Alohomora!” Then he opened the door, throwing himself to the side right away. Nothing happened. No spells flew out, no curse trap went off. Brenda heard someone else chuckle, although a tad nervously.

“What are you waiting for?” Parkinson yelled. “Move!”

Filigan glanced back at Parkinson, or glared, Brenda thought, then dashed through the door. Textbook roll, she realised - Hit-Wizard training. Then he fell over and lay still. There had been no spell she had seen that meant...

“Poison gas!” another Death Eater yelled. “Bubble-Head Charms!”

More Hit-Wizard training, Brenda thought. Although veterans would have cast the spell before entering an office that should have been under their control already.

The wizard followed his own advice, then pointed his wand at his fallen comrade. “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Despite the situation, Brenda wondered if the man shouted all his spells, and shook her head. At least this meant she wouldn’t be treated as curse fodder, not if these were the rank and file of the Dark Lord’s followers.

The body of Filigan started to float out of the room, but halfway to the second Death Eater, it dropped - together with the Death Eater who had been levitating it.

“It’s spreading!” Brenda yelled. “And Bubble-Head Charms do not protect against it!”

Parkinson sent a gust of wind at the open door. “Seal it up again!” he yelled while he kept his spell up. Brenda followed his example - she didn’t want to risk whatever had taken out Filigan and the other Death Eater near him.

Walls went up after a few moments, sealing the FNA offices off again. A third Death Eater was checking on the two fallen wizards - from afar, using his wand. That one wasn’t stupid, Brenda thought. Which was probably why he hadn’t been on point.

“They’re alive, but unconscious. Rennervate!”

Neither stirred. “It’s not a Stunning Spell or a similar effect,” the man declared. He had been in Ravenclaw, Brenda thought.

“Force a bezoar down his throat!” Parkinson ordered. Brenda felt a soft breeze on her back and realised that her partner was still keeping a weak wind spell going. Smart and cautious, as expected.

The Ravenclaw did as ordered, but not even that revived the fallen Death Eater. “It’s… it’s like… the Draught of Living Death!” he announced after several more spells. “But… he didn’t drink it. Who could have turned a draught into a contact-vectored gas? That’s...”
“Dumbledore!” Parkinson made the name sound like a curse. “Damned Alchemy.”

Brenda hissed. Alchemy. She knew what potions could do - you couldn’t become an Auror without a N.E.W.T. in Potions. Not because you were expected to do any brewing, but so you would be able to identify them when investigating. There were a few murderers who had been caught by finding reagents in their homes for poisons that had not been quite that exotic as they had thought. But Alchemy? There were very, very few Alchemists because their art was so dangerous - for themselves, and for others. She turned to Parkinson. “We’ll have to seal the whole floor. Deal with it later.” The Dark Lord could deal with that, once he had won.

Parkinson nodded. He didn’t look happy - he’d have to explain this to Lestrange, she knew - but it wasn’t as if they could do much. Anyone would understand that. Well, maybe not the dark witch.

“Alright, fall back, then seal the floor off!” the Auror ordered. With a lower voice, he added: “And let’s hope there are no more such surprises left in the Ministry.”

Brenda snorted. “You think the Department of Mysteries will be easier?”

He scoffed. “The Dark Lord will reserve that for himself.” They were out on the stairs again. The rest of their group was following close behind them. As soon as all were out, they started to seal the doors, transfiguring them to stone. Brenda thought she saw someone move inside, right before the doors closed, but she didn’t care. They could be woken up later.

“Why didn’t Dumbledore trap the Auror offices?” the Ravenclaw wondered.

“We were watching the blood traitors and each other too closely for that. We expected such things,” Parkinson said.

“We didn’t expect Alchemy, though,” Brenda said. She left the logical question - would they even have noticed an alchemical trap - unsaid. Judging by the grimace on Parkinson’s face, he had the same thought: Was some alchemical concoction already inside their bodies?

“Let’s go up and inform Lestrange!” Parkinson ordered after a moment. “Watch the entrances to the other floors - I want no more surprises!”

Parkinson was still speaking, but whatever he was saying was drowned out by a very loud explosion, followed by an even louder one.

Hermione Granger ran through the Atrium towards the stairs, almost slipping in the puddle near the broken fountain. Clenching her teeth, she sprinted towards the stone bench behind it, hearing the Major’s voice in her ears: ‘Always keep moving from cover to cover!’ Advice which had become ingrained, even though she was protected by a Shield Charm. She reached the damaged bench, ignoring a dead wizard with two withered arms on the ground next to it, and crouched down, quickly glancing around.

Justin and Sally-Anne had taken up a position to her left, covering the remains of the lift with guns and wands. Tania and Mary were just starting to move towards the stairs as well, where the Delacours were already moving up, towards the Minister’s and Wizengamot’s floors.

Hermione cursed. Damn that French élan! They were charging ahead without support! They couldn’t afford to split their forces. She turned around and cast a quick Amplifying Charm. “Demo team, blow the fireplaces! Send one to relieve Justin, then follow me!”
She looked at Justin, who nodded at her. He knew what she was doing, then. Hermione took a deep breath, then jumped up and sprinted towards the stairs. She reached the entrance to the stairways. Remus was standing there, wand pointed down, next to the twins. Bill and Fleur were halfway up the stairs, right behind the French. The stairs were wide and spacious, but they were still bunched up too much, or so she thought.

Remus stared at her. “You can’t blow up the Floo connections! What about the wounded? And the ones trapped in the Ministry?”

Hermione glared at him. “They’ll have to wait until we’ve won! We can’t cover all the entrances to the Atrium and move to support the French!” And downstairs were the Auror Corps’ offices. If the traitors had taken over there, and pushed up… Hermione wasn’t about to risk the whole battle for the Ministry employees. They had to win this battle at all costs.

Tania and Mary reached her, and at once set up a machine gun nest with a bit of conjuring, to cover the stairs. She heard yells and screams from above. Hermione wanted to head upstairs, but she was the group leader - she shouldn’t go on point. But then, the French were on point. She turned to Mary and Tania. “Send the rest up after me!” Then she was moving up the stairs, leading with her rifle. It was ‘bayonet terrain’, as the Sergeant had called it, but the Resistance hadn’t had the time to train with that weapon, and the middle of a battle wasn’t the place to start.

The Delacours had pushed the Death Eaters back to the entrance to the Minister’s floor, and halfway up to the Wizengamot’s floor, but the enemies - mixed Death Eaters and civilians - were holding fast. She saw several bodies on the stairs, two of them wearing the golden robes of the Order and French. Then a Blasting Curse hit the area, and the bodies turned to chopped, ripped meat. She fought the nausea down. She couldn’t afford to be sick right now.

Marcel Delacour was bleeding from a cut above his brows, but seemed otherwise unhurt. His wand flicked, and the wall to the right of the door to the Minister’s floor shifted, forming a hole. Three French wizards sent Blasting Curses through it that shook the stairs, followed by a volley of fireballs from two Veela.

“Avancez!” Delacour yelled, and half a dozen golden robes surged forward. One went down at once to a Killing Curse, but the others charged on.

Hermione moved back a few steps and pulled Sirius’s mirror out. After activating it, seconds passed without a response. Had Sirius…? No, there appeared his face. “How far are they into your floor?” Hermione yelled, over the screeching screams from the transformed Veela fighting nearby.

“We’re holding the chamber, not much else!”

“Can you hold out?”

“Not forever, but yes.”

“Good.” Her rifle dangling from its sling at her side, Hermione moved her wand and started to fill the stairs leading to the Wizengamot’s floor with walls. They couldn’t push up there with the French fighting on the Minister’s floor - it would be an invitation for a pincer attack.

Another pincer attack, she amended her thought when she heard explosions and machine gun fire from below. Where were Seamus and Dean? What was holding them up? They needed to clear the Minister’s floor as soon as possible and then push upstairs to the Wizengamot’s floor.

She heard more gunfire, rifles now, and… were those faint explosions? Then the howls of the twins’
special fireworks drowned out all other sounds. Those things were not quite rockets, but they came rather close. And in the confined space of the stairways… Hermione grinned. That should drive those Death Eaters back. Now they just had to…

She stared. Her conjured walls were crumbling to dust, and behind them… she gasped when a swarm of bugs or spiders, so big and thick it looked like a carpet, rushed forward. She managed to seal the stairs with another wall, but that wouldn’t last…

The wall blew up, and rock shards peppered her Shield Charm. A Veela, Hermione didn’t recognise her, it was not Sirius’s girlfriend, threw a fireball at it, and the first yard or so vanished. Hermione was about to cheer when the French witch collapsed, screaming - someone from upstairs, whom Hermione couldn’t see from her position must have hit her with a Torture Curse. Hermione saw her falling, right when the next wave of the insects surged forward, swarming the woman.

“Aguamenti!” Hermione shouted, and a blast of water hit the Veela, pushing the bugs back and away. “Wingardium Leviosa!” The writhing, screaming witch shot in the air, and then flew towards Hermione. Almost…

“Avada Kedavra!”

A green spell hit the French witch, and a second later, Hermione held a body in her arms while cackling laughter filled her ears.

*****

Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

“Bite!”

“Kill!”

“Bite!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

Harry Potter was a Parselmouth. Where others would have heard simply hissing, he understood what the snakes slithering towards him and Dumbledore were saying. And they understood him. Just like in second year. “Stop! Don’t attack us!” he hissed at them.

They understood him, but they didn’t listen. They didn’t even react.

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

“Bite!”

“Kill!”

Clenching his teeth, Harry sent a Blasting Curse at them. Half a dozen were blown up, shredded and torn - but that had just been the closest group; more were swarming them. Muttering the incantation of a spell he couldn’t cast silently yet, he waved his wand and turned around, sending a stream of
flames at the other snakes.

They didn’t even react to the fire. The survivors kept coming, crawling over the burned bodies of the others, hissing their intent - or their orders. He sent another stream of fire at them, flinching when above him, one of Dumbledore’s conjured stone slabs was hit by a dark curse from Tom and shattered a bit too close to the ground, and to Harry. Voldemort was pressing them hard. Where were the others from the Order? Had all the Aurors been killed?

He burned the last snake he could see when Dumbledore yelled: “Harry! I’ll keep him busy, get ready to fly away!”

He didn’t want to leave the Headmaster. But he knew he couldn’t do much to help Dumbledore. He hadn’t even been able to control the snakes. Voldemort had ignored the spells he had cast at the Dark Lord too. For a moment, he was tempted to use Legilimency. But Voldemort was too far away for that, and the Dark Lord would be using Occlumency anyway. “Yes,” Harry pressed out, straddling the broom Dumbledore had given him.

Just as he was about to announce that he was ready, the Headmaster cried out: “Watch out!”

Harry looked up and saw stone walls shooting out of the ground, encircling him and Dumbledore - an instant before they shattered in a giant explosion that shook the earth.

Even shielded by a wall, Harry was blown back by the force of the blast, fragments of rock and stone smashing against his Shield Charm as the area around him disappeared in a cloud of dust. He was almost blown off the broom too, barely holding on to it as he was thrown through the air - towards the walls on the other side.

But he had been in similar situations before, if not as lethal. He had been trained to always know where up and down was, no matter how much he was tumbling through the air, and he pulled up just in time to avoid the wall.

And just in time to fly into the next explosion.

This time his Shield Charm shattered and he screamed as something hit his left shin, the shock of the impact throwing him off the broom. He managed to keep his grip on the shaft, but he couldn’t control the broom while hanging from it. And that meant he’d be an easy target for Voldemort, who was still floating above them.

This would hurt, but he had no choice. Harry let go of the broom.

He saw something - a spell - pass above him, hitting the broom, and managed to cast a Cushioning Charm before he crashed into the ground. Even so, he screamed again as his left leg buckled under him, and agonising pain filled him.

Harry knew that pain. Broken bones. Several of them. He couldn’t run, couldn’t even stand up, not like this. And he didn’t think the Headmaster had another broom ready. He was a sitting duck. Curse bait, as Moody called it.

He recast his Shield Charm anyway. He might die, but he wouldn’t give up.

*****

Ron Weasley grinned, despite the fight he was in. The tables had turned. The Death Eaters who had been chasing him were now trying to go help their master hunt Harry. He wouldn’t let them. He had kept them busy for minutes now, buying time for Harry to escape and help to arrive.
They were cunning, though - like Slytherins. One of them tried to keep him busy while the other two tried to fly away. Ron dove towards the ground again, trading altitude for speed, and managed to cut one of them off. His manoeuvre had taken them by surprise, and his pursuer was left to cast curses at him that were missing him by a wide margin. The one he was closing in on was casting at him as well, and Ron rolled and banked, evading those curses - it was very hard to hit anything with a curse at the speeds they were going.

But he was a Keeper. Maybe not good enough to go professional - though that still remained to be seen; he certainly couldn’t do worse than the current Cannons’ Keeper - but good enough to catch Quaffles and dodge Bludgers.

And a head was a bit bigger than a Quaffle. His let his Piercing Curse fly right before he reached the other wizard, shattering the man’s Shield Charm. Then he pulled up and to the right, corkscrewing to bleed off speed. He ended up facing the Death Eater while the other was just about to recast his shield, and Ron’s next Piercing Curse went into the man’s chest. Just as Moody had drilled into them - too many wizards were so dependent on Shield Charms, they’d recast them at once if they were shattered.

But he found that he had timed it a bit too close when a curse hit and broke his own Shield Charm, right when he was about to accelerate again. He rolled to the left at once, and the follow-up spell missed him - but hit his broom’s rear end.

He cursed when he felt it slow down at once, and, more importantly, become far less manoeuvrable. The smart thing would be to head to the ground, and hide. But that would leave the two remaining Death Eaters to chase Harry. Ron would have to do something else. Something crazy.

He pulled to the left, then to the right, and around again, as more curses flew past him, coming closer to hitting him. He wanted to recast his Shield Charm, but didn’t - he couldn’t spare the time. There! The Death Eater he had hit was still on his broom, but floating rather than flying, clutching his chest. Blood was flowing between his fingers, and from his mask. Ron didn’t dwell on that, though.

He needed the man’s broom. His Bludgeoning Charm smashed into the Death Eater’s head with a sickening crack. He didn’t fall off his broom, though he rolled with it until he was hanging from it upside down - he must have had a Sticking Charm cast before. No choice now. Ron bared his teeth and reached out, grabbing the shaft as if he was grabbing a Quaffle, then pulled himself over.

As soon as he sat on the broom, he urged it to speed up, then pointed his wand at the corpse. “Finite Incantatem!”

The corpse fell down, and the unburdened broom seemed to jumped ahead. Just in time - the last volley of curses had come too close. But Ron was back on a working broom, and there were just two Death Eaters left.

While he was corkscrewing up to gain altitude again, a loud explosion drew his attention. Voldemort was floating in the air, and raining curses down on the ground.

Ron gasped - Harry! Had the Dark Lord caught Harry on the ground? He banked left and right, trying to throw off the two Death Eaters’ aim, as he flew towards Voldemort. Something, someone was stopping the curses with conjured shields.

Dumbledore! It had to be Dumbledore! He was protecting Harry. Ron flew in a wide curve, closing in on the battle. Voldemort was going all-out, spells flew from his wand in a continuous stream, smashing into conjured barriers or hitting the ground a bit away. Explosions kept erupting around the
area; Ron saw that the front of a nearby house had caved in already.

And Harry and the Headmaster were in the middle of that! How could he help them?

When a green curse - a Killing Curse - almost clipped him and he saw another Death Eater flying towards him, Ron was forced to abandon that plan. He had to stay alive first. He didn’t see the smoke rising from the other end of the village.

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Hermione Granger dropped the dead Veela at once, both out of sheer shock, as well as to move, to change position. Those insects were still coming. She transfigured the floor into tar, trapping them, then set it ablaze while falling back.

Not a second too late - the ground in front of her blew up. Shards and splinters tore into the dead witch and bounced off her shield. But the insects had been dealt with.

She wanted to fall back even more, rally her group and then counter-attack, but that would mean abandoning the entrance to the Minister’s floor, and letting the Death Eaters cut the French off from the rest of them. Instead she yelled: “We need help here!” and pulled a flashbang grenade out of her enchanted pocket. Wishing she had taken the time to create a Banishing Charm variant that would allow her to throw things around a corner, she cast a Cushioning Charm on the stairs, then crept forward, low to the ground, and flipped the grenade around the remains of the corner. She threw herself back, on her charm.

A moment later, the corner turned into a green liquid, splashing the stairs she had just vacated - and flowing towards her. Then her grenade went off. She heard a scream, but she was busy transfiguring a small dam in the middle of the stairs to keep whatever that liquid was from reaching her, or her friends behind her.

But her friends were behind her, and below her, she realised - and the Death Eaters had blown up part of the stairs!

“Watch out, poison dripping down!” she shouted - too late, as a horrible scream from the Atrium’s entrance told her.

“Dean!” she heard someone - Seamus yell. “Take the bezoar!”

The screaming went on, though. She wanted to rush down the stairs, help them, help him. But she couldn’t. She had to hold her position. She clenched her jaw as the scream grew fainter, then suddenly cut off.

“Dean! Dean! Damn it!”

She had to focus. Couldn’t think about that, about the horrible death she had just avoided, or more would die. Even more, she added, looking at the remains of the Veela. Snarling, she pulled out another grenade. That one had been harder to get. A flick of her wand conjured a flock of birds, bigger than her usual ones, and one of them grabbed the grenade, carrying it with them as they took off.

She disillusioned them right before they turned around the corner. A few seconds later, the grenade went off, and white phosphorous filled the upper stairs. Hermione bared her teeth in a grim grin when she heard the screams from above her. “That’s for you, Dean,” she whispered. Let the Death
Eaters deal with that!

Tania and Mary reached her a few moments later.

“Watch out, more poison ahead!” she warned them, gesturing to the pool that had formed. Then she blinked, and cursed. Shaking her head, almost hoping she was wrong, she aimed her wand at the poison. “Finite Incantatem!” she whispered.

The poison turned to stone again, and she cursed her own stupidity. If she had done that right away, if she had not panicked, if she had thought clearly, then Dean would not have been… “Dean?” she asked.

“Dead,” Mary said. Her tone told Hermione that it hadn’t been quick.

“Willie-Pete?” Tania asked, pointing at the smoke slowly drifting down towards them.

“Yes,” Hermione used her wand to send the smoke back up. The screams from above had ended. “We need to push them back, link up with the French again.”

The two others nodded. “You’re not going to take point,” Mary said.

Hermione was about to argue, then glanced at them, and realised it wouldn’t do her any good.

“I’m taking point!” Seamus had arrived. He was trembling, with rage, Hermione saw. He was in no shape to lead the advance of her group, she knew that. The Major and the Sergeant had been clear on that. But she also knew that she wouldn’t be able to stop him. So she nodded. “Don’t get killed. He wouldn’t want that.”

He didn’t answer, just pushed past her.

*****

“Move, you thrice-cursed sons of trolls! Move up and push those traitors back!”

Parkinson could get quite creative when he was in a bind, Brenda Brocktuckle noticed. Her partner wasn’t looking quite that smug any more. Quite the contrary, actually.

And they were in a bind - blood traitors had taken control of the Atrium, and were holding the stairs on the third floor, right between Lestrange’s force, and the rest of the Dark Lord’s followers, including herself.

The remaining Death Eaters of their group hesitated, but the sight of Parkinson’s wand aimed at them drove them upstairs. They disappeared around the corner.

The Death Eaters in the Atrium were probably dead, Brenda realised - there had been those explosions, bombs, and none of them seemed to have fled downstairs. “Dumbledore!” she hissed. “He must have smuggled muggle bombs into the Ministry!”

Parkinson jerked. “What?”

Brenda shook her head. “The alchemical trap downstairs, now this explosion - he must have been preparing for this for a long time.” More than they had expected. And more ruthless too. How many Ministry employees had died in that explosion?

“That can’t be!” Parkinson said. “They searched the Ministry daily for such traps.”
“They didn’t find the one in the Floo Network.”

“That was Alchemy.”

Brenda was about to argue that the explosion could have been Alchemy as well - no one knew what it could do, after all - but another blast interrupted her, followed by infernal howls, and screams. She ducked as something flew by, ricocheting off the walls and trailing smoke as it disappeared downstairs. Fireworks, she realised.

“They are shooting fireworks at us, stop screaming!” she yelled. Bunch of cowards. A Shield Charm would stop that easily.

A series of explosions, smaller ones though, went off above them. More fireworks. No more screams, at least. Then a dark figure slid stumbled back. A Death Eater.

“Hey!” Parkinson yelled, “What are you…”

The Death Eater - the Ravenclaw, Brenda recognised the cut of his robe - slowly turned around, and she could see that his right arm and part of his shoulder had been ripped off. “F-firew…w…” he stammered, then collapsed.

Brenda looked at Parkinson. She was now certain that everyone in the Atrium had been killed. Her partner swore. “Hold the stairs, I’m gathering what wands we have on this floor, and the one below.”

Brenda stared at him. Was he sacrificing her?

He shook his head. “I’m getting curse-fodder. Don’t die!”

The Auror hesitated, then nodded. She hadn’t much choice any more anyway. If Parkinson was betraying her now, she was done for. She conjured a wall to cut off the stairs, and took cover as best as she could while Parkinson rushed into the offices next to them.

She heard him scream and yell, and probably curse while she waited, wand aimed upstairs. More explosions shook her wall, and it started to crumble, but the push she feared, or the giant explosion that turned the entire stairway into an inferno failed to happen before the first of Parkinson’s curse-fodder arrived. Most of them were Ministry employees, Brenda realised. Hardly anyone among them wore the robes and masks of the Death Eaters. A dozen, all told - they’d have to do.

Parkinson reappeared. “Those are all from this floor.”

“I’ll round up the ones below,” Brenda said. She was going down the stairs before Parkinson could answer, and she heard him yell, pushing the rest to move, before she reached the fifth floor.

There she marched in and started bellowing at once. “Listen up! Blood traitors have taken control of the Atrium. We’re massing to destroy them. Anyone with a wand, gather on the stairs on fourth floor!”

Two Death Eaters moved up to her, wands out. “Who’re you? Why are you trying to order us around?”

She stared at them. “We’ve received direct orders from Bellatrix Lestrange.”

The two glanced at each other, then muttered curses and ran past her. Brenda snorted. With a little luck, Lestrange would never hear of this - the Auror didn’t know how the dark witch would react to people acting in her name. But there was no choice - and Lestrange would certainly punish them for
failing to take back the Atrium.

She went through the offices on the floor, past a fat wizard with four withered limbs who had soiled himself, and another who was sobbing and holding one withered arm, stunning both blood traitors. She found half a dozen of the Dark Lord’s followers tormenting another blood traitor, and broke that up by putting the cursed witch out of her misery, then sent them upstairs under the threat of cursing them herself. No discipline, the idiots. At least the masked Death Eaters were quick to act, but this rabble? Not even Hit-Wizard material.

By the time she made her way back upstairs, the fighting had already started again.

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Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

Harry Potter ground his teeth in frustration. He had managed to numb his leg, which made the pain bearable. It was a move limited to truly desperate situations, Moody had told him, since it usually caused even more harm in the long run, but his current situation certainly qualified. He even had managed to transfigure his trouser leg, or what’s left of it, into a cast. He still couldn’t run, but he would be able to walk.

Not that it did him any good. With Voldemort raining down curses on him, and the Headmaster barely managing to protect the two of them, there was nowhere to run or walk to, since the moment he left Dumbledore’s side, he’d be killed. And with him here, the Headmaster couldn’t move either.

Even worse - Harry could tell that Dumbledore was slowly losing ground. He might not recognise all of the curses being used, but he could see that Dumbledore’s conjured obstacles were appearing closer and closer to them. It was the curses aimed at the area around them that were the reason, Harry realised. Dumbledore couldn’t move, and so had to counter the curses or their effects, which took a lot of effort. Meanwhile the Dark Lord could simply aim somewhere near them and let a curse fly, in between sending dark curses right at them.

If this continued, both the Headmaster and himself would die. Harry was certain of that. He didn’t have the experience of Moody or the Headmaster, but the old Auror had praised him for his instincts in combat. In a backhanded way, but still. And he knew that Dumbledore was losing this battle. He had caught a glimpse of Ron, on his broom, but too far away, and fighting three Death Eaters. Ron wouldn’t be able to help him.

For a moment, he thought about sacrificing himself, to save his best friend and the Headmaster. They’d be able to easily escape if they didn’t have to worry about him. But that would mean Voldemort would become almost unbeatable. Finding all of the Dark Lord’s Horcruxes was all but impossible.

But, Harry thought, pushing himself up to stand, he was no helpless victim. He could still cast. He could make a difference. He would make a difference. Help had to be on the way. The Order, the teachers, the Aurors. Moody. They just needed to hold out a bit longer. And that he could help with.

He didn’t flinch when another slab of rock exploded right above him, and splinters struck his Shield Charm. He didn’t panic when a curse blew another crater in the earth nearby. He analysed the situation. Between the curses from Voldemort and the conjured defences of Dumbledore, Harry couldn’t cast directly at the Dark Lord and hope to hit him. That left indirect methods.

He aimed his wand straight ahead, and started casting.
The Dark Lord Voldemort smiled as his wand flicked back and forth. He had his two worst enemies cornered! Dumbledore and the Boy-Who-Lived were trapped. With magical travel blocked, Dumbledore couldn’t send Potter away. And the old wizard would never do the sensible thing and abandon the boy, even though it meant both of them would die.

Two more Blasting Curses, followed by Killing Curses and other dark curses. It wasn’t elegant, or cunning, but it was working. Dumbledore was forced on to the defensive, unable to effectively strike back, and with each spell, with each curse, the defences of the old wizard were pushed back just a bit more. Sooner or later, the old man would either make a fatal mistake, or simply be too slow to react.

Help wouldn’t be coming either, not in time to save them. Not with magical travel blocked, and his Death Eaters in the air. They might not be able to stop every broom rider - in fact, last he had checked they had a bit of trouble dealing with the redheaded blood traitor - but they had already dropped Fiendfyre on several houses in the village.

Voldemort’s smile widened. Dumbledore’s friends and allies had the same weakness as his old foe himself: They’d rather sacrifice themselves than so-called innocents.

Besides, it was almost over. The stone slabs and shields were appearing so close to the ground now, even Voldemort, in a perfect body that surpassed human limitations, would be hard pressed to react in time to counter his next curses.

Just as he was about to send another poison cloud down to the ground, he noticed a large rock flying up towards him. Flying rather slowly too. He flew to the side, the rhythm of his volleys suffering from the distraction. What did Dumbledore hope to… His eyes widened. Of course! It was a trap! Dumbledore wanted him to react as though it was just a normal rock! That explained the weaker spells the Headmaster had used at the start of the fight in an attempt to fool him! It had been a buildup for just this gambit!

It had failed, though. Voldemort flew to the side, evading the rock and sending another Blasting Curse down to the ground, followed by an Entrail-Expelling Curse and a Sectumsempra. Dumbledore blocked them, as he must have blocked Voldemort’s Earthen Spears Curse - since neither the old wizard nor the boy was impaled. Voldemort briefly considered then dismissed the thought of trying for another subtle attack; he couldn’t afford to let up, not with this new distraction. He had to keep the pressure on until Dumbledore slipped.

The rock continued to follow him, interposing itself between Voldemort and his enemies. Dumbledore couldn’t be more obvious in his wish to have Voldemort blast it. The strain he must be under was telling, especially since he was both keeping the rock floating and conjuring all those defences, as well as countering his less direct attacks.

His eyes widened again. How did the old wizard manage that? Had he faked slowly losing ground, just for this? That didn’t make any sense! Dumbledore wouldn’t risk Potter’s life for such a ploy. Potter! Voldemort hissed. The boy had been blasted off his broom and fallen down to the ground, twice now, and been under constant attacks since the fight had started. He wouldn’t be able to move, much less cast after that.

But evidently, he had been able to cast - there he was, wand aimed at Voldemort. No, at the rock. It was Potter! In a rage, both at his foe and at himself, the Dark Lord almost blasted the rock to pieces. Then he checked himself. This could be the trap he suspected. No, he would simply keep casting. The boy would tire sooner rather than later. And then it would be over. He cast two more Bombardas, in between Killing Curses. Soon.
Then a volley of spells smashed into his shield. Who dared? And where? He shot to the side, twisting in the air. There! On the ground, a hundred yards from Dumbledore stood… Dumbledore? Voldemort gasped, then realised it was the Headmaster’s brother. The black sheep of the family - or 'the black goat’, as the joke went.

What was Aberforth Dumbledore doing here? Everyone knew he hated his brother. Why was he risking his own life? And, Voldemort added when more spells flew at him - well-aimed spells he realised, flawlessly cast - why was that wastrel able to fight that well? He was an innkeeper and a drunkard!

More spells followed, as did that damned rock. Some hit his shield, even, and others burst nearby, forcing him to evade. Voldemort couldn’t keep his own spellcasting up, not like this. Dumbledore would be able to retaliate against him.

Cursing, the Dark Lord flew towards Dumbledore’s brother. If he managed to kill the fool quickly… To his surprise, his Killing Curse was blocked, if not with quite the finesse that Dumbledore himself would have done it, still quickly and precisely enough to show Voldemort that this was no ordinary wizard. To think the Headmaster had managed to keep his brother’s skill a secret for so long… how many of Dumbledore’s enemies had fallen to that ploy? Grindelwald, maybe?

It didn’t matter right now. As much as it galled him to admit, he couldn’t win this fight any more. Not alone against those two. As he flew straight up, towards the upper limit of the jinxes blocking magical travel, he told himself that this had just been a distraction anyway; with Dumbledore tied up in Hogsmeade, the Ministry would have fallen to his forces. And holding the Ministry would be easy with the wards, and with the hostages his curse had struck.

The thought did nothing to lessen the sting of this defeat. If only the fight had lasted a bit longer...

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With an unknown poison and White Phosphorous covering much of the stairs ahead of them, charging ahead was not an option, Hermione Granger decided. Even if they conjured a new floor, a simple Finite could counter that. They could create an alternative route, of course, she thought, looking at the ceiling - though it would require some work. She gasped, and quickly reinforced the ceiling with conjured metal propped up by steel pillars. The ceiling above their current position was thicker than the one the enemy had blown up earlier, but by no means impenetrable.

She was making too many mistakes, she thought. Debriefing this mess would not be pleasant. Provided she survived it. At least Ron and Harry were not involved, she told herself.

They had already used phosphorous, they had opened holes in walls, the enemy had blown holes in the ceiling… she needed something new to get them through this. Or at least new information. “Seamus, don’t go any further; there’s poison on the floor,” she said, grabbing Sirius’s mirror again and falling back to the Atrium.

Once again it took longer than she had hoped for the wizard to answer. “Yes?”

“Sirius, how are things on your floor? Can you see what the enemy is doing?”

“We’ve lost the antechamber, but we’re holding. Turns out that the Wizengamot Chamber is one of the most protected rooms in the Ministry - the budget for its defences rivals that of the Auror Corps. I’m very happy about such selfishness on the part of my fellow honoured members of the
Wizengamot right now, of course.” Sirius chuckled.

“Can you see how they are guarding the stairs?” Hermione bit her lower lip.

“No, my dear, we can barely spot what they are doing to our doors, or trying to do. My dear cousin must be going mad with frustration right now.”

His cousin? Bellatrix Lestrange! That laugh… Hermione ground her teeth. She had killed Dean, and that Veela. She nodded. “Alright. We won’t try the stairs - too dangerous. We’ll go through an alternate route. Be ready in a few minutes!”

Sirius had an eager grin on his face as he nodded. “We’ll be ready. I’m sick of waiting!”

Of course he’d hate being penned in, locked in in that chamber, after Azkaban, Hermione realised. Another potentially crucial fact she hadn’t considered. She was slipping. Shaking her head, she focused on her task again. Defeatism only helped the enemy.

“Alright!” she addressed her group. “Seal the stairs up, fill all of it, both the stairs leading up and the ones down, with stone and metal and whatever else you can think of that stops poison and acid!”

“What?” Seamus stared at her.

“Seamus, come with me. We need to make an alternate entrance. Two actually.” She pointed at the ceiling in the Atrium behind her. “It’s spelled against Transfiguration - don’t ask me why the walls aren’t - and against damage, but you know… a big enough bomb will go through anything.”

His scowl turned into a fierce grin.

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It only took a few minutes to set it all up, mainly because Seamus had spent a considerable amount of time preparing all sorts of shaped charges in his spare time and Hermione had the plans for the building on hand. She had sent a Patronus Messenger to the Delacours, warning them to stay away from the entry point. They couldn’t answer her, so she waited two more minutes, then nodded at Seamus. “Blow it!”

The explosion shook the entire Atrium, sending dust and small stones crumbling from the ceiling and blew a hole in the ceiling wide enough for two broom riders to fly through. Which the Resistance and Bill and Fleur did. The rest guarded the sealed stairs.

“You don’t know ‘ow glad I am to see you!” Marcel Delacour greeted them upstairs. “We were in a bit of a bind.”

He had an almost British gift for understatement, Hermione thought - from what she could tell, half his group was either dead or unable to fight any more, and most of those who were still fighting were wounded. She just nodded, though. “We had some trouble on the stairs, so we decided to make our own entrance.”

Behind her, Seamus was already setting up the next charge, to break into the Wizengamot’s floor - outside the chamber proper, though. Hermione wasn’t quite certain if they could breach that floor without killing everyone inside. That wasn’t a problem with a section held by Death Eaters, of course. Like the one directly in front of the entrance to the chamber.

Hermione didn’t know if the poison that had killed Dean would be destroyed in a blast, or if it burned - and what the fumes from such a fire would do. And she didn’t want to find out, not the hard
Which was why Seamus was placing another charge on the other end of the floor. The first would draw attention - and hopefully kill a few Death Eaters - while they’d enter through the second breach.

“Sirius? We’re about to attack now. Don’t blindly charge out the front - there won’t be a floor there.”

“What?” Sirius asked.

Hermione grinned, and shut the mirror off, then turned to Seamus. “Blow it.”

The first charge went off, followed ten seconds later by the next. With cries and yells, the French and the Resistance - and wasn’t that a fitting combination, Hermione thought - charged on their brooms.

She wasn’t among the first through the breach, of course. She knew better. And she wasn’t that good a flyer either. By the time she set down on the ground, the few disoriented Death Eaters nearby had been dealt with already. With extreme prejudice. Hermione doubted that there would be many survivors among the enemy. Not after Dean, and after the French dead. She should say something, she knew, but… it wouldn’t help. Not here, not now.

She heard shots and spells ahead - the first wave had already moved on to the main entrance of the Wizengamot Chamber. Where the first charge had gone off. The Death Eaters would have had time to recover, Hermione knew. But the risk of an ambush had been too great.

She was with Justin and Sally-Anne as they passed the remains of two Death Eaters who had holed up in an office to the side. They had died quickly, but not easily. To Hermione’s surprise, Sally-Anne put a round into both corpses, without flinching, while rushing past.

Seamus, Tania and Mary were in front, followed by the Delacours and Louise and Jeremy. They were hitting shaken, disoriented Death Eaters, Hermione told herself. It was a textbook indoor assault, just modified to include magic.

Then the floor ahead of her group blew up and with it, the first wave. She saw Louise and a French wizard get thrown back, towards herself, landing hard. They were not moving - their shields had not held, Hermione saw. Sally-Anne was rushing ahead, wand flashing, with Justin at her side, to Louise. Hermione ran past them, around the corner. She heard gunfire. Automatic fire. And screams.

And cackling laughter.

She reached the corner, slamming her side against it, then peered around it, leading with her rifle. Then she gasped. A witch - Bellatrix Lestrange - was floating above the hole the floor, laughing while she sent curses at the others. Mary was firing at her, Tania… Hermione couldn’t see Tania. Or Jeremy. Seamus was there, bleeding from his leg, but firing as well. And two of the French were casting curses.

None seemed to faze the dark witch. She seemed to ignore the bullets and curses hitting her Shield Charm, focusing on casting curses herself, instead. Her wand flashed, and Seamus screamed, convulsing on the floor. The witch laughed louder, then flicked her wand, and a green curse struck Mary, going straight through her own Shield Charm. A Killing Curse.

Hermione clenched her teeth and started shooting herself. More curses hit the shield - Seamus was casting as well now. No Shield Charm could withstand such an assault forever, Hermione knew. Lestrange would have to know that as well. Why was she just floating there, instead of moving, fleeing? Was she truly mad beyond any reason? Or had she realised that she was trapped, and
couldn’t escape anyway, and would rather die than surrender?

A fireball hit the dark witch, and another - coming from Hermione’s side. She took a glance and saw that a transformed Veela had stepped up. Her magazine ran dry, and she switched it while the Veela writhed under another Torture Curse. Lestrange threw her head back and laughed.

At that moment, her shield finally failed. Hermione’s bullets tore into the witch’s throat a fraction of a second before half a dozen curses hit her as well. For a moment, Lestrange floated there, jerking under the impact. Then the witch started to fall.

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When the stone and metal blocking the way to the Atrium suddenly disappeared, Brenda Brocktuckle knew that the battle for the Wizengamot must have ended. The traitors had sealed the stairs so they could focus on Lestrange’s forces, and they wouldn’t remove the obstacles while they were still fighting them.

The explosion that ripped apart the first rank of the Death Eaters ready to charge up the stairs told her who had won. Not even Lestrange would have done that - she would have used a Torture Curse. She glanced at Parkinson, who looked grim. The curse-fodder they had gathered wouldn’t beat whoever had defeated Lestrange.

Without a word, Parkinson turned and started to run. Brenda followed him. She didn’t know where her partner was going, but she trusted that he had a plan. It wasn’t as if she had any idea how to escape. And staying and fighting was suicide.

When he led her down to the cells, she understood. The secret passage they had used for their plan to fool the mudbloods! “It hasn’t been sealed properly then, right?” she asked.

“Not completely!” Parkinson answered. “I know how to open it again!”

With renewed hope, Brenda followed him. They reached the furthermost cell, and Parkinson’s spell ripped the door off its hinges in his haste to enter. Then he stopped and cursed. The secret passage was open already.

“Someone else must have known about this!” Parkinson said. “But…”

A Bludgeoning Curse hit him, smashing the Auror into Brenda, and her into the wall behind her. Her head hit the stone, and she fell down, under Parkinson’s body. Dazed, she tried to get up, to grab her wand again. Before she could reach it, though, a foot pressed down on it. A wooden foot, she realised. A very familiar one.

Then everything went black.

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**Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997**

Ron Weasley was in a bind. His new, slightly used broom wasn’t a Keeper’s broom. It was less agile than he was used to. That was a bad thing, with three Death Eaters trying to kill him. So far the greater speed of the broom had kept him alive, but the dark wizards were persistent.

A brown curse came too close for comfort, and he abruptly dove to the ground, between two houses. More curses flew past him. With his new broom, he had to pull out of his dive a bit higher than he wanted, and a Blasting Curse hit the ground nearby, pepperng his shield with cobblestones and
debris. Their tactics were getting better as well.

Cursing under his breath, he veered to the left, passing the local bookshop on eye level, and then turning into the side alley next to it. He had misjudged the broom’s turning radius, though, and almost crashed into the wall - and then, overcompensating, he slid along the opposite wall in the alley. If not for his Shield Charm, he’d have scrapped his robe’s sleeve and his arm’s skin off.

Behind him, more Blasting Curses hit the street, and his shield, already weakened by the collision, shattered under the hail of rocks and stones. Ron couldn’t recast it while he had to use all his strength to turn at the speed he was going, and he couldn’t slow down without getting hit by the Death Eaters.

He clenched his teeth. He couldn’t evade their curses for much longer, not if he kept so close to the ground. He could pull up, and fly away - he should be able to outrun them, if he didn’t have to dodge houses - but then they’d go after Harry…

There was one thing he could do. It was crazy, but they wouldn’t expect that, and he might just pull it off. If he was far luckier than he had been so far.

Cursing, hoping Hermione would forgive him, he pulled up sharply, shooting almost vertically up, then pulled further back, and rolled - what Harry called an ‘Immelman’ - to face the Death Eaters head-on.

They weren’t where he expected them - two behind, one above - and he wildly banked and rolled, to throw off their aim. No curses flew at him, or past him, though. Had they gone after Harry? He twisted his head, trying to spot them. There! They were flying away.

He gasped. Harry! Had the Dark Lord killed Ron’s best friend and the Headmaster?

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Harry Potter was panting, his wand still pointed up. Voldemort had fled. He was still alive. Dumbledore was still alive. They had done it. He shook his head, a surprised smile on his face. They had done it. He barely managed to ensure that the troll-sized rock he had been levitating, trying to block the Dark Lord’s line of fire, didn’t crush anyone when it fell to the ground.

Shivering, he realised just how much he was hurting, even with his broken leg numbed. Dumbledore was moving his wand. Dispelling the jinxes? Or something. Harry slowly sat down, on the ground, breathing heavily. That had been… he lacked the words. It had been worse than the Bastille. Far, far worse.

He spotted a dead snake next to his trainer. It wasn’t one of those he had killed with fire since it was missing its head and didn’t look burned. Or maybe he had missed it - its tail end looked burned. Or shriveled from the heat.

Dumbledore interrupted his musings by throwing a coin on his lap. A second later, the Portkey took Harry away.

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Breathing

Chapter 33: Breathing

‘The Battle of the Ministry is seen by some as a draw, or a stalemate. The Dark Lord did not manage to take control of the Ministry nor to cause significant damage to Hogsmeade. Further, the duel between him and Albus Dumbledore ended inconclusively, with the Dark Lord retiring from the field. At first glance, the status quo did not change.

However, such a view fails to take into account the effects of the battle. Not only did the civilians who did not manage to evacuate in time suffer terribly, but all factions that were involved in the Battle of the Ministry suffered serious casualties. The majority of the Aurors and the Hit-Wizards opposing the Death Eaters in the Ministry were killed, as were those guarding Hogsmeade. While recruiting efforts could make up some of those losses, the veteran Aurors and Hit-Wizards killed in the fighting could not be replaced by raw recruits. More important, though, was the fact that the Ministry’s forces were reduced to the point that they now had trouble guarding the Ministry and Diagon Alley. Any offensive action would have required exposing either location to an attack.

On the other hand, the Dark Lord’s forces fighting in the Ministry were decimated as well, with only those able to hide among the civilians escaping capture or death. However, as the Dark Lord lacked locations he had to defend, he was able to use all his remaining Death Eaters in his future attacks.

The losses the Muggleborn Resistance had taken in the Battle of the Ministry only exacerbated the situation, since they could not recruit replacements as easily as the Ministry or the Dark Lord, and even those they managed to recruit would require lengthy training to be as effective as the average Resistance member. Even Dumbledore’s Order had taken heavy losses among their combatants, and their French allies were devastated.

Far from being a stalemate or a draw, the two battles therefore were a turning point in the Second Blood War, even without the Night of the Dead.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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Hogsmeade, January 17th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore watched Harry disappear as the portkey he had created activated, and let out a relieved sigh. Poppy would take care of the boy. He looked at Aberforth. His brother was glaring at him. “Thank you, Aberforth,” the Headmaster said. “You saved both my and Harry’s life.” He smiled.

“I saved the boy,” his brother spat, “even though it meant abandoning the village because you couldn’t handle the Dark Lord by yourself. It better have been worth it, Albus!”

“I…” Albus started to answer, but his brother had already apparated away.

The Headmaster felt more tired than he had in a long time. The fight against Tom had been a close affair. Far too close - and he couldn’t blame everything on the need to protect Harry. He should have been better prepared. If he had had a second broom… or had been able to heal the boy’s wounds… he shook his head. He could berate himself for his mistakes later; he still had a village to save. And possibly a Ministry. Although a quick exchange of Patronus Messengers with Alastor reassured him
that the Ministry had not fallen. And Albus doubted that Tom would risk another fight, especially one in confined quarters, right now.

A quick Apparition took him to the closest burning house, Dominic Maestro’s Music Shop. Several villagers - brave souls, all of them, to have come out while the battle still raged - were trying to keep the green flames of Fiendfyre from spreading past the doomed shop. He shook his head as he raised his wand. That a wizard who was claiming to fight to protect the culture and traditions of Wizarding Britain would destroy such a venue revealed the hypocrisy of Tom and his followers.

“Stay back!” he said, helped by an Amplifying Charm, “I will take care of this."

“Dumbledore!” exclaimed more than one of the villagers as they stepped back to let him work, and excited whispering followed while he raised stone walls to contain the fire, before smothering it with the help of an alchemical compound.

“Do not disturb it!” he said, lowering his wand and trying not to look as exhausted as he felt, “the Fiendfyre will not be extinguished completely until a few hours have passed.” There were quicker ways to deal with the cursed fire, but they were both more draining and more dangerous. He realised that he didn’t see the shop’s owner among the crowd. “Was Dominic at home?” he asked.

“He was. He didn’t get out,” Beatrice Bitherling, a neighbour of the musician, said. “Not before…” she sobbed.

Albus inclined his head. Another good wizard, killed in the war. Dominic had never wanted to be anything but a musician, and hadn’t taken any side in the war. And he had been killed anyway. The Headmaster couldn’t dwell on this, though - he was needed to deal with another fire.

But when he arrived at Spintwitches Sporting Needs, the cursed fire had already been dealt with. By his brother.

Aberforth, standing near the smoking ruins, nodded curtly at him.

Given the bad blood between them, this was a rather cordial greeting. His brother hadn’t calmed down, much less forgiven him, though - Aberforth knew as well as Albus did that they had to show a united front against Voldemort, and half a dozen villagers were watching them.

He returned the nod. “I have dealt with the Fiendfyre raging at Dominic’s.” He briefly closed his eyes. “Not in time to save him, though.”

Aberforth muttered a curse.

Albus took a deep breath. “The Dark Lord has fled, but the Ministry was under attack. I need to head to London. We need to talk later.”

Aberforth scoffed, sneering, but did not contradict him.

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They had won, but at a terrible cost, Hermione Granger thought while she walked across the ruins of the Atrium. The Ministry employees sifting through the debris tensed up when she passed them, more than one interrupting their search for survivors and staring at her, her uniform, her weapons. She met their stares, tense herself. Who knew if there were any traitors hiding among the survivors?
The surviving members of the Resistance had taken up a position near the lift shaft leading up to muggle London. Two bodies were laid out there, covered with conjured white blankets. Mary and Dean. Hermione had floated Mary’s body down from the Wizengamot’s floor herself.

Justin, standing with a machine gun behind a conjured chest-high wall, nodded at her as she approached. John was there as well, covering the other half of the Atrium. Seamus leaned against a pillar, his weapon not quite pointed at the shaft, through which a steady stream of wounded were floating up until they were outside the range of the wards and could apparate. The Irish wizard was still trembling, suffering from the after-effects of Lestrange’s Torture Curse.

He’d be fine, though, Hermione knew - it hadn’t been that long. She couldn’t say the same about all of the wounded, though. Tania, Jeremy and Louise were in the middle of their position, tended to by Sally-Anne. All were unconscious, which wasn’t a good sign.

“How are they?” Hermione asked in a low voice. It was her fault that they were here, suffering. If she had been better prepared, had had a better plan...

Sally-Anne winced. “They’re stable, but…” She sighed, wiping some dust and blood from her face. “…Louise has a broken leg, broken ribs, and a dislocated shoulder, and some minor wounds.”

“Curses?”

The witch shook her head. “None. She’ll recover quickly given care.” Sally-Anne pressed her lips together.

“The other two, Jeremy and Tania,” Hermione corrected herself, “they are cursed then?”

Her friend nodded. “Yes. Tania’s been wounded as well from falling down a floor, but the Bone-Breaking Curse she has been hit with means she’ll need a lot of Skele-Gro. Too many of her bones are simply smashed.”

Hermione winced. That would be painful. “And Jeremy?”

“I don’t know what curse he’s been hit with.” Sally-Anne shook her head and wiped her eyes. “But it must be a dark curse - he’s breathing shallowly, and has a fever. He had been bleeding too, but I managed to stop that.”

The witch didn’t have to tell Hermione that she couldn’t deal with that sort of curse. Sally-Anne was no full-fledged healer. She was great at first aid, but dark curses were beyond her.

Hermione sighed. “St Mungo’s will be overflowing soon.” There had been so many victims of that Withering Curse. Even the Minister himself had been struck by it. Once the Floo connections were repaired and the wounded could be evacuated through them, the Healers wouldn’t have much time for the muggleborns. If they even could be trusted. “I’ll have to ask Dumbledore to let us take them to Hogwarts.” The school would also be much safer than St Mungo’s - or the Ministry.

“How is Dumbledore anyway?” Sally-Anne asked.

“He’ll be on his way as soon as he has dealt with Fiendfyre in Hogsmeade,” Hermione said. A glowing Phoenix - a Patronus Charm - had told Sirius that, who had then informed Hermione. She glanced at the wizard. Sirius was standing near the stairs, holding his girlfriend, Vivienne, in his arms.

She pressed her lips together. She had tried to contact Ron and Harry through her mirror, but they hadn’t answered yet. They should be safe, at Hogwarts, but… they would have heard about the
battle, and she’d expect them to have the mirror on hand. Even if they were helping with the relief effort in Hogsmeade.

So why were they not answering?

She wanted to go to Hogwarts and look for them, but she couldn’t. She was needed here. Her friends needed her. And she needed to be here, to be seen, to be heard by the Minister, to ensure the Resistance had not bled fighting the Death Eaters in vain. Their fate would not be decided by others. Never again.

Sally-Anne turned back to care for their three wounded friends again, and Hermione stepped back, to join Justin and the others.

“They’re afraid of us,” he said. “We fought for them, we saved them, and still…” He shook his head.

“Not all of them,” Hermione said, but she knew it was a weak response even before she said it.

“Bloody cowards,” Seamus muttered. “If they hadn’t rolled over for the Death Eaters, we wouldn’t have been needed.” And their friends would still be alive.

“If they weren’t cowards they wouldn’t have passed those laws in the first place,” Hermione pointed out.

Shouts at the shaft near them drew her attention, and Hermione drew her wand while Justin and John aimed their machine guns. They would not take any chances. Not when they were surrounded by people who would have cheered their arrests and executions just a few months ago.

The evacuation had been stopped, Hermione saw, an Auror holding the next wounded back, which had prompted the loud protests - which promptly died down when Dumbledore stepped out of the shaft. Whispers and murmurs greeted the old wizard as he stepped through the ranks of the walking - or floating - cursed.

“You’re in charge, Justin,” Hermione said, and quickly moved towards the Headmaster. She had more than a few questions for the man. Urgent ones.

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“Headmaster.” Hermione fell in at Dumbledore’s side as he was walking towards the stairs. No, towards Sirius.

“Miss Granger.” The old wizard nodded at her.

“Do you already know what happened here?”

“Broadly, yes.”

She quickly looked him over. Up close, he looked tired, exhausted even. She cast a privacy spell, even though the Ministry employees were giving them, or rather, her, a wide berth. “Harry and Ron are not answering the mirror,” she said in a low voice.

Dumbledore sighed. “They are both alive, but not entirely unscathed.”

Hermione pressed her lips together so she wouldn’t gasp. Both were hurt? “How did that happen? Was Hogwarts attacked?” She wanted to add ‘and what did you do?’, but didn’t. Not until she knew the whole story.
“I think Sirius should hear this as well,” Dumbledore said, smiling faintly.

Hermione frowned, but she couldn’t really contest his reasoning. Not without acting like an immature girl. She wanted to, though.

“How did your friends fare in the battle?” Dumbledore asked.

“Dean Thomas and Mary Smith were killed. Tania Dennel, Louise Clifton and Jeremy Chadwick were wounded, two of them by dark curses.” Hermione tried to keep any emotion out of her voice. She didn’t quite succeed, judging by the Headmaster’s expression.

Then they reached Sirius, who separated from Vivienne. Harry’s godfather was smiling, though his expression faltered when they stepped closer, and Hermione recast her privacy spell. The Veela had taken a step back, so she didn’t feel guilty about excluding her.

“Albus?” Sirius asked, in a rather tight voice.

The Headmaster sighed again. “Harry and Mister Weasley took part in the fight at Hogsmeade. Neither was struck by dark curses, but both were wounded, Harry more seriously.”

“Merlin’s rotting crotch! When I heard his message, I hoped he wouldn’t… What was he thinking? We taught him better than that!” Sirius looked both spitting mad and as if he was about to cry at the same time.

“As far as I can tell, the two boys tried to distract the Dark Lord and his followers, to keep them from further harming the villagers. Foolish and reckless, but definitely brave and noble.” Dumbledore sighed. “In their defence, they were on their brooms, and did not intend to actually fight, but lead the Death Eaters on a chase until reinforcements arrived.”

“Gryffindors,” Hermione muttered.

“Where is he?” Sirius asked. “I need to go to him.”

The Headmaster hesitated a moment, then nodded. “He’s in Hogwarts, being treated by Poppy.”

Sirius nodded curtly, obviously struggling to control himself, then turned away. He quickly hugged Vivienne, whispering something in her ear, then headed for the lift shaft, already pulling out his broom from an enchanted pocket.

Hermione noticed that Dumbledore was looking at her. She shook her head, anticipating his question. “I’ll visit them once things have been settled here, but I’d like to move our three wounded to Hogwarts’ infirmary. We can’t treat them as well as Madam Pomfrey, and I’d rather not trust them to St Mungo’s.” She hated to admit such a weakness, but Dumbledore knew these limitations of the resistance already, after their attempts to help Colin and Dennis.

“Of course, Miss Granger. I will inform Poppy to expect three more wounded.” He pulled out a sock and handed it to her. “This Portkey will take your friends to the infirmary.”

Of course he’d be prepared! “You will be sending the wounded Order members to Hogwarts as well then,” she said.

“Indeed.”

While Dumbledore sent a Patronus Messenger off, Hermione quickly informed the Resistance. “Dumbledore’s informing Hogwarts. We can move Tania, Louise and Jeremy there at once. We’re
not waiting until the Floo Network is restored. Justin, take the group up, and use this Portkey as soon as you’re outside.”

“Aren’t you coming too?” Justin frowned.

“I’ll stay here with Dumbledore. We can’t be left out of the planning, not now,” Hermione said.

“We’re not leaving you alone here.” Justin shook his head. “John stays with you.”

Hermione reminded herself that a leader should never give an order she knew would not be followed, and nodded. “Alright. Now go!”

While the Resistance moved out, she and John walked back to Dumbledore. The Headmaster was talking to Marcel Delacour. For a man who had lost half a dozen members of his family, the French wizard was holding up well, Hermione thought. But he was probably just a better actor than herself.

“Ah.” Dumbledore smiled at her. “Marcel will move his own wounded to Hogwarts.”

“Yes. I do not think that we should go to St Mungo’s.” Delacour smiled faintly. “While I do not doubt the skill of the ‘ealers there, I cannot say the same for their allegiance.”

That Hermione agreed with. She didn’t think there would be trouble, not even with Seamus - the Resistance and the French had fought side by side, and both had lost too many to the enemy’s curses.

“Let us proceed to meet Cornelius and Amelia, then. There is a lot to discuss,” Dumbledore said. “I shall talk to you once I am back at Hogwarts, Marcel. You have my thanks for your brave help, and my condolences for your loss.”

The French wizard’s smile didn’t change. “Thank you.”

“I was informed that they made up the vanguard of our forces,” Dumbledore said, once he, Hermione and John were on the stairs which had been conjured or transfigured below the entrance Hermione and Seamus had created in the ceiling.

“They insisted,” Hermione said. “French élan.”

“I fought Grindelwald at their side,” Dumbledore said. “I am familiar with their way of fighting.”

He probably had expected that, then. Had expected the French to take heavy losses. Hermione stiffened for a moment when she had a chilling thought: Had the Headmaster expected the Resistance to take severe casualties as well, given that they hadn’t been able to plan and prepare as thoroughly as usual? Had he been counting on that, to weaken them, while the forces of the Ministry and the Dark Lord decimated each other? She shook her head. She couldn’t go and blame others for her own faults and shortcomings. She had failed to plan enough, to prepare enough.

They reached the Minister’s floor, guarded by two Aurors, one of them wounded. Both of them stared at Hermione and John, but didn’t dare to say anything as the two muggleborns walked with Dumbledore. Debris covered much of the floor, still, but the door to the Minister’s office had been repaired, and the bodies of those who had been killed here had been removed already. The Hit-Wizard standing at the door smiled at them, and Hermione thought that he was one of the guards of the Wizengamot, although she wasn’t certain.

“Albus! Finally! How are things at Hogsmeade?” The Minister for Magic, sitting behind his desk, asked as soon as they entered. Hermione recognised the woman standing next to him: Bones, Head of the DMLE, and the man on the other side, Scrimgeour, Head Auror. His left arm seemed to have
been hit by the Withering Curse, as far as she could tell. Both were staring at her, and Hermione met their eyes. Neither smiled, though Scrimgeour slowly inclined his head. Bones, though, didn’t even twitch.

Hermione heard John hiss under his breath, next to her, and clenched her jaw. Those were the two who had spent months hunting the Resistance. They had executed Martin, and had tried their best to kill them all.

“Cornelius, Amelia, Rufus - Miss Granger and Mister Emmet.” Dumbledore seemed unfazed by the tension in the room. “I asked Miss Granger to join us, to discuss our next steps.”

“Of course! That’s what we voted for, after all!” Fudge smiled at her. “I would like to offer my thanks for your help - I dare say you saved quite a number of lives today.”

Hermione wanted to curse the man. He was responsible for those awful laws. He had been manipulated by Malfoy, but ultimately, he had pushed those laws through, had stood behind them, and had let the Ministry persecute and oppress muggleborns. And now he suddenly acted as if they were friends? She forced herself to smile, though. They had to focus on defeating the Dark Lord.

“Thank you. We just did what we have been doing for months now - fighting the Dark Lord and his followers.”

Fudge’s smile didn’t waver. “Of course. And while he has caused terrible pain and misery, he has suffered a decisive defeat today! The British wizards and witches will take heart hearing about the heroic defence of the Ministry - and the validation of our new policy.”

Dumbledore smiled widely, Hermione noticed, as did the Minister. Bones didn’t even bother to try, though. Hermione had a feeling that the witch would not dismiss the past as easily as Fudge.

She was fine with that, since she had no intention of doing so either.

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“After the Dark Lord had retreated, I sent Harry to Hogwarts, then helped put out the Fiendfyre he and his followers had cast on several houses in Hogsmeade before coming back to the Ministry. Sadly, we could not save all the buildings; four burned down completely. I fear some of the tenants did not manage to escape in time, either.” Albus Dumbledore didn’t let the others present - Cornelius, Amelia, Rufus and Miss Granger - notice how tired he was, nor had he let on just how close he had come to being defeated by Tom. That would have further eroded the morale of the Ministry’s forces after the horrible casualties they had taken in the attempted coup d’état.

Cornelius was nodding. “Our enemy has suffered two defeats today then. The public will be glad to hear of this. His forces killed or captured, and he driven from the field of battle.”

“The public will not be that glad to hear about the devastation he has caused. Apart from the losses we took in the Ministry, most of our Aurors in Hogsmeade were killed,” Amelia said, “and the ones who survived were cursed.”

“How many loyal Aurors and Hit-Wizards are left?” Miss Granger asked.

Albus saw Amelia tense up. He had expected that - the question was a logical one, but Amelia and her department had fought the Muggleborn Resistance for the better part of a year. She would not like to give out such crucial and potentially dangerous information.
Cornelius wasn’t quite aware of that, or had taken the Resistance’s support - their help had saved his life as well - to heart. “It’s not as bad as it looks. A third of our Aurors and Hit-Wizards were not present, and a number were on patrol in Diagon Alley.”

Amelia and Rufus were visibly annoyed by the Minister’s frank answer, but fortunately, they did not make an issue of this in front of Miss Granger. None of the Dark Lord’s enemies could afford that.

“Some of them might be traitors too, unless the Dark Lord’s spies managed to get every one of theirs assigned to the Ministry today. But even if that was the case you’ll still be hard-pressed to just guard the Ministry as well as Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade,” Miss Granger said. Albus couldn’t tell if she had missed the tension her question had caused, or simply ignored it. “Offensive actions will be difficult.”

“As I recall your group did not come out of the battle unscathed either,” Amelia said, a bit sharper than would have been advisable.

“That is correct,” the younger witch admitted, “but we’re still able to take action - we don’t have to spread ourselves thin trying to guard most of Wizarding Britain’s population.” Her smile turned the information into a warning - or even a threat.

Albus cleared his throat. “Which makes working together even more of a necessity than before. The Dark Lord’s forces have been decimated. His right hand, Bellatrix Lestrange, has been killed by our French allies and the Muggleborn Resistance, although at great cost. His reputation will suffer as well, for having fled and suffered defeats. And yet, he will work hard to replenish his ranks, probably from Magical Europe’s malcontents. We have a window of opportunity here to defeat him for good - but it will take all of our forces, working together to achieve victory.”

“I couldn’t have said it better, Albus!” Cornelius said. “In this hour of need, all of Wizarding Britain is standing together against the Dark Lord.”

While the Minister sounded sincere, Albus didn’t think the others in the room shared his enthusiasm. Hopefully, they would keep their priorities straight.

“That’s all nice and good to tell the public, and keep up morale, but in order to defeat the Dark Lord, we need to find him while all he has to do is to go to ground, and recruit until he can attack us again,” Amelia said. “The Ministry cannot go and hide, which puts us at a distinct disadvantage.” The witch’s glance showed that she wasn’t just talking about the Death Eaters.

Rufus spoke up for the first time in the conversation: “In addition to that, he can hire mercenaries and criminals, while we need to train our recruits. We can rush the current batch of recruits in training into service, but they’ll be barely better than fresh graduates from Hogwarts. Worse, in some cases - those who will have forgotten their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes.” He paused for a moment. “We could hire mercenaries ourselves, but I doubt that there are enough trustworthy wizards and witches to be found in that profession to be worth the security risk.”

“The Dark Lord’s recent and public defeat will hinder his recruitment efforts,” Albus said. He’d ask a few old friends to help with that, too. Aberforth might know a number of dependable mercenaries as well, provided Sirius was willing to spend more gold. And some of the untrustworthy ones might be hired for a task abroad, simply to deny their services to the Dark Lord.

Amelia scoffed. “Greed wins over fear for that kind of scum. As long as the Dark Lord has gold, he’ll be able to find unscrupulous wands.”

“His financial resources are not unlimited. We can further limit his options by working on some of
his supporters, who might have experienced a change of heart after they hear of today’s events.” The Headmaster’s smile grew a bit cynical. Those among the Old Families who had thought that by abstaining from fighting and sticking to paying gold to the Dark Lord they’d be safe no matter who won the war might discover that they had thought wrong. The blood on their hands would not be washed away with gold either.

“You mean those who fled the Wizengamot right before the attack,” Amelia said. “With their treachery exposed, they’ll join him openly.”

“We can probably persuade a number of them to abandon the Dark Lord, if they are approached with some finesse,” Cornelius said. “They’ll realise that the tide has turned, and the more reasonable among them will be looking for a way out.”

“Are you proposing to spare those scum? Have you forgotten what happened after the last war?” Miss Granger was not yelling, but she was raising her voice. “If you let them get away with their crimes, then they’ll do the same again at the next opportunity, like Malfoy. Those marked by the Dark Lord will not betray him!”

Albus knew that to be false, but mentioning that would not be opportune right now. “Not all of them will be marked. Some might serve as spies, given the opportunity - although I do not believe the Dark Lord will trust those. Further, many might fear the Dark Lord more than anything else, and that fear might drive them to betray us again.”

“I didn’t mean to let them go. But if promised some leniency, we might manage to get them to surrender,” Cornelius said. “That would spare our own forces from having to fight needless battles.”

“I won’t condone letting murderers escape justice,” Amelia said.

Judging by how Miss Granger’s face hardened, she had understood what the older witch meant. Albus fought not to show his frustration with the Head of the DMLE. Forcing himself to smile, he said: “Those who willingly joined the Dark Lord and supported his goals with gold or spells should not be offered leniency, be they marked or not. They are directly responsible for all the deaths today. But those who simply supported his proposals in the Wizengamot, maybe even unwittingly, should not be forced to join him out of desperation.”

“Exactly!” Cornelius said. “We need to draw a line between the Death Eaters, and those who made honest mistakes.”

Such as Cornelius, Albus thought. And he didn’t think he was the only one in the room. But even if it was self-serving, the Minister’s view was correct - they needed to remove the Dark Lord’s support among the broader pureblood population, and that would not be possible if anyone who had voted or supported the muggleborn laws were treated as a Death Eater.

“Even if that works, that still leaves us with the problem of actually finding the Dark Lord,” Amelia said. “You haven’t yet explained how you’ll solve this problem, Albus.”

“And I will not.” Albus smiled, hoping it took the sting out of his refusal. “But I ask you to trust me that I have reasons to expect that I’ll be able to find the Dark Lord soon enough.” With the current losses, Tom would be forced to rely on his remaining supporters - even those he might not trust that much. Severus should be able to exploit that. And if that failed, then there was another option, although Harry was not yet ready for that.

Once again, Cornelius was the only one to smile happily. At least the others would understand the necessity of keeping Albus’s plans secret, especially after today’s battle had revealed just how many
traitors had been hiding in the Ministry.

“Speaking of secrets, Albus,” Amelia said, frowning, “the offices of the Floo Network Authority have been filled with what my experts assure me is an alchemical compound. Efforts to clear it have failed so far, which means we cannot restore the Floo connections.”

“Ah, yes. That was a precaution I took, to keep the Death Eaters from taking control of the Floo Network and using it to attack others.” Albus smiled. “I will deal with it right after we conclude this meeting.”

“There were no such precautions in the Auror and Hit-Wizard offices.” Amelia was staring at him. She wasn’t quite accusing him of sacrificing her people, yet.

He sighed. “I had wanted to install such precautions there as well, but unfortunately, the premises were under too close scrutiny to be able to do so.” Too many Aurors and Hit-Wizards on all sides had expected such a ploy, after all. Even if young Nymphadora had managed to place the concoction without being spotted, it would have been discovered by someone shortly afterwards. And the other precautions had not been triggered; he would have to ask her to remove them, before Amelia found and acquired them.

Amelia frowned, but she couldn’t very well berate him for her people being too observant to be fooled by him. Miss Granger, though, was likely thinking of countermeasures, probably based on muggle technology. If he found the time, he’d have to discuss that with her.

“Please clear those offices of the compound; it would expedite evacuating the wounded to St Mungo’s.”

“Speaking of,” Rufus said, pointing at his dangling arm, “do you know how to counter this curse? Dozens of Ministry employees were struck by those cursed paper aeroplanes, many of them losing the use of two or more limbs.” The Head Auror sounded composed, but Albus saw that it cost him a lot. It was understandable, really - to feel part of your body shrivelling up like that…

Albus shook his head. “To my great regret, I am not familiar with that curse. Although it reminds me of a report from the last war with Jamaica; one of our wizards reported a similar curse being used by a Houngan.”

He felt slightly ashamed for deceiving the others about his apparent knowledge - only Miss Granger knew that he had been researching this particular curse for some time already - but it would give those struck by the curse hope that he’d be able to find a countercurse quickly, which would help them endure this ordeal.

Albus could only hope that he would be able to find a cure.

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Hogwarts, January 17th, 1997

It felt weird to be back in Hogwarts, Hermione Granger thought. Even more so wearing combat fatigues instead of school robes. She sighed as she and John followed the Headmaster out of his office to the infirmary.

“Is something wrong, Miss Granger?”

“Just memories.”
“I hope they are good ones,” the Headmaster said.

“They are,” she answered. Which made the contrast to her current situation just more painful. She would never return to be the student she had been, she realised when she casually covered one side of the next hallway they crossed with her wand while John covered the other side. She had changed too much. And so had her friends.

She tried to console herself that everyone changed growing up. Harry, Ron and herself were quite different from the three first-years confronting Quirrell, or even from the three third-years tracking down Sirius Black. Thinking of how much Ron had changed, she smiled. Her boyfriend had really grown up - and filled out.

Although he still was as recklessly brave as he had been in first year, she added to herself with a frown. And she’d speak to him about that.

Once she had checked up on Tania, Jeremy and Louise.

No students were around in the hallways; it was already past curfew, Hermione remembered. Another thing she wasn’t used to any more. She hadn’t had a curfew since she had left her parents’ house. She snorted - it was such a trivial thing, but it once again illustrated just how much had changed for her and the Resistance.

They reached the infirmary. An older wizard Hermione didn’t recognise was guarding the door. Dumbledore nodded at him. “Dedalus.”

“Albus.”

She took note of the name, just in case, as they entered the infirmary. The familiar smell hit her, but that was as far as the memories went. Instead of the empty room with a dozen beds, one of them Harry’s usual bed, the infirmary had been doubled in size - and filled to capacity, as far as she could tell, even with the curtains drawn to preserve the privacy of many of the wounded.

She saw Fred or George duck behind a curtain, and for a moment, wanted nothing more than to rush there and check up on Ron. He’d be next to Harry, too. Hermione told herself that she couldn’t be certain if Ron was there - Madam Pomfrey might have had the two be treated somewhere else, before she had enlarged the infirmary to handle the wounded from the Ministry. And she had a duty to her group.

So she walked over to where Justin was standing, his gun dangling from its sling at his side, next to a curtained area. Curtains someone had transfigured into stone walls, she saw coming closer. She approved of the precaution - Hogwarts was too open for her taste. Too many had reasons to be there. And it would take just one Imperius to have anyone strike at them.

“Justin. How are things?” she asked, a bit brisker than she had wanted. But it had been a long day, and it was far from over.

“We’ve been here since we arrived. We were lucky; we were among the first here, and Pomfrey had already treated us before the rest arrived.” In a lower voice, he added. “Your friends are in the room there.” He nodded at a door to the side. A door Hermione hadn’t seen before.

“Thanks.” She stepped past him, inside the curtained area. Sally-Anne was there, next to five beds, four of them occupied with Tania, Louise, Jeremy and Seamus. Hermione looked at Seamus, and the other witch flushed. “He needed the rest, but didn’t want to rest, so we forced him to.”

That sounded like him.
“He took Dean’s death very hard,” Sally-Anne added, wiping her eyes.

“How are the others?” Hermione asked.

“Louise will be fine tomorrow, or so Pomfrey said. Tania will take two days until the Skele-Gro is done.”

Hermione winced. Two days with Skele-Gro… that was torture.

“Jeremy…” Her friend winced. “A month, with regular potions. That curse did a lot of damage to his organs.”

“Did you get all the potions we need?”

“Yes. I insisted.” Sally-Anne nodded.

“You should get some rest too,” Hermione said. The other witch looked dead on her feet.

“I can take another Pepper-Up Potion.”

“And collapse tomorrow, when we might need you even more. Please.” Hermione grinned. “We’ll tell Seamus we forced you to rest as well.”

Her friend snorted, but picked the free bed to lie down.

“I’ll send Justin in as well,” Hermione said. John would have to take over for a bit, but that couldn’t be helped. Justin needed to be able to take over for herself.

“Did you inform Colin and Dennis?”

Hermione nodded. “I called them before we entered the grounds of Hogwarts.” They had been frantic. She should have called them sooner, but there had been so much to do and think about… she was making more and more mistakes. And her friends were paying for it. She looked at the four in the beds. All were asleep - assisted by some potions, she knew that. If she had just been a bit better prepared… She shook her head.

“I have to talk to the Order. I’ll be back soon,” she said.

Sally-Anne smiled. “Send the two my regards.”

Hermione chuckled ruefully. Was she that easy to read? She nodded, though, and walked out.

It was time to berate her two best friends for being stupid reckless idiots.

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_The man coughed, clutching at his chest. Blood was seeping between his fingers, staining his dark robe. Then Ron’s next curse smashed into the man’s head, breaking his mask and his skull with a sickening crack. More blood and gore. But the man kept flying, towards Ron. And Harry needed him. He could hear him screaming._

“Ron!”

Ron Weasley woke up with a start. This wasn’t his bed! He had his wand in hand and was about to roll out of the bed when he remembered. He was in the Hogwarts infirmary. A side room he hadn’t known existed until today. Might not have existed until today. And he was pointing his wand at
Hermione!

He quickly stashed it. “Merlin’s balls, I’m sorry!”

She shook her head. “No, it’s my fault. I startled you. But when I saw you lying there, still…” She sighed and ran a hand through her short hair.

He got out of the bed and hugged her. She was wearing a muggle uniform. Camouflage, she had called it during their last date. “I’m alright. I wasn’t wounded. Not really,” he added, when he felt her tense up. “A bit battered, some scratches. I’ve suffered worse in a friendly Quidditch match.” Once, and his mum had blown her top for two days. “I must have dozed off.”

He glanced at Harry, in the bed next to him. His friend was still asleep. “Harry, though…” He shook his head. Their best friend looked like he had played a Quidditch match by himself against the Slytherins, with Snape as referee and no snitch to stop the carnage.

“What were you thinking, attacking the Dark Lord!” Hermione hissed.

Ron bit back a sharp retort; Sirius had already berated him in Harry’s place. “We weren’t attacking him. We were trying to check what he was doing so close to Hogwarts, to warn Dumbledore. We were keeping our distance, we were disillusioned, and we thought we could fly away any time, to Hogwarts.”

“What went wrong?”

Ron cast a privacy spell. “He could sense Harry.”

His girlfriend hissed, and muttered something that was probably a swear word.

“Yes. We couldn’t escape him undetected, and so we had to outfly him and his Death Eaters. It didn’t work out that well.” He closed his eyes. “Harry crashed before Dumbledore arrived, and I was chased by three Death Eaters, so I couldn’t help him.” Ron ground his teeth; that had been one of the worst moments of his life.

Hermione looked at Harry, sighing. “He survived.”

“Thanks to Dumbledore. Voldemort tried his worst to kill them both. It wasn’t enough.” Not with Dumbledore around.

The witch sat down on Ron’s bed. “Did you hear about the Ministry?”

Ron sat down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “I heard some from my family. Dad and Percy were in the Wizengamot, and both were hurt in the battle. They’ll be fine, though - they told us about it.” He sighed. “Bill’s wounded as well, and sleeping. Fleur wasn’t in a state to tell us much.” And he hadn’t wanted to talk to the Resistance, not without clearing it beforehand with Hermione, in case they had to keep their relationship a secret.

“Fleur lost many family members. Half a dozen, I think.”

Ron hissed. That was terrible. He imagined losing so many Weasleys… He shuddered and pulled her closer. “Things were very hectic then, so many wounded arrived. The Order, the French, and the Resistance. Mum came as soon as she had heard - she had been waiting in St Mungo’s. Ginny managed to sneak in. Don’t ask me how she did it.” He sighed. “I’d have called you, once I got the mirror from Harry, but Sirius said you were in an important talk.”
“With Fudge, Bones and Dumbledore,” Hermione said. “A strategy meeting, you could call it.”

She didn’t sound as if she was happy with its results, Ron thought. “What went wrong?”

“Nothing went wrong, but…” She shook her head. “I don’t trust Bones. And Fudge… he acted as if everything was fine. As if all those laws were never passed.”

“He’s a fool,” Ron said.

“I just hope he’s a useful fool.”

She nodded. “Oh. Have you been told? Dean was killed.”

Ron closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “Shite.” He hadn’t been that close to Dean, or to Seamus, but they had been dormmates for five years.

“Some sort of poison spell killed him, probably cast by Bellatrix Lestrange. We killed her, though.” Hermione leaned into him.

“Neville will be happy to hear that.” Hopefully - the bloke had changed, Ron thought. Very intense, and driven by his desire to avenge his family. Who knew how he’d react to hearing that someone else had killed Lestrange?

“Where is Sirius?” Hermione interrupted his thoughts.

“I don’t know. He was called away earlier, and then I fell asleep.” He grimaced. “Not my finest hour.”

“You faced Death Eaters and the Dark Lord and you’re still alive. You did well,” Hermione said, before she kissed his cheek.

He didn’t feel as if he had done well. And there was something else. “I killed one of them. Piercing Curse to the chest. Then a Bludgeoning Curse to the head.” Just like he had been training for.

“Oh, Ron!” Hermione hugged him, hard.

He wondered about her reaction. She had killed before, multiple times. And Harry had killed Quirrell when he was eleven years old. Had they had nightmares too?

“It’ll get better with time. Talking helps too.”

“To whom?” He didn’t want to talk to his family about this. He didn’t want them to know it, if possible. And Hermione… he didn’t want to waste their few times together with that.

“Your family?” She must have noticed his reaction. “McGonagall? Dumbledore?”

He was about to scoff, then reconsidered. Dumbledore would probably understand. He had been there, too. And he was regularly trying to break into the Headmaster’s mind, so they were, well… he couldn’t call it close, but… the Headmaster would listen, Ron was certain. “Yes.”

Hopefully, it’d help.

She was resting her head on his shoulder, still leaning into him. He turned his head, and cupped her chin, then kissed her, properly.

They needed to make the most of the time together they could have, before the war separated them
again.

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Brenda Brocktuckle woke up and couldn’t move. Full Body-Bind Curse, she knew - a favourite of some of the instructors, every Auror was quite familiar with it. Which meant she was a prisoner of the Ministry.

“Hello, Brocktuckle.”

She knew that voice. Mad-Eye Moody. The old Auror had stunned her and Parkinson - she remembered seeing his peg leg before she lost consciousness. She couldn’t see him, though - he was staying outside her very limited field of view. She wanted to tell him to save the theatrics, but she couldn’t say a word either.

Then she felt her body relax, and her control return. Limited control, as she quickly found out - bands of metal held her wrist and ankles to the bed she was laid out on. But she could turn her head and talk.

“Moody.”

“That was quite a busy day, today. Death Eaters in the Ministry. Traitors in the Ministry. Half the Auror Corps dead - murdered. Half the Ministry cursed.”

There hadn’t been that many paper aeroplanes, Brenda knew that. He was baiting her, hoping that she’d correct him. As if she was an idiot - she had been in his place before. She didn’t answer the man. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

He chuckled. “Unfortunately for those traitors and Death Eaters, they lost. The Wizengamot held out, and reinforcements arrived. And all the Death Eaters and traitors were caught or killed.” He started to walk around her. “There were a lot of them. A number probably were both - Death Eaters and traitors. Hard to tell who’s who.”

“That’s easy to check for. Look for the mark.” She regretted answering as soon as she had said it. She should have stayed silent.

He smiled, his ugly face twisting. “Oh, we have. You are not marked. Neither was your partner. You know, Parkinson. You live with him, too. Didn’t listen to me when I told you that mixing work and your private life was a bad idea?”

“You don’t have a private life.”

He laughed. “Usually, I wouldn’t bother interrogating you until much later. So many others to interrogate, and so few Aurors left. And so much to rebuild. Why waste time on an unmarked traitor and her boyfriend?” He cocked his head sideways, and that weird ugly eye of his rolled around almost frantically. “But you and your partner were not captured with the rest of you scum. You were trying to flee through a secret tunnel you shouldn’t have known about while the rest was fighting still. So, I think you two were among the smart ones. Those who know more than the curse-fodder.”

She glared at him while he reached into a pocket in his robe and pulled out a vial. “I think you’re familiar with this.”

Brenda clenched her jaw so she wouldn’t scream in frustration.
Hogwarts, January 18th, 1997

Harry Potter woke up to a familiar ceiling and a familiar smell. He was inside the Hogwarts infirmary. Not in his usual bed though, but in a smaller room. He wasn’t alone either. Sitting on the bed next to him were Ron, and Hermione in a uniform - fatigues - and on the other side was Sirius.

“Harry!” his godfather yelled, then hugged him. “Don’t do this to me again!”

“Good morning, mate. You had us worried.” Ron said, smiling.

Hermione was frowning while she nodded. “Yes.”

“Is this where you tell me how much I messed up?” he asked.

“Not me.” The girl shook her head. “Ron told me what you were doing. It wasn’t quite as reckless as it looked. Even if you were on brooms.”

“I’ll do that in a bit. I’m too glad you’re fine again,” Sirius said.

Harry chuckled, then winced when Sirius hugged him a bit too hard. “Ow.”

“Harry?” Sirius released him at once.

He raised a hand. “I’m fine. Just some lingering bruises. I’ve had worse in Quidditch.”

Hermione huffed. “You and your Quidditch! Bloody dangerous foolishness!”

He exchanged a glance with Ron and his godfather. Their friend probably would never understand just how great the game was. Then he looked back at Hermione. “What happened? You wouldn’t normally be here, just because I’ve got a few bruises.” Sirius, of course, would have to be stunned or otherwise incapacitated to be kept away from him.

“You were hurt far worse than ‘a few bruises’,” she said. “I talked to Madam Pomfrey.”

“You know what I mean.” He paused for a moment. “What happened?”

Ron took a deep breath. “Death Eaters tried to take over the Ministry. They attacked the Wizengamot.”

Harry gasped.

Sirius made a placating gesture with his hand. “As you can see, I’m fine. So is Vivienne.” Harry didn’t really care about the Veela. Not as much as he did care about his godfather.

“My family will be fine after a bit of rest,” Ron added, “but….”

“Dean was killed. Mary too,” Hermione said, after taking a deep breath.

Dean dead? Harry hadn’t known Mary, not really, but Dean… he muttered a curse. It could have been Hermione, in Dean’s place. He didn’t want to think about that.

“Seamus was hit with a Torture Curse, but should be fine in a bit,” Hermione continued.
Harry had been hit with the same curse. It took longer than she thought to be fine. He nodded, though. “How did that go?”

“Well, we went in through the lift entrance from muggle London,” Hermione started, “and we cleared the Atrium with a bomb. But then, on the stairs…”

Harry listened while his friend and his godfather told him about the Battle of the Ministry. “And you thought I was being reckless?” When he saw her wince, he regretted his words.

“I know… we weren’t prepared enough. I didn’t plan enough.” Hermione looked down. “Just too rushed, and fights inside a building are usually more dangerous.”

“You can’t plan for everything,” Harry said. Ron agreed.

Hermione nodded, but Harry didn’t think she believed them. She was a perfectionist, after all. He had to talk with Ron about this - their friend couldn’t be allowed to blame herself for everything.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 18th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort was incensed. His plan, failed! His right hand, his most loyal Death Eaters, murdered! His forces, both marked and not, decimated! How could this have happened? He had lured Dumbledore to Hogsmeade. How had the Ministry been able to resist? He glared at the Daily Prophet on the table. Mudbloods and foreigners and blood traitors, fighting together against his own forces! How low had Wizarding Britain sunk for such a travesty to not only happen, but to be celebrated?

He wanted to lash out, destroy something, someone. Turn Wizarding Britain into Bellatrix’s funeral pyre. Make them all pay for defying him. With an effort, he forced himself to calm down. He was the Dark Lord Voldemort, not some mere dark wizard. He would not let emotions rule him.

But he had to understand what exactly had gone wrong. Maybe he should have gone to the Ministry himself, engaged Dumbledore there… He shook his head. No. To fight Dumbledore, a master at Transfiguration and a famous alchemist, inside the Ministry where Voldemort couldn’t move as freely as in the air above Hogsmeade to avoid the numerous traps and other lethal surprises Dumbledore could create in such an environment, would have been foolish. Not suicidal - he was the old man’s equal - but far from ideal for a confrontation.

It was galling, but it was likely that his forces in the Ministry had lost due to the mudbloods and foreigners. The blood traitors would have been outnumbered once his curse had struck and the ambushes had been sprung. The sudden arrival of reinforcements for the enemy could have tipped the scales, although his Death Eaters should have been blocking the entrances to prevent exactly such a thing from happening. At least they had paid the price for failing him.

Besides, his situation was not quite as dire as it looked, no matter what the Ministry’s rag claimed. His Death Eaters might have failed him, but they had taken a great toll on the Ministry’s Aurors and Hit-Wizards, and the mudbloods; that much was certain just judging by the pictures in the article. And his curse had struck as planned. No, the Ministry might have won this battle, but it might have lost the war as well.

He had to take stock of his remaining followers. Some of whom he had sent abroad, for a variety of reasons, would have to be called back. Pettigrew, for one - that man was a sniveling coward, but a skilled wizard and a capable spy. There was Snape, too. His information had allowed Voldemort to
engage Dumbledore and almost kill Potter. The Dark Lord still didn’t fully trust the double-agent, only a fool would, but in his current situation, he’d have to make more use of the man. There should be a suitable mission that would both test the man and serve Voldemort’s goals no matter its outcome. At least most of his followers in the Wizengamot would have escaped before the battle had started; for once, their cowardice had been a boon.

And he’d have to put his own story out there. He could blame the mudbloods; their presence proved that they were trying to take over the Ministry and that he had just struck before they were ready. But that would make him appear weak. Maybe blame the Ministry for using mudblood enforcers against ‘undesirable’ purebloods? It might scare some of the dumber purebloods into joining him. He’d have to recruit abroad, though, to replenish his ranks.

And there was another unexpected boon he had discovered. He could sense Potter if the boy was nearby. And Potter could sense him. That explained why the boy had been tracking down Horcruxes for Dumbledore - it wasn’t just because the boy was protected from Voldemort’s power, but because there was a connection. And it went both ways.

He grinned. That was another opportunity he would exploit, given time. But first, he added, glancing at the skull on his table, he had to decide how to use the wand up his sleeve. It was a good thing he hadn’t used it against the Resistance, even though he had had the chance for weeks. The mudbloods would have warned Dumbledore, and he would have not only taken steps to counter this, but would have gained an effective propaganda tool as well.

Using houngan techniques was, after all, a taboo in Wizarding Britain and in most of Magical Europe.

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Chapter 34: At Hogwarts

‘At first sight it might seem odd that even after having fought together in the bloodiest battle in the war so far, the Ministry’s wounded were sent to St Mungo’s while the Order of the Phoenix and their allies, as well as the Resistance, moved their casualties to Hogwarts. However, the close cooperation that followed the battle was largely the work of Dumbledore, who managed to convince the Resistance and the Ministry to join ranks despite the bad blood between the two factions. But the separation of the wounded heralded the fact that while the three factions were at this point united against the Dark Lord, they had by no means truly reconciled. Deep rifts remained, a situation the Dark Lord was poised to exploit.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Hogwarts, January 18th, 1997

“Good morning, Aberforth.” As usual, Albus Dumbledore greeted his brother with a friendly smile. And as usual, Aberforth ignored his greeting as he sat down in front of Albus’s desk, staring at him.

Albus didn’t sigh. “I trust you have heard about the events at the Ministry.”

“Yes. Quite the massacre.” Aberforth scoffed. “Why did you let that happen? You expected the Dark Lord to launch an attack following that vote in the Wizengamot.”

The Headmaster shook his head. “I took precautions, but the sheer number of spies Voldemort had inside the Ministry hindered my and my friends’ efforts.” He might have been too cautious, Albus knew, but if Tom had learned of his precautions then the Dark Lord would have been able to counter them. The battle had been close enough. If not for the Resistance and the Delacours and d’Aigles, the Ministry would have fallen.

“Really?” His brother snorted. “Didn’t the battle end just as you wanted, with the Ministry both weakened and indebted to the muggleborn and your friends, and the Death Eaters broken?”

“I certainly did not wish for so many good people to die,” Albus said, forcing himself to remain calm. That there was some truth to this accusation made it harder - with both the Resistance and the Ministry suffering such terrible losses, they were unlikely to attack each other until the Dark Lord had been defeated, and Albus hoped that by then, the rift would have been mended sufficiently to avoid further bloodshed.

“Hah! You may claim that, but no matter what you intended, people keep dying while you scheme and plot,” Aberforth sneered at him. “Children as well.”

Albus knew what his brother was not quite saying. Decades had dulled the pain of the loss of his sister, but not the shame he felt for his part in it. He felt the urge to lash out at his brother, remind him that there had been three wizards fighting each other that day, that Aberforth was guilty as well, but he knew he couldn’t afford it. He needed Aberforth’s help.

So he slowly nodded, denying his brother the satisfaction of seeing him react with anger. “I try my best, but the Dark Lord is no ordinary enemy.”
Aberforth scoffed again, but didn’t press the matter. For a short while, neither Albus nor his brother said anything. Then the Headmaster broke the silence. “The Dark Lord has lost most of his Death Eaters in the Ministry. He will be looking to recruit more unscrupulous wands to fill up his ranks.”

“There are not many left in Britain who’d follow him,” Aberforth said. He had to know what Albus was asking. “And I think your French friends will not look kindly on attempts to recruit their scum.”

The Headmaster nodded. “But Tom will look further abroad as well. He spent years in Albania as a shade.” He didn’t react to his brother suddenly growing tense.

“He couldn’t have built up a network of contacts as a shade,” Aberforth answered.

“No. But he had ample time to remedy that since his return - a number of his inner circle are not accounted for.” Albus folded his hands and propped his elbows up on his desk. “I am not asking you to go there.” Aberforth relaxed minimally. “But I need a few names friends of mine can contact there. Trusted mercenaries. And mercenaries who would be joining the Dark Lord.”

“If you try to put pressure on them not to join the Dark Lord you might cause them to join him out of spite,” Aberforth said. “They’re a prickly sort.”

“I am not planning to do that,” Albus said, shaking his head. “I intend to hire them myself, although the less trustworthy ones I would probably send to guard something unimportant abroad, just to deny them to Tom.”

“Expensive, but effective.” Aberforth chuckled. “Although they’ll grow restless sooner or later.”

Albus spread his hands. “I would rather have them grow restless after a few weeks than attack us straight away.” And if things went well, Tom would be dead before this became an issue.

“I’ll give you a list. I don’t know if any of them are still alive, though. Is that all?”

Albus doubted his brother’s professed ignorance of the fate of his former comrades. Aberforth was far too loyal to the thieves and other shady people he associated with to have abandoned those he shed blood with during the troubles in the Balkans. He shook his head. “Tom will try to recruit in Britain as well. If your friends could keep an eye and ear out for his recruiters…”

“I’m not going to have them risk their lives for you, Albus.”

“Shouldn’t that be their choice?” Albus said softly.

Aberforth muttered a curse, but he couldn’t very well accuse Albus of manipulating others like puppets, and then try to make such decisions for his friends. The Headmaster waited until his brother had gotten up, then spoke up again. “The Resistance might need your help as well.”

Aberforth whirled around. “What? Are you sending them into harm’s way again, before they have recovered from this debacle? They lost half their number!”

Albus made a mental note that his brother had kept track of the Resistance. That and his reaction meant he cared for them. The Headmaster shook his head. “No. But as you said: They lost a number of dear friends. They, or rather Miss Granger, might need to talk to someone who has gone through this before.” Albus couldn’t help but feeling a small bit of satisfaction at seeing his brother jerk - Aberforth wasn’t the only one able to use old tragedies against another.

His brother stared at him, then nodded, and left the Headmaster’s office without a further word.
“Good morning, Alastor.”

“Morning Albus.” The old Auror’s peg leg made a loud noise with each step he took. Albus ignored it; Alastor was doing this so his enemies, both real and imagined, would not suspect that he could move far more quietly if he wanted to.

“You sent your brother off on his errands already?” Alastor said, sitting down on a chair he had conjured himself.

Albus nodded.

“Good to see the old bugger doing something helpful, for a change.” His old friend snorted.

The Headmaster shrugged. He might still harbor hope for a reconciliation with his last family member, but he was certain Alastor and Aberforth would never be civil to each other. There had been too much bad blood, back when Aberforth had just returned to Britain from the Balkans, and both men carried grudges like no one else Albus knew. “What did you find out?”

Alastor grinned, his scarred face twisting. “Ah, I got lucky - the very first traitor I interrogated was the one who snuck those cursed aeroplanes in.”

Albus leaned forward. That was very important news. “Did they know what curse was used?”

His friend shook his head, the enchanted eye spinning wildly. “No. The fool just did what she was told to, without knowing exactly what would happen. She knew that it was a dark curse, and that the spell would not hit anyone near the target - but that might have been a lie told to her as well.” He scoffed. “Two Aurors were behind that nasty business, Malcolm Parkinson and Brenda Brocktuckle. They organised the traitors in the Corps, sent those cursed planes out, and fought in the coup. Parkinson was the leader of that group, but Brocktuckle had quite the authority, for a recent recruit. We got the names of the others in their cell too - but they were killed in the fighting.”

“Did either know the Dark Lord’s hideout?” One of them, at least. Mister Parkinson had been a very well-connected Slytherin; it was not impossible for such a wizard to have gained the Dark Lord’s trust.

“Parkinson knows the locations of the spots where he met his master. Which means that the Dark Lord is certainly not living there. And with his Death Eaters captured, he’ll know we now know those spots as well.”

“I see.” He remembered Miss Brocktuckle. A very determined, stubborn student at Hogwarts. A good Auror too. To think she had joined Tom… “Is there any chance that Miss Brocktuckle was just a follower?”

“Technically, she was just a follower, but she was being groomed for more by Parkinson. He wanted to sleep with her too.” Alastor chuckled. “Won’t be doing any of that, not any more.”

Albus nodded. With so many Ministry employees and even Wizengamot members cursed, and the Ministry and the Wizengamot almost falling to the Dark Lord, mercy would be in short supply. “How is the mood among the surviving Aurors?”

“Mixed. They still don’t trust each other, even though everyone claims to want to avenge their dead comrades and fight the Dark Lord.” Alastor shook his head. “There’s talk about dosing everyone with Veritaserum.”
Albus frowned. Veritaserum was a powerful tool, but it was not infallible. There were a few of ways a spy could foil such an interrogation, provided that they knew it was coming. And it threatened to expose several actions taken by his own agents.

Alastor scoffed. “They don’t realise just how much skill it takes to spot memory charms, or someone skilled at Occlumency.” He sighed. “The Corps will take a long time to recover from that blow. Traitors, and then so many dead…”

“You will be busy getting the survivors into shape then.”

“Yes.” For a moment, the old Auror looked almost apologetic. “I’ll still be training the boys, of course. But if the Corps can’t pull their act together, then the Ministry’s going to be doomed.”

Albus nodded. His friend was correct. That Alastor, for all his complaints about the younger generation, and the useless rookies and Ministry, still cared for the Auror Corps, didn’t change that. But while his training of Harry and his friends was essential, Alastor would be missed on the other missions he had undertaken for the Order. “There might still be spies among the survivors.” In Tom’s place, Albus would have ensured that not all of his spies exposed themselves.

“Of course there’ll be spies! But we’ll find them.” Alastor grinned. “We’ll get more names from the prisoners. Would be easier if we had more prisoners. Your friends were quite bloodthirsty.”

Albus ruefully spread his hands. “They will kill rather than risk their lives to capture a Death Eater.” At least unless they had specific orders, or the opportunity to capture a member of Tom’s inner circle. Although Bellatrix had proven that even then, capture might not be an acceptable option.

“Yes. Like Hit-Wizards.” Alastor shook his head. “Is your spy any closer to getting the Dark Lord’s location, now?”

“Such things cannot be rushed, but I think the sheer scale of the casualties the Death Eaters suffered means there’ll be an opportunity for us.”

“Let’s hope so. It would be a shame if so many people died just for the war to go on as before, after a recruiting period.” Alastor snorted. “There’s another thing: Both of the traitors were living in a muggle house. And they assume many others did so as well.”

Albus nodded slowly. He didn’t think that Tom would live among muggles - the Dark Lord had no fond memories of his childhood in muggle Britain - but other Death Eaters might have followed Parkinson’s example. But how to find them… he might have to ask Miss Granger for some ideas.

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Hogwarts, January 18th, 1997

When Hermione Granger left Harry’s room with Ron, they ran almost straight into Ginny. “Ron! Hermione!” The younger witch was whispering, and glancing around, even though no one in the main room seemed to be paying any attention to her. “How’s Harry?”

“He claims he’s fine, but that’s up to Madam Pomfrey to decide. You know how he is,” Ron said. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

Ginny glanced at Hermione, then back at her brother. “No one’s paying attention in class, not after the Daily Prophet arrived this morning.” She huffed. “I’d rather see my friends and family than Snape.” Glaring at Ron, she added: “My family and friends who almost died in those battles.”
Hermione stepped in. “Ron and Harry didn’t plan to fight. The Dark Lord surprised them.”

Ginny gasped. “So it’s true! You fought the Dark Lord!”

“Dumbledore and Harry did. I was being chased by Death Eaters,” Ron said.

Hermione saw that he was wincing - he must be remembering the wizard he had killed. “How are the students taking this?” she asked. She hadn’t left the infirmary yet since she had arrived.

The girl winced. “Those who have family in the Ministry are trying to find out if they lost someone. The rumours are crazy. The rest... “ She shrugged. “I think they are happy that the Dark Lord was defeated, but with so many killed...” she sighed, then looked at Hermione. “You were fighting in the Ministry, weren’t you? The Prophet claims the Resistance was called in by the Minister and Dumbledore.”

“Yes.” Hermione hesitated, then continued. “Dean Thomas and Mary Smith were killed.” They had been Gryffindors, and Ginny had known them. She nodded at the area the Resistance had taken over. John was standing guard now. “Tania and Seamus were hurt, but should recover soon.”

“It looks like half of Gryffindor is in the infirmary,” Ginny said.

“More like half the patients here are Gryffindors,” Ron said.

He might very well be correct, Hermione thought - the members of her old house certainly were living up to its reputation. “I’ll have to check up on my group,” she said when Ginny eyed the door to Harry’s room. It would be good for Harry to have more visitors. Her friend was too prone to blame himself for everything if left alone.

Ron hesitated a moment, then nodded. “We can grab something to eat afterwards.”

Hermione bit her lower lip. She wanted to take him with her, but... she was checking up on her group as the leader of the Resistance. She wasn’t visiting friends in the infirmary. “Alright.” She nodded, and left the two siblings.

“Any trouble while I was away?” she asked John once she reached the corner where the Resistance members were being treated.

“No.” He shook his head. “Lots of glances, but no one bothered us.”

Hermione wasn’t certain if that was a good or bad thing. The Resistance had fought side by side with the other wounded in this room, after all. On the other hand, the transfigured curtains and conjured cover didn’t look inviting. Quite the contrary. It was understandable that no one had approached them.

“Justin, Sally-Anne and Seamus went to get some food,” John continued.

Something Hermione should have taken care of. They had food in their enchanted pockets, but the meals the house-elves cooked were far superior, and Hermione should have organised that. Another mistake. “Good,” she said, passing him. “I’ll check up on the rest.”

True to Madam Pomfrey’s diagnosis, Louise was fine and up already. The former Hit-Witch was sitting at Jeremy’s bed when Hermione entered the improvised room, looking at her cursed friend, who was still, or again, asleep. Seeing the two, Hermione felt another pang of guilt. If she had planned this better...
“Hermione!” Louise smiled at her. “Madam Pomfrey said he’ll be cured in a month.”

Hermione had known that already. “Yes. And Tania should be fine in a day or two.” After another day of suffering from Skele-Gro’s effect. She shuddered.

“We used to get stunned when we had to take that potion, in the Hit-Wizard Corps,” Louise said, glancing at the bed next to her. “She didn’t want to, in case we had to fight. Took her hours to finally fall asleep.”

Hermione shook her head. “Stubborn idiot,” she muttered under her breath.

“How are your friends?” Louise asked.

“They were lucky. Ron’s fine and Harry should be fine.” He better be fine, she added to herself.

“Did they really face the Dark Lord?” Louise sounded doubtful. “Bellatrix Lestrange almost killed all of us, and the Dark Lord is even worse.”

“Dumbledore arrived in time, and fought the Dark Lord off, but yes - they faced him, although they were running rather than fighting.” Hermione frowned at the look of awe on the other witch’s face. Then she reconsidered - this might help her friends get accepted by her group. Still, she felt a little bit vexed. The Resistance had bled fighting Death Eaters, and saved the Ministry. They should be proud of that.

She heard someone approach, and drew her wand without even thinking about it. Louise had done the same, she realized, when Justin and Sally-Anne entered, floating a large tray between them.

“Hermione!” Sally-Anne was smiling, no, beaming, at her. “Did you sleep well? Ron’s waiting for you outside.”

Hermione sighed. Her friend was anything but subtle. “Yes.” Let the other witch make of that what she wanted. “Did you get enough rest?”

Sally-Anne nodded, and Justin didn’t frown, so she was not fudging the truth, Hermione thought.

“Good. I’ll have to check up on a few things, but I’ll be back soon,” she said. “Have you talked to your friends here yet?”

“Not yet,” Justin said.

“We’ll stay another day here, until Tania is fine. Keep one guard posted, but otherwise…” she trailed off. She couldn’t tell them to enjoy the day, not with two of their friends dead.

Justin nodded. “We’ll be visiting our friends here.” He looked at Sally-Anne. “They don’t know about us yet.”

Hermione nodded. She hoped that the couple would keep Lavender and Parvati busy enough to not bother Ron and herself. She wouldn’t put it past those two to use the Marauder’s Map to track the couple down.

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Harry Potter wasn’t quite relieved when Ron and Hermione left the infirmary, but he couldn’t help but relax a bit. He had been the one who had hared off to Hogsmeade on a whim, forgetting about Moody’s lesson that if he could see the enemy, the enemy could see him. Ron had dutifully
followed. If his friend had been killed it would have been Harry’s fault. In hindsight, he should have
known better than to underestimate Voldemort.

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asked.

Harry sighed. “Hermione’s going to blame herself for the deaths. I need to talk to Ron so he can talk
to her.”

“I can talk to her as well.” Sirius coughed. “But there’s something we need to talk about.”

Harry closed his eyes. “I’m sorry for flying off. I really thought it would be safe.”

“You shouldn’t have left Hogwarts.” Sirius didn’t raise his voice, which somehow made Harry feel
even worse.

“I know. But… I couldn’t just do nothing.” He narrowed his eyes at Sirius. “It’s not as if you stayed
back either.”

“I wasn’t behind the strongest wards in Britain,” Sirius said.

“Second-strongest then.”

“That’s a long way from the best, in this case.” Sirius snorted. “Besides, I’m an adult, and we were
under attack. You should have stayed safe.”

Harry pressed his lips together. Arguing otherwise would make him look foolish. Even more foolish,
at that.

His godfather sighed. “I know how bad it is, to wait while others risk their lives. James was the
same. James was ranting about hiding like a coward. Not where Lily could hear him, of course.”

For a moment, the older wizard seemed lost in his memories. Memories which, Harry hoped, were
slowly returning to his godfather as he recovered even more from his ordeal in Azkaban.

Sirius shook his head. “Sorry.”

Harry simply nodded.

“As I was saying, you need to stay safe. You know why.”

“Yes.” That didn’t mean he had to like it, Harry thought. “But he knows now.”

Sirius cursed through clenched teeth. “We need to tell Dumbledore.”

The Headmaster would likely have realised that already, Harry thought. But it wouldn’t hurt to
ensure that he knew. He nodded. “Please carry on with your rant about my security.”

Sirius glared at him. “You’re supposed to be all contrite and repentant.”

“Didn’t you tell me not to be predictable?” Moody had said so as well.

“Foiled by my own short-sighted words!” Sirius shook his head, but he was grinning, if only a little
bit.

Harry forced himself to chuckle. Before he could say anything else, they heard a knock on the door.
Harry drew his wand at once. He didn’t bother with finding an excuse for it, like levitating a glass of water over or such. He had just survived a battle with the Dark Lord, after all. “Yes?”

“Harry?” Ginny peered inside, then slipped into the room. “Sirius.”

“Ginny.” Harry nodded at her, lowering his wand.

“Miss Weasley.” Sirius sketched a bow and grinned at the witch. “Welcome to our humble but temporary home. Harry picked it out.” He was keeping up appearances, Harry knew, and played along by scowling at his godfather.

Ginny didn’t seem to be fooled, though, and smiled politely. “How are you doing?” She grimaced. “Or rather, how are you holding up?”

“I’ll live.”

“You’re not ‘fine’?” She touched his sheet with her left hand, running her fingers over it. Not quite sitting down, not quite keeping her distance.

He snorted. “Pomfrey recently threatened to give me Veritaserum if I didn’t stop answering her questions with that.”

Ginny giggled at that. “That would fit her.” Then she took a deep breath, and grew serious. “I heard some of what happened from Ron and Hermione. Dad, Bill and Percy told us a bit about the Battle at the Ministry, enough to sift through the Prophet’s propaganda.”

“Technically, it should be our propaganda now,” Sirius said. “Since the Ministry is now allied with the Order and the Resistance.”

“There’s more to it, though, isn’t there?” Ginny was looking at him.

He closed his eyes, sighing, then blinked. The Dark Lord probably had another wand too, since there hadn’t been that weird effect that had happened back at the graveyard. “I can’t tell you more. Secrets.”

She huffed. “My whole family is keeping secrets. Everyone but me.”

“Well, they’re not sharing them with me either,” Harry said. “That’s just how the Order’s organised.” And he shouldn’t even talk about the Weasleys being in the Order, even though that was pretty much publicly known.

Sirius nodded. “He’s right. Back in the last war, we suffered from traitors a lot.”

Harry knew which traitor his godfather was thinking of. If he ever managed to find the rat...

“I need to learn Occlumency then.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not a perfect protection, not against Veritaserum, for example.” And a few other things Moody had taught them about.

“Perfect or not, it’ll help.” Ginny looked determined.

“That’s rather pessimistic, Ginny,” Sirius said. “You presume that we will not have dealt with Voldemort before you’ll be eligible for the Order?”

She looked at him. “The last war lasted for a decade.”
“Well, I think we have learned a few lessons from that,” Sirius said.

“But so has the Dark Lord,” Harry added.

No one had an answer for that.

“How’s Gryffindor?” Harry asked, to break the silence.

“Full of rumours. You’ll get mobbed once you’re back. Ron too. Some of them might even mob Hermione, if they meet her.”

“They better not,” Harry spat. It wouldn’t do to ruin her time with Ron.

“We’re keeping the map under close guard.” Ginny grinned. “Though if they head to the Great Hall, it’ll be their own fault.” She nodded at him. “I have to head back now.” With a grin, she added: “Snape’s lesson should soon be over.” Then she slipped out of the room again.

“She’s skipping Snivellus’s lesson?” Sirius grinned. “There’s a Gryffindor for you!”

Harry nodded. Though knowing how many Gryffindors had died last night, he wasn’t quite certain if that was a good thing or not.

*****

Ron Weasley had thought that taking the long way around to the kitchens in Hogwarts was a good idea. Hermione had agreed - it was a detour, so almost no one used those passages. The twins probably had used them for their pranks, but they had graduated last year. So when he heard footsteps coming closer, he glanced at Hermione, and the two split up, wands out. Just in case.

The blonde witch walking around the corner stopped when she saw the two of them aiming their wands at her, but didn’t shriek, or go for her wand. She didn’t even look scared. “Hello, Ron.”

Luna Lovegood hadn’t changed much, Ron realised. The weird blonde witch was smiling at him and Hermione, and not quite looking at them. Those strange fruit earrings of her were floating near her ears, and she had her wand stuck behind her ear.

“Luna.” He nodded at her.

“Hello, Hermione.” The Ravenclaw cocked her head sideways and stared at her. “I would like to thank you for saving my Daddy.”

“Your father?” Hermione looked surprised.

Luna nodded several times, her head bobbing up and down. “He was covering the Wizengamot session, and was trapped there when the Death Eaters attacked. He’s in St Mungo’s, getting treated. I’m on my way to visit him.” Her smile widened. “I’ve just heard the news that he’s there.”

Ron winced. That meant that she had not known whether her father was alive or not for the whole night.

“You’re welcome,” Hermione said, if a bit belatedly.

“If you need The Quibbler for your mind-controlling propaganda, you’ll just have to ask. Although you’ll have to figure out a way to get past the tinfoil hats our readers are certain to be wearing.” Luna beamed at the witch.
Hermione was lost for words, so Ron nodded. “She’ll get back to you - such things take careful planning.”

“Of course! Like the Rotfang Conspiracy!” Luna smiled. “Is your family safe? Your dad was there as well, wasn’t he?”

Ron nodded. “Yes. They’re all in the infirmary here.”

“Oh.” Luna blinked. “That makes visiting them easy. Do you think I can get my father transferred as well? We have no other family, so he’ll be lonely in St Mungo’s.”

She was asking with such an earnest expression, Ron felt even worse for being annoyed by her. “You’d have to ask the Headmaster, I think.”

“Right. It’s his school, after all.” Luna nodded again. “Are you looking for Death Eaters here? Or looking for secret passages to sneak in and out of Hogwarts?”

“We were actually on the way to the kitchens,” Hermione said. “We want to avoid the crowds.”

“Oh.” Luna blinked again. “But the Nargles have largely disappeared from Hogwarts, so the crowds should be safe. For now, at least - they breed quickly, after all.”

“Nargles?” Hermione asked.

“Invisible animals,” Ron quickly said. Luna beamed at him. “But we shouldn’t hold you up any longer, Luna. Your father is waiting, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes. I shouldn’t get distracted. Have a nice day, you two!” Luna said, then continued on her way.

“I hope her dad is not too badly hurt,” he said, once they were again covered by a privacy spell. “Her mother died six years ago.”

“I don’t know what happened to him,” Hermione said, answering his unasked question. “Do you think Dumbledore will move him to Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know.” Ron shrugged. “But I think he’ll have a hard time refusing her.”

“The Quibbler… They covered some of our leaflets. We had considered contacting them, you know.” Hermione smiled, a bit ruefully. “But nothing came of it. Or rather, we didn’t get around to doing anything about it.”

“Well, you heard her - she’s offered to help you.” Ron wasn’t quite certain how much help the Lovegoods could offer the Resistance, but it was a nice gesture.

“Yes, she did. I might take her up on that. Provided I can spare the time.” The witch sighed. “Which doesn’t look like it’ll happen any time soon.”

Ron wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in for a quick, or not so quick, kiss. They had to make the best of what time they had, after all.

*****

Hermione Granger saw the two witches the moment she entered the Hogwarts kitchens with Ron at her side. She recognised them too, which was why she wasn’t quite aiming her wand at them.
“Hermione!” Lavender said, loud enough to be heard over the noise filling the kitchens as dozens of elves worked to make and serve lunch for hundreds of students and teachers. “See, Parvati? I knew Ron would head to the kitchens.”

Ron muttered something about being too predictable that Hermione didn’t catch completely. She was watching the two witches carefully as they approached. They were Gryffindors, and had helped guard the school, according to Ron and Harry, but why were they looking for Ron? She knew Lavender had asked him out, and Ron had turned her down. Narrowing her eyes, she took a half-step closer to Ron.

Parvati grinned. “Ah! You are a couple!”

“Lavender. Parvati.” Hermione nodded at them.

“You cut your hair!” Lavender looked at her.

Hermione frowned. She should have thought of wearing a wig. Technically, she didn’t have to hide from the Ministry any more, but she wouldn’t trust them even if Dumbledore were the Minister; they had too many spies for the Dark Lord in their ranks. And too many bigots. “Yes. It’s more practical.”

“Well… it suits you.” Parvati nodded.

“Why were you looking for me?” Ron asked.

“Because you were with her,” Parvati said. “I heard from Padma that the Resistance was in Hogwarts as she’d met John Emmet earlier, and since Harry’s still in the infirmary, we decided to look for you. We checked the library first, but you were not there.”

Hermione was slightly impressed by the reasoning, but then, the two witches always had shown considerable talent when it came to gathering gossip. “And why do you want to meet me?”

“We want to drag you to our dorm to talk, of course! We haven’t seen you for months!” Lavender sounded very excited.

Hermione almost groaned. If those two thought she’d waste time gossiping with them while the war was still going on and she could be with her friends… On the other hand, she had to think ahead. “I’d been planning to visit later, when the lessons were over.” Ron looked at her in surprise. She nodded at him. She’d tell him later.

“No one’s paying attention to the lessons today. Not even the teachers themselves!” Lavender said.

“We still need to eat first,” Ron said.

“Alright! Let’s get a table!” Parvati waved to the closest elf.

“So! Tell us! When did you get together? How was your first date?” Lavender was almost twitching with excitement, looking back and forth between Hermione and Ron.

Hermione stared at the two witches. That was what they wanted to talk about, when the Ministry was in ruins, the wounded and dead filled St Mungo’s, and Hogsmeade had barely escaped a Fiendfyre conflagration? On the other hand, it would be nice not to talk about the war, about death and killing. About the friends lost and cursed. For a little while at least.

And Lavender had asked Ron out, hadn’t she? Hermione sat down very close to Ron - their sides were touching - and leaned into him. “We became a couple some time ago, but our first date was a
wonderful evening in muggle London.” Then she proceeded to give the two witches a detailed account of her first date with Ron - though bereft of names and locations.

For a little while at least, the war was far away.

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“...and so I wanted to ask if Daddy can be transferred to Hogwarts, Headmaster. So he’ll not be alone in St Mungo's.”

Albus Dumbledore smiled at the earnest young witch in his office, though he was torn. It would be easy to grant Xenophilius's daughter her wish, but what if other students asked for the same? He couldn’t turn Hogwarts into a hospital. Not only would that compromise the school’s security, Poppy would be hard-pressed to treat so many people. She was already straining.

On the other hand, it was known that members of his Order of the Phoenix were treated here instead of St Mungo's. One more wouldn’t cause much suspicion - although the public might assume that Xenophilius was a member of the Order as well. Which might put him and his daughter at risk. Ultimately, it would be up to the editor of The Quibbler to make that sort of decision. He nodded. “I will ask him if he wants to move to Hogwarts later today, Miss Lovegood. Now off you go to St Mungo's - he’ll be waiting for you.” Provided that the man was not hurt worse than Albus expected. Which was unlikely, unless Xenophilius had joined the battle. Not entirely impossible, of course.

“You can use my fireplace,” he added. “That will save you some time.”

“Thank you, Headmaster!” Miss Lovegood beamed at him, bowed, and grabbed some Floo powder. A few seconds later, she had disappeared.

The old wizard kept smiling for a bit longer, then leaned back, sighing. Another family hurt by the war, and doing their best to cope. And with Tom now aware of his connection to Harry, Albus would have to readjust his plans. If Severus succeeded in gaining the Dark Lord’s trust... the Death Eaters had suffered so many casualties, there were bound to be some openings in the Dark Lord’s inner circle.

The spell on his fireplace alerted him that his next visitor was about to enter his office. Right on time. He flicked his wand and opened the Floo connection. A second later, Remus stepped out of the fireplace, cleaning the soot from himself. “Headmaster.”

He glanced at clock. “Good afternoon, Remus. Please have a seat.” While the younger wizard sat down, Albus asked: “How are things at home?”

Remus looked confused for a moment, which told Albus that the other wizard still felt as if he was a guest at Grimmauld Place - being an outcast for almost all his life, shunned as a dark creature, had left Remus with more scars than the ones visible on his face. Albus still hoped Sirius would be able to help his friend, but once more, the necessities of war would offer scant opportunities for that. At least if Remus followed Albus’s plan.

“But for the Tonkses and myself, no one is currently there,” Remus said. He didn’t have to tell Albus where the Delacours and the d’Aigles, those still alive, were. Nor where Sirius was. And the Weasleys had moved into Hogwarts as well, with Arthur, Percy and Bill getting treated there. “But we’re prepared for their return. Provided they wish to stay.”

“That is up to them, but, as they are French, I doubt that even such losses as they have suffered will deter them from seeing this war through.” Albus smiled grimly, but he was glad for the French élan - Britain could use all the help it could get, right now. “But let us talk about why I called you here.”
The other wizard nodded at him. He looked tired, but determined. The full moon was still almost a week away, so this was not related to his curse.

“The Dark Lord has lost many of his followers, including Bellatrix Black. I expect him to step up his recruiting efforts both in Britain and abroad, to make up for this. We cannot let him do so unopposed.”

“You think he will court the werewolves again, and wish me to put a stop to that,” Remus said.

“No.” Albus shook his head. Remus was not well-liked among the British werewolves. Many envied him his Hogwarts education, or scorned him for hiding his affliction for so long. “I would like you to head to Albania.”

“Albania?” The younger wizard looked puzzled. “I’m not very familiar with the area.”

Albus knew that. He hoped Aberforth’s ‘friends’ would help there. “But you are very familiar with who I assume is Voldemort’s main agent in the area.”

Remus’s eyes widened and his voice sounded almost like a growl. “Peter.”

Albus nodded. “Peter Pettigrew has not been seen in Britain since the Dark Lord’s return, and he has been to Albania before.” Pettigrew had been the one to fetch the Dark Lord’s shade from there. As young Mister Diggory’s murderer, the animagus had been a political liability for the Dark Lord’s cause. Sending him abroad would have served Tom’s purposes most, Albus thought, and there had been a report about a man whose description fit the traitor from one of Albus’s friends in Greece. “He might call him back, but the Dark Lord will need wands, and Albania and Northern Greece are rife with mercenaries.”

“I’ll find the rat.” Remus was definitely growling now.

“Just be careful - there might be other agents. And spies, and traitors.”

Remus scoffed. “Just like in Britain, then. I may not be too familiar with Albania, but I am familiar with mercenaries.”

Albus was aware of that, of course. It was an open secret that many werewolves, those whose families were unwilling or unable to provide for them, turned to that life. Being seen as a dangerous dark creature was not a drawback for most mercenaries. He nodded. “I would ask Sirius to go with you, but…”

“…he’ll not leave Harry.” Remus finished for him.

Not again. Albus knew that Sirius having left Harry to chase down Peter Pettigrew was one of the decisions Sirius regretted most.

And while Albus didn’t like to admit it, as a member of the Wizengamot and the head of the Black Family, Sirius was needed in Britain right now. Far more than Remus.

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For a seventeen-year-old girl, she was feeling very nostalgic, Hermione Granger thought while she and Ron walked towards the Gryffindor dorms. The familiar hallways, the moving stairs, the smell, even - all brought back memories of her time at Hogwarts. Mostly good ones.

But she also was almost painfully reminded that that time had past, and would never return. She
wasn’t wearing school robes, but fatigues. She was not returning to her dorm, but visiting. And she
was not carrying a bag full of books, but enchanted pockets with weapons, ammunition, and
explosives, while keeping an eye out for ambushes, her wand ready to cast.

She wasn’t the girl who had left Hogwarts at the end of her fifth year. And she’d never be that girl
again. Even though Lavender and Parvati acted like she still was their dormmate.

They reached the entrance to the Gryffindor tower. The painting let them pass, but then, it probably
let everyone with the correct password enter.

“Everyone! Ron and Hermione are here!” Parvati yelled into the common room. Which promptly
erupted into loud yelling as everyone jumped to their feet. To Hermione’s surprise, the Gryffindor
students didn’t rush to mob them, but stopped after a few steps. After they had seen her, she realised.
Of course, being Gryffindors, they didn’t stop for long, and soon surrounded the four, far too close
for her comfort, and asking questions all at the same time.

“Oh! You lot!” Ron yelled. “Back off a bit!”

It took quite a while for the excited students to back off and settle down. It was worse than after
some of Harry’s adventures, in Hermione’s opinion. She wasn’t quite certain any more that it had
been a good idea to come, even though she had to talk to the students. But she wouldn’t quit now.
She owed it to them, and to her friends.

A quick Amplifying Charm helped her be heard over the whispers still going on. “Please listen. Yes,
we have beaten the Death Eaters at the Ministry, but at great cost. You already know that many
Aurors and Hit-Wizards died, and more were cursed. They weren’t the only ones. Dean Thomas and
Mary Smith were killed fighting Bellatrix Lestrange. Tania Dennel and Seamus Finnigan and two
more of our group were hurt and are currently being treated.” The Gryffindors weren’t smiling any
more. Many of them would have lost family members as well, she realised. But they deserved to hear
about the death of their friends and fellow Gryffindors.

“Did you kill Lestrange?” Neville asked. She hadn’t seen him joining the crowd.

“I shot her while Seamus and others cursed her. She was dead the instant her shield failed, and fell
down into a fire,” Hermione said.

Neville slowly nodded, but he didn’t look happy.

“We had her cornered, but she still killed several of us and the French,” she added. Just in case
Neville had wanted to kill her himself. “It was the worst battle I’ve been in.” Yet, she added to
herself.

“Did you fight the Dark Lord?” a young boy asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “He wasn’t at the Ministry. Ron met him.”

Her boyfriend shot her a glance, then smiled wryly. “I wouldn’t say I fought him. He and his Death
Eaters were chasing Harry and me, and we tried to escape. We didn’t, but managed to stay alive long
enough for Dumbledore to save us, and took out a Death Eater or two.” He snorted. “They cast
Fiendfyre at Hogsmeade, but the Headmaster put the fires out before too many buildings burned
down.”

That made a number of students shiver - mostly the youngest, and the oldest, Hermione noticed.
Probably the most impressionable, and those who had read up on Fiendfyre for their Defence
N.E.W.T.s.
“How many Death Eaters did you kill?” A third-year student asked. He reminded Hermione of Dennis Creevey.

She had expected that question. “I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. In war, what matters is that you achieve your objective in a battle. And for that you need to work together.”

“But you have killed Death Eaters!”

“Yes.” She forced herself to keep smiling. “I didn’t keep count, though.” And she didn’t know how many of those she had killed had been Death Eaters anyway.

“Shouldn’t killing Death Eaters be the main objective?” an older student asked.

“It’s usually one objective. It depends on the mission, and the battle.”

“We won’t have peace until all of them are dead,” Neville said. “Every last Death Eater and the Dark Lord himself.”

Hermione agreed with him, though she wouldn’t have said it like that. It sounded far too bloodthirsty.

“Dead or in Azkaban,” Ron said.

“They escaped from there once already. They’ll do so again.” Neville glared at Ron.

“We certainly cannot trust the Dementors any more,” Hermione said. “And Azkaban relied heavily on them to keep the prisoners from escaping.”

“I doubt that the Wizengamot will show much mercy to Death Eaters anyway,” Ron said. “Not after so many in the Ministry were killed or cursed.”

“And after the Death Eaters attacked the Wizengamot,” she added.

“Now that you’re allied with the Ministry, will you be returning to Hogwarts?”

That question, coming from Fay Dunbar, almost made Hermione wince. “We’re needed in the war. Some of us might, though that’s up to them.” Colin and Dennis would be safer here, and able to take up their studies while waiting for a cure for the withering curse. But she doubted that the two brothers would want to ‘desert’ their friends.

“And afterwards?”

“I don’t know yet how long this war will take.” Or if she would be alive at the end.

But, Hermione thought, she knew that she wouldn’t return to Hogwarts. She didn’t fit in here any more. She had organised and led the Resistance. Fought in the war. Killed scores of people. Her, going back to be a student again? Having a curfew? Listening to Snape berate her for being a Gryffindor, and a muggleborn? Dealing with all that petty teenage drama?

No. She wouldn’t do that. She was past that.

*****

Harry Potter was watching his godfather pace in front of his bed. Back, and forth, back and forth. Like a caged animal. He probably would be changing into Padfoot soon. And in a way, Sirius was caged. And it was Harry’s fault.
“You know, you don’t have to stay in Britain. You can go with Remus and hunt Pettigrew,” he finally said. He’d miss Sirius, of course, but his godfather would be happier that way.

Sirius stopped pacing and stared at him. “What? No, I can’t.”

“I’ll be safe at Hogwarts.”

Sirius snorted. “I doubt that.”

Harry shrugged. It wasn’t as if anyone could help him if or when he and Voldemort met inside their minds. “I know you want to hunt down the traitor.” He would like to do that himself, but he was needed in the war.

His godfather sighed. “I want to, yes. But I’m needed here. And not just because my godson is suicidally brave,” he added with a smirk. Shaking his head, he continued. “No, Albus needs me in the Wizengamot. And with our French friends. Apparently, I have become a diplomat and a politician without noticing. What a shame!”

Harry chuckled despite himself.

“But yes, Harry, I’m also staying here in Britain for you. I left you once to chase Wormtail, and we both know what trouble that caused. I’m not making the same mistake again.” He grinned. “So, no more talk about me leaving, alright?”

“Alright.” Harry couldn’t help but feeling happy at hearing that.

Sirius didn’t resume pacing, but Harry could see that his godfather was tapping his foot. He was about to tell him to change into Padfoot and go for a run when the door was opened and a blonde head appeared, looking around.

“Hello, Luna,” Harry said, after he had recognised the blonde.

“Hello, Harry. Hello, Mister Boardman,” the Ravenclaw said.

“I’m not Stubby Boardman,” Sirius said.

“He really isn’t. His singing is so bad, it drives people and pests away,” Harry said. “Luna, this is my godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius - Luna Lovegood.”

“Oh!” She jumped to her feet. “I’m looking for the best bed for my Daddy! He’ll be moving to Hogwarts from St Mungo’s, and I don’t want him to be bored while he recovers.” She gazed at
Sirius with wide eyes. “Although I guess if he’s sharing a room with a famous singer and the Boy-Who-Lived, he’ll see a lot of groupies sneaking in.”

“Groupies?” Harry asked.

“Witches who want to sleep with famous wizards,” Sirius said.

“I know what groupies are,” Harry retorted.

“Why are you asking then?” his godfather shot back.

“I’m not a groupie,” Luna said. “I’m a bed-scouter.” She looked at Harry. “Though I could be a groupie, I guess.”

Sirius coughed, and Harry shot him a glare.

“I think this room will suit Daddy. You’re quite entertaining. I’ll inform the Headmaster!” The witch skipped out of the room.

“Maybe I’m really not needed in Britain,” Sirius mused.

“You’re not leaving me alone with her or her family,” Harry said, glaring at his godfather.

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“And my thoughts are with you.”

After finishing, Albus Dumbledore remained smiling for a moment longer, then leaned back and sighed. He had done this before, several times. Just in case his next mistake would be his last. And he had come close, in Hogsmeade. Very close.

His near-escape wasn’t the reason he had done this again, though. That was because of the changes in the Ministry, which had necessitated a few plans be adapted. He summoned two vials with his wands, unsealed them, and vanished the silver ribbons curled inside them. Then he touched the tip of his wand to his temple, and drew copies of the memories he wanted out, storing them in the two vials.

For a moment, he held them in his hand, as if he could weigh their contents. This wasn’t his legacy. It wasn’t even his last will. It was just a precaution. A very important one, though. One he hoped he’d never need. Or rather, he hoped would never be needed.

He looked at the clock on his wall. Severus was meeting with the Dark Lord. It was a longer meeting than Albus had expected. That could be a good sign. Or it could mean that Severus had been found out, and was now dead, or wishing he was dead. Albus hoped the younger wizard’s own precautions would work, in such a case. Death was but the next Great Adventure, but no one should start that after hours of torture.

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Night of the Dead

Chapter 35: Night of the Dead

‘After the Battle of the Ministry, many expected the Muggleborn Resistance to recruit as heavily as the Dark Lord and the Ministry itself. Indeed, after taking so many casualties - relatively, given the small number of Resistance members - it would have seemed only logical. And yet, that did not happen, for several reasons.

The muggleborn population was still in hiding, not many of them trusting the agreement with the Ministry yet. That made finding recruits difficult - the Resistance Radio could reach the muggleborns, but its audience could not contact the Resistance. Especially since there was still the risk of agents of the Dark Lord, mind-controlled or voluntarily, using such recruiting attempts to strike at the Resistance. Although that alone would not explain why the Resistance did not recruit among the students at Hogwarts during their stay there. At the school they could safely meet potential recruits. That they did not recruit there is a strong indication that, for all their claims about fighting for equality before the law, the Resistance were as biased with respect to blood status as their enemies, and refused to recruit half-bloods and purebloods.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Salisbury, Wiltshire, Britain, January 18th, 1997

“You have served me well, Severus. Your information about Dumbledore’s phoenix would have granted me victory, if not for his brother.”

The Dark Lord Voldemort smiled at his spy. He hadn’t missed how the man had looked around - he was probably trying to find out where they were, but the cellar of the safe house to which the Dark Lord had taken him offered no clue about its location - only conjured furniture appropriate for this meeting. The man could be simply curious and cautious, looking for a way out if anything happened - or he could be working to betray Voldemort.

“I beg your forgiveness, milord. I was unaware that the Headmaster’s brother was willing to help him, nor did I know how skilled he was.” The potioneer bowed deeply.

“Blood will tell, Severus. Family matters,” Voldemort said. “It takes a lot to sever those bonds. Only the deepest betrayal will achieve that. Dumbledore might have publicly distanced himself from his unsavory brother to further his ambitions, but it’s obvious that his brother has been working for him.” He chuckled. “The disgraced Dumbledore would have been able to approach people the Chief Warlock couldn’t. An ingenious set up.” He wondered if Dumbledore’s brother had volunteered for this, or had been forced into it.

“I see, milord.” Snape nodded, stiffly though.

“You doubt my reasoning?” The Dark Lord let the smallest amount of menace creep into his voice. After his recent setback, some of his followers might be wavering in their faith in him.

“No, milord. I was merely wondering how best to deal with this.”

“Do not concern yourself with that. I have a more important task for you.” A task that would show him on which side his spy truly was. It would put Snape at risk, but that was an acceptable price to
be paid to be certain of the wizard’s loyalty. He had not needed to know before, but with so many of his followers dead, he could no longer ignore the opportunities Snape could offer him - or the danger. It would be easier to simply sift through the man’s mind, if not for the fact that the spy had been hiding his true allegiance from either Dumbledore or Voldemort for years. Considering Snape’s skill at Occlumency, discerning his real thoughts from those faked for his facade would be nigh-impossible without an effort that might irreparably damage his mind.

“I live to serve you, milord!”

“Indeed.” Voldemort smiled. “But first, tell me about the situation at Hogwarts.”

“Dumbledore has brought those members of his Order who were wounded in the battle at the Ministry to Hogwarts for treatment. He seems to distrust St Mungo’s,” Snape started to report.

Which was, of course, only to be expected - Dumbledore would know that Voldemort had spies and agents in St Mungo’s who’d be able to let a blood traitor ‘succumb to their wounds’.

“The most prominent are Arthur Weasley and three of his sons - William, Percy, and Ron.”

The Dark Lord frowned. Ron Weasley was Potter’s friend. That boy had been at Hogsmeade too.

“Then there are several of the French allies of the Order. I have not yet found out their names.” Snape pressed his lips together under Voldemort’s faint glare, then continued. “And the Mudbloods have been invited as well, not just to treat their wounded, but to recover at the school.”

Voldemort nodded. “He has abandoned the charade that they are anything but his tools, then.”

“Yes, milord.” Snape bowed again.

“Good. We can use that to show the truth to some of those who doubt us even now.” He gestured to the other wizard to continue.

“Today, Xenophilius Lovegood was also moved to the infirmary at Hogwarts.”

That was a surprise. Why would Dumbledore reveal that the editor of The Quibbler was working for him? It would serve Voldemort’s enemy better if the public remained ignorant of that, and thought the magazine independent. Or was the Headmaster trying to make Voldemort believe that Lovegood was a member of the Order? He needed to consider this some more. “Anything else?”

“No, milord. We teachers are supposed to continue as if nothing had happened, even though all the students are doing is talking about the battles.”

“Dumbledore is trying to keep up appearances. No matter. Let us now talk about your task.” He smiled, and leaned back in his seat. “I need a young pureblood wizard child as a sacrifice.” He saw that Snape’s eyes widened, and he grew tense - but was that because of the task he was to undertake, or because he was aware of how much of a risk it would be for him? “With most pureblood families hiding from mudbloods or my faithful, you, amongst all my followers, are in the best position to take one of the blood-traitors’ children and bring it to me.” He smiled. “No one would think it too suspicious if one of the children, maybe a recent orphan, was distraught enough after the recent events to run away.”

Snape slowly nodded. “Yes, milord. It might take me a while to arrange matters, with the mudbloods and so many of the Order in the school, but I will manage it.”

“Failure is not an option, Severus.” Voldemort dismissed him with a gesture.
As soon as the man had disappeared, Voldemort left the location as well, apparating to his real safe house. The die had been cast and now it remained to wait and see what came of it. If Snape brought him a child, then Voldemort could be assured of the man’s loyalty - Dumbledore would never allow that. But if he was a traitor… Voldemort had taken a few precautions for such an outcome.

He glanced at his desk, and the skull set upon it. Maybe he should spend some time to find a ritual that could actually use a child sacrifice. It would be a shame to let such an opportunity go to waste, should Snape prove his allegiance to Voldemort. He nodded - yes, he would set Rookwood on this task.

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Hogwarts, January 18th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore knew that Severus was troubled as soon as the young wizard entered his office. The man was a good actor, but Albus knew him too well. “Good evening, Severus.”

The other wizard just nodded curtly and sat down. Another sign that things were not well. Although they were not too bad, either - Severus was still alive.

The Headmaster didn’t have to wait long. “He wants me to prove my loyalty, and deliver a child as a sacrifice to him!”

Albus took a deep breath. He had hoped that Severus would be able to gain Tom’s trust thanks to his spying and his skill with potions, that the deed the younger wizard had done to earn his mark, and his past services in the last war, would be enough, but the odds hadn’t been that good to start with. “I see.”

Severus was looking at him. Albus knew what his friend was asking, and shook his head. Some prices were too high to be paid for anything.

“He’ll kill far more than one child, if he’s not stopped,” the younger wizard said.

“That is likely,” Albus admitted. “But by no means certain.”

“Really? You think you can kill him before more people die?” Severus shook his head, sneering.

“If a plan of mine bears fruit, yes.” Albus inclined his head. He saw Severus clench his teeth in frustration. The Headmaster knew that his friend hated that he didn’t know what else Albus was planning, but as a spy, he could not know about Albus’s plans with Harry. The risk of Tom finding out was too great.

“If, Albus, if.” Severus was shaking his head. “I’m so close. He has lost so many of his followers, if I can gain his trust…”

“But at what cost?” Albus frowned. He knew what his friend was thinking. One life against dozens, maybe hundreds. He had thought so himself, once. And, at times, you had to weigh lives. Send people to die so others would be saved. Any leader in a war knew this. But to pick a child, and deliver it to be murdered… no, that was unacceptable. “You cannot sacrifice an innocent child. Not without dooming yourself.” A price Severus would gladly pay, Albus knew, if it meant the death of Voldemort. His spy did not expect to survive this war.

“A child who’s not innocent then.” Severus sneered. “There are those who have blood on their hands.”
“You know that they would not qualify as children. Not for what the Dark Lord has in mind.” He gently shook his head. “It would be for naught, since you’d lose his trust for making such an obvious mistake.”

Severus hissed in frustration. “A volunteer, then. Polyjuice to appear as a child. I’ll deliver him to the Dark Lord, and we strike.”

“And who do you think would be able to stand up to the Dark Lord long enough to make a difference? Apart from me,” Albus asked.

“Your brother. Moody. Anyone. We only need to last long enough to keep the Dark Lord from fleeing until you arrive with the Order.” Severus looked at him, pleadingly. Albus’s friend knew that if he failed this task, he would not be able to spy on the Dark Lord any more. All his efforts, all his sacrifices, would have been wasted. And, worse, he wouldn’t be able to find the redemption he so craved.

“He’ll be behind wards,” Albus said.

“Granger can blow them away.”

Of course Severus would have studied the attacks by the Resistance, Albus thought. “At great risk to the warded structure, and its inhabitants.”

“A risk I’ll take. Gladly.”

“The Dark Lord will expect such an attack. If not from you, then from others. That is why he always meets you at different locations.” That was why Albus had not intended to try such a ploy until he knew where Tom was living.

“That can be dealt with with a suitable distraction. If he thinks you are occupied elsewhere, he’ll think he can deal with any attack.” His friend was leaning forward.

“I would have to be away from Britain, and yet visible to the public. And the ICW takes a dim view of using Polyjuice to send proxies.” Albus smiled. One or two delegates had tried that in the past.

“Have your brother pose as you, and attack some warded mansion in Albania then.” Severus took a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. “Albus, please.”

“You will almost certainly die, Severus,” he said. “Do you think this is worth it?”

The younger wizard simply nodded.

His friend was set on this course of action, the Headmaster realised. Even though it would very likely cost his life. And the life of another volunteer. Even if he refused, Severus would go through with it. Albus considered volunteering himself, but discarded the notion at once. The risk was far too great, and would only serve to alleviate the guilt he’d feel over letting two people sacrifice their lives for a very slim chance of destroying Voldemort’s body. He had far greater sins for which to atone, still, and Britain yet needed him too much for him to throw his life away like that. He closed his eyes and sighed. “Very well. If you, we, find a volunteer, I will be ready to attack the Dark Lord once you meet him.”

“Thank you.” Severus’s smile was thin, but the man’s satisfaction and relief were quite obvious to Albus - and painful. He told himself that his friend wanted this, wanted to die to finally achieve some sort of redemption, but it didn’t help.
Hogwarts, January 19th, 1997

Hermione Granger checked the privacy spells in the unused classroom the Resistance had taken over. She had done that twice already, but even at Hogwarts, you couldn’t be too careful. And it gave her something to focus on while she waited for the rest of the Resistance to arrive.

There they were. Justin entered, followed by Sally-Anne, who was levitating Jeremy, to her surprise. Louise stayed at her friend’s side. Behind them were Tania and Seamus, not quite leaning on each other, but close enough, and Colin and Dennis, limping. John brought up the rear.

“Madam Pomfrey was quite put out with us taking Jeremy with us,” Justin said.

“I’m not her student,” Jeremy said in a tight voice. “And this is important.”

He was hiding just how much he was suffering, Hermione knew, but she nodded. It was his decision. When everyone had sat down - or at least managed to get somehow comfortable - she cleared her throat. “I should have done this sooner, but not all of us were ready for a debriefing.” She pointed her wand at the blackboard behind her, and revealed the first of the maps she had prepared.

“The mission’s primary objective was to stop the Dark Lord’s forces from taking over the Ministry. Secondary objectives were to destroy the enemy forces, save the Wizengamot members and Ministry employees allied to our cause, and to improve our standing among the hitherto neutral pureblood and half-blood population.”

“Dying for public relations,” Seamus muttered.

Hermione suppressed the annoyance she felt at being interrupted. “We’re in a civil war. Almost all of those are decided by winning over the population. Showing that we’re fighting the Death Eaters, beating them, and saving our friends is a big step in that direction.”

Seamus was about to say something else, but Tania put her hand on his arm, and he settled down. Interesting, Hermione thought. And encouraging, if Tania could influence the Irish wizard. “We achieved all our objectives. In that, we were successful. However, we lost many of our friends.” She couldn’t talk about casualties and losses, not when talking about Dean and Mary, or Louise, Jeremy and Tania. “Too many. And their deaths could have been avoided.”

Seamus looked up, staring at her. Justin frowned. “How?”

She took a deep breath. “We entered this battle without being sufficiently prepared. We hadn’t trained with our allies, and were not ready for the tactics of our enemies. I should have anticipated the poison, and the enemy breaking through the ceiling.”

Seamus muttered something in response to her statement that she didn’t catch, but Tania whispered into his ear. Hermione would have to ask her later, probably. “Further, four of us were wounded, one of whom will take a month to recover.” She didn’t look at Colin and Dennis, who didn’t know when they’d recover. If they would ever recover, a small voice in the back of her head added.

“I’ll be fine sooner than you expect,” Jeremy said. Louise’s frown belied his words, though.

“We need to discuss how to avoid similar mistakes in the future, and how to improve our own tactics - and how to rebuild.” Otherwise, another such loss would mean the end of the Resistance.

“We could start with not trying to save the purebloods!” Seamus snapped. “We should have simply let them kill each other, then mopped up the survivors!”
“What? How can you say that?” Justin yelled. “It’s not about blood!”

“We have many pureblood friends in Hufflepuff and Gryffindor!” Sally-Anne added.

“Really? What kind of friends let us fight and die, while they stay safe at Hogwarts?” Seamus sneered, shrugging off Tania’s hand on his arm while he jumped to his feet. “Dean and Mary died, saving those worthless purebloods!”

“They’re students,” Louise said, “not Aurors or Hit-Wizards.”

“We were students too, until they kicked us out,” Seamus retorted. “If we can do it, they can do it.”

“So, are you suggesting that we recruit those students?” Hermione fought to ask calmly, and not snap at Seamus. He had just lost Dean, she told herself. “I’m certain if we ask, a number of Gryffindors and some Hufflepuffs will join us.” Seamus hesitated, and Hermione went on. “Or is it about the blood? Do you think blood means that much?” She didn’t have to add ‘like Death Eaters?’ - Seamus knew what she meant, and so did everyone else.

“No,” he spat out, “I didn’t mean that. But it’s not right that we died to save people who don’t care about us and a month ago would have applauded if we had all been killed.”

That was received with several nods from the rest of the group. Hermione couldn’t disagree with the notion either. “I don’t like it either,” she said. “But we need to focus on winning this war. And that means we have to make compromises.” And sacrifices, she added in her head. “We need the support of half-bloods and purebloods.”

“More support in the field would be good,” Seamus said. “Most of the dead were ours, and the French.”

Hermione had noticed that as well. She had considered the possibility that this had been by design - to weaken the Resistance, and use expendable foreigners - everyone knew the French wizards were too brave for their own good - while preserving the purebloods of the Order. But she trusted Dumbledore not to betray them like that. And it didn’t make any sense for him to use such ploys when the outcome of the war was still in doubt, and he couldn’t be certain that he would not need the Resistance again for a crucial battle. The war would only end when Voldemort was dead for good, and she knew that Harry was not yet ready for that confrontation.

So she shook her head. “Dumbledore doesn’t have that many fighters. A lot of the best Aurors supporting him died in that trap in East Sussex, and most of the rest, as well as many Hit-Wizards, were probably killed in the Ministry before we arrived.”

“Yes,” Louise said. “That was a massacre. Between that and the withering curses, I don’t think Dumbledore has many wizards and witches left who can fight as well as we can, or the French.”

“Or the Weasleys,” Hermione added.

“Does that mean we’ll recruit from Hogwarts?” Sally-Anne asked.

Hermione sighed. Leaving aside how the Headmaster would react to that, there were a few issues with doing so. “I’d like to, but if we recruit among the older Hogwarts students, we’ll need to be very careful - even now, there are possible spies here.” Harry and Ron had warned her about the likes of McLaggen. She couldn’t mention his name, though, or someone might kill him.

“Not Harry or Ron, though!” Sally-Anne said with a smile.
“No, not them. But they already are committed to their own group,” Hermione said. “They were not hurt hiding inside Hogwarts, after all.”

“So, we might get more Gryffindors as support,” Seamus said. He exchanged a smile with Tania, and glanced at Justin with a smirk.

“Don’t expect too much too soon.” Hermione didn’t quite roll her eyes - house rivalries, here? “They’re not ready for battle yet, with a few exceptions, and those usually have their own missions.”

“Aha! So Dumbledore is recruiting at Hogwarts,” Justin said.

“I think it’s more that he took those who would have become involved with the war anyway,” she explained. “But yes, sooner or later we can expect more help.” Hopefully later - she wasn’t looking forward to seeing more friends die. “In the meantime, though, we’re in a bind. Even if we recruit more from muggleborns, or even Hogwarts, we’d need to train them until they fit in with us.”

Louise nodded at her - the former Hit-Wizard and her friend should know very well how much training had been needed, and they were still mostly using their wands because they were among the weakest shooters in the group.

“That means that we can’t do much while we train them. We cannot prepare for a new mission either,” Hermione went on.

“And after the Ministry, it’s likely that things won’t settle down,” Justin said, frowning.

“Yes. So, new recruits won’t be much help for some time. But we need to recruit anyway. We don’t know for how long this war will go on.” And the more members the Resistance had, the better would be their position after the war. “We might need to hire the Sergeant and the Major again,” she added.

“We can afford it,” Justin said.

“But we need recruits first. John, we’ll need to put a call out in the next broadcast. Put up an e-mail address.”

“I could have done that in the last broadcast, if I’d known,” the wizard said, sighing.

“Sorry.” That couldn’t have been helped. Rushing things would do more harm than good, Hermione thought.

“A public recruitment ad will lead spies to us as well,” Justin pointed out.

“Yes. But we can’t be safe from them even by recruiting through our contacts and acquaintances.” Hermione sighed. “We’ll have to scrutinise each recruit, probably with Veritaserum and one of those Thief’s Downfalls.”

“Do you think Dumbledore will help us with that?” Tania sounded almost doubtful.

“If he wants us to keep fighting, then he’ll have to.” Hermione shook her head. “If we have to spend even more time vetting new recruits, we’ll be unable to do any missions. We certainly won’t rush into a battle unprepared again.”

That was met with much approval.

“And what do we do if purebloods or half-bloods ask to join us?” Sally-Anne spoke up. “If we turn
them down just because of their blood status, we’d be as bad as the purebloods. Those purebloods, I mean.”

Hermione sighed. She almost hoped that there would be no such recruits. “They’ll have to be able to fit in among muggles. Perfectly - we can’t afford to be discovered in muggle Britain.”

“Not many will be able to do that,” Tania said.

“We can send those who don’t to Dumbledore.” Hermione shrugged. “So, next point: What can we do better in a fight?”

“Use the Killing Curse on them!” Louise said.

“Yes!” Tania and Seamus said quickly.

“I’m not certain that that would have helped us much,” Hermione started.

“It certainly would have taken Lestrange down!” Seamus interrupted her.

“If we hit her, yes. We’re not exactly experts at casting the Unforgivables,” she pointed out. “And I think we all know that using a spell is not the same as knowing how to cast it. Which we don’t know either. We’d need quite some training to be able to use those spells effectively.”

“It’s not that difficult,” Louise said. “A Hit-Wizard who had fought in the last war said it was easy to learn and to use.”

“Use, maybe, but use effectively?” Hermione scrunched her nose. “I’d rather not figure things out in the middle of a fight.” She had made that mistake already. “The emotional component of the casting also worries me.” You had to feel a lot of hatred to successfully cast the Killing Curse.

“You think we might not be able to muster enough hatred?” Seamus looked incredulous.

“Or it might be too easy.” Hermione looked at him. He had been a good friend of Allan’s. “Not to mention the trouble we can get into for using the Unforgivables.”

“The Ministry has authorised their forces to use both the Imperius and the Killing Curse,” Louise said. “Now that we’re allied with them, there shouldn’t be any problem.”

Hermione wasn’t quite certain about that - Bones hadn’t struck her as the type to allow anyone much leeway when it came to the law, an impression Sirius had confirmed. “I don’t trust the Ministry that much. But I was thinking about the effects on the purebloods in other magical countries, where the Dark Lord will be trying to recruit more wands for his ranks. Us using the Unforgivables will make it really easy for the Dark Lord to paint us as Grindelwald’s heirs.”

“The French like us,” Sally-Anne said. “I talked with them quite a bit in the Infirmary.”

“Those French like us,” Hermione said. “But the vast majority of purebloods haven’t forgotten that muggleborns flocked to Grindelwald’s banner.”

“Because they were oppressed and he promised them equality!” John said.

“Yes. But the other purebloods don’t care much about that. Britain’s about the only country in Magical Europe where we were treated somewhat equal to purebloods, and that’s only because of Dumbledore. Durmstrang doesn’t even allow muggleborns to attend, and in Beauxbatons, they are limited to their equivalent of O.W.L.s.” Hermione had looked into other schools once. The French
muggleborn could study for themselves, or get tutors and take their equivalents to N.E.W.T.s later -
in theory. “And you can bet that they are watching Britain carefully. If we start acting like dark
wizards and witches…”

“If they are afraid of their own muggleborns starting a war, then no matter what we do, we’ll be
blamed,” Justin said. He looked grim, though.

“Possibly. But things could be much worse, and I’m not certain it’d be worth using the
Unforgivables if we risk driving more purebloods to support the Dark Lord.” Hermione pressed her
lips together.

“A single Killing Curse could be the difference between winning and losing the war,” Louise said.

“Yes. Like in the last war,” Hermione said.

“That’s not the same!” Seamus said.

“No. But using the Dark Arts is not something that should be done for expediency. I propose that we
research this thoroughly to at least be certain that the mere act of using those spells is not dangerous
in and of itself.”

The smiles and chuckles surprised her. She frowned, but before she could ask what had brought this
on, Sally-Anne spoke up. “Hermione, proposing to thoroughly research things! We’re really back at
Hogwarts!”

Hermione had to chuckle as well. Though she was not quite as amused - the Resistance were facing
serious troubles, even if the Dark Lord stuck to licking his wounds.

And she somehow doubted that Voldemort would do so.

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Mister Lovegood was a nice man, Harry Potter had found out quickly after Luna’s father had arrived
in his room. He was friendly, he was chatty, and he was funny.

He was also stark raving bonkers, as Ron had put it. After a night in the same room as Xenophilius,
as the man had insisted Harry called him, he was now well-acquainted with the Rotfang Conspiracy,
Muggle Mind Control Techniques, and more animals that had not yet been discovered than he could
remember. He was also the proud owner of a ten-year subscription for The Quibbler. And he hadn’t
slept much during the night - Xenophilius could talk at length about anything.

The door opened, and Harry went for his wand.

“Good morning, Daddy! Good morning, Harry.” Luna walked in. “I brought the dreamcatchers!”

“Splendid, Luna! I was not certain if I could keep the Nargles at bay for another night!” The older
wizard beamed at his daughter.

Luna nodded. “I know, so I hurried with making them!” She smiled widely, reached into her bag and
pulled out what looked like a head-sized Acromantula with Butterbeer corks and glitter stuck to its
legs. A flick of the witch’s wand had the thing float towards Harry, coming to a stop directly over his
head.

With a sinking feeling, Harry realised that it was an Acromantula with cork pieces and glitter stuck
on it. “Is that thing dead?” he asked, his wand already aimed at it. He remembered Hagrid’s lesson
on Acromantula hunting tactics in their fourth year quite well, and how they liked to drop on to a
deer and ram their fangs into its head to inject their poison straight into the brain had featured
prominently.

“Oh, no! It’s not dead.”

“What?” Harry had never been as quick to roll out of his bed and come up in a crouch. Even Moody
would not fault his speed this time. “It’s alive?” Not for much longer, he promised himself.

“It was never alive,” Luna said.

“What? You transfigured something into a dead Acromantula?”

“No, no! It’s the shed exoskeleton of an Acromantula.” Luna smiled. “Spiders are very good at
catching things, so their skeleton makes a great base for a dreamcatcher!”

Harry dimly remembered Hagrid talking about Acromantulas shedding their skin. Hermione had
started to whisper a lengthy explanation about how non-magical spiders did the same thing, and
Harry had somehow failed to follow either lecture. “Ah. So, it’s basically harmless, right?”

“For humans, yes. It'll destroy bad dreams, and scare Nargles away - they can be caught with nets
spun from the finest Acromantula silk, so they shun them, you know;” Luna said, nodding. Then she
stuck the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and focused on moving the floating thing a
bit around until she nodded and cast a Sticking Charm. “There! It'll perfectly protect your dreams,
Harry!”

The blonde witch promptly proceeded to pull out a second one and install that over her father’s bed.
“They should work well enough, but if there are persistent Nargles, then I can animate them. I had to
do that for my own room in our dorm - Nargles kept stealing my things until I animated my
dreamcatcher.” She put a finger on her lips, pouting. “I didn’t know Nargles could shriek that loud,
or imitate human sounds that well, so you might need a Silencing Charm to sleep soundly through
the night.”

“Oh, I don’t need a Silencing Charm.” Harry knew what Moody would do to him should he ever try
to sleep while being effectively deaf and unable to hear an enemy approaching. Or a teacher.

“Alright.” Luna nodded and sat down on her father’s bed. “Do you feel better yet, Daddy?”


“But you’ll be healthy soon, right?” Luna asked, and for once, her voice suddenly sounded rather
brittle.

“Of course!” Xenophilius reached out and pulled Luna into a hug.

Harry felt both embarrassed at seeing such an intimate moment, and irrationally jealous. Sirius had -
temporarily - returned to Grimmauld Place, to organise things for Remus’s absence, and would pass
by the Ministry afterwards, so Harry’s godfather wouldn’t be back until the evening.

He could do with a nap, he thought, and returned to his bed to lie down. Which placed his head
straight under the dreamcatcher. He was suddenly more understanding of Ron’s fear of spiders.

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Ron Weasley felt… not jealous. Hermione was having a lengthy meeting with the Resistance, which
excluded him. He knew she needed to talk about several important issues with the rest of her group, and he knew he was not part of that, but it was Sunday, when there were no classes, and they could have spent the morning together.

Which was annoying. Another thing to blame on the war. Although sometimes he wondered if Hermione and he would have become a couple if there hadn’t been a war. Would they even be friends if Voldemort had not let a troll into the school in their first year? He liked to think they would have become friends anyway, but the odds weren’t that good. Without Voldemort to worry about, would they have found common ground, or would they have simply seen each other’s small, petty flaws? Would he have even seen past the nagging swot with the bushy hair? Would he have cared to even try? Would Harry have? And would Hermione have ever been interested in him?

He sighed. He didn’t want to be grateful to Voldemort for anything and forced the idle thoughts away. Just as he had forced the thought of killing that Death Eater away. He took a deep breath. He should visit Harry, and his family, instead of moping around. They would be glad for the visit, too.

As he entered the infirmary, he noticed that Bill had woken up, and had a visitor. Although Ron wasn’t quite certain if Fleur had even left the infirmary since the battle, with seemingly half her family and her fiancé stuck there. Percy seemed to still be asleep, and Dad was gone.

“Good morning, Ron. Dad’s gone with Mum, back to Grimmauld Place,” Bill informed him.

“Good morning, Ron.” Even tired, Fleur sounded perfect.

“Morning, Bill. Morning, Fleur.” Ron nodded, frowning - Moody had told him often that he was easy to read. Although Bill was his oldest brother, which gave him an unfair advantage. “He’s fine then.”

“Yes.”

Ron hadn’t been worried, not really, but … it felt good to hear it confirmed. “And Percy?”

“Will be fine. He just needs more rest,” Bill said.

Ron had heard that before. “What about you?”

“I’m fine,” Bill said, grinning. “Pomfrey will see that too, once she returns.”

“’E’s not fine!” Fleur said. “’e needs more rest as well!”

“I’ve had worse at work,” Bill said.

“You work as a Curse-Breaker. Of course you’ve ’ad worse at work!”

Ron thought just the fact that his brother had made such a mistake was proof that he wasn’t quite that fine. “How are your relatives?” he asked.

Fleur’s face fell, and Ron pressed his lips together. He shouldn’t have asked her that.

“They’re doing well, considering the circumstances.” She didn’t have to add ‘those who survived’; her face said enough when she glanced at the corner housing the French wounded.

Ron was about to excuse himself and go to Harry - Bill and Fleur would probably be happier together, just as he would like to be alone with Hermione - when Fleur spoke up again: “This will make quite the trouble at ’ome for Uncle Marcel.”
“Because so many of your family were killed?” Ron asked.

“Non. Because they were fighting side by side with muggleborns.” She sighed. “France still remembers the muggleborns ‘oo joined Grindelwald. ‘La trahison du sang’, they call it. A number of people were almost glad when the Muggleborns rebelled - they said that Britain ’ad ’ad it coming for granting them so many liberties.”

“Idiots,” Ron hissed.

“They’re afraid. Which is quite strange for a country famous for their bravery,” Fleur said.

“If they treated their muggleborns better they wouldn’t have to fear a rebellion,” Ron replied.

“That the French muggles celebrate their revolutions so much doesn’t ’elp, of course. The Duc’s Court is very much aware of the fate of the last muggle king. Or was it the second to last?” Fleur shrugged.

Ron had no idea. Hermione would know, of course, but she was busy. “So, what will the Duc do?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I think that ’e’ll do nothing, and tell the people that this is Dumbledore’s country and fault, and ’as nothing to do with France.”

“Don’t they know that the muggleborns started fighting when the Wizengamot took away their rights, and not before?” Ron asked.

“They might think that if Dumbledore ’adn’t granted the muggleborns more rights, there wouldn’t ’ave been a Blood War in the first place - certainly not two.”

Ron snorted. “Why didn’t they support Voldemort back then?”

“He acted too much like Grindelwald, Mister Weasley.”

Ron whirled around, drawing his wand before he recognised the Headmaster. He hadn’t noticed the old wizard arriving. That Bill and Fleur had missed Dumbledore as well was not much of a consolation.

The old wizard seemed to ignore his reaction, and continued while Ron stashed his wand. “Some Old Families fear purebloods from younger families rising in power almost as as much as they fear the muggleborns. The Dark Lord lacked both a history and blood relations among the Old Families. His claim of being the heir of Slytherin did not carry enough weight outside Britain to overcome that handicap.”

“We should be so lucky that our pureblood bigots were not pureblood enough for the bigots of the rest of Europe,” Ron muttered.

“Sometimes, Mister Weasley, fate works in quite ironic ways.”

*****

Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 19th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort took a deep breath. It was time. Sunday evening. The sun had set already. Two days after the battle. Right when the first of the wounded were leaving St Mungo’s and most of the survivors would still be tired from the rescue and recovery efforts. It had taken him months to create the spell. Back when he had just returned, it had been as much a way to pass the time, waiting
for Lucius’ efforts to bear fruit, as a serious undertaking. Given the reputation of the houngans in Britain, even among those sympathetic to his cause, using the curse would have undone all of his faithful’s work. Having a few select Death Eaters test parts of the curse had been as far as he had dared to go. But now, after his other plans had failed, there was no reason not to use it. The British wizards might loathe him for it, but they’d fear him more.

He reached out and picked up the skull sitting on his desk, then walked to the circle he had drawn on the floor of the room, lighting the candles with a flick of his wand. He put the skull down in the centre, on the parchment with the symbol he had chosen, then whipped his wand against his left hand, slashing it open. He redrew the circle with his own blood, then let it drop on the skull. Blood meant power. Even the houngans understood that. He held his hand steady while his blood kept dripping on the skull, disappearing where it touched the polished bone. Finally, the skull started to glow red, and Voldemort closed the gash in his hand before sitting down.

Holstering his wand, he grabbed the skull with both hands and raised it until he was facing it. He took another deep breath, the scent of blood growing stronger. Closing his eyes, he pressed the skull against his head, hissing at the pain this caused. Weaker minds than his would have stopped then, but he had endured far worse in the pursuit of the Dark Arts. Pain was no stranger to him, nor would it ever be his master. He pushed the pain away, and focused. His power. His will. He could feel it reaching out, touching the prepared vessels. Filling them, one by one, with his power. Brushing past wards and spells as if they were not there.

Finally, they were ready. All of them, prepared by himself, or by his followers. All waiting for his command.

Shuddering under the strain, he gave the order.

*Rise, and strike at my enemies!*

*****


Albus Dumbledore was tired. An afternoon spent handling the minutiae of the Ministry’s many tasks was draining on the best of days. Two days after the Battle of the Ministry, with many of the survivors still being treated at St Mungo’s, or resting in their homes, with their families, it was exhausting.

And yet, it couldn’t be helped. Wizarding Britain depended on him, and on his friends and allies - they could not afford to dawdle. Reorganising the Ministry’s forces, planning the war, changing the muggleborn laws, organising repairs - so much had to be done, with so few wands available.

At least everyone was doing what they could. Even the walking wounded. He saw Finegas Smith step out of the restored fireplace. The man had been struck with the Withering Curse during the coup, but you wouldn’t be able to tell it judging by his slow but steady stride. Although with his wand arm withered, he would not be able to help out with the repair work. Still, his help would be useful in organising the work, freeing those who could cast spells from paperwork.

Albus smiled, and nodded at the man as they approached each other in the Atrium. “Good evening, Finegas.”

The other man didn’t return his greeting and simply continued his way. Albus raised his eyebrows - Finegas was always impeccably polite. He didn’t look as if he was alright, either. His eyes were… empty. And he was moving his withered arm, wielding a wand!
Albus conjured a slab of metal right in time to stop Finegas’s Piercing Curse. He cast a Shield Charm while he stepped around the barrier, and sent two Stunners at the other wizard. Both hit, and the man staggered. He didn’t fall, though, and cast a Cutting and Bludgeoning Curse, both stopped by Albus’s Shield, before another Stunning Spell took him down.

“I am very sorry, my friend, but it is for your own good.” Albus mumbled, summoning Finegas’s wand and casting a full Body-Bind Curse, followed by conjured ropes. He turned to the Auror guards - two very young wizards, Mister Auckley and Mister Runcorn, both Hufflepuffs, graduated in the last year - approaching them. “I fear he has been compelled to attack me - he was acting quite unlike himself. Please take him into a cell, for his and our safety. We need to find out what has been done to him. Merlin’s Staff! The Withering Curse!” He whirled around. “It doesn’t simply cause a limb to wither, it also allows the Dark Lord to control them!”

The Aurors grew pale - they knew as well as Albus did just how many people had been cursed by the Dark Lord’s trap, or his followers.

“Scrimgeour!” Auckley yelled, while Albus sent a Patronus Messenger to warn Hogwarts. “He’s been in to supervise!”

“He’s not the only one!” Runcorn said.

Before they could move, though, screams and explosions once more filled the Ministry.

*****

Hogwarts, January 19th, 1997

“So, you’ll have to stay another night in the infirmary.”

Harry Potter, sitting in his bed, nodded at Luna. “Yes. Pomfrey said that she was taking no chances with anyone who had fought the Dark Lord directly.”

“That is wise, but she missed Dumbledore. And Ron,” Luna said. “Should I go and fetch them for her?”

“I think she has the situation in hand,” Harry said. While Luna trying to drag Dumbledore to the infirmary for his own good was an amusing thought, he didn’t think Ron and Hermione would appreciate having their dinner date interrupted by Luna.

“Are you certain?” Luna frowned. “You can’t take chances with your health.” She glanced at her sleeping father.

“Pomfrey released Ron, so he must be fine,” Harry said.

“But did she know what he did?”

Harry was about to answer when he heard the door opening. He had his wand aimed at it before he realised what he was doing - and so he was able to cast a Shield Charm the instant a small object flew through the widening gap. A second later, an explosion filled the room.

Harry’s shield had protected him from the blast, but he couldn’t see anything but patches of colour, and his ears were ringing. Luna’s screams were just a dim noise to him and he could barely see the furniture as he rolled off his bed. Further, but fainter, explosions sounded, flashes too, and something hit his Shield Charm. Several times.
Someone was shooting at him, he realised. Harry threw himself to the side, away from his bed. He couldn’t see enough, yet, but his enemy had to be standing in the doorway. And Harry had trained under similar conditions with Moody.

He sent a few Bludgeoning Curses in the general direction of the door, aiming high, then covered the floor at the door with oil. He could see contours now. Silhouettes. A figure was stumbling at the door, slipping on the oil, with a large stick in their hands. Luna was still screaming. He didn’t hear her father. The figure was turning around, towards her.

Harry snarled and stabbed with his wand forward, sending a volley of curses at the attacker. His Piercing Curse was stopped by a Shield Charm, he could see the flashes, but his Reductor Curse went through and hit the figure, followed by a Cutting Curse that went wide, before his Fire-Making Spell hit the oil, setting it and the figure ablaze.

The attacker didn’t scream, though. Even burning, they shot at Harry, though the bullets went wide, not even hitting his Shield Charm. Harry dived forward, rolling past another bed, and came up casting. His next Bludgeoning Curse smashed the attacker into the wall, hard enough to break bones, but they still tried to raise their gun until Harry’s Cutting Curse sliced into their arm and the rifle dropped.

A moment later, the figure dropped as well. Panting, Harry kept his wand trained on the burning … boy? He blinked, his eyes finally having recovered from the blinding flash, then gasped - he recognised the burning wizard. He had just killed Colin Creevey.

“It’s almost like a date,” Ron Weasley said as he and Hermione walked down the hallway. “We had dinner together, just the two of us, and now we’re off to…” He trailed off.

“... the library,” Hermione finished for him while he was searching for a better word, “to do some research on the Unforgivables. It’s not exactly a dance or a movie.” She was smiling, though, despite her words. “And I wouldn’t be wearing the fatigues for a date,” she added, pointing at her clothes.

“If we dance or watch a movie in the library, Pince will probably demonstrate all three Unforgivables on us,” Ron said, snorting. “She would cast them silently, of course, so as not to disturb the other visitors.”

Hermione chuckled, then grew serious. “It says a lot about us that we’re joking about the Dark Arts, doesn’t it?”

Ron shrugged. “It’s the war.” If you couldn’t laugh about it you would have to cry about it. And laughing was better.

“It seems so far away from here,” Hermione said. “Hogwarts hasn’t changed.”

“Other than for the better by losing most of the Slytherins,” he said. “And we’ve had our fair share of troubles here too.” Not all of those had been Harry’s or Ron’s fault, either.

“That’s true, I guess.” She didn’t comment about the Slytherins. A year ago, she might have, he thought.

“How long will you be staying here?” He didn’t bother to ask casually. She knew how much he loved her being here.

“A few more days, I think. Until Jeremy is in better shape.”
“You could stay here until the end of the war.” They passed a junction, and he covered the crossing hallway on his side while Hermione did the same on her side.

She sighed. “I’m not certain that would be a good idea. That might endanger the school.”

He scoffed. “With Dumbledore as the Headmaster and Harry here, it’s already a target for Voldemort.”

“It would also make everyone think we’re Dumbledore’s wands.” She was frowning. Not at him, though. “That might bring problems of their own once the war is over.”

“How so?”

“Other muggleborns might not trust us that much if they think that we were just his to command,” Hermione said.

“Can’t win a war without coordination, and an overall commander.” Ron had learned that when he had let his chess set play itself once.

“It’s unlikely, but not impossible.” Hermione pursed her lips. “But we are coordinating. It’s just the appearance of subordination that I want to avoid. We’re the Resistance, his allies, not members of his Order.”

“Well, I don’t know if many care about the difference,” Ron said. “In fact, I think…”

Loud explosions, followed by screams, interrupted him.

“Someone’s shooting!” Hermione said, drawing her wand and starting to run.

Ron hurried to catch up, though he had to push himself to manage it. They rounded the corner to the sound of more shots being fired. “It’s near the Great Hall!” he yelled.

“That’s a machine gun. One of ours!” Hermione yelled. “Someone must be attacking us!” Both had already cast a Shield Charm.

They were close now. The screams were growing louder. Then three students ran around the corner, yelling and screaming. They stopped as soon as they spotted the two of them, though. No, as soon as they spotted Hermione.

“Noo!” one of them - a Ravenclaw, Ron thought, probably in Ginny’s year, all of them were - screamed. “Please!”

Another figure turned around the corner, a gun in his hands, firing, and the three Ravenclaws fell down, like animated statues when the enchantment was finited.

“Dennis?” Ron heard Hermione say.

It was Dennis Creevey. The boy was wearing fatigues like Hermione. He didn’t answer, but lifted his gun, swinging it towards them.

Ron dived to the floor, away from Hermione, an instant before the boy fired again. Split up, force them to split their attention, as far as possible, Moody had taught him and Harry. Not much room in a hallway for that, though.

“Dennis, stop!” Hermione yelled. She was also casting, though, and Ron saw a wall rise in the middle of the hallway, stopping both bullets and Ron’s Stunner. “He must be under someone’s
“Help! Please help!” one of the Ravenclaws was screaming, blood gushing from a deep wound in her arm.

“Help her!” Hermione yelled and rushed forward. She threw a small object through the gap between the wall and the hallway’s ceiling, then cast a spell. Thick, black smoke appeared on the other side of the wall, parts of it drifting to their side.

“Episkey!” Ron yelled, stabbing his wand at the girl’s wound. “Episkey! Episkey!”

After three spells, the bleeding started to slow. After four, it stopped. Ron glanced at Hermione. She was waving her wand over another girl, then shook her head. The third was crawling away, dragging one leg behind her.

“Hold still!” Ron said, casting at her. She screamed, flailing, despite his reassurances that he was helping her. He still managed to close the wounds in her leg.

“Let’s move them around the corner!” Hermione yelled, and Ron saw that she was levitating the girl he had treated.

The other girl was scrambling to her feet, so Ron simply grabbed her arm and pulled her with him. This time she didn’t resist. Just before they reached the corner, the wall behind them exploded. Shots hit Ron’s Shield Charm as he pushed the girl into the next hallway. His shield shattered, and something hit him in the side. Unbalanced, he fell to the floor, bullets passing over his head. Then the pain hit him. He had been shot.

“Ron!” he heard Hermione scream.

He rolled to the side, screaming at the pain that caused, and aimed his wand with shaking fingers, lying on his back. Hermione had conjured another wall. “Let’s blow it up!” he managed to press out.

For a moment, she hesitated, then he heard her agree. “On three. One. Two.”

Ron’s Blasting Curse hit the wall a fraction of a second after hers, filling the hallway with a cloud of dust. He rolled to the side, coming to a stop at the corner, wand still aimed into the cloud. Merlin’s balls, that hurt!

A gust of wind drove the dust back, away from them. Ron saw someone on the floor there. Dennis. The boy was still moving, one arm grasping for the gun. Ron hesitated, then banished the gun away from the boy.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!”

Hermione was there, casting at Dennis. After her second Stunner, the boy stopped moving.

Ron forced himself to stand up and walk, despite the blood running down his side.

“Ron!” Hermione yelled. “You’re wounded! Stop moving!”

He didn’t stop until he reached the boy on the ground, then he stared while Hermione started to treat his wound.

Dennis was bound as well as stunned now, and bleeding from several wounds, but his leathery, dried-up looking arm was still twitching.

Albus Dumbledore took a step to the side, deflecting a curse with a conjured floating shield, then swished his wand. The Ministry Employee, Bertie Gibbons, who had cast at him fell down when the floor underneath the man’s feet turned into a rug that was then ripped away. Before Bertie had recovered, Albus had bound him with conjured ropes. He took care to remove his wand and secure the withered limb with a few more bindings - more than one afflicted victim had been stunned, yet their limbs had managed to keep moving. A Stunning Spell knocked the poor wizard unconscious, just in case the Dark Lord’s curse had hidden another surprise.

“I don’t see anyone else,” Mister Auckley said. The Auror wiped some blood from his brow where a splinter from a Reductor Curse had struck him. His partner had been wounded more seriously in the Atrium, and had been taken away to St Mungo’s.

The old wizard looked around, checking his Human-presence-revealing Spell, then turned around and nodded at the latest arrival. “Amelia.”

“Albus.”

“How is the situation?” he asked as they started to walk towards the Atrium.

“Under control. We’re stunning anyone stepping out of the fireplaces.” The Head of the DMLE had not escaped the battle unscathed either - her robe was ripped, and there were some bloodstains on her shoulder.

“Good.” It was better to ambush the cursed attackers in the Atrium than block the Floo connection and let them find other targets. “Minerva sent me a message. Hogwarts has been secured as well. There have been victims, though.” He felt guilty - his warning had come too late; the curse-victims at the school had already struck by then. Even if he had been at the school he probably wouldn’t have been able to prevent the attacks; Hogwarts was a large school, and he would have been hard-pressed to be quick enough to find and stop the curse-victims in time. He knew that, but it didn’t alleviate his guilt.

“The Minister’s dead,” Amelia went on. “Rufus marched straight into his office and murdered him.”

Cornelius dead… that would have far-reaching consequences. There were more urgent things to worry about, though. “Did you manage to subdue him?”

“He’s alive.” Amelia said. Her expression told Albus that Rufus had been hurt. It couldn’t be helped - the Head Auror was a talented and experienced wizard, and would have been hard to capture unharmed.

He sighed. “The victims need to be secured and dosed with Draught of Living Death. All of them. We cannot risk the Dark Lord influencing them further until we can cure them.” If they could cure them.

Amelia hissed. “We’re still taking a tally of them. Some of them attacked their own families.”

Albus briefly closed his eyes. He had been afraid of that. They reached the Atrium, and he saw the bodies laid out on the floor. Most bound in conjured robes, and stunned, but too many covered with blankets. The Atrium had suffered more damage as well - rubble and dust was strewn around, and several new craters were visible in the floor. If Albus had stayed here… but if he had, the attackers inside the Ministry would not have been subdued as quickly.
“Albus!” The Headmaster saw Sirius walking quickly towards him. “I’m returning to Hogwarts.” The younger wizard’s robes showed some rips and tears, but he appeared unhurt - he might have already been healed, of course.

Albus nodded, even though Sirius’s presence in the Ministry would be very helpful right now - but nothing short of - maybe - another battle would have stopped Harry’s godfather from checking on his godson.

Amelia led him up the stairs, past an Auror guard - if you could call two wizards who had graduated last year Aurors - to Cornelius’s office. Albus looked inside and frowned. Rufus had used Blasting Curses. There wasn’t much left of Cornelius’s desk, or of the Minister himself.

“What happened, Albus? What did the Dark Lord do?”

“He found a new way to create zombies.”

*****
Chapter 36: Failed Plans

‘The Night of the Dead has been the subject of much speculation among both historians and the public. Why did the Dark Lord wait until his coup had failed to cast this curse? Wouldn’t his forces have won the Battle of the Ministry if they had had the support of the victims of the Withering Curse? If his spell hadn’t been ready in time, why didn’t he wait a few more days? Some of my colleagues claim that it was all part of an intricate plan of his to deal with Dumbledore, the main obstacle to the Dark Lord’s goals. However, I disagree. None of the theories put forth can explain, at least not in a satisfactory manner, why he would sacrifice so many of his followers for no perceptible gain. If he had done so to lull Dumbledore into a false sense of security, as the most popular theory goes, then why had he struck so hard at Dumbledore during their duel in Hogsmeade?

No, I am of the opinion that the Dark Lord didn’t want to resort to such a measure because he was aware of the consequences of using houngan magic. It was only after his efforts to appeal to the pureblood population had seemingly failed that he abandoned them and prepared to rule through fear. Undoubtedly, the Night of the Dead, which itself was an imprecise name based upon a common misconception of houngan magic, struck fear and horror into the very heart of Wizarding Britain.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Hogwarts, January 19th, 1997

Harry Potter had stared at the body, had seen the flames slowly spread, the hole his Reductor Curse had opened in the boy’s chest bleeding, the stump of his arm, bleeding as well, his leg, the cursed, leathery one, twitching still. He had killed Colin Creevey. A boy who had revered him. He had barely noticed Fleur arriving - had the whole fight been so quick that she hadn’t managed to reach the room in time to intervene?

Then Luna had screamed, panicking about her father, and he had whirled around. Xenophilius had been bleeding, hit by a bullet in the chest, Harry realised, and Luna had been desperately trying to help him, casting spell after spell while blood continued to flow from the hole in the man’s chest. She had been trembling, crying, but hadn’t given up. Xenophilius’s breathing had made a horrible sound, with more blood flowing from his mouth. The man’s lung had been hit, Harry had thought, and he had rushed to help Luna. His own spells had worked better, but the wounds had been so extensive - the bullet had gone through the man, leaving a far larger hole in his back - that Xenophilius would have died anyway, if not for Pomfrey’s arrival.

He had held Luna while the matron had saved the man’s life with spells and potions - and Colin’s body had burned behind them. None of them had noticed the stench. Not until Xenophilius’s wounds had been closed and Pomfrey had levitated him out of his blood-soaked bed.

By then, more victims of this attack had arrived, Ron among them! Colin’s body had been quickly moved to another room, joining two others. And Sirius had taken him away, to have him checked for injuries and curses.

That was the room in which Harry was now standing as he stared at the blanket covering the dead boy. He could still smell the burned flesh, and the blood, despite the spells that had cleaned and
preserved the bodies. Or so he thought.

The door opened behind him, and he shifted, turning. Just in case.

Hermione stood there, and behind her, Ron.

His friend was looking a bit pale still, Harry noticed, and he sounded just a bit hesitant: “Sirius told us you were here.”

Harry nodded. His godfather hadn’t wanted to leave him, but he was needed, now more than ever, with the Minister dead. Harry had realised that, even if his godfather hadn’t.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hermione said, stepping inside.

“I didn’t recognise him. He blinded me with a grenade.”

“Flashbang,” Hermione said.

Harry ignored her correction and went on, looking at the body again. “He was shooting at me, and at the Lovegoods. He’d have killed us, if I hadn’t stopped him.” He took a deep breath. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I killed him. I should have stunned him.” They had stunned Dennis, after all.

“He’d have taken a few Stunners, mate,” Ron said. “He might have killed you if you had tried that. Or he might have killed Luna and her father - he came close, didn’t he?” Harry’s friend rubbed his side, a reminder that he, too, had had a close call. If the bullet had hit a bit closer...

“He was mind-controlled by Voldemort,” Harry said. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“And neither was it yours. You did what you had to. It’s Voldemort’s fault,” Ron said. “Besides, Hermione is blaming herself.”

“What?” Harry frowned at the witch.

“I should have expected something like this. At least thought of the possibility,” Hermione said.

“Dumbledore didn’t expect it either,” Ron cut in. “No one expected the Dark Lord to use houngan magic. Which I told you already.”

“It’s not quite clear if it actually is houngan magic,” she said.

“Turning people into zombies certainly sounds like it,” Ron said. “It fits the stories about the war in the Caribbean.”

“They’re not exactly undead,” Harry said, “they’re alive but mind-controlled.”

“With the withered limbs providing the link to the Dark Lord,” Hermione said.

“Creepy,” Ron said. “Dennis’s arm was still moving, even though he was out.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “The snakes!”

“What?” Ron said, drawing his wand. Hermione had already taken a step to the side and turned, to guard their back.

“The snakes Voldemort sent after me and Dumbledore. I noticed that one of them had a dried-up tail.
I thought it had been the fire, back then, but now…” Harry trailed off.

“Maybe that had been a test,” Hermione said. “We’re still not certain how detailed Voldemort’s orders are, or were. But as far as we can tell, all of his victims started attacking others at the same time. We haven’t been able to interrogate them, yet.”

“Colin and Dennis split up,” Ron said. “Dennis started attacking any student he saw, and Colin attacked you.”

“He’s been obsessed with me since he started at Hogwarts,” Harry said, and regretted it at once. Colin had been annoying as a first-year, but he had grown up.

“If Voldemort had wanted to kill you, wouldn’t he have sent them both together after you?” Hermione nibbled on her lower lip. “That might indicate that he can’t actually give such orders.”

“He could order all of his victims to fight,” Ron said.

“But they attacked without coordination,” she said. “He might have been limited to blanket orders - like ‘attack the Ministry’.”

“The Creeveys didn’t attack the Ministry, though,” Harry said. “So, he had to be able to split the orders.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose, then shook her head. “Not necessarily. He might have simply ordered them to attack his enemies, and leave them to execute the order as they saw fit. Colin saw you as Voldemort’s biggest enemy, which might explain why he attacked you.”

“Maybe.” Harry thought that was just speculation. “He shot Xenophilius too, though.”

“That might have been a stray bullet, or a ricochet,” Hermione said. “I think if Colin had wanted to kill him, he’d have shot him several times. We certainly trained for that.”

Harry refrained from commenting that that training almost led to his own death - it hadn’t been her fault. Though his friend would probably not believe it.

Not that he could blame her - he couldn’t help feeling guilty himself.

*****

Ron Weasley felt like hexing both his girlfriend and his best friend. They were still blaming themselves! He took a deep breath - he could lose his temper right now - and rubbed his side. Pomfrey had said he should rest a day or two.

“Not even Dumbledore expected this,” he began. “There was no way you could have expected this. No one ever heard of something like this being possible.”

“There were tales of houngans controlling people,” Hermione said, her jaw set.

“Not like this. Not from afar.” At least Ron thought so.

“Still…” She bit her lower lip.

“You can’t think of everything. No one can. It wasn’t your fault.”

Hermione slowly nodded.
Ron didn’t think she was convinced, but hopefully it helped, he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close for a moment. Then he turned to his friend. “And it’s not your fault either, Harry. You were surprised, blinded, deafened, and almost killed.”

“I still should have used a Stunner,” Harry said, frowning.

“You know what Moody said about Stunners.”

“That they’re great when facing a single enemy?” Harry snorted.

“You didn’t know there was only one,” Ron shot back. “And you know what happens if we assume there’s only one.” That had been a very painful lesson.

“Technically, there were two,” Hermione added. “They just split up.”

“You saved Luna and her dad,” Ron went on. “There was no time for you to wait until you could recognise him, and make certain there was only one of them.”

“I didn’t actually look for more enemies after he was dead. I went to save Xenophilius,” Harry said.

“And Moody will not be happy about that,” Ron said. “But you did save lives.”

“Doesn’t make killing Colin right,” Harry muttered.

“It wasn’t right, but it wasn’t your fault.” Ron reached out with his free arm and pulled Harry into a hug with himself and Hermione. His friend stiffened, but didn’t resist, and Ron could feel him gradually relax.

They remained like that for some time.

*****


Albus Dumbledore had to hand it to Tom - this curse had been a masterstroke. Both in the timing of its use, and the effects it would have. It had been bad enough to see so many Ministry employees and even Wizengamot members struck with withered, dead limbs. But now, after it had been revealed that they could be controlled by the Dark Lord and even ordered to attack their own families… Tom’s leverage on the families of the victims, not to mention on the victims themselves, was too great.

He straightened up from where he had been bent over Bertie’s unconscious form, which was secured to a bed in the bowels of the Ministry, ignoring the slight pain that caused to his back, and holstered his wand.

“Ingenious!” Next to him, Saul Croaker, the Head of the Department of Mysteries, was still moving his wand through complicated spells. “He used the dead limb as a conduit to control the body! He found a way to use spells meant to control the undead to control the living! Even the Thief’s Downfall only removes an existing compulsion, but will not remove the withering curse that serves as the base curse, allowing the Dark Lord to retake control of the victim anytime he chooses!”

Albus suppressed a sigh. It figured that the Unspeakables couldn’t be bothered to actually get involved in the war until a new kind of magic had been discovered. “It is based upon houngan spells.”
“Are you certain?” Saul sounded as if he was frowning behind the magic hiding his face. “I think there are some similarities to the work Grindelwald did on Inferi.”

“Trust me,” Albus said, with more tension in his voice than could be blamed on his lack of sleep, “It is not related to Grindelwald’s studies.” He was quite familiar with the spells Gellert had created. “It is definitely based upon houngan magic.”

Saul was cocking his head slightly. He had done that as a student too. “I see. Your excursion in ’57?”

“Yes. As you deduced, it stems from their ways to control the dead, not the living.” Albus had had to teach the masters of the Magical Caribbean that trying to expand their fiefdoms into North America had consequences they couldn’t afford. Fortunately, he had had a lot of experience dealing with Inferi from the war with Gellert. “I destroyed enough of their creations to know that.”

“I would have expected them to use their zombies, not their Inferi. They are, after all, famous for having many muggle villages ready to fight for them when in need.”

Albus was reminded that for all his brilliance as a spellcrafter and researcher, Saul was neither a politician nor a strategist. “Using mind-controlled muggles in such numbers to conquer North American Wizard Enclaves would have threatened the Statute of Secrecy, in light of the political situation in the muggle world.” Of which Saul, like so many purebloods, was ignorant.

“Ah.” Albus’s friend nodded. “But you did attack their homes too.”

“The homes of a few, select houngans,” Albus said. “And I managed to surprise them, so they were unable to call upon their zombies.” Those not already serving them in their homes, at least. The fighting hadn’t been clean, but it could have been worse. And their practice of kidnapping muggleborn children on vacation in the Caribbean had, if not ended, at least lessened a great deal.

Saul, of course, only cared about the magical aspects. “But still… how could the Dark Lord control a living, ensouled being, even if one limb was dead, with a spell controlling dead bodies? And the bodies of wizards, to boot? That goes against Gunther’s theory.”

“Yes,” Albus said, nodding, “that is the question.” Gunther’s theory had not been proven, but neither had it been disproven ever since it had been formulated, decades ago. “Once we know this, we can cure them. Or at least prevent the Dark Lord from controlling his victims.”

“Yes, yes.” Saul was staring at Bertie. “We’ll need to experiment.”

“With the utmost care,” Albus said. His tone carried enough of a threat to even make Saul, who was caught up in the research already, take notice.

“Of course, of course.” Albus’s friend made a dismissive gesture with his free hand.

Albus felt not quite as guilty as he probably should at knowing that Saul’s research would make Tom consider him an enemy. It might even put the whole department firmly into the Ministry’s camp, though the Headmaster was quite certain that the Dark Lord had spies among the Unspeakables as well, and would know that, as a whole, the Department of Mysteries was still focused only on research, and safeguarding those magics too dangerous to see the light of day.

A policy Albus doubted Tom would let the Department continue, should he win the war.

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“Acting Minister.” Amelia greeted Albus with a nod when he entered her office.

“Amelia.” He nodded back and sank into the seat in front of her desk. He had never sought the position, had taken pains to discourage any speculation about it, even, and yet here he was - as Chief Warlock, he was Cornelius’s successor until another Minister could be elected. As tragic as the reason was, it also facilitated certain things. “What’s the situation with the victims of the withering curse?”

Amelia’s lips formed a slight frown. “As ordered, we have taken those we could find into custody. As far as we can tell, the majority of them are now secure.”

Most of them would have been captured in the Ministry, attacking it, Albus knew.

“But a few have been reported as missing by their families,” Amelia continued. Her frown deepened.

“I think it is rather unlikely that the Dark Lord has told them to go into hiding.” He would not call them to his base either.

“Yes.” Amelia glanced at him. “I suspect that they are being hidden by their own families.”

Out of shame, or because they didn’t trust the Ministry to save them. Or because they were ready to make a deal with the Dark Lord. Albus didn’t have to lay that out; Amelia was already aware of that possibility. “That cannot be helped. But we have the vast majority of them in custody. At least of the survivors.”

“My Aurors and Hit-Wizards were protecting the Ministry. That was their duty, and I’ll not punish them for choosing not to risk their own lives, and those of their co-workers, to save the attackers.” Amelia stared at him.

“I am not about to condemn them for it, either.” Albus would have been a hypocrite for doing so, after assuring Harry that he was not to blame. Or more of a hypocrite - he knew his sins. “I was just remarking on the tragic loss of life, so close on the heels of the Battle of the Ministry.”

“Yes. Which has sent morale plummeting. Even my veterans are expecting another blow to come soon. We can only hope that this was the Dark Lord’s last surprise.”

It was a faint hope, Albus knew - Tom was crafty and cunning. But… “We have gained a respite, at least, unless I am gravely mistaken. Nevertheless, we need to sedate the victims of this curse, lest they rise and attack us again at a most inconvenient time.”

Amelia sighed. “Until we know whether that will actually stop the Dark Lord from ordering them around, that will tie up more wands. Wands we need elsewhere.”

Which was, of course, part of the reason Tom had done this - to further reduce the manpower available to the Ministry. Not to mention that such a large number of helpless enemies of the Dark Lord was also a very tempting target. “It is just a temporary setback, Amelia. We will find a cure for this curse.” They had to.

The witch didn’t look as if she believed him. “And how long will that take?” She put the parchment in her hand down on her desk, forcefully enough to displace the air so much that a few paper aeroplanes were sent flying. “Can we hold out that long? And while we search for a cure, what will he be doing?”

“It will not hinder or delay my plans to destroy him,” Albus said. Not by much, at least. Harry’s training was continuing, and in a pinch, Alastor would be able to step in.
Amelia still looked doubtful. She needed more reassurances.

“Trust me. I have an… acquaintance in Jamaica.”

“A houngan?” She was frowning, but she didn’t look quite that cynical any more.

“Yes. I met him during the troubles in the Caribbean. I think he will be able to provide me with enough information about the houngan spells used by the Dark Lord to create a cure.”

“You’ll be delving into the Dark Arts.” Amelia didn’t sound disgusted, or wary, but calculating. She sat straighter, too.

She was likely considering how to use this information at a later date, Albus thought. If she knew that he had studied the Dark Arts for much less noble purposes, with Gellert himself… he smiled gently and just a tad patronisingly. “You cannot find a remedy without understanding the disease, Amelia. Any Unspeakable will tell you the same.”

“Saul will claim anything to justify his research and experiments.” The witch scoffed.

“That does not make him wrong.” At least not when it came to his knowledge. His ethics, on the other hand… “Between myself and the Department of Mysteries, we should have a cure for this curse in short order.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” She leaned back in her seat.

He nodded, conceding the point. “Now, there are several positions left vacant by recent events.”

“Traditionally, filling such positions is the prerogative of an elected Minister.” She summoned the paper aeroplanes back with her wand.

“Given our circumstances, I do not think that we have the time to follow tradition,” Albus said. “A functional Ministry is now more crucial than ever.” If a number of other countries thought that Britain had grown too weak...

“Given the urgency, the Wizengamot could certainly convene quickly,” Amelia shot back.

“With so many of their number still either absent since before the battle, and therefore suspect, or afflicted by the curse? I think not.” Albus shook his head slowly. “I would not like to taint my successor’s first term by having them be elected without a properly convened Wizengamot. Certainly you can see the problems that would cause.”

Foiled by her own principles, Amelia looked like she had bitten into a particularly disgusting Every Flavour Bean, but she nodded. “Of course. So, who do you have in mind for the various positions?”

Albus noted her wording - Amelia didn’t sound as if she considered his choices final - but let it slide. She couldn’t do much to stop him now, and she knew it. He almost shook his head. A Minister for Magic needed more than a bit of flexibility, and Amelia, despite being among the favourites for the position, might prove to be too stubborn for the office.

He was facing more time spent on politics and even worse, office politics, when he should be preparing for his visit to Laron. Not for the first time, Albus deeply regretted Cornelius’s death.

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_Hogwarts, January 20th, 1997_
Inside one of the usually unused rooms near the infirmary, Hermione Granger was staring at Dennis. Sleeping and with his wounds treated, the boy looked peaceful. He had wanted to cut his withered arm off, she remembered. And she had persuaded him and his brother to wait for a cure, instead. And now Colin was dead and Dennis had killed students for the Dark Lord.

“Are we going to give him Draught of Living Death?” Justin asked next to her.

“Dumbledore said it was the best way to keep them secure until we find a cure.” That wasn’t an answer. She sighed. “The alternative is cutting the arm off, but it’s not yet known if that will keep the Dark Lord from controlling him.” She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. “I wish we could keep him, but we don’t have enough people left to take care of him.” With a glance to her friend, she added: “Even Seamus will understand that.” She snorted. “He certainly wouldn’t want to be stuck caring for Dennis if he could be fighting instead.”

“Probably,” Justin said. “Will we ask him what he wants?” He nodded at Dennis.

“Could we trust it was him and not the puppet of the Dark Lord talking?” Hermione glanced at Justin and saw him flinch just a bit. “We don’t know enough about this curse. Dumbledore and the Unspeakables are researching it.”

“Can we trust them?”

“We are trusting Dumbledore. The Unspeakables?” She shook her head. “But there are too many purebloods suffering from this curse. They won’t be able to abuse this to get to us.”

“Mary-Jane has still not been taken through a Thief’s Downfall,” Justin pointed out. “Despite Dumbledore’s promises.”

“The situation at the Ministry was too volatile for him to risk a leak by the goblins. So he said.” Hermione shrugged. “Now that Dumbledore is the acting Minister, we can move her through the one at the Ministry.”

“Will we recruit her?”

Odds were that the witch would be another Seamus - or worse. After what the Aurors had done to her, though, it was understandable. Hermione sighed. “I think so. We can keep an eye on her that way.” She didn’t have to say that there wouldn’t be another Allan on their watch. Justin had been there with her when they had interrogated that monster.

“Why did he attack the students?” Justin took a few steps towards Dennis, but stopped a yard away.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I heard that Voldemort ordered the cursed to ‘strike at his enemies’, but left it up to them how to execute the order.”

“So, he picked random massacres?” Justin sounded sceptical.

“Or he had some plan. We won’t know until we can talk to him.” She wasn’t looking forward to that - Dennis would be devastated once he realised what he had done. “And that will likely be a while. We’re not going to treat him like a captured enemy.”

“If they are really using Draught of Living Death on all of the cursed, then it won’t be long before half of Wizarding Britain will be in a magical slumber,” Justin said.

“It’s better than the alternative.” Hermione looked at him. “Imagine if the Dark Lord orders them to kill themselves.”
The words Justin muttered under his breath would have done the Sergeant proud.

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**Hogwarts, January 20th, 1997**

Albus Dumbledore had barely returned to Hogwarts and eaten the meal the elves had prepared for him when Severus appeared before the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmaster’s office. For a moment, Albus was tempted to pretend he was still at the Ministry, dealing with the aftermath of the recent events. He had craved some rest, or at least, a bit of quiet. Fawkes, who was still barely bigger than a freshly burned phoenix, had certainly acted as if Albus was in dire need of comfort. But needs must, he thought, sighing, and let the younger wizard enter.

“Good evening, Severus.”

“Albus.” Severus was stiff and tense, Albus saw, when the other man sat down.

The Headmaster knew the reason for this visit. He sighed. “I haven’t been able to find a volunteer, yet, Severus. The Ministry is in shambles, so many have been lost… I’ve been dealing with a myriad of things today.”

Severus nodded. “I know. But with all those deaths, it shouldn’t be hard to find a wizard or witch who has lost everyone they care about, and is willing to risk everything for a chance at revenge.”

Like Severus himself, Albus knew. His friend was correct, though - and unlikely to accept excuses. “There are a number of poor souls who lost their families, yes.”

“Pick the least useful then. Preferably some dunderhead with a smarter half-blood heir.” The younger wizard’s sneer was full of loathing and bitterness, and old wounds - his mother had been disinherited by her parents. “I trust you already have thought about such matters.”

Albus winced - his friend knew him too well. While he had not planned to act on such calculations, or so he liked to think, he knew a few wizards who, while firmly opposed to Voldemort, would not be very helpful in the time after the Dark Lord’s defeat. He hesitated a moment, then slowly inclined his head. What was another sin, piled up onto his numerous others? “Balthasar Brinden. His son was cursed in the Ministry, and killed Brinden’s wife before dying at his father’s hand.”

The smile on Severus face was so satisfied and cruel, seeing it hurt Albus almost more than knowing his friend would soon be dead.

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**London, Ministry of Magic, January 21st, 1997**

The Ministry might officially be an ally now, but Hermione Granger wasn’t about to trust the Aurors or Hit-Wizards. The Resistance entered the Atrium with weapons and wands ready, with John levitating the stunned and bound Mary-Jane Milton in their midst.

Two of the guards at the fireplaces confronted them. Hermione thought she recognised one of them - a Hufflepuff, two years above her. And the Auror apparently in command didn’t look that much older. At least his voice didn’t crack when he asked, “What is the meaning of this?”, but he sounded quite nervous.

Hermione used her best ‘command voice’, as the Major called it. “Imperius victim. We’re taking her through the Thief’s Downfall, on the order of Minister Dumbledore.”
Whether it was her tone, the Resistance’s reputation, or - as she suspected - the Minister’s name, it did the trick, and the Auror stepped aside. “Ah… alright.”

She passed the two wizards with a nod and walked up to the Thief’s Downfall, set up in an empty door frame, like a metal detector. A number of the wizards and witches working on repairing the damage to the Atrium were staring at her and the others. A few even fled further into the Ministry. She heard Seamus chuckle behind her as she stepped through the magical waterfall. Hermione didn’t share Seamus’s mirth, though. As satisfying as it might feel to see those who had worked to persecute the muggleborns shy away in fear, it didn’t bode well for the future - both for the immediate future, when they would have to work together to defeat the Dark Lord, and for the time after the war.

But she had to focus on their current mission, which was to finally free Mary-Jane from the Imperius. Which, fortunately, was the work of just a few seconds. A minute later, and the rest of the Resistance had passed through the waterfall as well, and cast spells to dry and clean their weapons and themselves.

“Alright, let’s head back!” Hermione said. There was no reason to linger. Justin and Sally-Anne were bringing up the rear this time.

But before the group reached the closest fireplace, a wizard stepped out of it, followed by another. She recognised them at once. Arthur Weasley and his son, Percy.

“Hermione!” The wizard greeted her.

His son nodded at her and the others. “Hermione. Mister Finnigan. Miss Dennel.”

“Mister Weasley. Percy.” She nodded at them. “I’m glad to see you have recovered.” She truly was. She turned to Justin. “Justin, take the rest to Hogwarts. John can stay with me,” she added, before he could protest.

“Alright.” Justin didn’t sound too pleased, but he nodded at her.

Mister Weasley’s warm smile turned into a puzzled one when he noticed the floating and bound Mary-Jane pass him. “What happened?”

“She was under the Imperius, so we took her through the Thief’s Downfall,” she explained.

“Ah.” He slowly nodded, then blinked. “But why is she still stunned?”

Hermione noticed that Percy winced - he had probably recognised the girl. She sighed. “She was imperiused by Aurors, some time ago, to trap us. We don’t want her to wake up in the middle of the Ministry.” The witch deserved privacy for that.


Percy scoffed. “Why wouldn’t she? As long as the Wizengamot says it’s legal, it’s good enough for her. I do not think she’ll change should she become the next Minister.”

That was an alarming thought. “How likely is that?” Hermione said.

“We haven’t heard much news during our convalescence,” Percy said, pursing his lips, “but before the recent events happened, she was considered the most likely successor to Minister Fudge.” He lowered his voice a bit. “Things might have changed with all the dead. Both of us have been
promoted. Father’s now heading the new Office of Anti-Curse Measures and Research, and I’ve been promoted to the position of Deputy-Head of the Department of Magical Transportation.”

“Congratulations.” Hermione smiled. Dumbledore was stacking the Ministry with his people, then.

“Thank you.” Mister Weasley was beaming at her.

“Thank you.” Percy’s smile looked a bit cynical to Hermione.

“Oh, that reminds me: We’ll have to have dinner together, you, Ron and us!” Mister Weasley chuckled. “We should have asked you before, but with all the troubles, there never seemed to be a good occasion. And Molly wanted to invite you to a proper home - we’re currently just guests of Sirius. But we can eat dinner at a muggle restaurant!”

A family dinner with her boyfriend’s parents - in the middle of a civil war. Hermione certainly hadn’t expected that.

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Mary-Jane didn’t scream when they woke her up, back in a private room at Hogwarts. The muggleborn witch simply started to sob and cry, curled up on her bed. Hermione raised her hand and took a step closer, then hesitated, uncertain if she should touch the girl, or if that would make things worse. Sally-Anne apparently had no such doubts, and moved to hug the other witch.

Hermione exchanged a glance with Justin, and left the room. Once outside, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes for a moment. She remembered the time she had been under the Imperius herself, in her fourth year. She had been lost in a haze, utterly relaxed. No worries, no doubts, no thoughts of her own had crossed her mind. As if she had been drugged. And just as with drugs, once the curse had been lifted, all her doubts and fears had returned, worse than before, joined with embarrassment, shame, and the horror of remembering how helpless she had been. And she hadn’t been forced to betray her friends, and work for their murderers. She could only imagine what Mary-Jane was feeling right now.

And yet she was considering using that spell herself, if it was needed to win the war or save one of her friends.

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Hogwarts, January 21st, 1997

Harry Potter ground his teeth and gripped his wand so tightly, he thought he could hear the holly crack between his fingers. He had already entered the Headmaster’s mind once this evening, and now he had to do it again - without a day to recover. His head was hurting, pain flaring up in step with his heartbeat.

He wanted to close his eyes and rest. Sleep. Give his mind time to sort out what were his memories, and what were glimpses he had caught from the Headmaster’s. But that would be giving up. And he wouldn’t do that. Everyone was counting on him to master this spell, so he could defeat - no, destroy - Voldemort once and for all. He wouldn’t, couldn’t let them down.

He raised his wand, pointed it at the Headmaster’s forehead, and spat the incantation out.

“Legimens!”

Once more the world shrunk to pinpoint of light, then expanded, and Harry found himself floating in
a room full of spheres of all sizes. They were moving around, some growing, some shrinking, and
each was filling his ears with words and noise and sometimes music, forming a cacophony that made
just thinking hard and painful.

But this was not his first time. He focused his mind, and concentrated on one of the spheres, until the
rest had faded - pushed away, even. Until this sphere was all he could see, until it was large enough
to swallow him, close enough to touch… and he was inside.

He found himself in the middle of a field with strange plants. Sugar cane, he realised, after a second.
He could see a white mansion in the distance. It looked as if he was on a plantation - and an ancient
one. Or at least an old-fashioned one. As he made his way through the field, he could see no signs of
modern appliances - no antennas, no cars, no machines.

How old was Dumbledore? he asked himself, as he stepped on a lawn - perfectly maintained, he
noted with a brief glance - and started walking towards the mansion’s main entrance. He had barely
covered half the distance when the massive door was blown off its hinges. A body flew out of the
dust cloud the explosion had left, landing hard on the lawn. Another figure ran out of the cloud. A
young man, just a few years older, at most, than Harry himself.

“Master!” the man cried, rushing to the fallen figure’s side.

“Step away from him, boy!”

Harry blinked. That was Dumbledore! But younger. And his expression… Cold and distant. He had
never seen the Headmaster looking like that.

The young wizard was trembling, but raised his wand. An almost casual swish of Dumbledore’s
wand disarmed him with so much force, he was thrown very nearly on top of Harry, a dozen yards
back.

“You have a loyal apprentice, Mister Francis. Although I wonder just how deserving of his loyalty
you are,” Dumbledore said, stepping closer to the older man, who was now feebly moving. “Did you
kidnap him as well, years ago?”

Harry saw that the young man in front of him, who had been trying to get up despite a broken leg,
froze when he heard that.

The other wizard - Mister Francis, Harry presumed - muttered something he couldn’t understand,
then spat. He had skin darker than Dean’s, and was wearing the shredded remains of what might
have been a white suit.

Dumbledore shook his head. “I told you that the times of enslaving muggleborns in the Caribbean
were past. But you and your friends didn’t want to listen. People like you seldom do listen to mere
words. You usually need a demonstration - or a lesson.”

Francis yelled something, and the young man flinched. Dumbledore looked at him and shook his
head. “Do not waste your life trying to protect this man, boy. He’s not worth it.” Turning back to the
prone wizard - houngan, Harry corrected himself - Dumbledore went on, talking in a tone as if he
was discussing the weather, “I do think you and a few others of your friends will have to serve as an
object lesson. To encourage, as the French are fond of saying, the rest of you to rethink your
policies.”

The panting, bleeding houngan spat again, then started to yell - but Dumbledore interrupted him at
once with a spell that smashed into his head with a loud crack.
“There won’t be any dying curses either, Mister Francis,” the Headmaster said. “Diffindo.”

Harry saw the head of the man roll over the lawn, trailing blood, and Dumbledore slowly picking up a wand. Behind the Headmaster, the mansion was burning. Harry blinked. That looked very familiar. He had seen that scene before, just … different. He started to walk towards the burning building, taking in the details. It looked right, and yet… it didn’t fit. The scene didn’t fit.

The closer he got, the more certain he was. The burning mansion was not real. Or had not been real. Just when he was about to touch it, it collapsed, and for a moment, Harry was floating in a dark, empty space.

Then he was back in the Headmaster’s office, kneeling on the floor, and his head hurt worse than ever. He hissed, clenching his jaw, so he wouldn’t scream, and sucked in as much air as he could.

“Very good, Harry. You saw through one of my altered memories, and for a moment, you broke through my defences.” Dumbledore sounded as tired as Harry felt, but he was smiling.

“It was an altered memory?” Harry managed to say while Ron helped him up and eased him back into his seat.

“Yes, it was. Inspired, so to speak, by a visit I paid to Jamaica, almost forty years ago.” Dumbledore leaned back in his seat, his gaze rising to the ceiling. “I have been thinking a lot about that visit lately, so it is not surprising that it ended up being used for your training.”

“Ah.” Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. It didn’t help much.

“You have made a lot of progress. You will soon be able to penetrate the Dark Lord’s defences. But I think you need to rest now.”

Harry started to nod in agreement, but stopped when that caused his headache to grow even worse. He couldn’t help wondering what exactly, other than the mansion, the Headmaster had altered in the memory he had seen.

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Hogwarts, January 22nd, 1997

“Are you certain of this course of action?” Albus Dumbledore had to ask, even though he knew the answer. The two men standing in front of him had made up their minds, and nothing would deter them. Neither thought he had anything to live for, not any more. Albus thought that he might be able to make Balthasar change his mind, given enough time - but then, he hadn’t been able to change Severus’s, not in almost twenty years.

Predictably, both shook their heads, Balthasar with a grim expression, Severus with a faint sneer.

“Very well. I have prevailed upon Miss Granger and her friends to be ready to take down the wards, and our French friends, as well as some Order members suited for such a mission, will be joining us once we have a location.” Severus was without a doubt aware that Sirius and the Weasleys were the obvious choice, but Albus was not about to rub it in. He could do that much, at least, for his friend.

The potioneer produced a vial, and a small envelope. “A bit of hair from a first year Slytherin student.” He handed it to Balthasar, who took it almost eagerly. A bundle of school robes lay on Albus’s desk.

Albus refrained from sighing. The two had made their choice; now all he could do was honour it -
“By using shaped charges, we can target the wards without doing much damage to the building. Planting them in the ground, and at an angle, will further help keep the building intact,” Hermione Granger explained. “They can be used to breach doors and walls too, during the assault.” She looked at the three men in the Headmaster’s office.

“Did you test these ‘charges’?” Snape was wearing his usual scowl. “I do not intend to risk my life only for some untested muggle contraption to fail at such a crucial time.”

“We have used similar charges before, and I trust my calculations.”

“You haven’t tested them, then. You have bombs you already used on other targets. Use those!” Snape spat.

“Those bombs destroyed the buildings as well as the wards. If we use them here, then…”

“Did I stutter, Miss Granger? Or do you think I’m fool? I said I will not allow this mission to be put in jeopardy by using untested bombs.” Snape sneered at her.

Hermione bit her lower lip so that she would not yell at the impossible man. Didn’t he understand that he would die if they used the same type of bomb that the Resistance had dropped on Malfoy Manor? She glanced at the Headmaster, surely he would be able to make Snape understand what he was demanding. But Dumbledore was looking sad and grim. And not saying anything. That meant…

Hermione gasped when she realised that Snape was very much aware of what he was asking for. “We will be using the bombs then,” she pressed out, staring at him.

“Good.” He turned away, to the Headmaster. “With that settled, I think we are ready.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore slowly stood up. “The others have gathered as well. Let us be on our way then.”

“I don’t like this,” Hermione Granger muttered ten minutes later. “We’re not prepared for this.”

“But it’s an opportunity we can’t afford to let slip by,” Justin said. “And they wouldn’t let us, anyway.” He nodded at the rest of the Resistance in the room.

“I know.” Hermione didn’t quite frown. But she pursed her lips. Seamus, Tania and Louise, even John and Sally-Anne, all were eager to kill the Dark Lord. To end this war before more people died. And so they were off to another ill-prepared mission on Dumbledore’s behalf. And once more with the Delacours, the d’Aigles, and the Weasleys at their side. If Hermione were superstitious, she would consider this a bad omen. But there was a reason she had walked out of Divination.

Still, she would have preferred more time to rest and recover. She didn’t like leaving Mary-Jane and
Jeremy alone either. But it couldn’t be helped - they’d need everyone able to fight for this. Even with the Headmaster leading the attack.

“At least there won’t be much left once the bomb goes off,” she muttered.

“Provided they are not meeting the Dark Lord in the middle of a village or town,” Justin said in a low voice. They’d have to use the shaped charges then. “Snape’s braver than I thought.”

“Yes.” And more suicidal too, she added to herself. She glanced at Ron, and at Harry, who were standing with Sirius’s group. She wanted to be with him, with them, but she had a responsibility to her own group. A leader couldn’t leave her troops, not in this situation. And not to hug her boyfriend. The Major had been clear on that. And Hermione understood that. Intellectually.

She still wanted to rush over and hug Ron. Just once, before this battle.

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Outside Withernsea, Yorkshire, Britain, January 22nd, 1997

Harry Potter could feel the Dark Lord’s presence the moment he arrived at the location Dumbledore had directed them to. Without a Supersensory Charm, it was not too bad, just a faint pain. But the Dark Lord definitely was in the area. He tried to catch Dumbledore’s attention, but the Headmaster was furiously casting jinxes to block magical travel.

“Mate?” Ron asked at his side, wand out.

“I can feel him,” Harry whispered. “He’s nearby.” He stared at the building in front of them. It was too close to the muggle village for the kind of bomb used on Malfoy Manor, so the Resistance was already racing ahead to place the other bombs. The French were spreading out as well - they’d attack from the rear. Brave as usual, Harry thought - Sirius’s group and the Resistance would follow Dumbledore in.

“We can get him!” Ron said.

Both knew that Voldemort wouldn’t be killed today, but if his body was destroyed, he’d be reduced to a shade. And by the time he returned, the war would be over, and Harry would be ready for him.

Suddenly, he blinked. The faint pain was growing a bit stronger… was the Dark Lord moving? They had been checking for tunnels and buried bombs too, so… Harry closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on his connection to the Dark Lord. Where was he?

“Mate?”

“Shh.” He had to focus. Where was Voldemort? He was near, but… there! To his right. Harry turned, then opened his eyes. “He’s not inside! He’s on our flank!” he yelled.

“Retreat!” Dumbledore’s voice was so loud - Amplifying Charm, Harry knew - the muggles probably heard him.

“Hermione!” Ron yelled.

Harry whirled around, expecting the worst. But the Resistance members were already in the air, on their brooms, and speeding away from the building. As were the two Veela and the other French.

Ron let out a relieved sigh.
Harry turned his attention back to Voldemort. What was the Dark Lord doing? Where was he? He gasped. The pain was gone!

“He’s gone,” Harry said, “He’s left.”

“Blimey! It’s burning!” Ron pointed at the building.

Green flames were shooting out of the windows. Harry was familiar with them.

“Fiendfyre!”

*****

Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 23rd, 1997

So, Snape had been a traitor, the Dark Lord Voldemort thought when he returned to his home hours later. A brave, but dumb traitor - as if such a simple plan would have worked against the heir of Slytherin. Dumbledore must be slipping, he thought, to have allowed that. Unless it had been a ruse.

Voldemort pondered this while he summoned a glass and a bottle of wine. If this had been a ruse, what had been his old enemy’s true plan? Potter had been there, and had sensed his own presence. Had that just been a test to see how well the boy could track him?

If it had been a test, then the boy had failed. No one had followed the Dark Lord, not to his first, nor to his second decoy safe house. And Dumbledore wouldn’t have sacrificed even a useless spy like Snape for a mere test. Not when he could have used the traitor still - there were few potioneers of Snape’s skill.

No, it had not been a test. A gamble then? Was Dumbledore ruthless enough to sacrifice Snape for a small chance to hurt him? The Dark Lord filled his glass, then nodded. Yes, he would be. Snape was a good potioneer, but Dumbledore was an alchemist. And the old wizard had had almost twenty years to use Snape as a brewer. The spy had been expendable. Doubly so since his enemy must have known what Snape had done to earn his Dark Mark.

Well, the gamble had not paid off. The Dark Lord almost regretted not having prepared a more lethal trap. If he had placed a few bombs nearby… but his enemies would have checked for that, after his ambush in Sussex. He would have to console himself with the thought that at least Snape and whoever had been posing as the child Voldemort had demanded would have suffered before their deaths. A result well worth a little Polyjuice, an Imperius, and a short lesson in conjuring Fiendfyre.

*****

Cokeworth, Midlands, England, January 24th, 1997

Albus Dumbledore entered the small park and looked around. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Dirty snow covered the playground in the centre, and the bushes and trees were mostly bare, naked branches sticking out and up. He wouldn’t have chosen such a spot, but it wasn’t his decision.

Sighing, he cast a quick Muggle-Repelling Charm, then reached into one of the pockets of his robes and pulled out a small urn. A quick tap of his wand enlarged it. There was no name on the urn, as per the instructions left to him. None was needed, either.

He flicked his wand, and the lid of the urn floated up, followed by a thin trail of the ashes contained within. A swish, and the ashes started to spread through the park, between the bushes, quickly sinking into the soil thanks to a small charm.
The Fiendfyre had burned for hours, and hadn’t left much of either Severus or Balthasar, nor of whoever had played the role of the Dark Lord. It had taken Albus some effort, even, to ensure that he would not take the wrong body to be cremated - Balthasar had wished to be buried with his family. They wouldn’t mind that their father and husband had not been in his own body at his death, Albus thought.

The urn had emptied in the time he had let his thoughts wander, and the floating trail of ashes was dispersing.

Albus shook his head at the sight. It was sad to think that, as far as he knew, this was the only place Severus had ever been truly happy in his life. The place he had met Lily Evans as a child. The Headmaster liked to think that as a student, his friend had been happy at Hogwarts as well, but he knew that for Severus, his time at school had been forever tainted by the end of his friendship with Lily.

He closed the urn, and vanished it, then checked his watch. There would be a wake for his friend, at Hogwarts. It would be a very small affair. Apart from Albus himself, Severus hadn’t had any friends, only colleagues and acquaintances. Duty and custom would make them attend, nothing more.

Albus shook his head. In a way, that was even more tragic than Severus’s death.

*****

North of Santa Cruz, Jamaica, January 25th, 1997

The area of the Black River hadn’t changed much since he had last visited the island, Albus Dumbledore thought. Nor had the hidden enclave of the late Jevaun Francis. The swamp outside looked the same, the fields looked the same, and the mansion looked the same. Albus hoped that the workers tending to the fields were not enslaved muggles, though. He would hate to have to repeat the lesson he had taught Francis.

As he approached the main entrance, the door was opened and a young woman in a thin, short linen robe bowed to him. “The Master awaits you in his parlour, sir.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t look like an apprentice, but looks could be deceiving, Albus thought. He knew that very well. Still, he doubted that the current owner of the mansion, Bedard Laron, would try to ambush him. He wouldn’t consider Bedard a friend, but they were not enemies. And the man owed him for letting him not just live, but succeed his old master - and for keeping quiet about just how cooperative Bedard had been when it came to helping with Dumbledore’s lessons for the houngan rulers of Magical Jamaica.

The mansion hadn’t changed much inside either, apart from the repairs. Jamaican houngans seemed to be as conservative as the Old Families in Britain. Bedard, as Albus saw when the girl opened the door to the parlour, was even wearing the same suit his predecessor had worn when Albus had killed him over thirty years ago.

“Good day, Bedard.” He nodded at the houngan.

“Mister Dumbledore.” The man’s smile was thin, and just this side of polite. “I am honoured to have you visit my humble abode. Very honoured, even, in light of the current situation in Britain, which no doubt requires your constant presence.”

The boy he had left back then had grown some teeth, Albus thought. His own smile widened a bit. “It is exactly due to that situation that I have come to visit.”
“I can assure you that neither myself, nor my colleagues, have had anything to do with this ‘withering curse’, as the newspapers call it.” Bedard said quickly - too quickly. “We have kept the agreement.”

Albus sighed loudly. “I did not doubt that. But the curse is of houngan origin. That I am certain of.”

“That doesn’t mean any one of us was responsible. As much as we strive to keep our secrets, there are always dissidents and spies.” Bedard sighed. “A plague Britain is familiar with as well, I believe. But where are my manners? Please, have a seat.” He gestured to the couch.

“Indeed. I think it’s very likely that the Dark Lord currently making trouble in Britain stole your secrets, and then improved upon them.” Albus sat down, after a quick and subtle check of the couch. “If one of your colleagues had created such a curse, then I think we would have heard of it.” The infighting on the island would have rivaled the current war in Britain, Albus was certain.

Bedard’s expression soured some more. No houngan would like to hear that a British wizard had not just taken their own spells, but improved them. “A compelling argument, I have to admit.”

The girl returned, carrying a tray with glasses and a bottle on it. Albus passed. He didn’t think Bedard would try to poison him, but there was no need to take a risk. And he would be needing all his wits. He did use the distraction, though, to silently dispel a few enchantments in the room. Bedard was not quite as subtle as he thought - nor as skilled. But then, few could stand against Albus wielding the wand he had won from Gellert.

Bedard didn’t seem to have noticed that his defences had been rendered far less effective than they had been. Sipping from his drink, he looked at Albus. “But even if that were true, how could I help you? I am ignorant of whatever spell might have formed the base for this curse.” His smile returned.

“Indeed,” Albus said, “but as a houngan of your stature, you have access to the Library of Souls.”

Bedard jumped up, letting his glass shatter on the floor. “How do you know about that?” he hissed, drawing his wand. When he found Albus’s wand pointed straight at him, though, he froze. His eyes widened even further when nothing else happened.

“Please,” Albus said, smiling.

Trembling, the man slowly stashed his wand again. “Everyone has sworn an Oath to the Loa! They’d die rather than betray our most sacred secret!”

“Death, sadly, is no bar to betrayal,” Albus said. “I would rather visit with you as my guide than find my own way there. I might have to break a few things to enter, and would not know where to start looking for what I seek.” He didn’t move his wand. He had hoped that Bedard would be less hostile. But the man’s reaction to the mere mention of the library had been enough to convince Albus that some rather disreputable measures would have to be taken. He sighed. “I am truly sorry about this. Imperio.”

*****

Dry Harbour Mountains, Jamaica, January 25th, 1997

The Library of Souls, hidden in the mountains of Jamaica since the time of the Maroon Rebellion, was, as with so many things in the Magical World, a bit of a misnomer, Albus knew. While it did contain the knowledge of many dead houngans, their souls were not actually bound to it. No, the library was built with enchantments not unlike those used to create magical portraits, although these were significantly more thorough, Albus had to admit. And using the actual skulls of the dead
houngans, instead of canvas and paint.

As he followed Bedard on the small path winding through a dense forest, he kept an eye out for the defences he knew were there. The enchanted plants and animals were not supposed to attack Bedard or anyone in his company, but that didn’t mean too much given the often bloody nature of Magical Jamaica’s politics. Thanks to the expertise of Rubeus and Pomona, though, he was well-warded against both dangers.

As was to be expected for a location containing so much secret knowledge, there were more defences than just guards. They had passed through several wards already - which wouldn’t stop Bedard or a guest of his. Overall, Albus expected the library to be at least as well protected against intruders as the vaults of Gringotts. Which meant that a wizard of his skill and experience could break in. Especially with the - albeit unwilling - help of one of the houngan leaders of the island. Every system had a weakness, and the library’s main weakness was that the ruling houngans did not trust each other enough to require more than one of them to grant access to their apprentices. That didn’t mean that the library’s defences were easy to defeat, of course. The houngans had improved on them for more than two centuries, after all - ever since Magical Jamaica had won its independence from Wizarding Britain in 1752.

Aided by his enchanted spectacles, he spotted the Thief’s Downfall, concealed as a natural waterfall, ahead of them. A flick of his wrist, and a spell covered Bedard, letting the enchanted fluid wash over him without affecting the spells controlling the man - Albus had had ample time to study this particular enchantment, and ways to deal with it.

They entered a cave behind an actual waterfall - though Albus kept his counter-measures up, just to be safe - and reached a massive door carved from the same stone as the cave itself. Bedard slit his palm and smeared blood on the stone surface in a complicated pattern, then took a step back as the door started to retreat, almost flowing into the walls, revealing the antechamber of the Library of Souls. Albus frowned when he saw the silent, undead guardians arrayed there. He had known to expect such from his glimpses into the minds of Francis and his colleagues decades ago, but to see them with his own eyes…

But those abominations were not a threat to him. The spells layered on the entrance to the library proper were. Not even Bedard could get him through all of them. But Albus had come well-prepared for traps and curses. His wand made short work of the more obvious spells, and the more subtle ones were no match for his experience - he had broken into a few sanctums of houngans in his day, after all. And dealt with many more cursed tombs. And even if he should make a mistake, thanks to his skill as an alchemist and his friendship with a phoenix, he had the means to save himself which no others could count upon. Himself only, though - as the battle at Hogsmeade had shown, trying to protect another could be fatal, which was why Albus had traveled alone to Jamaica.

Soon, the doors opened, and the Library of Souls was revealed. It was far smaller than someone not familiar with Jamaica would expect. Less than a hundred skulls, each on a pedestal displaying the houngan’s name and deeds, gathered in a natural cavern, expanded with magic. Far more modest than anything similar in Britain, and yet containing so much knowledge… Albus was both tempted to peruse it, and to destroy it. But he had not come here for either.

“Please fetch me the skull of Lawrence Gayle,” he said. That houngan was almost unknown outside Jamaica, but the man had done more research into both Necromancy and Mind Magic than any other on the island. If he hadn’t been assassinated by a rival before he could turn his research into actual rituals and spells, he might have become more famous - or infamous. As it was, his contemporaries and successors had taken his death as proof that his work had little value. An opinion the Headmaster didn’t share.
Compelled by Albus’s magic, Bedard stepped forward. The oldest skulls were furthest back, but Gayle had lived in the 19th century, so his skull was far closer to the entrance, just a few yards away.

Bedard mumbled the appropriate prayer and picked the skull up. He had just started to turn towards Albus when the skull’s eyes lit up and fire shot out of its mouth, engulfing the man.

Bedard started to scream, his whole body on fire. Fiendfyre, Albus realised, as it formed a snake and dived at him. No, not at him - at the entrance! Albus hastily conjured a wall between himself and the flames, and retreated to the side, away from both the still burning and screaming Bedard and the flames sealing the entrance. The skull’s mouth was now spewing billowing clouds of green mist that ate through both arms of Bedard, leaving the skull floating in the air, while the eyes released curses in all directions.

“Fawkes!” Albus cried out, flicking his wand to banish the approaching acid back with a gust of wind. Then he saw that the curses were not flying off in all directions, but curving back - to strike at him!

He conjured slabs of metal and stone to block them, but the skull was still sending out more, and the cursed fire was spreading. Fawkes appeared - straight in the path of one of the curses, and Albus acted without thinking, sending one slab up to block the curse, leaving himself open. If Fawkes was quick enough…

His companion wasn’t. Albus felt the curse strike his side an instant before they vanished in a flash of fire.

When they reappeared, he fell down on the floor of his office, unable to breathe. Unable to say anything. He rolled on his back, flicking his wand, casting silently, trying to break the curse eating into his lungs. He failed. Fawkes was crying, his tears falling on Albus’s chest, but they didn’t help - this dark curse had to be beyond even their power to cure. It had been a trap, he realised. For anyone researching that particular curse. He swished his wand, summoning a vial from his pocket. A last gift from his mentor. With fumbling fingers, he opened it, swallowing the liquid even while he felt as if his heart was bursting.

Relief filled him as the pain receded.

Then he realised that he still couldn’t breathe. That he was still asphyxiating. But he had gained the time to cast a complex spell that drew oxygen directly into his blood. His vision, which had been fading, returned to normal. He still couldn’t breathe or speak, but he was able to sit up. The pain was growing stronger again. He vanished the robe covering his chest, and shuddered.

His chest was rotting. He could see the ribs poking through the parting skin, could see the flesh shrivel up, blood and other fluids forming a pool under him. Fawkes was still crying, frantically flapping around.

Shaking his head, he smiled at his oldest friend. He wanted to tell the phoenix that it was alright, that he was just going on the next Great Adventure, but without lungs all he could do was hope that his companion would understand.

Then the rot reached his spine, and he started to fall back.

The last thing he saw, before the world turned dark, was Fawkes, crying above him. And the last thing he heard before death claimed him was the mourning song of his friend.

*****
‘The death of Albus Dumbledore would have shaken Wizarding Britain to the core under any circumstances. But following so closely after the Battle of the Ministry, and the Night of the Dead, the effect was devastating. The Ministry’s morale, flagging after the crippling losses it had taken in the recent battles, plummeted. Albus Dumbledore had not only been Wizarding Britain’s protector, seen by most as the only wizard able to stop the Dark Lord, but he had also been its most important leader. Even more important, though, he had been the Headmaster of Hogwarts for decades. The majority of wizards and witches had attended Hogwarts during his tenure there as a professor and later Headmaster, and had spent their formative years under his authority. They had not just lost a leader and protector, they had lost a member of their family.

And yet, despite the man’s importance, to this day the question of who killed Albus Dumbledore has not been answered in a satisfactory manner. Both the Dark Lord as well as various houngans of Jamaica have claimed responsibility for his death, with convincing although mutually exclusive arguments and evidence.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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Hogwarts, January 26th, 1997

The Headmaster was dead. Harry Potter still had trouble believing it, even after he had seen the body in the infirmary. Dumbledore had been a fixture in his life, not just at Hogwarts. Harry had known that the old wizard was not immortal, but even after the fight in Hogsmeade, part of him had felt so. And now Dumbledore was gone, and Harry felt as if part of Hogwarts, part of himself, had died with the Headmaster.

He was walking past the hallway leading to the Great Hall. A few crouching figures drew his attention, and his wand rose, until he realised that it was just a Hufflepuff prefect trying to console three first-years, all four of them crying. He still kept them in his sights until he had turned the corner.

Most students were in their dorms or on the way back there after the meal, but he couldn’t stand being cooped up right now. Couldn’t stand the gazes, the whispers he expected as the Boy-Who-Lived. He longed to go flying, take to the skies and let the cold air numb him, but that would bring back memories of Hogsmeade. And he’d rather not think of that fight, not right now.

He didn’t want to think at all. He’d rather do something, anything to not feel so helpless. Which was why he was headed to the training room Moody used for his lessons. The old Auror wasn’t around, and Ron was busy with Hermione, probably, but Harry would be able to practise some spells, at least.

*****

Harry had been training in silent casting more or less effectively for five minutes when the door to the training room was opened. He turned slightly until he was presenting his right side to the door, wand pointed not quite at the entrance.

“There you are!”
Seeing Sirius, Harry relaxed. It felt good to see his godfather. Comforting. Doubt quickly filled him, though. “Shouldn’t you be in the Ministry?” With Dumbledore dead, the Ministry would be panicking, from what Harry had gathered. His godfather was needed there, to keep it from rolling over for Voldemort.

Sirius shrugged. “I’ll head there in a bit. Once I’m certain that you’re holding up.” He frowned. “You practically ran away from there.” The infirmary, where they had seen Dumbledore’s body.

Harry suddenly felt guilty. He was keeping Sirius from more important matters.

His godfather sighed. “Don’t be like that, Harry.” The older wizard walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “You are the most important person, for me.”

A weird mix of warmth and guilt filled Harry. Then he frowned. With Dumbledore dead, he was the most important person in the war against Voldemort. He was the one prophesied to defeat the Dark Lord - for good this time. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“For what?” Sirius sounded honestly puzzled.

“For worrying you.” For letting down everyone who was depending on him to be strong.

“I’d worry about you no matter what you did, Harry. That’s what a godfather does.” There was a slight hitch in Sirius’s voice before ‘godfather’.

“Well, I’m training.” Harry pointed at the conjured block of stone. It was sporting several small holes.

“Piercing Curses?” Sirius peered at them.

“Silent casting, mostly,” Harry clarified. His normal Piercing Curses did better than that.

“Ah.” Sirius nodded. “Show me?”

Harry took a step away, then jabbed his wand at the stone. Another hole appeared, in a small cloud of dust. He repeated the spell. Again and again.

“You’ve got it figured out I think,” Sirius said. “Just need more practice.”

“Not just with silent casting,” Harry said. He shrugged. He needed more training in Legilimency, more than anything else. But with the Headmaster gone…”I didn’t think he’d ever die. Not really.”

“No one lives forever.” Sirius frowned. “I didn’t think he’d die to a curse, though.”

“Did he duel Voldemort?” Dumbledore had known he couldn’t kill Voldemort, but had he gone and faced the Dark Lord in an attempt to gain more time for Harry’s training?

“No one knows so far. As far as we know, he was visiting the Caribbean, to search for a cure for the curse, but we don’t know if he actually went there, or was ambushed on the way, or if it was all a ruse.” Harry’s godfather sighed. “McGonagall found him in his office, dead. That’s all we really know, for now.”

Harry had known that already. “Is Fawkes still singing?” He thought he could hear the song, a sad one, faintly, as if in the back of his mind, but that could just be his imagination - his Legilimency training had taught him just how easily such a thing could happen.

“Yes.” Sirius conjured a chair for himself and sat down. He looked tired, Harry thought. “He hasn’t
stopped since… well, we think it started at the time of death.” He snorted. “Moody’s leading the
investigation, you know. Or at least claiming to. We didn’t want other Aurors poking around, but
that won’t stop them.”

Harry cursed. “Do they even have enough Aurors left to guard the school and everything else?”

“If they scratch together everything, probably. Many of them won’t be any better than seventh-years,
but… they can’t leave Hogwarts unguarded. No matter how effective they will be.” Sirius scoffed.
“Politics.”

“Hermione will leave.” Harry’s friend wouldn’t stay. Not with the Ministry moving in and
Dumbledore dead.

“Yes.” Sirius shook his head, rubbing his forehead. “Can’t trust the Ministry, even though they need
her and her friends now more than ever.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Do you think they’d attack her to make a deal with Voldemort?”

“Bones wouldn’t make a deal with him. She’ll fight him to the last breath. But she won’t make a deal
with the Resistance either. Not the kind of deal they need. We can but hope that she’ll keep the deal
Fudge made.” Sirius snorted. “Not that it matters much until we beat the Dark Lord.”

Which, Harry knew, all hinged on him. And his training. “I’ll need a new teacher.”

His godfather slowly nodded. “There’s something else.”

*****

The Headmaster had looked quite peaceful, laid out in the small room in the infirmary of Hogwarts,
in Hermione Granger’s opinion. The robes had hidden the sickening sight of the remains of his chest,
eaten away by some rotting curse Madam Pomfrey hadn’t identified so far. What a horrible end for a
great man!

She hadn’t stayed long in there. Just enough to see for herself that he was really dead. Barely enough
to pay her respects. With Dumbledore dead, things in Britain had changed, and not for the better.

Schooling her features, she addressed the rest of the Resistance gathered in Dennis’s room, where
they had pushed the bed of the comatose boy into the corner: “The Headmaster is dead.”

They already knew that, but Sally-Anne, pressed into Justin’s side in a conjured armchair, gasped
anyway, as if there had been any hope that this was just a mistake. Most nodded grimly - they knew
what this meant for the group.

“Aurors and Hit-Wizards will be arriving soon, to ‘guard’ the school,” Hermione went on. “We’re
not needed here any more, and we’ll be returning to a safe house.” Better safe than sorry.

“You don’t trust the Ministry?” Seamus said as much as he asked.

“I trust Bones not to turn on us in the middle of the war,” she said. The witch was too competent for
that. “But afterwards?” She shook her head. “I’d rather not reveal anything about us to them if we
can help it. Just in case.”

“Damn bitch will stab us in the back before the Dark Lord’s body hits the ground!” Seamus growled.
“I don’t think that’s likely,” Hermione said, “but from what I heard, she’s almost fanatical about
upholding law and order.”

Louise, the former Hit-Wizard, nodded. “Bones is a hard ass about justice. Incorruptible. Stubborn. Unyielding.” She was sitting on the conjured bed for Jeremy, holding his hand.

“Didn’t see much of that love of justice when the Ministry was hunting muggleborns.” Tania sneered, leaning back in her conjured seat.

“She doesn’t have the same view of justice as we do,” Hermione said. “If the Wizengamot passes a law, she’ll enforce it. No matter what.”

“Like a Nazi,” John added.

Hermione wasn’t quite certain she’d go that far, but she couldn’t really disagree with the assessment. That was how a number of Nazis had tried to defend themselves when they had been put on trial: That what they had done had been legal in the Third Reich. “In any case, we need to move. We can care for Jeremy at our safe house. Dennis, though… I’ll ask a few friends to care for him.” They couldn’t spare the manpower, nor could they leave him to fall into the hands of the Ministry.

“Who are these friends?” Seamus asked, staring at her.

“I’ll tell you if they can take him in,” Hermione said. She looked at him until he frowned and let his gaze drop. “Anything else?” she addressed the room again. When no one spoke up for a few seconds, she nodded. “Alright, let’s move!”

*****

Ron Weasley felt helpless and useless. The Headmaster was dead, Hermione was with the Resistance, already preparing for the new situation, and Harry was off with Sirius, probably dealing with the Wizengamot - the Boy-Who-Lived would be the ray of hope Britain needed right now. His dad and Percy were at the Ministry, working to keep it from collapsing, no doubt. Bill was with the French, the twins in their shop… everyone was doing something useful. But for Ron, who was stuck at Hogwarts. And Ginny, though his sister was probably watching the map in their dorms.

He leaned against the wall, a hallway away from the infirmary. Dumbledore’s death meant the loss of the one wizard able to counter Voldemort. Maybe they should have tried to keep it a secret, even if only for a few days. He shook his head. No, the news would have spread anyway, and if the Dark Lord had been able to prepare for the shock of the revelation, or reveal it at a time of his choosing…

Dumbledore’s death wasn’t something Ron liked to think about. The consequences were too grim. Too many would now consider the war lost, even among the Order. Not his family, of course. They were Gryffindors to the core, and they knew the Headmaster would have made plans even for his death. They’d fight on. In the Ministry, and everywhere else. Sirius wouldn’t give up either, knowing that Voldemort wouldn’t rest until Harry was dead. Everyone knew that the French wouldn’t stop fighting until either they or their enemy were dead. Or both, as had happened a few times.

The Ministry would keep fighting too, as long as Bones was at the helm. That witch would not give up, and her Aurors and Hit-Wizards, those who were left anyway, would want revenge. And the Wizengamot members who knew that they would be killed if the Dark Lord won.

But the public? They’d be shaking in their boots, and either fleeing or begging for mercy soon enough. Ron knew that. Just as he knew that the odds of his family surviving were low. Not that that would stop them. Even Mum would know that. He closed his eyes. This would be hardest for her.
But they had no choice, not really. As long as there was a chance to win, they’d keep fighting. And as long as Harry was alive, there was a chance to win.

He muttered a few curses under his breath and pushed off the wall. He couldn’t just do nothing. Maybe Hermione needed help. Or Harry. Or Luna. He’d do anything to stop feeling so helpless.

*****

Ron ran into the Resistance at the infirmary. Or rather, he ran into Seamus, standing at the door there. For a moment, they stared at each other, Ron’s wand pointed at the other wizard, and Seamus’s muggle gun pointed at his chest. Then Ron lowered his wand, chuckling, although he had to force himself to do so. “Sorry, Moody’s training left me rather jumpy.”

After a second, Seamus lowered his gun, then snorted. “Can’t trust anyone.”

“Constant vigilance.” Ron shrugged. “Is Hermione inside?”

Once more Seamus hesitated for a moment, then nodded, turned his head and yelled: “Hermione! Your boyfriend’s looking for you!”

Ron chuckled again, without forcing himself to this time. That had sounded just like … as if Seamus hadn’t left. He ignored the other wizard’s slightly confused glance. Hermione arrived. She was wearing her uniform, and a rifle was dangling from a sling at her side.

“She bit her lower lip in that manner he found so adorable, and once more Ron was reminded of the time before this mess started.

He spread his arms and took a step forward, then another, until he could pull her into a hug, wrapping his arms around her, above the gun. He ignored the snickering in the background. His girlfriend was leaving, and he didn’t know when he would see her again. Or - though he buried that thought quickly - if he would see her again. Then he felt her grow tense in his embrace, and pull back.

“The mirror,” she said, casting a privacy spell while she pulled it out.

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When her door was opened, Amelia Bones had her wand ready. The Ministry’s defences had been mostly repaired, some had even been improved, but she hadn’t forgotten about Fudge’s death, and she was not about to let herself grow complacent.

“Bones.” Moody nodded at her, closed her door behind him, then started casting privacy spells.

She waited, not quite patiently, but trying to hurry the paranoid Auror would be useless, and given recent events, he was probably right in taking additional measures. If she fully trusted her security, she would have used the time to read another page of the latest report on her desk.

Finally, Moody finished, and turned to her. “Albus is dead.”

Amelia felt as if she had been hexed in the gut. She almost blurted out a ‘What?’ as if she was a rookie. “How did he die?” she asked instead. Dumbledore dead…

“McGonagall found him on the floor of his office, chest rotted away by a dark curse, with his
Phoenix crying over the body. Died during the night, as far as I can tell.” Moody took a seat, his artificial eye spinning madly.

Amelia felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Someone had managed to kill the greatest wizard of Britain. There was just one man she knew was able to do such a deed. “Was he killed in the middle of his office?” No one would be safe in that case. Hogwarts had the best wards and defences in Britain.

“I saw no sign of any fight, or any trap being triggered there,” Moody said. “Best guess? He managed to escape whatever or whoever did this to him, but died in his office before he could get help.”

That made sense. Not that it improved the Ministry’s situation much. With Dumbledore gone the Dark Lord would be able to attack almost anything at will, especially if he himself had killed the wizard. Only wards would be able to stop him - if he tried to take them down himself, he’d be vulnerable. But if he hired Curse-Breakers… She shook her head. Normally, she’d cancel all leave, but that had already been done. Everyone able was already on duty, usually on double-shifts. “What is Hogwarts’ status?” Moody would know that; the old Auror was one of Dumbledore’s men.

“The wards are as strong as ever, but with Albus and Snape gone, the only ones left who would be of any use in a battle are McGonagall and Flitwick.” Moody scoffed. “The rest are barely up to scratch. Better than your average Auror, though. Heh, some of the kids there would probably do better than half your people.”

Amelia wanted to tell the old Auror off, but he was probably correct - they were scraping the bottom of the cauldron for recruits. Had been for some time. “I’ll send a squad then.” They could rotate. Enough to show the flag, and to keep an eye on the school.

“Don’t send idiots. And don’t send bigots,” Moody said.

She knew what he really meant. “I’m not about to renege on the Minister’s deal.” Even though it grated on her pride to admit it, working with those murderers was the Ministry’s - and her - only hope now.

“Good. You’re finally learning. You’ll still be a terrible Minister.” Moody cackled, then coughed and took a sip from his flask.

She adjusted her monocle. It wasn’t quite as good as Moody’s eye, but it let her see far more than even trained eyes like hers normally could.

“I’m not about to keel over, Bones. I’ll not quit until the Dark Lord’s done for.” Moody grinned, which twisted his scarred face into something fit to curdle milk. “But I’m not getting any younger.” He paused. “Who’s the acting Minister now?”

Amelia knew this by heart, of course. “Philius Runcorn.” The oldest member of the Wizengamot. Who had been missing since the Battle of the Ministry.

“Death Eater,” Moody said.

“I’ll call for an emergency session to elect a new Minister,” Amelia said.

“To elect yourself, you mean.” Moody cackled again.

“Is there anyone else who can do what needs to be done?” There wasn’t; she had looked. Rufus might have been able to, but he was one of the cursed.
“Arthur Weasley might surprise you.”

Amelia shook her head. “He has no support among the moderates, and the traditional Old Families hate him. And with Albus dead, even some of his own faction might not vote for him.”

“You could convince them.” Moody took another sip from his flask.

“Weasley’s not the wizard we need. He’s too radical.” And he’d bend too many rules and break too many laws. He’d focus on winning the war, and wouldn’t care about the consequences of such a stance. What good was winning the war if it meant turning the country into a dictatorship where the rule of law had been sacrificed on the battlefield, and the strong ruled the weak in the name of expediency?

“Might be that’s what needed.” Moody shrugged, as if he wasn’t concerned. Amelia knew him better, though.

“Hardly. Allying with the muggleborns, and electing a wizard who’s not only fascinated by all things muggle, but whose son is going out with the leader of the Resistance? Too many will feel as if that would be handing the country over to the muggleborns.” Amelia scoffed. Susan had told her about that particular couple. Weasley would make for a good scare though - the moderates would rally behind her, as would some of Dumbledore’s friends who had trusted him to keep the muggleborns from getting out of control. Whether the old wizard would have done that was another matter - he had sounded far too radical for Amelia’s taste, in their last talks. As much as it shamed her to admit it, if Dumbledore had died right after the Dark Lord, it would have been better for Britain.

“His eldest is the fiancé of one of the Delacours.”

“The fiancé of a Veela. People will assume that she controls him.” And as welcome as the Delacours’ help was, Amelia knew she wasn’t the only one who was wary of France meddling in Britain’s politics. If the French would commit to more than just tolerating a private initiative, things might be different, but such a commitment was very unlikely.

“Just remember, Bones: The muggleborns don’t trust you. Your Aurors spent too much time hunting them. You’ll have to tread very carefully with them.” Moody grinned again.

“I’ve spoken with their leader. The Resistance know that we need to work together to beat the Dark Lord.” Granger was young, but she wasn’t that foolish. And she had not even a dozen wands left - with a bit of luck, even more of them would die before the war was over.

“I’m not talking about just the Resistance, Bones.”

Amelia narrowed her eyes at him. “The rest of them fled and hid.” Unorganised rabble, on the level of the scum in Knockturn Alley - a persistent nuisance, but no real threat.

“That was before they had an example to follow.” Moody stood up, coughing again. “I’ll head back to Hogwarts, to continue the investigation. Have whoever you send to Hogwarts report to me. I’ll keep them from getting embarrassed by the students there.”

She didn’t let herself to react to Moody’s last jibe and simply nodded while the old Auror left. She had an election to organise, and quickly.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 26th, 1997
The Dark Lord Voldemort stared at the note that had just reached him. His greatest enemy, dead? In the middle of the Headmaster’s office, even? Who but Voldemort himself could have achieved such a thing?

It could be a ruse, of course. A trap, meant to draw him out, overextend himself, so the Headmaster could ambush him. For a wizard of Dumbledore’s power and experience, faking his death would not be difficult. And yet… Would his enemy actually go that far? Shake the faith of Britain’s sheep in himself? Of course Dumbledore would do it - hadn’t he sacrificed two of his friends in an attempted ambush already?

The Dark Lord shook his head. No, he would have to stick to his plan, at least for now. See how long Dumbledore was willing to let this go on. Prepare to denounce the old man as a cruel manipulator, once he had revealed his deception. And if this was true, if someone had actually managed to kill his greatest foe, then the Dark Lord might even be able to exploit that. It would have been a foreigner, and Voldemort would be able to offer Britain his protection against this new threat.

But who could have done this? There was no wizard equal to Dumbledore, much less himself, in Europe. That Voldemort knew for certain. And what other part of the world would have a stake in British affairs? The Ottoman Empire might carry a grudge - Dumbledore had been the driving force behind the coalition that had forced them to end their slave raids against the Mediterranean enclaves, but that had been decades ago, and they’d risk a new coalition forming in response. Although… Dumbledore’s ‘visit’ to the Caribbean had been over thirty years ago as well, and the houngans were even better at keeping grudges. Voldemort had managed to exploit that when he had traveled through the area himself, a few years later…

His gaze fell on the skull on his desk. The skull he had taken from the Library of Souls, replaced with a trapped decoy. The skull anyone researching his Withering Curse would try to use. He had tied the trap to the wards of the place. Not something that was done often, since most intruders or attackers would take down the wards of a location before entering. Of course, the owners of the place would not have done that. But if instead of some houngan Dumbledore had managed to enter with the wards still active… Voldemort’s curses would have been empowered by protections which had been growing in power for centuries...

He summoned some parchment. He had inquiries to make.

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Hogwarts, January 26th, 1997

While his godfather talked into an enchanted mirror, Harry Potter looked around the Headmaster’s office with some trepidation. Dumbledore had died here, in this very room. He wondered if the faint rotten smell was just his imagination, or a lingering reminder of the Headmaster’s death - a curse powerful enough to kill Dumbledore, despite Fawkes’s help, might also withstand a cleaning charm. It would fit the Dark Lord’s style to curse the Headmaster’s office that way - he had cursed the DADA teacher’s position, after all.

Harry was studying the various trinkets on the shelves when the door to the office was opened and Hermione and Ron walked in.

“What’s the emergency?” Hermione asked as soon as Ron had closed the door. She looked quite tense - understandably, in Harry’s opinion. “Sirius didn’t want to tell us through the mirror.” She looked around. “Where is he anyway?”

“He’s in the back,” Harry said, nodding gesturing towards the door behind the Headmaster’s seat,
“preparing the Pensieve.”

He saw her eyes widen, and he nodded slowly. “Apparently, Dumbledore left us a message.”

“Yes, you three!”

Harry turned and saw that Sirius had entered the office. “Albus gave me a vial with a memory, and was quite clear that you three - and only you three - were to see it.”

“Blimey.” Ron sounded more surprised than Harry had expected - the two of them had been training with the Headmaster, after all.

“Come on, you three - everything’s ready.” Sirius waved them forward.

Harry exchanged a glance with his friends, and the three stepped into the Headmaster’s quarters. Sirius closed the door behind them, then cast a charm on it. “Moody should keep eavesdroppers out, but we shouldn’t waste time.”

“Aurors will be arriving soon, I assume,” Hermione said.

“Probably. Wizards and witches in red robes, at least.” Sirius scoffed. “They’re as useless as the curse-fodder the Ministry was recruiting in the last war.”

“There are still veterans left among the Ministry’s forces,” Ron pointed out.

“They won’t send them here, though.” Sirius snorted. “The Wizengamot and the Ministry want the best Aurors and Hit-Wizards right at their side - protecting them.”

Hermione muttered something Harry didn’t catch, but before he could ask her what she had said, they reached an alcove in the Headmaster’s quarters, where a stone basin stood. It looked like it was marble - and covered with runes. Dumbledore’s Pensieve. Above it was a small cloud - mist or smoke.

“You know how to use it?” Sirius asked. Hermione was about to answer, Harry saw her open her mouth, but his godfather went on anyway: “Just push your head into the mist above the basin. Get comfortable first - you might not feel anything while you’re watching the memory, but afterwards you’ll feel it if you were cramped.”

Harry didn’t care about that - he wanted to know what message Dumbledore had left them - and simply leaned forward until his head entered the mist.

He found himself in a very familiar scene. He was standing in front of the Headmaster’s desk, with Dumbledore seated behind it. The old wizard was smiling gently.

“Harry, Mister Weasley, Miss Granger. If you are watching this memory, then I am dead.” He smiled. “Or, as I prefer, I have gone on the next great adventure. I cannot tell you how I died - if I knew that I would have avoided it, of course - but since I came very close to dying in the fight with Tom Riddle in Hogsmeade, I think it is a safe assumption that he proved to be more devious than I thought.” He sighed.

“In any case, unless I managed to at least destroy his body before I died, Tom will jump at the opportunity my death offers him, and move against the Ministry and Hogwarts, which he will
perceive as defenceless. A not altogether wrong assumption, to be honest. Without any false modesty, I have to say that with me gone, there is no wizard or witch left in Britain who can fight him as an equal on the battlefield. And while that is a grim truth, even worse is the fact that most wizards and witches will know this. While I do not expect the Ministry or my friends to surrender, I have to assume that they will fight with the courage born out of desperation, expecting to lose. Which is often a self-fulfilling prophecy."

The Headmaster sighed once again, and his smile slipped just a bit. “And yet, you, you three, you know that the situation, dire as it may appear, is far from hopeless. Harry, you have made much progress in your training. I hope that between this message and my death, I have managed to teach you a bit more, but that does not matter that much. You know what you need to know, and more training will be helpful, but not crucial.”

Harry didn’t think so. “I can barely catch a glimpse of a fake memory,” he muttered.

“You might not think that you are ready, of course,” the Headmaster’s memory continued, as if it had heard Harry, “which is only natural - facing the Dark Lord in single combat, even, or especially, in your mind, is quite daunting.”

The old wizard had a gift for understatement, Harry thought.

“Which is why we will be cheating.”

“What?” Harry thought all three of them had said the same thing in response to this statement.

Dumbledore, smiling widely now, raised his wand. “With this, to be exact. You have heard the saying ‘the wand chooses the wizard’, I assume - Garrick is quite fond of quoting it. It is true as well - each wand is suited best for a single wizard or witch. If they use another wand, one less suited for them, their spellcasting suffers. Mister Weasley has experienced this personally, as you may recall.”

“Yes,” Harry heard Ron mutter, before Hermione shushed him.

“And yet, there is one known exception - although there might be more; we can hardly be certain where magic is concerned - a wand that will serve anyone wielding it, and better than any other wand: The Elder Wand.”

“Blimey!” Ron said.

Harry glanced at him and saw that Hermione was doing the same. Obviously, their friend knew what this meant.

“Th onset by most wizards to be a legend, and sought by those who think it is real, the Elder Wand is said to have been crafted by Death itself.” Dumbledore slowly shook his head. “I do not believe this. I think it is far more likely that its first wielder, Antioch Peverell, made that up to conceal the wand’s origin - either because he killed its former wielder, or because he had crafted it himself using the Dark Arts. Although seeing as I am dead, I might have been proven incorrect by now.” He smiled again. “No matter its origin, the Elder Wand will allow you, Harry, to penetrate the Dark Lord’s defences, and face him in his own mind. It will not grant you victory, though. No wand, no spell will affect the struggle between you and Tom. All the Elder Wand will allow you to do is to reach his mind; the rest will be up to you.”

Harry pressed his lips together. When the Headmaster’s memory had mentioned cheating, he had hoped for something more. He should have known it wouldn’t be that simple.

“As you already know, you will have to be rather close to Voldemort to use Legilimency. Unlike
before, finding him will not be the main challenge any more - after my death, the Dark Lord will grow quite bold. But you will have to brave his followers, and himself, without my protection. Ideally, he would seek you out to duel, to prove his own superiority, but I fear that after killing me, he will not feel the need for such a gesture.” Dumbledore’s smile disappeared. “A situation that can be laid at my feet, and for which I hope you will be able to forgive me.”

The old wizard’s memory took a deep breath. “Mister Weasley, Miss Granger, it will be up to you and your friends and allies to protect Harry in my place, against the Dark Lord’s followers and Voldemort himself.”

Harry was about to protest - he didn’t want his friends to take such risks for him - but Hermione shushed him and Ron glared at him.

“I wish I could give you more advice on how to face the Dark Lord and his followers, but as my death proved, my plans were not as well-made as I thought.”

Harry heard Ron snort in response, and Hermione whisper something he didn’t quite catch. Before he could say anything, though, the Headmaster’s memory spoke up again: “However, I can leave you, Mister Weasley, Miss Granger, something more tangible than mere advice. Miss Granger, I leave you a quite exclusive collection of tomes you should find useful for dealing with the Dark Arts. I will caution you, though: It is very easy to think that the best counter to a dark curse is another dark curse. While that may be true in some cases, such ‘solutions’ are often more dangerous than the problems they are meant to solve. Do not succumb to such temptation - you will regret it, trust me.”

Harry glanced to Hermione and saw that the witch was tense, trembling even, as she slowly nodded.

“Mister Weasley, you may think you are just an average wizard doing what he can to help his friends, but you have proven yourself both courageous and able to think on your feet, facing dangers experienced Aurors would run from, or fail to deal with. I leave you a number of trinkets I have collected over the years which you should find useful. As with Miss Granger, I have to caution you, though - they can be quite dangerous, if used improperly. And sometimes even if used properly.” With a faint smile, the memory added: “I trust your experience with your brothers will serve you well there.”

“Merlin’s balls!” Ron exclaimed, only to be shushed again by Hermione.

“You may wonder why you three are hearing this, and not others, such as Alastor, Sirius and my brother, people who will fight at your side, risking their lives to defeat the Dark Lord.”

Now that the Headmaster’s image was mentioning it, Harry wondered why Sirius wasn’t in there with them.

“The reason for singling you three out is that Voldemort’s legacy will continue to threaten Wizarding Britain even after his final death. I am not talking about his surviving followers, but the hatred and fear his manipulations and ploys have caused.”

Harry saw that the Headmaster looked more serious than ever before in this memory.

“War brutalises people. As their friends and kin are killed, each side feels justified in retaliating - and escalating. Especially when fighting an enemy as vile as the Dark Lord and his followers. Violence often comes easier to those who have fought in a war. I have seen this in several wars myself. Experienced it, even, to my great shame.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected that. The Headmaster, doing …
“The Dark Lord’s actions have discredited his cause, and his followers. I do not doubt that the surviving Death Eaters will be brought to justice.” Dumbledore took a deep breath. “But many pureblood wizards and witches will not see justice being done. They will see revenge being taken by the victors. They have been told for over a year how dangerous the muggleborns are, and how brutal. Even if they have not taken any action against muggleborns, even if they have not abused the laws passed by the Ministry, they will be afraid of being punished just for being purebloods. Those who have been raised in the belief that blood matters will expect others - the muggleborns - to act accordingly, and judge people by their blood, not their deeds.

“On the other hand, the muggleborns have been persecuted for a year, forced to leave their homes and go into hiding. They have seen friends and family arrested, killed even, for no other reason than having been born to muggles. They have seen their homes, their businesses, taken over by purebloods profiteering from the Ministry’s laws. Many of them will not want mere justice, but revenge. And some will not care who they hurt, as long as it is a pureblood.”

Harry heard Hermione draw a hissing breath, and knew what she was thinking. And remembering.

“Britain will be a cauldron ready to boil over after Voldemort’s defeat. And I fear that many of my oldest friends and allies will not be able to do what needs to be done to avoid a bloodbath - or another war in ten or twenty years.”

“What?” Harry almost forgot that he was watching a memory. What was the Headmaster saying?

“Sirius has spent over a decade unjustly imprisoned in Azkaban, surrounded by monsters forcing him to relive his worst memories. His opinion of the Ministry is as biased as one would expect after such an ordeal. Alastor has spent decades hunting dark wizards, and has been crippled for his efforts - and left unable to trust anyone. My brother… it is not my story to tell, but he has been deeply wronged by this country, and hasn’t been the same since. Arthur is a good man, but he has been scorned and belittled by many in the Ministry, and like Molly, family comes first for him. Amelia is too rooted in the status quo, too convinced of her own principles, too unwilling to question herself or to bend when needed. Cornelius is too quick to bow to pressure, too easy to influence.

“Britain needs justice and reforms, but most of all, it needs people who will do what’s right, not what’s easy. People who will side with the innocents, even against their friends and family.” The Headmaster pulled his half-moon glasses off and seemed to stare straight at Harry.

“People like you.”

The Headmaster sighed again, and folded his hands. “You must not just win the war, but the peace as well. I hate placing this burden upon you, especially seeing what else you already have to shoulder, but I do not see any alternative. You’re young, but you’ve proven yourselves since your first year at Hogwarts. You have earned my trust again and again. Rest assured that no matter where I am, my thoughts are with you.”

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“Blimey, the man’s barmy! Was barmy.”

Harry chuckled at hearing Ron’s expression, though he felt like crying in frustration. Dumbledore expected him to not only defeat the Dark Lord, in single combat, but to reform the country? Three teenagers? “We haven’t even finished school!” he said, as the memory started to fade.

Then he was back in the Headmaster’s alcove, rubbing his temple. His back hurt from being bent for such a long time, and he stretched to relieve some of the pain.
“Told you, but did you listen?” Sirius was shaking his head at him with a rueful grin.

Harry scoffed at him.

“So, what did the Headmaster tell you?”

Harry hesitated. He didn’t want to lie to Sirius, but he didn’t know how his godfather would take the Headmaster’s words.

“He explained how Harry can defeat the Dark Lord,” Ron said. “With our help.”

“And he left us quite a few things to help us,” Hermione added.

“And he told us not to lose the peace,” Harry added. He trusted his godfather. He saw his two friends glancing at him, then at each other.

“That’s kind of comforting to hear,” Sirius said, grinning, “that Dumbledore already thought about the time after the war.”

“It was anything but comforting,” Harry said, snorting. “Trust me, killing Voldemort is the easy part.”

“What?” Sirius was now staring at them.

Hermione spoke up. “According to the Headmaster, Voldemort’s death might start a bloodbath as muggleborns take revenge, and purebloods retaliate.”

“We can’t let any Death Eaters escape justice, or we’ll have to fight them again ten years from now!” Sirius said.

That sounded familiar, Harry thought.

“We won’t let any Death Eaters escape. But the Headmaster is, was, concerned about muggleborns attacking purebloods indiscriminately,” Hermione countered. “He’s correct, too - we’ve seen that happen.”

“Bloody berk,” Ron muttered. Louder, he added: “And he doesn’t think you and the rest of the Order will be able to keep the muggleborns in check in that case.”

Sirius frowned. “How bad could it be?”

Hermione looked at him. “Purebloods and muggleborns starting to kill each other, like Death Eaters - attacking homes, starting riots, trying to drive their neighbours out…”

Sirius cursed. “They’re not Death Eaters!”

“No, but it won’t be too long before people on both sides start acting like them,” Hermione said. “As long as everyone thinks they’re doing the right thing…”

Sirius was silent for a moment. Then he spoke up again: “But what if they are attacking Death Eaters, like the Resistance?”

“How would they know who’s a Death Eater? We have had a lot of trouble finding them, even with all the spying and other help we received,” Hermione said. “We cannot tolerate vigilante justice, certainly not once Voldemort is dead and the war won.”
“But who will take over hunting the Death Eaters down? The muggleborns don’t trust the Ministry, and many of the purebloods don’t trust the muggleborns,” Ron asked.

“Hah!” Sirius sneered. “Trust the Ministry with hunting the Death Eaters? They couldn’t hunt down a bunch of dead flobberworms in an empty room!”

“We can’t just take over the country and replace the Old Families with ourselves. We need to reform the Ministry and Wizarding Britain,” Hermione said. “And we need the trust of the purebloods too - those who did not support the Dark Lord, at least.”

“Those are either already on our side, or too cowardly to do anything, no matter who’s ruling them.” Sirius shrugged. “But let’s get you your inheritances, and then let’s focus on killing the Dark Lord. We can worry about the rest once we have won the war.”

Harry nodded in agreement.

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“Here, Harry!”

Ron Weasley watched as Sirius handed Harry Dumbledore’s wand. The Elder Wand. He saw Harry take it, then give it a wave, and saw his friend’s eyes widen when Harry gasped. “Whoa!”

Ron had never been as jealous of his best friend as in that moment. Harry had just been handed the legendary wand of Death himself. One of the three Deathly Hallows. According to legend, people had fought and killed for that wand, risked their lives for it - and Harry just received it as if it was a seven-Galleon wand in Ollivander’s. Or, worse, a hand-me-down from another family member, like Ron’s first wand.

Then he remembered why Harry had received the Elder Wand. His friend would have to face Voldemort in a fight to the death, and needed it just to have a chance. Just to be able to challenge the Dark Lord, according to Dumbledore - the wand wouldn’t help him in the actual fight.

Ron had never felt so ashamed of himself. Not since their fourth year, at least.

“Here, Ron!”

He saw Sirius hold out a package to him, about the size of a muggle shoe carton his dad had once brought home, and remembered that Dumbledore had left him something as well - a few ‘trinkets’. Hermione received a library, Harry a legendary wand, and he was left with some toys. “Thanks,” he said.

He almost didn’t want to open it, but the sight of Hermione’s eyes lighting up when she was presented with a trunk full of books and Sirius commented that he had ‘spent an hour collecting them in Albus’s flat’ made him look for any distraction, before he started to be jealous of his own girlfriend.

There were half a dozen … ‘trinkets’ was a good description, Ron decided, since he didn’t recognise any of them, inside the package. And a letter. He opened the letter, started to read the descriptions of the different items, and then chuckled, ruefully, at the last line.

*I leave you with not just these devices, which should prove to be quite useful in your hands, but also with the counsel that even seemingly modest trinkets can turn out to be crucial and important at the right moment. Just like wizards.*
The Headmaster had known him well enough for one last lesson, or so it seemed.

*****


She was Minister for Magic. The Wizengamot - those who had dared to attend the emergency session she had called for, at least - had elected her but half an hour before. Everything had been in accordance with the law. Amelia Bones told herself this as she stepped inside the Minister’s office. Her office, now.

It had been repaired since Cornelius’s death, but nothing had been changed. She wasn’t about to change much herself. Cornelius’s personal belongings had been sent to his family already, and the office would suffice for her needs.

It wasn’t as if she would be starting her term in the shadow of her predecessor, as other Ministers had had to. Cornelius would not be counted among the great Ministers. No, she thought, looking at the lead article of the Daily Prophet placed on her desk by her secretary, at the big letters spelling ‘DUMBLEDORE DEAD!’, if anyone was to overshadow her, it was Dumbledore. Even dead his presence lingered. There had already been talks of placing a portrait of him in her office, so it’d be able to advise her once it was activated.

She had not decided to become Minister for Magic to be famous, she told herself as she sat down. She had become Minister because no one else was able to do what was needed to save the country. If she was to be seen as the mouthpiece of a portrait, then that was a small price to pay, as long as she could save Britain.

From all threats, she added to herself, looking at her calendar, where the entry of her upcoming meeting with Black, Potter and Granger was quite prominently placed.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 27th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort sneered at the missive he had just received from his agent. The houngans of Jamaica had heard of Dumbledore’s death, and claimed that he had been killed while breaking into their holy library - not that they had called it that. If they thought that such a claim would impress anyone who mattered, then they were fools. Although they might just be trying to cow their own subjects. And some of the houngans might even honestly believe that their pitiful defences had managed to fell his greatest foe, Voldemort thought.

Fortunately, Dumbledore had died in Hogwarts, so the houngans’ claims would look foolish once he took responsibility.

He smiled, his slight anger fading quickly. His greatest, his only foe, was dead. Killed by a clever trap of his, even! A fitting end for Dumbledore, laid low by a Slytherin’s cunning and his mastery of the Dark Arts!

Wizarding Britain was his now. No one could stand against him now, not for any length of time. All that was left were some minor obstacles: the mudbloods still fighting against their betters, those blindly following Dumbledore even after his death - and the Boy-Who-Lived.

And he had plans to deal with those obstacles.

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Chapter 38: Politics

‘Amelia Bones was the obvious choice to succeed Cornelius Fudge. The witch had been leading the Department of Magical Law Enforcement throughout the Second Blood War, and was widely seen as both competent and incorruptible - and willing to die rather than surrender to the Dark Lord. Those who had tied their fates to Dumbledore saw her as their last hope to survive the war after the Chief Warlock had been killed.

However, Amelia Bones also had the reputation of a witch who scorned politics. More than a few members of the Wizengamot must have been privately wondering - and worrying - about how she would handle issues that required compromises and deals, instead of a firm dedication to upholding the law.

Her biggest problem, though, was the fact that for many muggleborns, Amelia Bones had been the face of the Ministry’s oppression. It had been she who commanded the Aurors and Hit-Wizards harassing and arresting them, she who led the Ministry’s efforts to enforce the muggleborn laws, and she who had authorised the undercover mission against the Muggleborn Resistance. Some of the muggleborns who had not lived through the First Blood War even considered her a worse enemy than Voldemort himself.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

London, Diagon Alley, January 27th, 1997

Hermione Granger entered Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes wearing a wig, large old-fashioned glasses, and slightly shabby robes. None of which were affected by the door’s variant of the Thief’s Downfall. One of the twins was behind the counter, sorting through a box of various enchanted sour drops with his wand - which was pointed in her direction when she stepped closer. She suppressed the urge to draw her own. No one else was around.

She put her hands on the counter and leaned forward, ignoring the way his wand was almost touching her chest. “Hi Forge,” she said.

His eyes widened when he - finally - recognised her. “Using muggle disguises is cheating,” he mock-complained.

“Think of it as pointing out a weakness in your defences.” Hermione smiled for a moment, then grew serious again. “Do you have a moment?”

“Of course.” A flick of his wand flipped the sign on the door to ‘closed’, and a swish opened the door to the backroom. “After you, milady!” he said, grinning exaggeratedly.

Hermione snorted. When she stepped through the door, she felt a slight tingling sensation running over her. More enchantments. And the door had been reinforced as well. She glanced at the twin behind her.

He shrugged. “Can’t be too cautious, with Dumbledore gone.”

She nodded. The shop had been attacked during the riot in Diagon Alley, and later Davis and
Greengrass had tried to infiltrate it. The Death Eaters would certainly try again soon. “You’re not planning to stay and fight.” She didn’t make it sound as a question, but she wasn’t quite as certain as she tried to appear. The twins had been quite reckless in the past. They hadn’t been in a war back then, though.

“No. Just long enough to make them pay for attacking us.” The wizard grinned. “We have prepared our escape routes, and a nasty surprise. After this and the Burrow, they will never dare to attack a Weasley home again!”

Hermione doubted that - the Dark Lord would want to demonstrate that the Weasleys could not stand up to him and his followers. “Are you prepared for the Dark Lord walking down Diagon Alley too?”

Fred - or George, she still couldn’t tell them apart - winced. “We could be prepared… if we were willing to destroy most of Diagon Alley and probably break the Statute of Secrecy.”

Hermione nodded. Apparently, they had acquired their own explosives. “Yes. That is a concern.”

“Hopefully the Dark Lord will think we are prepared to do so.” The wizard was looking at her quite peculiarly.

Hermione nodded again. “We could probably prepare a shaped charge that would not do too much collateral damage, but the odds of the Dark Lord walking on top of such a bomb…” she shrugged. “He has used explosives himself, so he’ll be watching out for them. There are ways around the common detection spells, but…”

“Which means you’ll have to drop a bomb on him, if you want to kill him. One of those that destroyed Malfoy Manor.” He wasn’t dropping the topic.

“I think he’ll be prepared for that as well. We’d need to prevent all sorts of magical travel right before the bomb is dropped…” she trailed off.

“And that means whoever is casting the jinxes will not escape either.”

“Yes.” And coordinating such an attack would require a lot of planning, and probably some luck as well.

“You’d still try it if you saw an opportunity, right?” He leaned against a workbench, crossing his arms.

“As a desperate measure, yes. But we’ve made other plans.” Hermione smiled. “Dumbledore’s been preparing a surprise for the Dark Lord for a while, and his death hasn’t stopped the preparations.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She wasn’t about to tell him anything else. She probably shouldn’t have told him as much as she had, Hermione thought. But he deserved to know that not all hope was lost. Especially since the twins might try something brave but desperate themselves otherwise.

“I don’t suppose that you are visiting our humble abode because you need help with that?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m here because of Dennis Creevey. He’s a victim of the Withering Curse, and we don’t want to leave him in the Ministry’s care, but we also can’t spare the people to take care of him ourselves. We’d like to let those who take care of Greengrass and Davis take over.”

“It’s not us,” he said, frowning for a second.
“But you know them.” She kept looking straight at him.

“Yes.”

“And the Headmaster organised them.”

“Yes.”

“So, they can be trusted.” Or so Hermione assumed. Dumbledore’s death had changed a lot, but many would simply try to go on as usual.

“Yes.” The twin sighed. “I’ll contact them.”

“Thank you. With a bit of luck, it won’t be needed for long.” But longer than he’d expect, Hermione thought. Once Voldemort was dead, the Ministry would be taking another look at their alliance. Tomorrow’s meeting with Bones would be crucial to lay the groundwork for the time after the war.

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Brenda Brocktuckle pushed the meal that had been floated into her cell around on the tray. She had been hungry, until she’d overheard the guards’ conversation through the slit in her cell’s door while they distributed the meals. Dumbledore was dead! Killed by a dark curse!

A few months ago, such news would have shocked and saddened Brenda Brocktuckle. But now, sitting in a cell in the Ministry, she smiled. With the Headmaster dead, the Dark Lord was certain to win the war. And without Dumbledore, the Ministry wouldn’t be able to resist - they certainly wouldn’t dare to sentence her or the other prisoners to death!

She knew that the Dark Lord didn’t care that much about his followers, especially not those who had failed him, but executing them would be a slight he’d have to repay with blood. Lots of blood. And, she told herself, not for the first time, she hadn’t failed him. She had done what she had been ordered to - she had planted the cursed paper aeroplanes and had struck down the traitors in the Auror Corps. That the Dark Lord’s forces had failed to take over the Ministry hadn’t been her fault; others had failed to stop the mudbloods and French from breaching their lines. If anyone was to blame, then it would be Bellatrix Lestrange. The dark witch had been in command. Brenda had only followed orders.

She just hoped the Dark Lord would see it that way. At least she had been under Malcolm’s command as well, so if the Dark Lord was looking for a scapegoat, and unwilling to let Lestrange be blamed - rumours claimed she had been his lover - maybe Malcolm would be the one to get tortured as a punishment.

Brenda put the tray down on her bed, drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. And even if that didn’t work out… she didn’t want to get tortured, but anything was better than dying. At least the Ministry couldn’t get a Dementor to suck out her soul. And, she thought with a cynical smile, they couldn’t send her to Azkaban to be guarded by Dementors either.

She snorted, almost against her will. Who would have thought that there’d be a day she’d be glad that the Ministry had lost control of the Dementors? She was an Auror, she shouldn’t be imprisoned in the very cells to which she had sent so many criminals! It was all the fault of those mudbloods, and of the blood traitors!

She hissed through her clenched teeth. They’d pay. Brenda would get out of these cells, and she’d
“Home, sweet home,” Hermione Granger whispered when she entered the safe house in London to which the Resistance had returned. It wasn’t quite the joke she would have liked it to be - after months of living here, moving back from Hogwarts felt like coming home.

And wasn’t that sad.

“How did it go?” Sally-Anne stepped out of the kitchen as soon as Hermione drew near - the other witch must have waited for her.

“We can move Dennis later today,” Hermione said.

Sally-Anne smiled. “Thank God!” She sighed. “I mean, I’d like to care for him, and it wouldn’t take much, but…”

“We can’t spare a permanent guard for him, and if anything happened, no one would know how to find him,” Hermione finished for her friend. She didn’t mention that should all of the Resistance perish, then the odds of Dennis ever being woken up, much less getting cured, would be very, very low.

“Yes. But I still feel guilty about moving him out from here.” Sally-Anne grimaced.

“Me too,” Hermione said. She wasn’t quite lying, but she felt rather more guilty about failing him in the first place. Besides, Dennis would understand that they couldn’t spare anyone to care for him, not if they wanted to win this war.

“Have you heard anything from the Ministry?” Sally-Anne asked.

Hermione saw that the other girl was fidgeting with her hands. Not quite wringing them, but close. She shook her head. “No. Tomorrow’s meeting hasn’t been rescheduled, though.”

“I don’t like that you’re going there alone.” Sally-Anne was frowning, though it looked more like a pout.

“If it’s a trap, then I’d rather have everyone else safe. Your chances of saving me are much greater that way.” Hermione had used that argument quite often in the discussion. “I won’t be alone, anyway. And Ron will not be at the meeting either.” Although he’d be in the Ministry, visiting his father and brother.

Sally-Anne blinked. “Why not? Everyone at Hogwarts knows about your relationship after you spilled the beans to Brown and Patil.” There was a slight sneer in her voice when she mentioned the two Gryffindors.

“I’m attending for the Resistance, Sirius will represent the Order, and Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived,” Hermione said.

“Ah. No place for the Resistance leader’s pureblood boyfriend?” Sally-Anne was smiling now, teasing.

“We’d actually considered that,” Hermione said. “To show that we don’t care about blood.” She
smiled cynically when she saw the other witch wince slightly - lately, some of the Resistance seemed to care greatly about someone’s blood - and continued: “But I think Bones would not think highly of me should I show up with a boyfriend to a meeting.”

“She’d underestimate you, though.”

“She might - and as a result, she might betray us.” Hermione knew that the Resistance was not quite as strong as many, including some of their own members, thought they were. The Ministry would regret it, deeply, but that wouldn’t help those killed in an ambush, or in retaliation.

“What? Do you think Bones will sell us out to the Dark Lord?” Sally-Anne was gaping at her.

“No. She’s too smart to stab us in the back during the war, either. But once the war is over the Ministry won’t need us any more. If the Minister sees us as a bunch of kids led by a stupid teenager she’ll be unlikely to work with us.” Quite the contrary, actually.

Sally-Anne exhaled loudly. “We are rather young. Especially for wizards and witches.”

“Yes.” And if they acted their age, they’d invite trouble. Hermione snorted - she had spent a big part of her time at Hogwarts trying to get Harry and Ron to act more maturely. This wasn’t that different. Far more was at stake this time, though.

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**Hogwarts, January 27th, 1997**

“Harry! Harry!”

Harry Potter knew that voice. He had heard it often enough in the last few days - both cheerful, and desperate. Luna was definitely sounding cheerful today. She was about the only one in Hogwarts, with the possible exception of some secret pureblood bigots, he thought. He turned around and saw Luna and Ginny walking towards Ron and him. They must have just left the infirmary.

“Hi, Luna, hi, Ginny,” he said.

“Hi.” Ginny’s greeting was not as enthusiastic as Luna’s.

Ron simply nodded at them. Harry’s friend seemed to either miss or ignore his sister’s resulting frown - he had been quite distracted, after Dumbledore’s message.

“How is your father?” Harry asked, before a sibling row could break out. Tempers were frayed enough.

“He’s already writing and researching again!” Luna said, beaming at him. “Madam Pomfrey released him a few days ago.” Scrunching her nose, she added: “Although he might be a carrier for some illness - she said he’d drive the other patients crazy if he were to stay longer. I’ll have to ask her for treatment for that.”

Harry didn’t quite know how to answer that. He settled on nodding. “How are you two doing?”

“With Daddy healthy again, I’m doing fine!” Luna said with a wide smile.

“Shouldn’t we ask you that?” Ginny said. “You were very close to Dumbledore.” She bit her lip right afterwards.
Before Harry could assure the girl that this wasn’t exactly a secret, Luna piped up. “Oh, yes. I think Harry holds the record for being called to the Headmaster’s office. I’d have to ask Hermione to check.”

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Harry said.

Ron chuckled. “Close enough, in our early years.”

Harry realised that they were correct - he couldn’t remember any students who had met Dumbledore as often. The Headmaster had been quite distant, for all his friendly manner.

“Will you be OK?”

Ginny’s question shook Harry out of his thoughts. The witch was staring at him.

She was probably worried about the war, with her family so prominently involved. Harry slowly nodded. “The Headmaster was prepared for such an… eventuality, I think he’d say.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Ginny said with a frown, “but what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Ginny was still staring at him. “And don’t say you’re fine!”

Harry was tempted to say it anyway. He sighed instead. “I’ll be alright.” Once Voldemort was dead.

“Don’t nag him, Ginny,” Ron said.

The two siblings stared at each other for a moment, then Ginny looked away. “Sorry.”

“No problem,” Harry said. It was nice to see that she cared. And he was used to ‘interventions’, as Hermione called them, that were a bit more pushy.

Which reminded him of tomorrow’s meetings, and his good mood vanished. If the Ministry tried to double-cross them… He shook his head. “We have to go. More training.” That was no secret either.

“Oh! Good luck!” Luna said, brightly.

“We should get training as well,” Ginny said. “It’s not safe here, not any more.” She looked at Harry, her chin slightly raised, before glancing at Ron.

She wasn’t wrong, Harry thought, but the kind of training he and Ron were doing tonight wouldn’t help the girl. “We’ll talk to Moody,” he said after a moment.

Ron glanced at him, but didn’t say anything while Ginny smiled. Luna nodded, though Harry couldn’t tell if the blonde Ravenclaw actually knew what they were talking about.

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A few minutes after they had left the girls, Harry and Ron were in the room Moody used for their lesson. They were alone, though. Dumbledore was dead, Sirius was busy at the Ministry, Remus was still in Albania, and Moody wouldn’t trust anyone to enter his mind.

That left just one person to practise on.

Harry aimed his wand - the Elder Wand - at Ron.
“Remember: No embarrassing scenes,” his friend said, flinching a tiny bit.

“Promise,” Harry said. He had no plans to delve into Ron’s childhood memories. He had other plans, though. “Legilimens!”

Harry entered Ron’s mind as if his friend had no Occlumency shields at all. A second after he had cast, he was amidst spheres containing memories, drifting around, changing sizes as they floated by in a cacophony of words and sounds. Harry focused his mind, his will. He wanted specific memories. They wouldn’t be embarrassing, he knew that already, Harry told himself to ease the guilt he felt.

It was hard to find the memory he wanted, so many other memories were swirling around him. Some he just needed to catch a glimpse of, or a word, to remember them himself… there! He grit his teeth and dived in.

He was in a small restaurant. A French one, judging by the menus and the accents. Looking around, he spotted his two best friends at a table. Hermione was wearing a short black dress. Not an evening gown. Ron was wearing a jacket, though. But the whole set up of the date seemed… less expensive, certainly less formal than Harry’s own date with the witch. They were talking about France, about Ron’s family. And about Allan Baker. And the Yule Ball. Ron was quite open. Brutally honest, even, Harry would say. No pretenses.

He dropped out of the scene when Ron reached out to hold Hermione’s hand.

He floated for a while - how long he couldn’t say - pondering if he should check another memory of them together. To find out what Ron had done differently. What had made Hermione choose Harry’s friend over him.

He decided against it, though. He felt guilty - and stupid - enough about this already. She had made her choice.

He opened his eyes again and saw Ron sitting down on a bench, rubbing his temples. “Blimey! I didn’t even notice you, not even when you were inside!”

“It’s the wand,” Harry said, hefting it. “Let’s try it with a Shield Charm,” he added. Ron wasn’t exactly Voldemort. The Dark Lord wouldn’t be that easy.

“Alright. Protego!”

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 27th, 1997

“Trust me, Albus had plans for all eventualities. This war is far from lost.” Sirius Black was smiling as confidently as he could at Elphias Doge while he sat in his preferred armchair in the living room of Grimmauld Place.

The old wizard - almost as old as Dumbledore had been, but not nearly as wise - didn’t look convinced, though. He took a deep breath. “But what can we do, without Albus? No one else could stand against the Dark Lord. His forces barely failed to take the Ministry before, and that was without him being present.” Shaking his almost bald head, he went on: “No. We best flee the country. Gather support on foreign shores.”

Sirius was tempted to tell the man about the prophecy, and the plan to kill Voldemort. That had to remain a secret, though. Instead he snorted. “And what kind of support do you think we’ll be able to
gather, as refugees? If a country even takes us in, knowing the Dark Lord will want us dead. How long will we last, bereft of our ancestral homes, and their protections, when he sends out his assassins after us?” He leaned forward, lowering his voice slightly. “We could flee to muggle Britain, of course. Abandon magic and live like muggles.”

Elphias gasped at him. “Surely not!”

“That’s the only alternative. How many enemies did Albus make since he defeated Grindelwald? And how many of them will want to take revenge, with him dead?” Sirius scoffed. “We can hide among muggles, or we can stand and fight.”

“And die,” Elphias added. He sounded more resigned than afraid now, though. At least Sirius thought so.

“We may very well die. Like so many of us in the last war. Did we let that hold us back, or make us back down?” Sirius shook his head. “And trust me, the Dark Lord hasn’t won yet.”

“But what can we do against him? He even killed Albus!”

“Albus made plans, Elphias. That’s all I can say.”

Suddenly, the man’s eyes seemed to light up. “It’s the Boy-Who-Lived, isn’t it? Harry Potter is the only one who has ever defeated the Dark Lord!”

Sirius didn’t wince or frown. He didn’t obliviate Doge either, although he wanted to. He knew it would be futile, though - with Albus dead, people would be turning to Harry as their only hope. It was a sign of how shaken up Doge was over Albus’s death that the wizard hadn’t thought of Harry until now. He wasn’t wrong, of course - Harry was the key to defeating Voldemort for good, although Sirius wouldn’t mind blowing the bastard’s body to dust if given the opportunity. And even without him knowing about the plan, Voldemort wanted to kill Harry anyway. Having him come after Sirius’s godson would only help their plans.

Sirius told himself all that, and still wanted to take Harry and run. Far away. Despite his own words. But he knew that his godson would never run. Even if he might want to, Harry would never leave his friends, and they would never leave either. Gryfffindors! He slowly shook his head. “I can’t tell you anything. You know that.”

“I know, I know.” The old wizard was grinning now. “I should have realised it before. All the rumours of special treatment… I won’t tell the others, but I’ll tell them not to give up hope.”

Which was what Sirius had wanted him to do. “Good. We need to stand firm in the Wizengamot. Until…”

“Yes, until.”

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Once he had seen his guest out, Sirius leaned back against the wall next to the fireplace, and closed his eyes. Merlin’s balls, he was exhausted! But at least now it seemed as if the Order’s supporters in the Wizengamot would hold together for a bit longer. Which would help in tomorrow’s meeting.

“Did you succeed in stiffening their backbones?”

The familiar accent, and the slightly teasing tone, had him smiling before he opened his eyes and looked at Vivienne d’Aigle. “I hope so.”
The witch was wearing her duelling robes. Cut to not impede her movements, and tight enough to prevent them from snagging on anything - or from providing an enemy with an easy hold - they emphasised her figure as well. An effect she claimed was coincidental. Sirius didn’t think so - duelling was a sport, after all, and that meant spectators. Not that he minded. Although he hadn’t missed that prior to the Battle of the Ministry, and the horrible losses her family had suffered, she hadn’t been wearing these robes quite as often.

“Is there any news from Marcel?” he asked, pushing off the wall.

She shook her head, her smile fading. “The recent news ’as not been received well at ’ome.”

If he hadn’t come to know the Delacours well in their time at his home, especially the witch in front of him, Sirius would have been surprised by how the famous French élan seemed to vanish in the wake of Dumbledore’s death. As it was, he knew better. “The Duc’s having trouble?”

She nodded. “They are trying to use the opportunity to attack the Duc’s ‘apparent support for violent muggleborns following in Grindelwald’s footsteps’. Dubois and ’er ilk. Fools,” she added with obvious disgust.

She was looking lovely even with her face stuck in a frown. Sirius didn’t know if it was her Veela beauty, or that French je ne sais quoi that was almost as famous as their élan. He took a step forward and gathered her in his arms. The smell of her long blonde hair, hanging loosely down to the small of her back, was both familiar and enticing. “Your family’s sending help, though, right?”

“Of course!” she answered, indignantly. “Our blood will be avenged.” As he had expected - the French were like that. In a lower voice, though, she added: “But they’ll ’ave to be careful. Marcel cannot appear to defy the Duc. That would force ’im to demonstrate that ’e ’as not lost control of ’is supporters.”

“Politics.” Sirius spat the word out.

“You are a politician, you’d know all about it.” Her tone was teasing, but he knew what she meant. He had responsibilities. Duties. To Harry, of course. And to Britain.

“I’m also - and foremost - a brave and dashing wizard,” he retorted, pulling his head back to meet her eyes with his best smirk. “And I’ve had a very long day.”

“Oh?” Her smile grew more pronounced, more teasing. “You’re too exhausted for anything but rest, then?”

That was a challenge to which Sirius had never - almost never - failed to rise.

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Amelia Bones didn’t shake her head at the Daily Prophet’s headline article, but her mouth formed a thin line as she read it. According to the article - Skeeter was at it, again - Dumbledore had died fighting dozens of houngans to save the victims of the Withering Curse in Britain, ‘taking them with him into death’s embrace’. A load of drivel, she thought, that would fit much better in The Quibbler. Which had brought out an ‘Albus Dumbledore Memorial Special Issue’, and blamed the man’s death on a curse cast by Grindelwald in their famous duel fifty years ago, which had been held at bay by phoenix tears until now.

She sighed. More trouble for Britain. The Jamaican houngans had already sent a complaint to the
ICW. It wouldn’t go anywhere - apart from some sympathetic North American wizard enclaves, they had no allies - but some other countries might use the opportunity to put some pressure on Britain when Amelia’s country was weakened. Payback for some of Dumbledore’s less popular policies as Supreme Mugwump.

“Madam Minister?” Her secretary’s voice coming through the mirror on her desk interrupted her reading. “Auror Moody is here.”

“Send him in.”

“So, how’s it feel, being Minister?” the old Auror asked, in lieu of a greeting.

“It’s just like my old job, just with more stress,” she shot back. It wasn’t quite true, of course. And his laughter told her he didn’t believe her.

“You wanted it.” He conjured a seat for himself and sat down, his artificial eye spinning madly. “Why’d you send for me? I was about to whip some of our better curse-fodder into shape. Make them more likely to hit the enemy with their spells than their own feet.” He tapped his peg leg for emphasis.

“I’ve picked Dawlish as Head Auror.” She steeled herself for Moody’s reaction - his opinion of that Auror was well-known. But Moody wouldn’t make a good Head Auror. He was far too paranoid. And he had been Dumbledore’s friend.

“As expected. You don’t really have many decent choices left.” Moody snorted. “At least he’s not one to rock the boat. Who’ll be your successor? Thicknesse?”

“Yes.” Amelia wasn’t certain what annoyed her more - that Moody hadn’t reacted as she had expected, or that he had predicted her decisions so easily.

“Decent man. Useless in a fight, but he won’t screw up paperwork or hinder his Aurors. That’s more than most of the Ministry employees.” Moody chuckled.

Amelia didn’t think that the current state of the Ministry was funny, and didn’t react to the comment.

“Was that all? Or did you want to pick my brain before the meeting with Black, Potter and Granger?”

“Would you tell me anything?” She narrowed her eyes at him. The scarred Auror had been an old friend of Dumbledore’s, and a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Probably one of the leaders now, unless Amelia’s estimate of the organisation’s strength was mistaken.

“Of course I would. Don’t want you to make a fatal blunder, after all.” Another wide and ugly grin appeared on Moody’s face.

Amelia wasn’t quite certain if he was trying to rile her up, or if he had become even more abrasive and uncouth lately. Her long experience with him and others in the Ministry allowed her not to show her annoyance, though. “Can we beat the Dark Lord?”

“Yes. Plans are in motion.”

Which meant that the Order was doing the planning. She would have to ask the others, then. “Centred on the Boy-Who-Lived?” Dumbledore had showed far more interest in Potter than would have been normal even for such a celebrity.
“Mh.” Moody grunted noncommittally.

“Can the Ministry trust them? All of them?”

“If you don’t act like the idiots who got us into this mess, yes.” The old Auror leaned forward. “They don’t trust you, Bones. Granger’s been the most wanted witch in Britain for months, and she hasn’t forgotten that. And Potter and Black owe her their lives. If you try to play games, it’ll end badly. For all of us. But mostly for you.”

Granger had killed dozens of Aurors, Amelia thought. Not all of them, not even the majority of them had been Death Eaters. And the attack on Malfoy Manor… that muggleborn witch was a mass murderer! She controlled herself, though. “Cornelius has made an alliance with the Muggleborn Resistance. We’re all fighting the Dark Lord.”

“The Resistance will want a pardon, Bones. A full pardon. No ifs or buts or clauses.”

“Carte blanche?” Legitimise their murders? Amelia pressed her lips together. A country that sacrificed law and order to survive doomed itself. If she let the Resistance - or the Order - run rampant, kill at will…

“Call it what you want. We’re at war, and they’ll want assurances that you’ll not stab them in the back once it’s over.”

“You know how easily that would be abused. If they have nothing to fear from the law, what will keep them from settling accounts with their wands?” That was how the Death Eaters worked, Amelia thought.

“They don’t have much to fear from the law anyway. You haven’t been able to catch them in months.” Moody scoffed.

“They’ve had help from Dumbledore. And his agents.” She stared at Moody.

“I was retired.” He shrugged, then twisted his scarred face into a grin. “But I think you’d be making a mistake if you blame their successes on Dumbledore’s meddling. They’re good. You don’t want to start a war with them. Not now, and not later. There won’t be much left of the country if you do.”

“They will know that as well.” Two could play that game, Amelia thought. She wouldn’t let the Ministry be pushed around either.

“But do you think they’ll care much?” Moody leaned forward, baring his teeth. For a moment, his enchanted eye stopped rolling around and fixated on her. “It takes a lot for people to take up wands. A lot of guts, a lot of stupidity most often. Or a lot of desperation. You don’t want to push desperate people, Bones. You should remember how desperate people react - you were an Auror once.” He stood up. “I’ll return to whipping the latest recruits into shape.”

That dig hurt. But the rest of his words… Amelia nodded jerkily as he left her office. Moody was a member of Dumbledore’s Order. Of course he’d say that. Although he was correct about Granger’s ties to Potter and Black. And to the Weasleys. As much as she hated to admit it, if push came to shove, and if the Order sided with the Resistance, things would turn out even uglier than the Battle of the Ministry.

But that didn’t have to happen. Black was the key. He was another of Dumbledore’s men, but he was from an Old Family. The Blacks were proud - too proud, at times. He knew the forms, and the customs. And he held a seat in the Wizengamot. He had a lot to lose, should Britain descend into anarchy, like several wizard enclaves in the New World had in the past. And Black had shown that
he knew his way around the Wizengamot, since his exoneration. He was also Potter’s godfather, and
as far as Amelia knew, they were very close. If she could convince Black, Potter would likely
follow. The Weasleys were numerous, but poor - they were not part of the Old Families.

If she could get Black to see reason, this whole problem could be solved.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 28th, 1997

Harry Potter raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw Hermione in the entrance hall of
Grimmauld Place. She was wearing her uniform - her fatigues.

She must have noticed his reaction, since she frowned at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’d have expected you to wear something else,” he said. She looked like a guerilla fighter. Which
she was, he guessed.

“Why? I’m not about to wear robes. I represent the Resistance. And the purebloods wouldn’t be able
to tell one style of muggle clothes from the other.” With a grin, she added: “But every one of them
knows this uniform. It sends a message.”

Harry nodded. It would certainly be a not too subtle reminder that Hermione and her friends were no
pushovers. Quite the contrary.

She looked around.

“Ron’s gone ahead already,” Harry said, answering her question before she could ask. “Scouting for
an ambush, I think.” He shrugged. “Even though his dad, Percy, Tonks and Moody are in the
Ministry as well.” Ron could have waited for Hermione here.

“Another pair of eyes and a wand can’t hurt,” Hermione said.

“Indeed!” Sirius said loudly, appearing on top of the stairs. He was wearing his best robes, though.
“Can’t be too careful when dealing with politicians. They’re worse than goblins - they’ll stab you in
the back as soon as you turn around.”

“Aren’t you a politician as well?” Harry asked.

“I’m just posing as one. Temporarily, until this mess is over.” Harry’s godfather walked down the
stairs.

“That could be a long while,” Harry said. Dumbledore’s message hadn’t sounded too promising.

“Yes.” Sirius coughed. “So… everyone’s on the same page with regards to our goals?”

“A full pardon for the Resistance covering the whole war, all the muggleborn laws gone, all Death
Eaters and their supporters tried and punished,” Hermione started. “Those are just the short-term
goals, of course. Wizarding Britain needs far more than merely a change in government and a return
to the status quo. The idea that blood defines a wizard’s worth needs to disappear - and that will
necessitate far-reaching reforms. Too many laws have been passed with that thought in mind, too
much has been built upon that sick ideology. The current Wizengamot is composed of hereditary
seats, held by the Old Families, and appointed seats - granted by the Minister for the duration of his
term. As long as that remains the case, as long as the Wizengamot is controlled by rich, old
pureblood families, we’ll always risk a resurgence of the blood bigots.” With a grin, she added: “I’m
not telling the Minister that, of course.”

Sirius chuckled. “If you tell Bones that she’ll draw her wand on you. She’d fear a revolution.”

“If we can’t reform Wizarding Britain there will be a revolution,” Hermione said. “Things cannot continue as they are. Not after this war. There’s too much wrong with the country.”

“Might need another war to change it,” Sirius said, almost casually.

“That’s what Dumbledore was afraid of,” Harry said. “Can Wizarding Britain survive another war?” Or the current one, if it went on for much longer, he added to himself.

“Should it survive, if it can’t be reformed into a country that’s not a corrupt cesspit of bigots and murderers?” Sirius scoffed. “I’d rather see the Ministry burn, than let it go on like this.”

When Harry saw the expression on his godfather’s face, he shivered. Sirius certainly hadn’t forgotten who sent him to Azkaban. He glanced at Hermione, but his friend simply nodded.

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His brother’s office was a nice one, Ron Weasley thought, looking around. Much bigger than Dad’s old office. Furnished better, too. Percy could be proud. Ron hadn’t seen him that often since his brother had graduated from Hogwarts. It wasn’t as if they had grown apart, well, there was the mess during the Triwizard Tournament, but Ron couldn’t really cast hexes there, not with himself having been a right stupid git for most of that year too. They hadn’t grown apart, but their paths hadn’t crossed often. Just like with Charlie and Bill.

“So… you’re now the Deputy-Head of the Department of Magical Transportation,” Ron read from the small plaque on the door to Percy’s office.

His brother nodded. A year ago, he’d probably have straightened up and acted all proud, like when he had received his Head Boy badge, Ron thought. Not any more, though. “Yes,” Percy said. “I was the most qualified left, after the battle. And the most trusted.”

Ron nodded. “You have access to the Floo Network then.” Which was very useful.

“Yes, I do. Although all manipulations are logged. Or should be.” With a wry grin, he added: “Our workers are not always as diligent as they should be.”

“As long as the enemy can’t sabotage it.”

“I’ve taken measures to prevent that.” Percy sat down behind his desk. “How are things with Hermione?”

Ron tensed slightly. “Fine. As fine as they can be, in the middle of a war.” Merlin’s balls, he sounded like Harry! “Have you heard anything about the meeting later?”

“The meeting with the Minister?” Percy shuffled some parchment around. “There’s a lot of speculation, but no bigger security effort than normal.”

That meant Percy hadn’t heard anything about an ambush.

“Some of the older employees are concerned, of course,” Percy went on. “Father mentioned that during lunch yesterday. There aren’t that many left of the more extreme ones, of course.”
Ron sighed. “The muggleborns save their lives, and these purebloods still don’t want them around. Damn wankers!”

Percy’s mouth formed a thin line and for a moment, Ron’s brother looked like that time he had deducted points from Harry and Ron in their second year. “I see that even your relationship with Hermione hasn’t influenced you to correct your language. You might truly be hopeless.”

Ron chuckled. “I don’t curse when I’m with her, so I have to curse more when we’re apart, to even it out.”

Percy snorted. “Returning to the matter at hand, I do not think that those who have concerns about Hermione’s goals would have suffered much under the Dark Lord. They are the type to simply do as they are told, and close their eyes when they see something disturbing.”

“Ah. No trouble then?” Ron knew that type.

“Not as far as I can see. Although I’m not a trained Auror, so I’m not that well-versed in spotting spies.”

“Well, as long as the Minister is not trying anything sinister…” Ron shrugged.

“I doubt that. Though it would be a good opportunity for the Dark Lord to sabotage the alliance, if his spies could attack her and frame the Ministry.”

Ron cursed again. “Maybe I should be in the Atrium when they arrive.”

“Bones will have the Aurors and Hit-Wizards there vetted. She’s not dumb,” Percy said.

“She’s not perfect either,” Ron shot back, already on his way out. “Thanks!” he called over his shoulder.

He knew he couldn’t attend the meeting, but damned if he wouldn’t make every effort to protect his friends. He wasn’t useless.

*****

When Hermione Granger entered the Ministry’s Atrium through the Floo Network, she did her best to appear confident and unconcerned. It wouldn’t do to show any weakness before such an important meeting. For all her faults, Bones wasn’t stupid.

Half a dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards were present in the Atrium, and Hermione tensed up slightly when she saw two of them stare at her a bit too intently. She relaxed a bit when she spotted Ron in the background, and almost smiled at him. Arthur Weasley was present as well, nearby.

“You’re drawing more attention than I do,” Harry whispered next to her.

She glanced at him and saw that he was grinning. She shook her head. There were probably too many wizards and witches in the Ministry who had a guilty conscience, or they’d focus on the Boy-Who-Lived as their best hope against Voldemort.

To her surprise, no one tried to stop them for a quick chat before they reached the lift. Five minutes later, they were in front of Bones’s office, and the Minister’s nervous secretary waved them through.

Bones wasn’t alone, of course. She was there with Dawlish and Thicknesse, Head Auror and Head of the DMLE, respectively. It made the meeting look more like a parlay than a gathering of allies -
there was even a table with three seats on each side.

“Thank you for coming, Sirius, Mister Potter, Miss Granger. Please have a seat,” Bones said, gesturing at the table. Conjured, Hermione thought, with possibly an expansion charm to fit it in without the office appearing cramped.

Sirius took the seat in the middle, with Harry at his right side, and Hermione on his left side. If Bones thought that their seating arrangements would tell her anything about their group she would be mistaken.

“Thank you, Amelia.” Sirius smiled at the witch, all grace and politeness.

Bones presented her two underlings, and there was some polite exchanging of greetings and even more polite refusing of refreshments. Hermione didn’t think the Ministry would try to poison her, but better safe than sorry.

“Well, let us get to the point of this meeting,” Bones started. “Since the last meeting eleven days ago, the situation has changed a great deal. Where we could be confident of our impending victory, we must now just hope that Dumbledore’s last plan - whatever that is - will work before the Dark Lord takes the Ministry. I assume,” she added with a glance towards Harry, “that it depends on the Boy-Who-Lived.”

That hadn’t taken a lot to deduce, Hermione thought. Harry’s presence alone confirmed it. It wasn’t as if it was a secret either - Voldemort knew that Harry could sense him. The Dark Lord couldn’t be allowed to know the real plan, though.

Sirius smiled politely. “Harry has been instrumental in the war so far.”

Dawlish was about to say something, but a glance from Thicknesse shut him up. Interesting, Hermione thought. She hadn’t heard good things about the new Head Auror - he certainly hadn’t managed to make trouble for the Resistance in the past, so she wondered why he had been promoted. Probably because he was the one with the most time in the department, and a pureblood, she thought with no small amount of cynicism.

“And you’re not going to tell us what the plan is,” Bones said with a pronounced frown.

Sirius shrugged. “No offence, but the Ministry’s still riddled with spies. And with Albus dead, a number of people will consider turning traitor to save themselves.”

“We can keep a secret. We have done so in the war,” Dawlish said.

Harry snorted. He, like Hermione, had to be thinking about the spying operation they had set up in Diagon Alley. Neither said anything about it, though.

“Better safe than sorry,” Sirius said.

“We’re doing our best,” Harry threw in. “I’ve faced the Dark Lord a few times already.”

“And the last time, Dumbledore had to save you,” Dawlish spat out. “He’s not around any more.”

“That has been taken into account,” Hermione cut in. They had made plans. Ones not as concrete as she’d have liked, but they were preparing to face Voldemort.

“In any case, you can’t deal with the Dark Lord, and you know it, so just let us handle him,” Sirius said with a not-quite-smirk. “There are plenty of his followers still around for you to face. Recruiting
will be easier for him with Albus dead.”

Thicknesse winced at that. “Our own recruitment efforts have suffered in the last few days.”

“The cowards are reconsidering their decisions,” Sirius said. “The Order and our French friends are ready, though, and won’t falter.”

“We’ve recovered as well, and we’re ready for battle,” Hermione said. It was technically true. “But we have concerns which need to be addressed first, before we can deploy. Both the Minister and the Chief Warlock, who have been the driving forces behind the recent alliance between the Ministry and the Muggleborn Resistance, have been killed. While the muggleborn laws have been repealed already, there are certain fears that you might not uphold their other promises.”

Bones didn’t show much of a reaction. “I’m aware that a pardon for past crimes has been promised.”

“A pardon covering any action during the war,” Hermione corrected her. “From the day the Dark Lord returned to the day the war ends.”

Bones’s face seemed to freeze up. “Impossible. That would give you carte blanche. You could commit any crime without repercussion.”

“No. We would still police ourselves,” Hermione said. “Just like muggle military forces do.” Which had far more than a dozen members, of course.

Bones seemed to be aware of that, judging by how she scoffed. “Miss Granger, the Ministry is the lawful government of Wizarding Britain. We’re not a secret organisation created by private citizens. We represent our country.”

“After our experiences with your law enforcement practices, we will not grant you any jurisdiction over us. Not during the war, at least,” Hermione shot back. “As a courtesy, we can inform you should a case concern you. But unless we have a full pardon as promised, there will not be any alliance.”

“I have to agree with Hermione. The Order and our French friends needs the same reassurances as the Resistance.” Sirius smiled widely and leaned forward. “My personal experiences after the last war have taught me not to trust the Ministry when it comes to justice.”

Bones, who had a reputation as a stone-cold witch, actually hissed, while Dawlish growled. Thicknesse, though, simply nodded.

“Nor do we trust the Wizengamot when it comes to trying Death Eaters. The track record of our esteemed parliament is abysmal,” Harry’s godfather added.

“Your want to be untouchable and demand to judge others? That would undermine our entire judicial system!” Bones was leaning forward as well. “No one is above the law!”

“We don’t trust the law,” Hermione said. “Not any more.”

“If the law doesn’t apply to you, then you might as well take over the country,” Bones said.

That wouldn’t be a bad idea, Hermione thought. She held her tongue, though.

“I can’t see myself and my friends fighting Voldemort effectively if we are worried that we’ll be punished for what we had to do afterwards,” Harry said.
“No Auror has a problem with fighting the Death Eaters without breaking the law,” Dawlish said.

“Your muggleborn Aurors might have. Oh, wait - you fired all of them a year ago.” Harry snorted.

“It’s quite simple, Amelia.” Sirius shook his head. “You need us more than we need you. If you want this alliance to work, you need to trust us to police ourselves. The Ministry and the Wizengamot have done too much harm to us to let us trust them.”

“Will you grant the Aurors the same protection?” Thicknesse asked.

“For actions taken against Death Eaters, yes. Not for actions taken against muggleborns,” Hermione said. The Resistance would not let those murderers walk.

“They have acted in accordance with duly passed laws,” Bones said. “They cannot be punished for doing their lawful duty.”

“Leaving aside the validity of such laws, Aurors and Hit-Wizards who have abused even those laws can and will be punished.” Hermione stared at Bones. “How many muggleborns were killed while resisting arrest? Compared to how many purebloods?”

Bones frowned; the Minister obviously knew what her employees had done.

“We want justice. Real justice, not some corrupt play by the Wizengamot where murderers are let go because they are related to half the members!” Hermione said. Her voice had grown louder, and she forced herself to stop.

“Many Death Eaters were sentenced after the last war, despite their blood ties,” Thicknesse said calmly.

“The fanatics who loudly proclaimed their allegiance were judged,” Sirius said. “But their helpers? And those ‘imperiused victims’?” He scoffed. “We’ve seen how that works when the Greengrass girl tried to kill students at Hogwarts.”

Bones hadn’t an answer to that, Hermione noticed. Frowning, the older witch pressed out: “Who decides when the war is over?”

Hermione suppressed a smile. They were arguing over the details now. That meant they had already succeeded.

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Outside Stamford, Lincolnshire, Britain, January 28th, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort frowned, going over the numbers again. While recruitment was starting to pick up, he was still far from having replaced his losses. He wanted to storm the Ministry, but until he had sufficient numbers to take it over and keep it going, that would not do him much good in the long run.

And yet he couldn’t let this opportunity to cow Wizarding Britain pass. After the death of his greatest foe, the sheep would be frozen with terror. Another demonstration of his power should be enough to teach them not to resist, and lead to the isolation of his remaining enemies.

He leaned back. Even so, he needed more people. More competent people. Rodolphus and Rabastan had returned from abroad, and they would show no mercy to the murderers of Bellatrix. But Travers, Macnair, Rosier and Mulciber had died in the Ministry, and Flint in Hogsmeade. Rookwood was still
busy with research - though he hadn’t produced any results so far - and Dolohov was on the continent, recruiting. As were Pettigrew and Yaxley.

He needed at least a dozen to make a good showing. That would take a few days. Time enough for his spies to scout Diagon Alley.

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Chapter 39: Reflections

‘In any other war, the death of Albus Dumbledore would have marked the end of the conflict. That had been the case in both Grindelwald’s War and the First Blood War - without their leaders, neither Grindelwald’s armies nor the Dark Lord’s followers were able to oppose Dumbledore any longer, and accordingly, the vast majority of them fled or surrendered. In both conflicts, only a handful of fanatical wizards and witches kept fighting. And, as one would expect, they were swiftly defeated.

In the Second Blood War, however, the Ministry leadership did not even contemplate surrendering or exile. Even though their situation should have appeared objectively hopeless, they fought on.

Why would they choose such a seemingly suicidal course of action? Some might have put their trust into Harry Potter, the famous Boy-Who-Lived. He had survived the Dark Lord’s Killing Curse as a mere toddler, and he had been Dumbledore’s protege. Though while he had already shown quite remarkable talents for his age, most notably in the Triwizard Tournament, he certainly was no equal of Dumbledore or the Dark Lord. The Muggleborn Resistance had suffered critical losses, as had the Order of the Phoenix, and neither could stand up to the Dark Lord in open battle or match his guile. But they did not give up either.

In my opinion, this shows that all factions of the Second Blood War had become so fanatical during the conflict that they preferred death to defeat and would keep fighting even when there was but a faint hope of victory.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 28th, 1997

Harry Potter sighed with relief as soon as he, Sirius and Hermione entered Grimmauld Place. He hadn’t really thought that the Ministry would try to ambush them on the way out, or that Death Eaters would manage to infiltrate the Ministry, but the meeting had certainly become quite tense at the end…

“Did you see her face at the end? As if she had eaten a basket full of lemons!” Sirius chuckled while he cast a few quick cleaning charms on the group.

His godfather was taking this a bit too lightly, Harry thought. “That’s not a good thing,” he said. “She seemed to really hate our demands.”

“She seemed to really hate our demands.”

Sirius scoffed. “It’s all about power and control with her. She is obsessed with it. In her eyes the idea that we wouldn’t submit to the DMLE and let her judge us is almost as bad as Voldemort taking over.” He stepped forward and opened the door to the hallway with a flick of his wand.

“The Minister’s focusing on the rule of law,” Hermione said, hesitating for a moment when Sirius bowed slightly in a ‘ladies first’ gesture. “She isn’t completely wrong, actually. Vigilante organisations and paramilitary groups are generally not a good thing for a country. And no one should be above the law.” She shook her head and ran a hand through her short hair as she stepped through the door. “But if the law was passed by a fascist government catering to mass-murdering
bigots… The legal basis of Wizarding Britain is just one step removed from ‘might makes right’.”

“If Amelia didn’t know for certain that, without us, Voldemort would kill her and her family, and take over her precious Ministry, she’d never have accepted our terms.” Sirius muttered a curse under his breath Harry didn’t catch as both followed Hermione. “If only she had shown such dedication to upholding the law when I was unjustly imprisoned without a trial!”

Harry was a bit concerned how quickly Sirius had switched from chuckling to scowling. But then, all of them were suffering from a great deal of stress. Himself as well, he thought.

“Was that actually illegal?” Hermione asked. When Harry and Sirius stared at her, she winced. “I meant, didn’t they pass a law that made it possible to hold people without trial?”

“Not for so long after the war,” Sirius said. “But no one really cared. I was just another Death Eater in Azkaban.” He clenched his jaw and stared ahead - no, at the wall, Harry realised.

“Cherie?”

Sirius’s face broke out in a wide smile. “Vivienne!” He stepped forward and embraced the Veela, almost sweeping her off her feet.

“’Ow did the meeting go?” the French witch asked when Sirius released her.

“Bones had to give in. But she really didn’t want to.” Sirius grinned. “The Ministry, depending on muggleborns and vigilantes! She’s probably drinking a Calming Draught right now.”

“There’ll be trouble after the war,” Hermione said.

“We already knew that.” Harry’s godfather made a dismissive gesture with his hand. The one that was not holding onto Vivienne’s waist. “She’ll oppose our plans every step of the way. But if we can deal with Voldemort, then we can deal with her easily.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione. He wasn’t quite that optimistic. And, as far as he could tell, neither was she.

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Ron Weasley saw his friends leave the Ministry, and let out a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. They had made it out safely without incident.

“You can relax now.”

His dad’s comment made him flinch. “Was it that obvious?” he asked in a low voice. He had cast a privacy charm, but some habits were hard to break - Moody had drilled into Harry and him that all it took was one Supersensory Charm, and an enemy could listen from afar.

“No. But I know you.” His dad smiled and put a hand on Ron’s shoulder. “And it’s good to see that you haven’t changed that much.”

Ron was confused. “What do you mean?”

His dad sighed. “You’ve changed. All of you have changed. You’re not just growing up, you’re fighting in a war.”
Ron stiffened. “Is this about the Death Eaters I killed?” He hadn’t had a choice. They had been trying to kill him, and Harry, and would have killed anyone else Voldemort wanted dead. Like Hermione, or Ron’s family.

“In part only.” Ron’s dad closed his eyes for a second. “I know that people change in a war. And not just because they kill.”

Ron nodded. His family had fought in the last war. Gryffindors to the core. Mum’s brothers had been killed in the last year of the war, as members of the Order.

“If you know you could die in the next battle, it makes you look at things differently. You gain a new perspective. You tend to live more passionately, a friend once put it. Things you considered very important suddenly seem frivolous.” His dad pulled his hand away from Ron’s shoulder. “It’s partially why you’re here, today.”

“Huh?” Ron was confused again. What would have been more important than his friends’ safety?

“Hogwarts has strict rules. You’re not even allowed to visit Hogsmeade until your third year. Outside family emergencies, you don’t leave the school outside Hogsmeade weekends and vacations.”

Ron blinked. That was true, but he had been so used to leaving with Dumbledore’s blessing that…

“Ah.”

“Even if the war was over, do you think you’d easily adjust to being confined to Hogwarts again?” His dad chuckled when Ron winced. “You’re not the only one. Your friends too. And Ginny, of course.”

“She’s been sneaking out?” Ron asked. That was dangerous, she… he clenched his teeth together.

“I hope not. But I bet she will, if she thinks it’s important.” He sighed. “Molly hates it. And she hates even more that we cannot protect you. I do as well, of course, but I can handle it better. Molly… her two brothers were killed in the last war. To know you and your brothers are fighting is…” He trailed off.

Ron felt guilty for putting his mum through this, but some things were more important. He was needed. He opened his mouth, but his dad held his hand up.

“I know, and your mother knows it as well. That doesn’t mean we don’t hate it. But we understand.” He sighed again. “I just wish we had done a better job in the last war, so this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Not even Dumbledore managed it, dad,” Ron said.

“Yes. So, how are we supposed to achieve that this time?”

Ron didn’t know, but he trusted his friends. “We’ll manage.” He looked at the lift where his friends had left.

His dad chuckled. “Go. I know they’re waiting for you.”

Ron nodded, and left.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 28th, 1997

“Ron!” Hermione Granger jumped up from her seat when her boyfriend entered the library in Grimmauld Place. She quickly crossed the space to where he was closing the door and embraced him. She heard Harry chuckling behind her, probably because she was doing exactly what Sirius had done before, but didn’t care.

“I wasn’t the one in danger,” Ron said, wrapping his arms around her.

She didn’t answer that. She simply enjoyed his embrace for a moment. Or a few moments.

Then they pulled apart again.

“So… how did the meeting go?”

“Bones accepted our demands, but she wasn’t happy. Not at all,” Harry said, standing up to greet Ron himself.

“As expected, then.”

“More or less. She’ll be trouble once Voldemort is dead,” Hermione said. She tried to sound as matter-of-fact about that event as possible. Harry still winced, as she saw with a glance. “How are things?” she said, turning to her friend.

“He’s got the Legilimency down,” Ron said before Harry could answer. “His new wand works great. Even got through my Shield Charm.”

Harry winced again. “I can’t really test it on anyone close to Voldemort’s skill, though. Dumbledore said that Tom’s mastered Occlumency and Legilimency, but that my link to him would negate that. Somewhat at least.”

So, they were counting on the Elder Wand to make up the difference. Hermione nodded. As with the meeting, it was what she had expected. It was better than expected, actually.

“I have an idea for the actual fighting too, but… I couldn’t test it. Dumbledore said it was too dangerous.” Harry sat down again and stared at the next shelf.

That wasn’t a good sign, Hermione thought. She glanced at Ron, but her boyfriend was staring at Harry. So, their friend hadn’t told him either. And knowing how many risks Harry took in that stupid game, and if the Headmaster had said it was too dangerous… she took a deep breath. She didn’t like prying, or pushing - at least she had tried not to do either as much as she used to - but this was too important. “What are you planning, Harry?” she asked.

“Well… it’s basically a fight between our two minds. Or wills.” Harry slowly turned his head to look at them. “So… I remembered a similar situation.” He grinned, though weakly, and told them.

Hermione blinked. It was dangerous. And unprecedented. She wasn’t certain if it would even work. But if it did… She sighed and nodded. “It would be a good last resort.” Better to risk it, than dying.

Harry’s grin turned a bit more wry. He had to know that already.

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Amelia Bones was livid. The nerve of those... those... impudent upstarts! She clenched her teeth together and did her best to keep her anger from turning into rage - or showing on her face. To grant such criminals a full pardon was bad enough, but carte blanche for the rest of the war? She felt as if she had betrayed everything the Ministry stood for. And Black! Acting as if he was a muggleborn upstart himself, instead of the head of one of the oldest families in Britain!

Dawlish was not as restrained. “Those cursed....” he caught himself before he used Death Eater vocabulary. “How dare they treat the Ministry like this! Dictating terms as if they were anything but a bunch of...”

“We had no choice. We need their help, and they know that,” Thicknesse said, in his usual measured manner. “As much as it pains me to admit it, we cannot hope to resist the Dark Lord by ourselves.” He frowned. “Though the consequences of this agreement could be dire.”

Dawlish shook his head. “We don’t even know what that apparent plan of Dumbledore’s is. Only that it involves the Boy-Who-Lived.” He sneered. “The same boy who had to be saved from the Dark Lord by Dumbledore in Hogsmeade.”

Thicknesse spread his hands. “It’s not as if we have alternatives at our disposal. They did seem confident, though. Confident enough to pressure us like they did. They must know that if they fail, such arrogance will come back to bite them.”

Amelia nodded. It was vexing enough to have to accede to such demands, but if Black and the muggleborns failed to deliver...

“The muggleborns might simply use a bomb on the Dark Lord,” Dawlish said. “Blow up the Ministry or Diagon Alley with him.”

Amelia shook her head. “That is unlikely.” She saw both wizards seemed to be sceptical, though Thicknesse was hiding it better, and elaborated. “They used one bomb in Knockturn Alley, but it was a rather weak one. They did not use more powerful bombs on Diagon Alley or the Ministry.”

“They might simply not have wished to harm muggles,” Thicknesse said, “or they did not want to risk breaking the Statute of Secrecy.”

Amelia nodded. The Resistance had not cared about innocent bystanders when they attacked Malfoy Manor, but those had been wizards, not muggles, and the muggleborns hadn’t risked the Statute. So far. “But even if the Dark Lord might be a tempting enough target for them to change their modus operandi, he is aware of bombs. Granger is not stupid, she’ll know that he’ll be ready for such an attack.” That would, hopefully, curb such attempts.

Dawlish was still scowling.

Thicknesse sighed - whether at their situation, or at Dawlish, Amelia couldn’t tell. “While the Dark Lord’s defeat is of the utmost importance, it would be better, I think, if it came about at the hands of the Boy-Who-lived, and not through muggleborn means.”

Amelia nodded. The wizard was correct. If the muggleborns defeated the Dark Lord, they’d be impossible to handle afterwards. Were that to occur, the Ministry simply wouldn’t stand up to them. Potter, though, while not ideal by any means, should be easier to handle. Not much easier, sadly - he seemed quite attached to Granger, even though she had apparently dumped him for his best friend. Amelia almost snorted - who’d have thought that she’d consider the teenage rumours her niece was passing along in her letters when deciding the future policies of the Ministry!
Her mirth was short-lived, of course - the threat of the Dark Lord, and of the muggleborns’ arrogance, made certain of that. And Black. “Marginally better, at most. Black is Potter’s godfather, and he’ll be as willing to use the boy’s reputation as Dumbledore was.” And given Black’s apparent radical notions, that would be trouble. But there were other, more urgent concerns. “We’ll focus on shoring up our defences. We’ll protect Diagon Alley and the Ministry. Let Dumbledore’s Order and the muggleborns take the fight to the Dark Lord.” It would serve them right to bear the brunt of the fighting, after they threatened to watch the Ministry fall without doing anything. And with some luck, a few of her problems might even get solved in the fighting.

Dawlish grinned - he knew what she was thinking.

Thicknesse nodded, but spoke up: “Our nominal allies might not take it well if we’re not doing anything in the war.”

The Head Auror scoffed. “They got what they wanted, so they’ll have to fight now - or renege on the deal.”

“We’ll offer them something to placate them,” Amelia said.

What she had in mind would both show the Order and the muggleborns that the Ministry was dedicated to the war against the Dark Lord, and shore up the morale of her forces - and it would keep Black busy as well.

Granger and her friends might have won a victory today, but Amelia wouldn’t give up. She’d uphold the law against any criminal - even against the Dark Lord, or the muggleborns.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, January 29th, 1997

Sirius Black rubbed the bridge of his nose while his two guests glared at each other. At least their wands had been lowered. Lowered, not stashed - ready to be raised at a moment’s notice. He mentally cursed Dumbledore for not warning him about this. Or rather, for not making it crystal clear that when the Headmaster had talked about ‘old grudges’ he had meant something akin to a blood feud between Aberforth Dumbledore and Mad-Eye.

Sirius cleared his throat, and tried not to flinch when Moody’s wand flicked up to point at him. “We’re here to discuss how to handle the war against the Dark Lord, not to settle old grudges.” If Remus were here, he’d be be chuckling at the irony of Sirius saying this, he thought. “We need to work together to win this war.”

“With him and his criminals? Fletcher’s bad enough, but his sort?” Moody scoffed, and his face contorted into a grimace. “They’ll sell us out as soon as they get the chance.”

“Says the Ministry’s enforcer,” Aberforth retorted, sneering worse than Snivellus ever had. “Did you jump to enforce the law against muggleborns as well?”

“They weren’t robbing people blind. Unlike your friends.”

“You have no idea why they did it!” Aberforth was standing, but he wasn’t raising his wand.

“And I don’t care,” Moody said. “They weren’t in a war either. And if they were skilled enough to break through wards, they were skilled enough to earn honest gold. No excuses.”

“Shut up!” Sirius yelled. “You can kill each other once the Dark Lord and his followers are dead!”
In a more normal voice, he continued: “But if you don’t manage to drop this, we’ll lose.” He took a deep breath. “Albus’s death has fragmented the Order. I’m certain there are a number of members he was the only one to know.”

“I’m not part of his Order,” Aberforth said through clenched teeth.

“Not any more, at least,” Moody added.

“Well, you’re a member now,” Sirius said. “Of the Order, or of a new Order. Whatever.” That seemed to surprise both older wizards. Before they could say anything, Sirius pressed on. “But we don’t have time for old grudges. With Albus dead, the Dark Lord will not wait much longer before he’ll strike. We need to be ready. And we need every wand we can get.”

“We don’t need thieves who will run at the first sign of danger and sell us out at the first opportunity,” Moody spat.

“Enough!” Sirius yelled, drowning out Aberforth’s angry reply. “You don’t need to work with each other! You don’t even need to see each other!” He wondered how Albus had managed to stay sane while dealing with this sort of stupidity for so long. “All you need to do is to wait with killing each other until the Dark Lord’s dead!” Both men stared at him, then Mad-Eye chuckled. Aberforth was still scowling, but as long as he wasn’t leaving or cursing anyone, Sirius would take what he could get. “Now… Moody, we need all the Order members you know who can and will fight ready.”

The scarred wizard nodded, grinning. “I’ll get them ready, even if I have to curse them until they shape up. Been doing that with the Ministry’s recruits already.”

Sirius turned to Aberforth, who had been scoffing. “Aberforth, your friends need to keep their eyes and ears open. The Dark Lord will try something soon, if he’s not already doing it. We need to know what he’s planning. Even a few minutes of advance warning will save lives.” Like Harry’s.

Moody mumbled something, probably another insult, but Dumbledore’s brother nodded, if still reluctantly. “I’ll get the word out.”

Sirius smiled. “Good. It goes without saying that we also need your wand, once the Dark Lord makes his move.”

Aberforth’s scowl deepened. “I’ll work with the Resistance.” With a glance at Moody, he added: “They won’t curse me in the back.”

Sirius sighed. How had the Headmaster kept the Order from tearing itself apart? “Also, if you know any members of the Order in the Wizengamot, or close to it… I need to talk to them.”

“Ah. Bones’s throwing you a bone?” Moody laughed at his own remark.

Sirius shrugged. Since the old Auror was working in the Ministry, he’d already know about it, of course. “It’s better than nothing, and it’ll help the war.”

And he’d enjoy seeing it, too. Even if he was not looking forward to shoring up a quorum in the Wizengamot.

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Dover, Kent, Britain, January 29th, 1997

“Do you understand your task, Pettigrew?”
The Dark Lord Voldemort, wearing the guise of a random Albanian wizard whose hair he had collected years ago, stared at the pudgy wizard in front of him. They were seated in a muggle pub, the last place anyone would expect him to spend any time.

“Yes, Master!” Pettigrew nodded eagerly, smiling too widely. He was rubbing his gloved left hand, though.

Voldemort knew that the other wizard was a coward, despite his sorting, but he was skilled. No talentless wizard would have managed to become an animagus while still a teenager - or to conduct the ritual that gave Voldemort a new body. He would do. The Dark Lord pulled out a small bag from his pocket and handed it over.

Pettigrew fingered it, and Voldemort saw the man’s eyes widen. “Three, Master?”

“Yes. Just in case.” He had two hundred more bones of his father’s skeleton, safely hidden in many places. He could easily spare three. A bag with three vials followed. Madam Longbottom hadn’t any use for the blood, not any more, and she had definitely been an enemy of his. “Find a safe place, and if a day passes without my mark burning, conduct the ritual.” With a smirk, he added. “Don’t use a whole limb this time. A toe or two will do.”

Pettigrew gaped at him for a moment before closing his mouth and glancing at his left hand. He was a talented wizard, but his mastery of the Dark Arts was lacking.

“Don’t tell anyone about this. And don’t let that werewolf find you,” Voldemort added.

Pettigrew shuddered. “Yes, Master.”

“Now go!”

Voldemort watched as the man got up and hurried out of the pub. Others of his followers would try to exploit this, or would start to doubt him, should they know about this. Not Pettigrew, though. That wizard valued his survival more than anything else, even ambition, and understood the value of precautions.

A trait that had served Voldemort well in the past, and would serve him well again.

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London, Ministry of Magic, January 30th, 1997

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! We have gathered here to pass judgement over two accused of that most serious of crimes, treason.”

Brenda Brocktuckle forced herself not to pull on the chains securing her to the seat. She wouldn’t show such weakness. She hadn’t much left, but she still had her pride. She glanced at the Chief Warlock. Or the man in place of the Chief Warlock. It should have been Philius Runcorn, the most senior member of the Wizengamot. But it wasn’t. Had the blood traitors done away with him too? He certainly wouldn’t have been party to this farce, Brenda thought as she listened to the accusations leveled at her and Malcolm by Thicknesse.

It was a long list. They even brought up the Imperius she had used in the Ministry, citing that it hadn’t been a lawful use. It wasn’t as if it mattered. Brenda had brought the cursed paper aeroplanes into the Ministry and had fought and killed the blood traitors in the Corps. That would be enough to damn her.
Especially, she added, glancing over the half-empty Wizengamot, with only blood traitors and their proxies present. She wouldn’t have thought that there were so many fools willing to defy the Dark Lord.

“What a farce!” Malcolm muttered, next to her. She glanced over at him, and he grinned at her. “They’ll pay for this, once the Dark Lord takes over.”

That wouldn’t help either of them, Brenda thought.

“Brenda Brocktuckle, how do you plead?”

For a moment, she was tempted to plead guilty, just to get it over with. But she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. She was no criminal! Brenda raised her head and looked at Bones. Her former boss stared back at her without showing any emotion. “Not guilty!” Brenda announced loudly. “I fought blood traitors and mass murdering mudbloods to save Britain!”

That started yells and murmurs among the members of the Wizengamot present.

“No self-control,” Malcolm said in a low voice. “How far have they fallen!”

“Take note that the accused Brocktuckle pleads ‘not guilty’,” Thicknesse told the court scribe. “Malcolm Parkinson, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty!” Malcolm scoffed. “My only crime is having failed in my task.”

Which was, Brenda noted, very much true. If they had won, they’d certainly not be treated as criminals, but would be hailed as heroes. She chuckled at the thought while she watched an Unspeakable approach.

She knew the procedure. They’d check her for potions and spells, before administering the Veritaserum. “Let’s get this over with,” Brenda said and opened her mouth.

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“Those in favour of conviction, raise your wands!”

Brenda Brocktuckle had known the outcome in advance, but she had had a sliver of irrational hope anyway that the Wizengamot would not dare to challenge the Dark Lord. Would falter at the last moment. Malcolm certainly had reminded them of the consequences of a guilty verdict when he had spoken in his defence.

But it seemed that Bones and Black had picked their tools well - the vast majority of the members present lit their wands, sealing Brenda’s fate.

“Brenda Brocktuckle, the Wizengamot has judged you guilty of treason, conspiracy to treason, murder, conspiracy to murder, unlawful use of an unforgivable curse and partaking in a dark ritual.”

While the replacement Chief Warlock read the sentence, Brenda closed her eyes for a moment, composing herself. The Ministry had no Dementors, so they couldn’t give her the kiss. Maybe they’d imprison her…

“As punishment, you will be sent through the Veil. The sentence will be carried out immediately.”

She clenched her teeth. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing her lose her composure. She’d die with her head held high. The Veil wasn’t bad, she told herself while the Wizengamot
rendered their judgement on Malcolm. It was supposed to be quick and painless. And she wouldn’t lose her soul. She still flinched when her wand was snapped in front of her, but any witch would, in her place. Malcolm flinched as well when his turn came.

Then the Aurors guarding her stepped up, contempt in their faces. She sneered at the traitors. They’d get theirs when the Dark Lord came for the Ministry.

Maybe he was already on the way. If the wards came under attack, they’d need every Auror and wouldn’t be able to spare the time to execute her...

She knew it was stupid, irrational, but she kept hoping, kept watching, listening for any sign that the Ministry was under attack. Right until she reached the Death Chamber, and saw the Veil standing there. And heard its whispers. Alien. Wrong.

She faltered in her steps, then, and shook her head. “No!” she muttered. Anything but that.

But her hands were bound, and she had no wand. The Aurors escorting her grabbed her arms, and pushed her forward. Towards that thing.

It was quick, but it wasn’t painless. Not at all.

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London, East End, January 30th, 1997

“They executed Brocktuckle and Parkinson,” Hermione Granger announced to the rest of the Resistance gathered in the living room of their base. “Sirius just told me.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Seamus muttered. “Did anything important happen?”

Hermione suppressed the annoyance she felt upon hearing his comment. “The ones who imperiused you are dead,” she said, looking at Mary-Jane, then glancing at Seamus.

The wizard at least had the grace to look embarrassed when Mary-Jane closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. The witch recovered before Sally-Anne reached her, and looked at Hermione. “Thank you.”

Hermione hoped that this information would help the girl. She had been under the Imperius for so long, mind-controlled, her very emotions manipulated… it was as bad or worse as being roofied, Hermione thought.

But she couldn’t dwell on the matter. They had a war to fight. She cleared her throat and leaned forward, putting her hands on the dining table. “That said, Sirius also told me that the Order has mobilised, so to speak, and is ready to react to any sighting of the Dark Lord.” She looked at the others. “And so are we.”

“And the Ministry?” Tania asked. “What are they doing?”

“Guarding the Ministry, mostly,” Hermione said, scoffing.

“They’d only get in our way anyway.” John grinned in his seat.

“Or stab us in the back,” Seamus added.

“That’s unlikely,” Hermione said, “but not impossible. Bones really didn’t like our demands.” Once the Dark Lord was gone, the witch would try to renegotiate their deal. Or renege.
“And so they’ll let us bleed against the Death Eaters while they guard the Ministry?” Justin shook his head.

“It’s not as if we have a choice. The Aurors and Hit-Wizards left certainly won’t be very effective against Voldemort. Even if we could trust them completely, they wouldn’t be much of a help.” Hermione sighed.

“But we could blow them up together with the Dark Lord!” Seamus grinned widely. “Kill two birds with one stone!”

He wasn’t just joking, Hermione knew. She was tempted to agree - she wasn’t looking forward to dealing with the Ministry once the common enemy was gone - but she shook her head at the proposal. “It’s very unlikely that we’d encounter such a situation.”

“Because the Dark Lord would kill them all easily before we’d arrive!” Tania said, balancing her chair on the two back legs.

“Yes.” Hermione smiled at the witch, though she was tempted to tell her to stop fidgeting with her chair.

“We have a bomb or two ready with Voldemort’s name on it,” Seamus said. “If he shows up, he’s history. As long as we are informed in time,” he added with a frown.

“We will.” Bones would want them to engage quickly, Hermione thought. “But deploying the bomb will be very difficult. Voldemort will be prepared.”

“If we make it big enough then whatever he’s planning won’t help,” Seamus said.

“You’ll also run the risk of killing yourself with it.” Hermione looked at him. “The bigger it is, the bigger the height you’ll need to drop it from - and the longer he has to react to it. And the collateral damage would be far too great.”

“What can he do?” Seamus stood up, staring at her. “If wards can’t stand up to it, what can Voldemort do? Unless you care more about some stupid purebloods than winning the war.” He sneered. “You didn’t have such issues when we bombed Malfoy Manor.”

“Malfoy Manor was isolated and full of Death Eaters and sympathisers, not in the middle of London,” Hermione retorted. And, a small voice in the back of her head added, their kids. “What can the Dark Lord do? Fly away before it hits. Conjure a bunker. Vanish it before it explodes. Use a decoy to make us kill innocents.” She shrugged. “These are just the obvious counters.”

“So, what can we do then? Lestrange was bad enough, and the Dark Lord is worse,” Tania said. She wasn’t balancing on her chair any more.

“We have a plan,” Hermione started. “The key is Harry. He needs to get close enough to Voldemort to take him out. Which means we’ll have to clear the way for him, and protect him.”

“What? Are we supposed to die so he can play the hero?” Seamus shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what he had heard.

“We’re not supposed to die,” Justin quoted the Sergeant. “We’re supposed to make the enemy die.”

“Easier said than done,” Tania muttered. She would be remembering Mary. “But what can Harry do? And why hasn’t he done it in Hogsmeade, when the Dark Lord was chasing him?”
Hermione hated to keep secrets from her friends, but they didn’t need to know the exact details. “He wasn’t ready then. There’s a prophecy about him and the Dark Lord. Dumbledore has been training him.”

“Dumbledore’s dead!” John said.

“Yes, he is. But Harry’s ready now.” She was frowning, which wouldn’t help her.

“Ready for what?” Seamus gesticulated with his arms. “You can’t expect us to risk our lives without knowing what the plan is!”

“You know the plan. Telling you what Harry will be doing will not change anything except for putting the entire plan at risk.” Hermione glared at him.

“So it’s OK to tell your pureblood boyfriends everything about us, but we’re not to be trusted?” Seamus straightened up, then looked at the rest of the Resistance.

She resisted the urge to correct him about Harry’s blood status. That didn’t matter. She glanced at the others too, though, trying to guess where they stood. Justin and Sally-Anne would support her. But the others? “Are you willing to risk our best shot to kill the Dark Lord for good, just to feed your ego?” She took a step around the table. “Do you think everyone should know everything, so the enemy just has to take one prisoner, and we’re all lost?”

“You tell Weasley everything!” Seamus shot back. “And we’re protected against spilling secrets!”

“I don’t tell Ron everything.” Hermione pressed her lips together. She couldn’t get angry about this. “We’re protected against betraying the Resistance. Other secrets are not safe.”

“We know enough. I trust Hermione,” Justin said.

“Me too!” Sally-Anne added.

“Keeping information classified is basic procedure,” Louise chimed in. Next to the former Hit-Witch, Jeremy nodded.

Hermione started to relax. John wasn’t a hothead. That left Seamus, and possibly Tania.

“I just want the Dark Lord and all the Death Eaters dead. If you say this is our best shot, then I’ll trust you,” Tania said.

Seamus flinched. Hermione could see him glance around, then meet her eyes with clenched teeth. “Alright. We’ll play bodyguard for Harry,” he pressed out, then sat down. Tania reached out to put her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off and looked away.

Hermione took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. If she hadn’t had the trust of her friends... She returned to her seat and pulled out maps. “So... we’re expecting an attack on the Ministry, Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade or Hogwarts. Here’s what we’ll do in each case…”

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An hour later, Hermione was lying on her bed and staring at the ceiling. What was Seamus thinking? He hadn’t said anything questionable after their confrontation, but she was certain that he hadn’t changed his views. At least Tania hadn’t supported him. The two had grown close, after all. Hopefully, the witch would be a good influence on Seamus. Hermione didn’t know what he’d do if he felt that he was completely alone. If he decided to follow in Allan’s footsteps...
She closed her eyes. She hoped she was worried over nothing. So far, Seamus had just been talking about attacking purebloods - or rather, had tried to change the Resistance’s definition of acceptable collateral damage. He hadn’t actually done anything.

Nothing she knew about, Hermione corrected herself. It wasn’t as if she had been keeping track of what he was doing when he went out. She sighed and shook her head. No, she couldn’t assume the worst of Seamus. He hadn’t let her down so far, and he had had her back in every battle.

And yet… Allan had said the same things.

Hogwarts, January 31st, 1997

Attending lessons while there was a war going on was becoming more and more tedious, Harry Potter thought. How could he care about Herbology, or History of Magic, when he was fated to face Voldemort? At least Charms and Transfiguration had some use in battle. Potions on the other hand...

But it was over for now, at least. Harry smiled while packing his potions kit into his cauldron. No more lessons until Monday. No more useless lessons, at least - there was a training session in the evening, as usual.

Ron had already finished, and was waiting for him at the door. “Finally done! Come on, mate! Let’s get out of here before we start wearing green and silver!”

They made their way up to the Gryffindor dorms with their wands ready. Without Dumbledore, Hogwarts was not as safe as it had been. McGonagall was doing her best, but she wasn’t the Headmaster. Harry shook his head. It was a good thing that McGonagall was a witch and would be the Headmistress of Hogwarts - Dumbledore would probably always be the Headmaster for Harry, and for many others.

He smiled at his whimsical thought.

“How are you doing?” Ron said as they stepped through the Fat Lady’s painting.

“If they stick to their schedule, yes,” Harry said. And knowing Hermione, the Resistance would stick to their schedule.

“Hello, you two,” he said, without looking up.

“Hello, Neville.” Harry hesitated for an awkward moment. “How are you doing?”

“All’s clear.” The boy still was staring at the map with an expression of intense concentration on his face. “Do you have any news about the war?”

Neville sounded eager, Harry noticed, not scared or nervous like most of the students. He didn’t know what to tell the other boy - Harry doubted that he wanted to hear some empty words about being ready.

“No, mate. The Ministry’s still sorting things out, and the Resistance and the Order are picking up the slack.” Ron apparently had no such compunction, although he was telling the truth.
Neville grunted something unintelligible. Then he looked up, staring at the two of them. “Do you think he’ll attack Hogwarts?”

“I doubt it,” Harry said. “The wards are too strong. He wouldn’t be able to break through them quickly enough to avoid getting attacked while he’s tied up and vulnerable. And I doubt that he has competent curse-breakers left.”

“Have you heard anything about the Lestrange brothers?” Neville was splitting his attention between the map and Harry and Ron now, his eyes darting around.

“No, nothing. They haven’t been seen as far as I know.” Harry shook his head. “Like Pettigrew,” he added. The traitor hadn’t been seen by anyone since Voldemort’s return.

Neville nodded. “If they do appear, tell me.” He stared at them again.

“Of course, mate,” Ron said, smiling a bit weakly.

“He’s become even more fanatical about this than Moody,” Ron whispered, sitting down on Harry’s bed and kicking his cauldron under his own bed.

“Yeah,” Harry said, stowing his own cauldron in his trunk. Moody’s training didn’t help, of course. Part of him was glad for another wand fighting Voldemort. But he couldn’t help wondering if Neville was fighting to win, or trying to die fighting. Especially now, with Dumbledore dead.

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“...and while Dumbledore has died, the fight goes on! The Muggleborn Resistance will never surrender! We’ve fought both the Ministry and the Death Eaters together, and we’ll fight the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord by ourselves, if we have to.

“But we’re not alone! The Order of the Phoenix is with us! The Ministry’s fighting the Dark Lord too - just a day ago, they tried and executed several Death Eater spies. The French have sent help!

“And the Dark Lord’s forces were almost wiped out in the Battle of the Ministry and in Hogsmeade! He hasn’t shown his face since he was driven out of the village, either!

“Dumbledore is dead, but we’re not beaten - far from it! We’re ready to deal with the Dark Lord himself, should he dare to attack us, or anyone else in Britain! We will not rest until the last follower of his ideology has been defeated!”

Harry turned away from the wireless when Hermione’s voice was replaced with some rock music and shifted in his armchair. He, Ron and Ginny were sitting in their usual corner in the Gryffindor common room. He glanced at the witch. It had been his, Ron’s and Hermione’s corner last year and seeing Ginny sitting in Hermione’s usual seat was still somewhat disconcerting.

“That was pretty intense,” Ron said. He had a wistful smile on his face.

Ginny nodded.

“Yes,” Harry said, “but it doesn’t change the fact that Dumbledore’s death hit us hard.”

“Well, it’s a good sign that everyone’s working together,” Ginny went on. “I was afraid that with the Headmaster gone, everyone would turn on each other, again.”

“According to Sirius, the Order almost did. Or some of them, at least. He didn’t name names, but
apparently, some of the Order members really hate each other,” Harry said.

“Fred and George told me about that thief, who tried to swindle them out of stock, claiming Dumbledore sent him. Fletcher,” Ron said, nodding. “They drove him off with a few product demonstrations.” He grinned.

“Stupid. Why’s Dumbledore been recruiting such people?” Ginny frowned and pulled her legs up, hugging her knees in her seat.

“Probably as spies.” Ron shrugged. “Can’t fight a war without doing some shady stuff.”

“Did you do some ‘shady stuff’?” She was looking from one of them to the other with her chin resting on her knees. Harry was surprised how small she looked like that. Tiny, even.

“No.”

“No.”

The witch didn’t look convinced, but didn’t pry either. For a moment, none of them said anything. Judging by his expression, Ron was probably thinking of Hermione again, Harry thought. He couldn’t tell what Ginny was thinking about. Hopefully, she wasn’t remembering Voldemort possessing her in second year.

“Why can’t they see that we all have the same enemy?” Ginny huffed, and blew at a strand of her hair that had fallen on her face.

“They do. But everyone’s already planning for the time after the war. And that won’t be pretty.” Ron leaned back in his own seat and folded his hands on his stomach.

“They should win the war first!” Ginny said, snorting. She was clenching her teeth and staring at the floor. “Why’s everyone acting like idiots?”

She had a point, of course. But simply focusing on beating Voldemort was not that smart either. “The aftermath will be chaotic enough, it’s better to prepare in advance.” Harry stretched. He had another training session planned for this evening.

“That would be a good thing, if the Ministry wouldn’t be preparing to double-cross the Resistance as soon as Voldemort’s dead.” Ron shook his head, glaring at the wall.

Ginny whipped her head round and stared at her brother with wide eyes. “Did you hear anything from Dad or Percy about that?”

“No. But that’s no surprise. Bones knows that we’re blood traitors. She wouldn’t tell us anything. Especially not with people knowing about Hermione and I dating.” Ron glared at the Daily Prophet on the table nearby.

“It was a nice article,” his sister tried to console him. “Nothing like the Skeeter ones in third year.”

“Fourth year you mean,” Ron corrected her.

“It was my third.”

“So? It was Harry’s, mine and Hermione’s fourth!”

Harry chuckled while the two redheads bickered. The Legilimency training could wait a bit longer.
London, Greenwich, February 1st, 1997

The Dark Lord Voldemort looked at the building, and suppressed the rage rising inside him. He wasn’t seeing the modern muggle house in front of him, but the dark walls of Wool’s Orphanage. Memories appeared in his mind, unbidden, unwelcome. Hunger, pain, shivering in the cold, living amongst muggle filth. Stupid children, mocking him for being different, until he taught them better. Dumbledore, visiting, and showing off his power.

He didn’t like to remember his childhood. He had been weak. Weak and ignorant. Barely better than the muggles around him… No! He had always known that he was destined for greater things. That he’d one day rule over all of those who had looked down on him. And he had risen far, far above this.

He shook his head. This wasn’t Wool’s Orphanage, and he wasn’t here to remember his childhood. It was an unpleasant task, but a necessary one, and one he could not entrust to any of his followers.

He put a smile on his face and entered the building. There was a desk at the entrance, a reception. As if this was a hotel. A young muggle was sitting behind it. “Hello, sir. How may I help you?”

He smiled at her, once again disguised as an average man, and pointed his wand at her. “I have an appointment with the director.”

She blinked as the spell took hold. “Of course, sir! She’s expecting you. If you’ll follow me.”

Voldemort’s smile deepened when he spotted a few children peering at him from around a corner. Perfect.

Half an hour later, two dozen children, all between five and eight years old, had gathered in the orphanage’s courtyard. Most were smiling, and staring at the bus parked there. One, though, was frowning. “I didn’t hear about a trip. Those are usually announced in advance. Where are we going, anyway?”

Voldemort sighed. He knew the type. And hated them. He bent down and smiled widely at the annoying muggle boy, showing his teeth.

“Somewhere magical!”

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Battle of Diagon Alley

Chapter 40: Battle of Diagon Alley

‘Many of my colleagues have described the meeting on January 28th 1997 in the Ministry as an event involving the leaders of all the factions opposing the Dark Lord - effectively, a meeting of Wizarding Britain’s leadership. In my opinion, that is not quite correct. While it is true that the Minister for Magic and the leaders of both the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance were present, it has to be noted that none of them had the degree of control over the sides they nominally represented which many attribute to them.

Amelia Bones was the Minister for Magic, but she was dependent on the support of the Wizengamot for crucial issues, and was far from having the same degree of influence on its members that Dumbledore had commanded. Likewise, she had the personal loyalty of most of the surviving members of the DMLE, but other Ministry employees were not quite as reliable.

Sirius Black was the leader of a cell of the Order of the Phoenix and didn’t know all of the other cells and agents - some information Dumbledore had taken with him to his grave, apparently trusting his more discreet friends to contact his successors on their own. Black also had contacts in the Wizengamot, but these were not very extensive.

Harry Potter was the famous Boy-Who-Lived, known by everyone in the country, but he was still a student, and for all his famous deeds, not many adults would follow him.

Hermione Granger was the undisputed leader of the Muggleborn Resistance, and, at that point, as well-known as Harry Potter in Britain, but that did not translate into being a leader of all muggleborns - or even most of them.

Knowing this, the events that followed should be far less surprising than they have been made out to be by some.

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Diagon Alley, February 1st, 1997

“A fine day for a little stroll, don’t you agree, Ackerly? You’re quite familiar with such outings, aren’t you?” The Dark Lord Voldemort smiled when he saw Nott cringe - the man hadn’t forgotten what Voldemort had done to him as punishment for organising the riot last summer that had disrupted his plans. Nott hadn’t been able to walk without the help of magic for months.

“Yes, milord.” Nott was probably glancing around behind his mask - the man’s posture betrayed how nervous he was.

Rabastan chuckled at the sight, twirling his wand. “Not losing your nerve already, I hope?” He nodded at the two dead bodies that lay sprawled on the floor, victims of Killing Curses. “We haven’t spilled any mudblood yet.”

The man’s wit had suffered during his time in Azkaban, though not many had the courage to tell him that to his face, but he was otherwise as capable as he had been. He had secured the clothes shop the Dark Lord was using to stage his forces without any problems.
Rabastan had been pleased when he had been given the honour of being the vanguard for this mission. Unlike Nott, who had been nervous even when he was walking at the Dark Lord’s side. He’d do his duty, though, if he didn’t want to be punished even worse than before.

Voldemort looked around to make certain that they were hidden from the street by the shelves inside the shop and flicked his wand.

The fireplace flared up, and Rodolphus stepped out.

“Milord.” The man nodded at Voldemort and took up a position at the door. He hadn’t talked much since Voldemort had broken him out of Azkaban and only seemed to display his old savage temper in battle.

Today would accommodate that, Voldemort thought, as the fireplace flared up again, and a young boy fell out of it, rolling over the floor. Rabastan didn’t bother waiting until the muggle could stand up. Two spells had the child stuck to the wall while the rest of the urchins arrived through the Floo, none of them displaying even the least hint of grace. It was very fortunate that Silencing Charms prevented their crying from being annoying.

By the time Dolohov stepped through the Floo, two dozen of the little animals were covering the walls and floors of the shop, some of them still futilely trying to free themselves as if their weak limbs could overcome magic.

A dozen of the recruits Dolohov and Yaxley had brought with them from the continent followed, a number of them shifting around, obviously unfamiliar with the robes they were wearing. Then came Yaxley himself, carrying four rolled-up carpets.

Voldemort smiled. All was ready.

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London, Diagon Alley, February 1st, 1997

“Not much going on,” Ron Weasley said, looking around the twins’ shop.

“I know.” Fred, sitting behind the counter, sighed, spreading his hands. “People need to laugh more, especially right now, but they’re too scared. We have products that can make anyone laugh!”

Family loyalty, and the desire to avoid serving as a test subject for his brothers’ next product, kept Ron from pointing out that many of the twins’ products were not that funny for the victim. “With Dumbledore dead, people are expecting the Dark Lord to attack any day now. The Alley looks almost deserted,” he added, looking out through one of the store’s windows.

“It hasn’t changed that much,” Fred said, standing up and joining him at the forefront of the shop’s main room. “People have been avoiding walking in the Alley for a while - noticeably since summer, and even more so since some muggleborns dropped fire bombs on people.” He chuckled. “We’ve had customers who wanted to use the Floo to enter, and to move to the next shop.”

“That’d be a terrible idea,” Ron said, shaking his head. “All your protections could be bypassed like that. Did you check who made such a request? It could have been an agent of the Dark Lord.”

Fred laughed, briefly. “Is that Hermione’s influence? You didn’t use to be so…”

“... suspicious?” Ron shrugged. “It’s Moody’s training, actually. He encourages paranoia.”
Fred winced. “I’ve met him.”

Ron snorted. “You haven’t really met him until he’s been training you. If Pomfrey knew how often Harry and I were hurt in his lessons, she’d curse him so bad, he’d need another peg leg.” He noticed Fred was staring at him in a weird way. “What?”

“You’ve changed.”

Ron waited, but Fred didn’t go on. “Well, we’re in a war. Everyone changes.” He didn’t have to say that he had killed; his brother was well aware of that fact, as was his entire family.

Once the silence had grown uncomfortable, Fred spoke up again. “So, what brings you to us when you should be at Hogwarts?”

Ron laughed. “Dad said that he doesn’t think we’ll get used to Hogwarts’ rules again, even once the war ends.” Strangely, his brother didn’t seem to think that that was funny. Ron cleared his throat. “Anyway, I’m here because I need some of your inventions. We want to improve security at Hogwarts.” Some of the twins’ products, like the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, would give even a First Year a chance to escape a Death Eater. And Ron knew his brothers had created things that were not quite as harmless. Of course, he was planning to see Hermione before returning to the school, too.

“For free, I suppose?”

Fred was smiling, though Ron didn’t think he was entirely joking - no customers was a bad thing for any shop. So he shook his head. “Harry’ll cover it.” Or Sirius.

“Where is our illustrious Boy-Who-Lived, anyway?”

Ron sighed. “He’s showing the flag at Hogwarts.”

“Really?” Fred looked doubtful.

“Well, he has a harder time sneaking away, with the rumour that he’ll defeat the Dark Lord going around.” Ron shrugged. “And Sirius likes him safe at Hogwarts.”

Fred laughed. “I bet he hates that.”

“He does, but what can you do?” Ron shrugged. Harry was crucial for the plan to defeat Voldemort.

Something moved on the street outside, and Ron turned around. That was… “A flying carpet?” He stared. “Aren’t they banned?”

“There’s another one, behind it,” Fred said, “And… there are children on it.”

Children who, Ron noticed, were looking far too frightened for this to be harmless. And they were wearing muggle clothes too.

He was already sprinting to the fireplace when Fred yelled: “Death Eaters in the Alley!”

Ron grabbed some Floo powder and threw it inside. “Grimmauld Place!” he yelled, but the flames didn’t turn green. “Floo travel’s blocked!” he shouted to Fred. The door to the backroom was thrown open, and Ron almost hexed George before he recognised him.

“Apparition’s blocked too… and the wards are under attack!”
“They’ll hold them back long enough… Merlin’s balls! That’s the Dark Lord out there!”

Ron felt a cold shiver run down his spine. Voldemort, here in the Alley - there were not many targets for him, and the twins’ shop was the most prominent one.

“Alright, don’t panic!” George yelled, sounding quite panicked himself. “We’ve prepared for this.”

While his brothers ran around, pulling all sorts of things from shelves, Ron pulled out Hermione’s mirror. They needed to get the word out. Harry had to know.

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London, East End, February 1st, 1997

“Hermione! The Dark Lord’s attacking Diagon Alley! Call Sirius and inform Harry!”

Hermione Granger gasped, her smile at seeing Ron in the mirror dying on her lips when she heard his words. Her first thought was that the attack they had been waiting for had finally come. Her second was that this could be a trap. But they had to react anyway. A flick of her wand opened her door, and assisted by an Amplifying Charm, she alerted the rest of the Resistance. “Voldemort’s attacking Diagon Alley! Get ready to move out at once!”

She dropped the mirror on the bed and pulled out Sirius’s mirror. “Sirius!” she yelled while she hastily changed into fatigues. Fortunately, Harry’s godfather didn’t take long to answer.

“Hermione?”

“Voldemort’s attacking the twins’ shop!” Hermione yelled. “Ron’s there and talking through his mirror.”

“... about a dozen of them, and the Dark Lord. The wards are holding, but they won’t last forever,” Hermione heard Ron go on. “Blimey! He’s got hostages, kids on flying carpets! Over a dozen!”

Hermione froze for a moment. Hostages? Children? Where had the Dark Lord found so many... Muggles! “Are they wearing muggle clothes?” she asked, pulling on her boots and tying the laces with a quick charm. They had to be muggles - just about all of the wizard children were either at Hogwarts, or hiding with their families.

“Let me check... Yes. Looks like they’re muggles. Blimey! He’s torn up the street across from us!”

“Don’t linger!” Hermione yelled, grabbing her rifle and the mirrors. “Sirius! We’re apparating to Grimmauld Place at once!”

She rushed out of her room. Justin met her outside, just slipping into his rifle’s sling. Behind him, Sally-Anne left his room, struggling with her harness. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“Grimmauld Place. We’re linking up with the Order and the French.”

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Hogwarts, February 1st, 1997

“Harry! Death Eaters are attacking Diagon Alley. Hermione called me.” Harry Potter stared at Sirius’s image in the communication mirror. And to think he had been glad for the distraction just a moment ago, when he had felt the communication mirror vibrate in his pocket and had slipped out of
the common room to activate it.

“We’re gathering at Grimmauld Place!” Sirius said. “Hurry!”

Harry was already running. The next Floo connection was in McGonagall’s office, but… he sprinted through the common room.

“Harry! What’s happening?”

He ignored Neville’s yell. The infirmary’s Floo connection was not as close as McGonagall’s, but if she wasn’t in her office he wouldn’t be able to enter.

“Harry!”

Neville was running after him, but Harry had no time to explain, much less argue with the boy why he wasn’t ready to come with him. He pulled out his shrunken broom without stopping. A few seconds later, he was flying through the hallways - close to the ceiling, so he wouldn’t ram anyone in his path.

An Auror was standing guard outside the infirmary. Harry thought he had been a Hufflepuff two years above him. Maybe one of Cedric’s friends. He couldn’t remember his name, though.

“Stop!” The wizard was belatedly drawing his wand.

If this had been an attack, Harry could have cursed the man twice over. Moody would have fun training that one, Harry thought, jumping off the broom right in front of the man. “Medical emergency!” he yelled.

The Auror blinked, gaping at him while he slipped through the door. Moody wouldn’t have fun, Harry corrected himself. He’d be spitting mad.

He reached the fireplace and grabbed some Floo Powder. “Sirius! I’m coming through!” he said to the mirror. “Grimmauld Place!”

A moment later, he stumbled out of the fireplace into the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place. Sirius was in the centre of the room, next to Delacour, surrounded by Order members - mostly the Weasleys - and French wizards and witches. Moody was there, too. And Aberforth Dumbledore. As far as he could tell, pretty much all of the Order members left - at least those able to fight - were present. But where was…? Harry looked around. He couldn’t spot… there! Hermione and the rest of the Resistance entered through the door. They must have apparated, he thought. He couldn’t spot Ron, though. Hadn’t he planned to meet Hermione? Then he hissed - Ron had said he’d visit the twins first!

“Harry!”

That was Sirius calling him. Harry went to his godfather while the wizard addressed the room.

“Alright. The Dark Lord’s attacking Diagon Alley - focused on Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. He has about a dozen Death Eaters with him, and twice that number of hostages - children stuck to flying carpets.”

Harry wasn’t the only one who gasped upon hearing that. Molly Weasley was particularly loud.

“Aurors are engaging them already, and the shop’s wards are holding - the Dark Lord hasn’t risked taking them down himself so far - but neither the Aurors nor the wards will last that long. We’ll take the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, and then hit them from the air and from the ground, from all
directions. With the hostages, we can’t just blow them up, so we’ll have to be careful. Unless you’re ordered to, don’t engage the Dark Lord - leave that to those who have been preparing for this. Stick with your group, and stay alive!”

Harry swallowed, trying not to show how nervous he was. This was it. He’d face Voldemort. All he had to do was get close enough to use Legimency.

The French were already at the fireplace, taking the vanguard, as usual, followed by the Order members. The Resistance would apparently be the last to leave. While a short line was forming, Harry walked over to Hermione. She was glancing at a mirror. At Ron. He was alive and well!

“Hurry up!” he heard his friend yell. “The building’s shaking already.”

“We’re coming,” Hermione said, staring at the mirror with a grim expression.

Harry wanted to hug her, wanted to talk to Ron, but Sirius started to usher the Resistance through the fireplace before he could do either. All he managed was to briefly squeeze Hermione’s hand.

Then they stepped through the fireplace.

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London, Diagon Alley, February 1st, 1997

Ron Weasley stopped casting, horrified, when a Blasting Curse struck a flying carpet, shredding it and the six children stuck to it. Who had… there! The curse had been cast by an Auror advancing on the Death Eater position.

Ron wasn’t the only one to spot him - before he could say anything, the man was banished into a wall next to the shop with so much force, he left a bloodstain on the bricks when he slid down to the ground. A second later, the man’s chest exploded, blood and gore splattering the cobblestones.

Fred, crouching at the door, cast a curse at the Death Eater who had killed the man, but missed as the dark wizard stepped behind an overturned cart. Ron’s own Reductor Curse hit the cart, but didn’t do much damage - it had been turned into solid stone, he noticed. He was tempted to use a Blasting Curse, turn the thing into deadly shrapnel, but… he glanced at another floating carpet nearby. He couldn’t.

George arrived, with two floating stacks of rockets trailing behind him. “Let’s see how they like this!” he yelled, lining them up with a flick of his wand.

“No! You’ll hurt the hostages!” Ron yelled. The children were stuck to the carpets and couldn’t flee - and couldn’t be summoned to safety either.

“Don’t worry,” his brother bared his teeth, lighting the fuses. “It’s not going to hurt anyone… technically.”

What good would they do then? Ron thought, then ducked as the rockets shot out of the shop, towards the stone bunker shielding the Death Eaters attacking the wards. A second later, he saw the rockets blow up into thick, fluorescent smoke.

“Poison?” he asked, glancing at George. That would certainly harm the hostages.

“Not the deadly kind!” George grinned. “I loaded them with our puking pastilles!”
All of them knew that the odds of catching a Death Eater without a Bubble-Head Charm up were slim, but the enemy wouldn’t know what the rockets did, so it should at least distract them. It was quite ironic, Ron thought - the twins had spent a long time weaponising their products, turning pranks into lethal devices in preparation for such an attack, and now they were forced to rely on their harmless products, or they’d kill the muggle hostages. Of course, used correctly, even pranks could be deadly, he added to himself, with a glance at the corpse of a Death Eater who had been caught out of cover with a Freezing Frisbee. The ten seconds he had been held immobile had been more than enough to kill the dark wizard with Piercing Curses.

But that was just one of the attackers, and there were too many left. And the Dark Lord. If not for a handful of Aurors attacking, the wards would probably have been shredded already. Instead, the Aurors had been shredded - Ron could see three more red-robed corpses on the street.

He wasn’t feeling too sorry for them, though - not after that Blasting Curse. Ron shivered, glancing at the grisly remains.

Then he ducked, involuntarily, when another Blasting Curse hit the street right in front of the shop, at the wardline, and the building shook again.

“We should retreat,” George said. “The wards won’t hold much longer.”

They had reinforced the walls and door, but that would not offer much protection. Not against a dozen Death Eaters, much less against Voldemort. Ron shook his head anyway. “No. We need to keep them here, attacking us. Help is on the way.”

“You’ve been telling us that for a long time now!” Fred said, casting a few more curses.

“Just a few minutes,” Ron corrected him while his own curse drove a Death Eater back into cover.

“We might not have that much longer!” George said, summoning a bundle of Screaming Screwdrivers from a shelf in the back.

“They’re coming!” Ron said. Hermione had told him through the mirror. They were not yet in the Alley, though. He reached into his enchanted pocket and pulled out a small flask, another trinket left to him by the Headmaster. It wasn’t quite harmless, but if he used it correctly, then it shouldn’t harm the hostages. Or himself. And it would buy them time. But if he made a mistake… he took a deep breath. He should have used it right away, when no one but the Death Eaters had been in the Alley.

“Brace yourself!” he said. Then he broke the seal.

The Dark Lord Voldemort was growing impatient. Even without his help, his Death Eaters should have taken down the wards of that blood traitor shop by now. This was taking too long! At least, though, he had only lost one of his followers to the defenders’ curses - given the competency the new recruits had displayed, that was already a success, even with those boys hampered by the hostages.

They’d learn, though, or they’d die.

A speck of red caught his attention - another Auror? He waved his wand, and the street corner the figure had dashed behind vanished. The Auror stared at him, gaping, instead of moving, and Voldemort’s Killing Curse struck him in the chest.

That was the sixth dead Auror - they were displaying an appalling lack of skill. He was wondering if
the one who had killed half a dozen of the muggle children had done so to strip him of the protection
the hostages granted, or had simply mistaken them for Death Eaters. Once he was ruling Britain,
standards for Aurors would be raised considerably.

He glanced at the stone bunker protecting his Curse-Breakers - or rather, those of his followers
claiming to be Curse-Breakers. The three wizards had clearly overstated their experience. He told
himself that it didn’t matter - the wards would not last forever, and the shop was, ultimately, not that
important, as long as it served to attract his enemies so they could be slaughtered. And with two
buildings burning, and the blood traitors trapped, his enemies had to react.

He checked the sky, still obscured by thick clouds of smoke, and smiled. That would hinder his
enemies, too. More than they believed - they wouldn’t be able to see through it either, unlike himself.

A loud roar made him whirl around in time to see a huge blue figure shoot out from the joke shop. A
Marid, here? He definitely had underestimated those blood traitors. To use a bound genie showed
both their skill and nerve. Genies served only if forced to, and would take any opportunity to betray
their master.

They were fierce fighters, though, and hard to hurt with magic. A swish with his wand reinforced the
defences of his followers, just in time to absorb a crushing wave of water slamming into them. The
mass of water rebounded, then formed deceptively slim tendrils which struck at the stone walls with
enough force to send splinters flying. And they were making their way around the obstacles, probing
for weaknesses. A shriek told him that one had found a gap, and struck a Death Eater. He sneered -
as weak as his new recruits were, he needed them.

“Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!”

Water conjured and controlled by the genie intercepted his curses, exploding into clouds of steam
and obscuring the Marid from Voldemort’s view - and himself from the genie’s. Long enough to
send another volley of curses at it.

Those two were blocked by water tendrils, but the genie was now on the defensive. Voldemort
glanced at Rabastan, but his follower had anticipated his plan, and was already flanking the creature
with his brother.

The genie managed to dodge and block their curses as well - a truly formidable example of its kind -
but in doing so, it spent more of the water it controlled. And to conjure more, it would have to focus -
and greatly reduce its ability to block more curses. It had to know this as well, since it suddenly
struck out with all its tendrils at the Lestranges, obviously trying to overwhelm them. Rabastan was
struck, but his Shield Charm held, even while he was thrown back, while Rodolphus managed to roll
away, but had to take cover.

But in doing so, the genie had offered an opening to Voldemort - and he didn’t lose any time
exploiting it. He sent a volley of curses at it, striking the remaining water tendrils, disrupting them
long enough for another curse to hit the genie. It started to shriek at once, writhing in pain, arms
clawing at its back, where a dark stain was spreading.

Voldemort was almost disappointed that the Lestrange brothers killed the genie before he could see
his curse run its course, but he couldn’t fault them for being efficient. They were his most effective
followers.

Despite the victory over the creature, he was annoyed. After seeing such magic used against him, it
was clear that he could not afford to leave the shop and move on towards the Leaky Cauldron. He
had to keep the shop bottled up. On the other hand... He turned his attention to the Alley again. The
Ministry forces should arrive any moment, provided they had deployed as quickly as possible. If he could decimate their best, those who’d never surrender anyway, and rout the remaining forces, then the Ministry would be too weakened to further resist him.

*****

The Leaky Cauldron was full of panicking wizards and witches, Hermione Granger noticed when she walked out of the fireplace. Two Aurors were herding them through the exit to muggle London. They could have simply apparated, she thought - magical travel wasn’t blocked in this part of the Alley. Yet. But then, they’d probably splinch themselves in their state.

It wasn’t her problem, anyway. The French were already out of the pub - she had tried to tell them not to be quite as aggressive, but even after the horrific casualties they had taken in the Ministry, the Delacours had not been willing ‘to abandon two centuries of tradition’.

The Order members were moving as well, Ron’s parents leading them - with some exceptions. She saw Aberforth and Moody waiting to the side, together with Sirius and Harry.

Hermione turned to the Resistance. “We’ll use the brooms to fly around them and hit them from the other side. Louise, Jeremy - you’re front. Tania, John, fire support. Seamus, you’re with me behind them. Justin and Sally-Anne, you’re bringing up the rear. Mary-Jane, you’re on evac duty - summon and levitate the wounded.” The witch would be most useful in that function - she lacked the training to fight effectively.

This wouldn’t be like the Ministry, she told herself. They had trained for such missions. And they knew the area. But a small voice in the back of her head kept reminding her that they were once again rushing into a battle without proper planning.

“We’re at the Leaky Cauldron,” she said to the mirror. “We’re taking off now! In a lower voice, barely more than a whisper, she added: “Love you.”

She saw Ron smile for a moment, but she stashed the mirror before she could hear his answer.

Then she stepped into the yard behind the pub, and pulled out her broom from her pocket. A tap with her wand unshranks it, and she straddled it. “Let’s go!”

Louise and Jeremy were already in the air, taking the lead. Hermione saw smoke rising from a burning building - not the twins’ shop, but close. A lot of smoke, actually - she couldn’t see the ground in the area. They wouldn’t be able to take advantage of their rifles’ range, she thought, unless they managed to clear the smoke.

But that would take too long with the spells she knew. The two former Hit-Wizards were already half-way to the landing zone. Too eager, she thought, especially Jeremy, who should still be resting. But they needed everyone.

She swerved to the side, giving the area where she could see spells flashing through the smoke a wider berth. They weren’t the only ones in the air, she noticed. An Auror was ahead of them, sending a spell at the ground. She hoped he could see his target, and wasn’t just casting blindly.

The man banked to the left, avoiding a green curse that shot up from the ground, and disappeared into the smoke. Then he reappeared - flailing on his broom, which was descending rapidly.

“The smoke’s enchanted!” Hermione yelled, watching the man crash into a roof. “Don’t touch it!”

Ahead of her, Louise and Jeremy were pulling away sharply, putting more distance between them
and the smoke. It could be poison, she thought. Or maybe a cursed mist or fog - she had read about such spells, but usually they were used in traps.

In any case, they had no time to examine it. She pulled her mirror out again - she had to warn Sirius and Harry.

*****

“...the smoke is a trap, don’t touch it!”

Harry Potter flinched, hearing Hermione’s voice from Sirius’s mirror. He hadn’t been planning to simply rush in on his Firebolt, straight at the Dark Lord, but he had kept it in mind as a last resort. And he had thought about using the smoke as cover…

“Don’t touch the smoke!” Sirius’s voice rang out over the Alley, thanks to an Amplifying Charm. Of course, Harry thought, Vivienne and her cousin would be flying!

They were running towards the twins’ shop, right behind Moody and Aberforth. Ahead of them, Harry saw flashes of spells coming from the roofs - the French were already engaging the Death Eaters. And the Dark Lord.

In front of them, Moody stopped at the last corner before the twins’ shop. “They’ve dug in!” he said, without looking around the corner - his enchanted eye could see through it, Harry knew - “and they’re covering the approaches!”

Harry saw a red-robed corpse on the ground, close to the corner, and nodded. They couldn’t get close enough. Not without cover - or a distraction. Or… he looked up, to the roof. They would provide some cover, and they could…

A gargling scream made him look at the next building, and he saw one of the Delacours stumble and slip on the shingles, sliding down the slope, then falling off. A Cushioning Charm cast by Sirius stopped him from crashing on the cobblestones, but the man kept flailing and thrashing around, then suddenly grew still.

The smoke was touching the roof above them, Harry realised. Before he could react, though, Aberforth raised his wand and a gust of wind shot up, pushing the billowing cloud back up.

“Can you get rid of it?” Moody asked.

“Would take too long,” the old wizard answered.

“Too dangerous to go over the roofs, then,” Moody said. For the first time since they had reached the corner, he turned his head to look at them. At Harry. “They’re covering the side-alleys too. The French have already lost half their number, and with the smoke, the muggleborns can’t shoot them from afar. This’ll be messy.”

“We can go through the buildings,” Sirius said.

“Three of them are burning,” Moody said, “and two more have collapsed. But it’s the best option.”

“He’ll be expecting that,” Aberforth said.

“We’ll go first,” Moody said, staring at the other wizard.

After a moment, Aberforth nodded.
A frontal assault was the worst way to attack an enemy position, Hermione Granger knew that. But between the deadly smoke and the burning buildings, the Resistance didn’t have any other option. And they couldn’t wait - the Order and, of course, the French were already fighting. And dying.

“Watch your fire - they are using children as human shields!” she said into her radio, sprinting after Louise and Jeremy, with Seamus close on her heels. She flicked her wand, raising walls and boulders in the street to provide them with cover.

Behind her, Tania started firing her machine gun from the first floor of a shop. Justin had entered the building across from her, but hadn’t reached a firing spot yet. John was crouching behind a low wall, providing covering fire. She couldn’t see Sally-Anne or Mary-Jane - they were preparing a safe spot to treat the wounded.

Rolling behind some conjured cover, a bit too close to a burning building for her comfort, she glanced up. If the smoke started to sink down, they’d have to react at once. She sent a gust of wind at it, just in case. “Keep casting at the smoke, to prevent it from setting down on us!” she said into the radio. One of the boulders she had conjured exploded, and she pressed herself into the ground when splinters rained down on her. Seamus grunted, next to her.

“Are you hurt?” she yelled.

“No!”

She stood up and flicked her wand, raising more walls ahead of them. “Go!”

Seamus hadn’t waited for her signal and was already running. She followed him, raising another wall on the side - mostly as a distraction and to conceal their movements. It wouldn’t stand up to the Dark Lord’s spells for long.

And it didn’t. It started to explode behind her, the last parts blowing up while she slid behind the rubble from a collapsed house. A few yards away she saw the body of an Auror, chest torn open.

Louise and Jeremy were working their way even closer to the Death Eaters, through the rubble strewn around. Even from her spot, she could see three floating carpets full of terrified children. Some of them were bleeding, she realised.

She could see the positions of the Death Eaters as well - it looked like they were behind solid cover too. And smoke from burning houses obscured them - she couldn’t tell where that smoke ended and the deadly one started, though the Dark Lord wouldn’t use such a dangerous spell too close to his men, or to the hostages.

Another reason to get closer, she thought. Seamus stood up, firing a short burst. She leaned around the edge of their cover, trying to summon the closest flying carpet. It didn’t move towards her, though. Her Human-presence-revealing Charm showed her where people were hiding - but the presence of so many children made spotting the Death Eaters harder than usual. But there was a group of two people moving towards them. Death Eaters! She tapped her headset. “Two moving through the ruined house on the other side. Marking them for you.”

“Alright,” she heard Tania acknowledge while she switched to tracer bullets in her rifle. The markers were moving faster than she expected - disillusioned then. She waited until the first broke cover, then fired two bursts at it.

Tania and Justin immediately fired at the same location, a long burst from the machine gun tearing up
the area. The marker dropped, and Hermione shifted her aim, firing two more bursts. Next to her, Seamus was firing as well, and under the combined weight of fire, the Death Eater’s Shield Charm shattered. The Disillusionment Charm followed when more bullets found their mark, revealing a wizard missing half his head.

The other marker was moving back, towards the Death Eaters’ position. He was running. “Marking the other,” Hermione announced on their channel, “he’s running!” She started to fire single shots, the tracer bullets following the running Death Eater.

Tania was firing as well, hosing down the area with long bursts, but the marker kept running - until right in front of him, a wall rose, courtesy of Louise. It didn’t last long, but long enough for Seamus and Tania to drop that Death Eater as well.

That meant the flank of the enemy was open now. With the Delacours keeping them busy, the Resistance could hit them hard. There was just one problem. She keyed her radio again.

“Louise, Jeremy - once you can see the hostages, start conjuring walls around them!”

Next to her, Seamus chuckled. “Then we can blow them up!”

She didn’t answer him. Instead she stood up and laid down some covering fire. Or tried to - a Cutting Curse almost took her head off before she could duck down again. “Too close,” she muttered.

But Louise and Jeremy were in a flanking position now. And Seamus was getting his bombs out.

“No bombs! Use grenades!” she told him.

Seamus shook his head. “We have to take that risk.”

“Risking children?”

She stared at him. Was he really willing to go that far? A second passed. Another. Then he cursed, and started to collect the bombs.

Hermione let out the breath she had been holding and stood up again to cast once more at the enemy.

“I barely see them long enough to shoot!” Justin’s voice sounded through the radio.

Hermione had expected that. She tried to clear the smoke with a gust of wind, but it barely moved the thick clouds. At least Louise and Jeremy were making headway with the walls around the children. Just a few more, and…

The rubble the two former Hit-wizards were moving through suddenly exploded, and both disappeared in a cloud of dust. Seamus cursed.

Hermione pointed her wand at the cloud. “Accio Louise’s uniform!”

“Accio Jeremy’s uniform!” Seamus was slower to react.

Two bodies flew towards them. “Catch them!” Hermione yelled, already casting to raise another wall, so they wouldn’t share the fate of their friends.

Not a second too soon - another explosion made the ground shake, tearing through her obstacles as if they were made of cardboard. That had never happened before - it had to be the Dark Lord. “Voldemort’s engaging us!” she shouted, hoping Sirius or Harry were paying attention to the mirror.
“Jeremy’s dead!” Seamus yelled. “Louise’s badly wounded!”

“Sally-Anne, Louise needs help!” Hermione said, tapping her radio again. For a moment, she debated staying. If they managed to keep the Dark Lord busy, it would allow Harry and the others to get close. But the smoke was covering the entire area now, obscuring the street - not even tracer bullets would allow her to direct the fire from Tania and Justin - and more obstacles were growing from the ground. And she had to keep casting to prevent the smoke from reaching her - it was probably harmless, but they couldn’t risk being wrong. If Voldemort reached their position in the middle of this…

No, she thought - they’d die too quickly. It was better to make him chase them. “Fall back!” she shouted, levitating Louise and starting to run.

Seamus dropped a smoke grenade behind them, then sprinted after her. Behind them, their old position vanished in a green cloud - acid, she thought. Or poison. Or both. They were almost out of the ruins when she saw the body of the Auror she had noticed before standing up - despite his chest sporting a hole she could see through.

And it was charging her! She couldn’t use her wand without dropping Louise, not could she use her rifle. She fumbled for her pistol, but Seamus was quicker, firing several bursts from his rifle at the walking corpse.

The body shook under the impact of the bullets, but didn’t stop advancing.

“Use your wand!” Hermione yelled, backpedaling.

A Reductor Curse blew the thing’s head off, but it took two more to make it stop moving.

And Hermione had seen more corpses around.

“Zombies!” she heard Tania yell through the radio.

*****

The Dark Lord Voldemort snarled, lowering his wand. The cowardly mudbloods had killed Rabastan and Yaxley, then ran from him! But he had paid them back. They had lost more people, and dealing with a few dozen animated corpses would shatter his enemies’ cohesion as they defended themselves against the walking dead. It wasn’t actually necromancy, but a mere charm, the results far from a true undead like an Inferius, but the mudbloods and fools opposing him wouldn’t know that.

Not until it was too late. He raised his wand, blowing up a roof nearby and sending another fool to their death. The mudbloods were running, their nerve lost when their muggle weapons had been rendered ineffective and their plan to save the hostages had been foiled. All they had managed to achieve was drawing him away from finishing the blood traitors. A meaningless delay, since they were trapped inside their shop. And the majority of the Ministry forces had been driven off or killed already. That left Dumbledore’s Order, and what was left of their brave but foolish French friends. His Death Eaters had taken losses too, and three were still tied up taking down the blood traitors’ wards, but that didn’t matter now - the remaining enemies wouldn’t be able to withstand a charge led by himself. He could feel Potter out there as well - close, even. Killing the Boy-Who-Lived at the same time as he shattered his enemies would make the day perfect.

“Ackerly! Rodolphus! Follow me!” he commanded, striding out from their position. It was time to end this battle - and this war.
Nott rushed after him, almost stumbling over some rubble left in the street, while Rodolphus showed the awareness of a true fighter, moving over the uneven ground as if it was a smooth street. He vanished the pitiful walls the fools had tried to raise around his hostages, and summoned one of the carpets.

Something moved in the ruins ahead, and he sent a Blasting Curse their way, then turned the dust thrown up by it into acid. A grey-robed Hit-Wizard stumbled out of it, screaming as the acid ate away at his skin. Rodolalus added to the man’s agony by hitting him with an Entrail-expelling Curse.

Voldemort frowned - without any enemy to frighten with it, such a display served no purpose. A Killing Curse would have been better. But he had to indulge his most loyal followers.

He spotted movement ahead, and his Human-presence-revealing Spell marked them. Were the fools actually attacking still? With just two of them? He smirked, covering the street ahead of the two enemies in a cloud of acidic poison that looked just like the smoke from the burning house next to it.

To his surprise, the cloud was blown away - towards him, even! - by a single spell. His eyes widened slightly. There were not many wizards skilled enough to do such a thing. Then he grinned. It looked like he’d be able to avenge another slight today!

As expected, it was Mad-Eye Moody who jumped out from the corner, sending a Killing Curse at Voldemort. No, at Nott. The fool had moved away, too far for the floating metal shields protecting Voldemort to intercept the curse. He fell, dead, with a surprised expression on his face.

Good riddance to the coward, Voldemort thought, returning fire with a few Killing Curses of his own. His enemy showed surprising agility for a cripple, moving far quicker than expected. Had he enhanced himself with spells or potions?

Rodolphus was moving to the side now, to catch the enemy in a crossfire, but a volley of curses from the corner drove him back - Aberforth Dumbledore had entered the fray.

Voldemort smiled. A flick of his wand started to draw the Cursed Cloud above them down towards the street. When Dumbledore’s brother began to counter that, Rodolphus started to press him hard. Which left Voldemort free to deal with Moody.

The old Auror was casting rapidly, Killing Curses mixed with Cutting and Piercing Curses. Efficient, but hardly surprising - but then, few could surprise a man who had delved further into the Dark Arts than anyone else, so it stood to reason that Moody wouldn’t try.

Voldemort’s defences and protections weathered the assault, if not without some effort, a number of his shields exploding as they intercepted the Killing Curses, his Shield Charm straining to handle the rest. But he was sending Killing Curses of his own at the Auror. They too were met with conjured obstacles. Voldemort frowned - it was rare to find an opponent able to match his speed at casting the Killing Curse. He raised his estimate of Moody accordingly. It wouldn’t save the Auror, of course - Voldemort had far more spells at his disposal than the Killing Curse, even though he liked its power and simplicity. And thanks to Barty Jr., he knew a lot about the Auror’s enchanted eye - and its weaknesses.

He ducked beneath a decidedly illegal curse - Moody was using more exotic spells now, too, he noticed - and swished his wand, then stabbed it at the Auror’s position. Mixed with three Fire-Dart Spells, a few charms greased the ground beneath his enemy, but without any effect - Moody showed no trouble in avoiding the darts, having enchanted his peg leg to avoid slipping - another piece of information Voldemort’s late follower had acquired a few years ago.
Having known all this, Voldemort had cast those spells to distract his enemy, and keep the man’s enchanted eye from noticing the other spell he had cast at the street. He smiled when the ground suddenly opened beneath the Auror, the stone and earth forming a sphere around his enemy. Too quickly to let the man react and escape, but not quick enough for Voldemort to miss with the Fiendfyre he sent into it right before it closed.

That left Dumbledore’s brother. Voldemort turned just in time to save Rodolphus from being overwhelmed.

*****

Ron Weasley was staring at the smoke above Diagon Alley. He had heard Hermione’s warning - it was a trap. And he had seen an Auror fall from the sky after flying through it. They had to get rid of it, but he had seen how quickly the Marid he had released had been dealt with by the Dark Lord. A Djinn would come in very handy now. But he didn’t have another genie bottle.

“What are you doing, Ron? We need to kill those Death Eaters before they break down our wards!” Fred yelled at him.

“We need to deal with this smoke!” Ron yelled back. “Before it settles in the Alley and kills everyone.”

“The others are keeping it at bay with spells.”

They were - but every spell cast at the smoke was one spell less cast at the enemy. You couldn’t fight under such conditions. Ron ground his teeth. The trinkets he had received from Dumbledore were of no use here. And the pranking items wouldn’t help either. Unless… His eyes widened. He dug out the ‘Everlasting Evaporator’ from his enchanted pocket, then grabbed a bezoar from another pocket. “George! I need a mortar!”

“What?”

“A mortar! Now!”

“The wards are about to fall, and you want a mortar?”

“Yes! Hurry up!”

His brother arrived, with a mortar in hand.

Ron grabbed it and put the bezoar inside, then started the mortar. “Come on, grind grind grind!” he mumbled.

“What are you planning?” Fred asked.

“Dealing with the smoke,” Ron said, stopping the mortar and pouring the dust into the Evaporator.

“The wards will fall any minute now! We have to get out!” George said.

“Not yet!” Ron started the Evaporator. Thick, brown smoke poured out of it. He cast a Doubling Charm on the smoke, and the shop rapidly started to fill with it.

“Ron! What did you do?” George yelled.

“Neutralising the smoke!” Ron yelled, before coughing. He picked the Evaporator up and pushed it outside.
“At least it’ll hide us from them once the wards fall,” Fred muttered, coughing. “Unless we suffocate in here.”

Ron was ignoring him, staring at the sky. The magically multiplying smoke was rising, and mixing with the other smoke. If he had guessed correctly… he conjured a small bird and sent it up. Right into the thickest smoke. It didn’t die.

He pulled out his mirror. “The smoke’s neutralised where it’s brown!” he yelled into it.

He was repeating himself when the shop suddenly shook violently. He knew what that meant - the wards had fallen. He turned around, and saw a wall of flames rush towards him.

*****

Harry Potter saw Sirius suddenly stop, ducking into a broken door instead of continuing through the side alley.

“Ron said the smoke has been neutralised ‘where it’s brown’,” Sirius said.

Harry gasped. That meant… He stuck his hand into his pocket, feeling around for his shrunken Firebolt.

“Harry!”

He met his godfather’s eyes. “It’s the best way. I can reach him in a few seconds.”

Sirius muttered a curse under his breath, but he was pulling his own broom out.

Harry opened his mouth to tell him not to follow him, but a glare from Sirius shut him up.

A few seconds later, they were in the air. The faint pain Harry had felt ever since arriving in the Alley grew stronger - Voldemort was close. He pushed his broom down, skimming the edge of the next roof, then shot across the Alley. Where was the Dark Lord?

A slew of curses missed him, and he banked, then corkscrewed. There were the Death Eaters, and there was… He gasped - the twins’ shop was on fire. Flames shot out of the windows. As he stared, the roof was blown off - from the inside - and three brooms shot out of the burning building, chased by a giant snake made of flames. Fiendfyre!

The three broom riders disappeared in the brown smoke while the snake broke apart into tendrils of fire.

“There’s the Dark Lord!” Sirius shouted, before Harry could change course.

He glanced down. There was Voldemort - looking at him. Harry snarled, and dived down.

The Dark Lord was casting rapidly, and Harry had to corkscrew and break off his dive to avoid the slew of curses flying at him. Even so, the curses came very close. He couldn’t reach him by flying straight at him, Harry knew - he would be too easy to hit that way. He had to approach from the side, while circling. Just like in the tournament with the dragon.

Only Voldemort could cast faster than the dragon had been able to breathe fire. And the Dark Lord had better aim as well. Harry had to use all his skill at flying to avoid getting killed - and was still driven away, rather than closing in.

Then Sirius dived at the Dark Lord, his wand spitting curses. That gave Harry an opening. He pulled
his broom around and closed in again on the distracted enemy. Before he could finish his manoeuvre, though, a curse hit Sirius’s broom, sending him spinning away. Harry had to pull up again to avoid the next barrage of curses. He glanced around - he couldn’t spot Sirius. He hesitated. Should he press on, or go help his godfather?

He clenched his jaw and bent low over his broom. He had to get the Dark Lord.

“Harry!”

That was Ron! Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw his friend approach, on his broom, wand out. Another Death Eater stepped up next to the Dark Lord, wand raised, but before he could cast, a spell hit him in the back and he crumpled. Was that Aberforth? Before Harry could take another look, the man vanished in a cloud of smoke when Voldemort unleashed more curses.

That was an opening! Harry banked left, approaching the Dark Lord at an angle, in a shrinking circle. Ron, however, flew straight, raining spells down on Voldemort. Distracting him further, Harry knew.

Harry rolled, narrowly avoiding a Killing Curse. He was almost close enough. He drew the Elder Wand as the ground suddenly rose, and rose, forming a wall. Harry pulled on his broom with all his strength, hampered by his grip on the wand, but he managed to swing around, enough to scrape along the wall, rather than crash into it.

Ron flew over it - but the Dark Lord must have been waiting for that - Harry’s friend flew straight into a curse. He screamed as he crashed.

But that curse had cost Voldemort. Harry was close enough now, and the Dark Lord was facing away from him. Voldemort was still turning towards him, his wand rising, when Harry pointed the Elder Wand at him, just a few yards away from crashing into him.

“Legimens!”

His scar flared up in sudden, excruciating pain, and time seemed to stop.

*****

Harry found himself floating in empty space, the pain gone. There were spheres containing memories, but they were distant, their sounds barely audible.

“Potter!”

He whirled around.

Voldemort was floating there, his inhuman face sneering at him. “What did you do? Did you try to read my mind?” The Dark Lord blinked. “No, that’s not it. You used the link between us. I see. Clever, boy. But not clever enough.”

Harry clenched his jaw, rage filling him. That monster had murdered his parents. Had hurt, possibly killed his godfather and his best friend, and so many others. He aimed his wand at the Dark Lord. He couldn’t cast spells here, but it would serve as a focus for his will. His rage.

Voldemort hissed, twitching, and floated back a foot, before steadying himself. “You think you can defeat me, in my own mind? You, a mere boy, not even out of school?” Voldemort laughed, raising his own wand. And Harry felt the pressure against his own mind. Like in the graveyard.
“I’ve beaten you before,” Harry spat back. “As a toddler. As a first year. As a second year. I almost beat you in my fourth year, too.” He had forced the Dark Lord’s spell back when they had been caught in that golden cage. He could do it again.

“You never beat me. Dumbledore and your parents protected you. But they are dead. As are your friends. They sacrificed themselves, so you could fail. All those deaths, all that suffering, for naught! Because of you!” He laughed again, then smiled. “You will die here, and then Britain will be mine.”

The pain grew stronger. Harry let out an involuntary hiss before rallying. He wouldn’t let this monster defeat him! He’d crush him, and avenge everyone! Save everyone! And yet, little by little, he felt himself being pushed back. Felt the pain grow inside his head. Harry tried to focus his rage, but to no avail. He was driven back, beaten. He was about to die, he realised. Killed by Voldemort.

Voldemort was smiling now. “Who had this foolish idea? Did Dumbledore truly believe that a mere boy, without any experience in the Dark Arts, could be a match for me? Die!”

Harry heard someone groan, and realised it was himself. The pressure was growing even worse. His head felt as if a red-hot poker was being driven through it - through his scar. He thought of his friends, his family, and closed his eyes. He couldn’t beat the Dark Lord with rage. He should have known that. Had known it. But to see Sirius, and Ron, fall…

“Think of your loved ones, and their deaths! You'll be joining them now!”

His head felt as if it was bursting. His heart was racing. His body was shaking. He remembered his parents dying, Sirius crashing, Ron screaming, Hermione… he blinked. He had felt like this before. At the Black Lake. In third year. He focused on that memory. On the memory inside the memory. The happiness he had felt then, and remembered. Love.

He opened his eyes, facing Voldemort. The pain was fading, his rage and frustration and fear receding. He saw a glimpse of surprise, of fear, in his enemy’s eyes, and smiled.

“Expecto Patronum!”

No stag appeared, not here. But Harry started to glow, glow so brightly that Voldemort had to shield his eyes with his free hand. The Dark Lord looked afraid, Harry realised. And he smiled again.

This time Voldemort was shaking, hissing, his smile gone, replaced by fear and hatred.

Harry’s pain was gone now. He focused on his enemy, and pushed. And Voldemort faltered.

“No! No!” The Dark Lord was stammering now, panting. Sweating.

Harry was still glowing, the light seemingly reaching out, travelling from his wand to Voldemort’s. Like in the graveyard, almost two years ago.

But unlike back then, Voldemort couldn’t flee. Couldn’t break the confrontation off. He would die here.

And that realisation was, Harry suddenly knew, too much for a man who had sacrificed everything to avoid death.

“No! No! NOOOOO!”

When the light reached Voldemort’s wand, it started to crumble, turning to ashes that faded as they fell. His hand followed, then his arm. Behind him, the memory spheres started to fade as well.
The Dark Lord kept screaming until his head disintegrated and Harry found himself alone.

Voldemort was gone.

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Chapter 41: Hanging in the Balance

‘In many ways, the Battle of Diagon Alley was a repeat of the Battle of the Ministry. Ministry forces, members of the Order of the Phoenix, French volunteers and the Muggleborn Resistance fought the followers of the Dark Lord in the middle of a location full of civilians, ultimately defeating them at great cost.

And yet there were crucial differences. Unlike the Battle of the Ministry, where Bellatrix Lestrange was overcome by sheer force of numbers, this battle - and with it, the Second Blood War - was decided by a duel between two wizards. The Dark Lord and the Boy-Who-Lived met on the battlefield in single combat, just as Grindelwald and Dumbledore had, fifty years before them. Many consider it ironic that a war fought over muggleborns was decided in such a traditional manner. It is not a surprise, however, once one considers that Dumbledore must have planned this. While the duel between the Dark Lord and Harry Potter has been the subject of so many books, each revealing its author’s bias, that it is hard to find the truth, it goes without saying that the only way Harry Potter could have managed to defeat the Dark Lord was if he had been personally trained by Dumbledore for such a confrontation. In fact, some even go as far as to credit Dumbledore with the victory over the Dark Lord, claiming that the Boy-Who-Lived was nothing more than his tool and citing as proof the Dark Lord’s defeat in Godric’s Hollow in 1981 at the hands of a toddler.

While I share the view that it wasn’t a toddler’s accidental magic, but a well-prepared trap that decided the First Blood War - as I have already discussed earlier - I do think that Harry Potter’s subsequent actions show that he was far from a mere tool of Dumbledore.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, Diagon Alley, February 1st, 1997

His distraction had worked well - too well, Ron Weasley thought when he realised that he couldn’t avoid all the curses sent his way by Voldemort. He still tried his best, of course. He rolled and banked to the left, sliding between a green and a brown curse, then pulled up, as sharply as he could. The third curse hit his broom, shattering it between his hands and knees. The broom didn’t block the curse completely, though - it hit Ron anyway, and his right side erupted in pain.

With his broom destroyed, he instantly started to fall. Desperate, he waved his wand, casting a Cushioning Charm straight down. Hindered by his injuries, he barely managed to finish the spell before he hit the roof. Even so, the charm worked enough to keep him both alive and conscious, though his battered, bleeding body erupted in even more pain as he slid down the sloped roof. Ron grabbed for the edge of the roof, but didn’t find any purchase, and fell another storey. He did manage to land feet first, but his left ankle snapped, and he collapsed.

He had broken his leg before though, in training with Moody, so he rolled on to his side and numbed his ankle. But his side still hurt - and bled - and with the shock receding, he noticed that dozens of splinters had peppered his limbs and body as well. And they hurt. At least he was in a side alley, a bit away from his brothers’ shop, so he should be safe for a few more moments.

Clenching his teeth together, Ron tried to stop the bleeding of the curse wound in his side, but his spell had no effect, other than closing a few cuts over some of the splinters. Muttering a few more
curses, he pulled out a bandage from his pocket, pressed it to his side and cast a Sticking Charm to hold it in place. It wouldn’t help in the long run, but he wouldn’t bleed out that quickly. He’d last long enough to help Harry.

Groaning, he stood up, falling into a limping gait - his ankle didn’t hurt any more, but he couldn’t move it well either. He had barely taken a few steps when a figure appeared at the end of the alley. A figure missing half its head and most of one arm, wearing the shredded remains of red robes.

Ron gasped - it was an Inferius! Like in Paris! And he was hobbled by his ankle! He snarled and flicked his wand. “Incendio!”

The walking corpse was set alight. It still kept coming at him, as expected - Inferi weren’t easy to destroy. Ron started to fall back, but his leg wasn’t cooperating. He stumbled, and jarred his shoulder against the wall next to him. And the burning undead creature was advancing!

He moved his wand without caring about his hurt side. “Depulso! Confringo! Reducto!”

To his surprise, the first spell pushed the undead back, and the next two blew its torso into chunks, causing it to collapse on the street. He blinked. An Inferius shouldn’t be that easy to destroy. It must be a zombie! Either the Dark Lord’s work, or a houngan he had recruited.

Ron shivered, and pushed himself off the wall, limping forward. He hoped that it was Voldemort. The thought of facing a houngan Death Eater… He patted his side, and winced when his hand came away covered with blood.

And yet he pushed on. His friends, his family needed him. He drank a Blood-Replenishing Potion, which would keep him going.

Another zombie appeared, a small one. In shredded muggle clothes - one of the hostages, he realised. He pressed his lips together with revulsion and frustration, then blew that one up as well.

The Dark Lord and his followers would pay for this, he vowed, as he made his way to the mouth of the alley. Voldemort had been in that area when he had hit Ron with the curse. Harry would be there as well. He had to get there!

*****

Amelia Bones frowned while she watched the throngs of wizards and witches rushing into the Leaky Cauldron. Some headed to the pub’s fireplace, but most fled straight through the door to muggle London. Hopefully, the Obliviators were on the job - not even the muggles could miss dozens of panicking people wearing robes streaming out of a pub that they couldn’t see.

“Dawlish! Focus on evacuating these people!” she snapped.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You shouldn’t be here, Madam Minister,” Pius said in a low voice next to her. He’d know what she was thinking, of course.

Amelia frowned at him. He should have known better than to propose, even indirectly, that she retreat to the Ministry. “I won’t cower in my office while my people fight and die.” She had been an Auror, and she was still among the best in the Corps. Especially considering the horrible losses the Corps had taken in this damned war.

She stepped behind the bar, ignoring Tom’s glare, while Dawlish and the half a dozen Aurors with
him started to herd the fleeing people into some semblance of order and the Hit-Wizards took up positions at the entrance to Diagon Alley.

They couldn’t really move into Diagon Alley, not when all of its inhabitants were trying to flee through this pub. Well, she amended in her mind, they could - but they would be split up, and the reinforcements from Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, as well as the ones recalled from their homes, wouldn’t be able to reach them quickly enough.

And attacking piecemeal was a recipe for disaster, anyone with some experience knew that. The fate of the Aurors on duty in Diagon Alley had demonstrated that. No, they’d wait until they had assembled all available wands before moving to engage the enemy. That the Order and the Resistance would have to fight the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord alone for a bit longer couldn’t be helped.

Amelia smiled grimly while a witch carried a crying girl towards the door and didn’t even glance at Pius and the two Aurors assigned as her Bodyguards, who had followed her to the only space in the room which was not threatened with being overrun by the panicking mob.

The Order and the muggleborns had forced her to grant them carte blanche by threatening to withdraw from the war. Turnabout was only fair - she certainly hadn’t promised to sacrifice her own people for them.

Hermione Granger was in a bind. They were barely out of the line of fire of the Dark Lord and Justin and Tania couldn’t support them due to the smoke covering the Alley - she glanced up to check if it was coming too close again. It wasn’t, not yet. But Louise was still unconscious, and Apparition wouldn’t work - the Death Eaters or the Aurors or both would be layering Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey Jinxes all over the Alley. So Seamus and Hermione would either have to carry their friend, or levitate her. Either way, one of them wouldn’t be able to effectively deal with those zombies. And Hermione was better with a wand than Seamus.

“Seamus! Levitate her!” she yelled, lowering Louise to the ground. “I’ll cover you!”

The wizard looked at her, and for a moment, she was uncertain whether he’d follow her orders, but then he nodded.

Hermione sent another gust of wind up at the smoke above them, just in case, and then started moving towards the rest of the Resistance. “We’re coming back!” she said into her radio.

“We’ve killed three of those zombies, but there are more lurking around,” Justin answered on the radio. “But watch out - smoke’s very low between our position and yours.”

He didn’t report anyone getting hurt, Hermione noted with relief. She checked their rear - no one seemed to pursuing them. No marker was floating nearby. The Dark Lord must be fighting someone else, she thought. Ron, or Harry. She hissed - she wanted to go back and help them, but she couldn’t leave Seamus alone with Louise. She clenched her teeth and sprinted past Seamus, taking cover behind the remains of a cart before peering around the corner into the Alley.

As Justin had warned her, thick dark smoke was covering the street there. She pressed her lips together and cast a wind spell. The cloud started to slowly give away, making her wonder what kind of spells Voldemort had used to make the cloud that resistant to other spells.

But even so, her spell was slowly opening a passage to the rest of the Resistance. She clenched her
teeth - the longer she took here, the longer Harry and Ron spent fighting Voldemort without her help.

“Zombies behind us!” Seamus yelled.

Hermione whirled around. Half a dozen small figures were walking - shambling - towards them. Dead children, the hostages the Death Eaters had taken, she realised, horrified. Her wand was already aimed at them, though, and she cast a volley of Reductor Curses a moment later. It didn’t take long to destroy the zombies.

“Shite!” Seamus cursed, staring at the gory remains.

Hermione nodded, pressing her lips together. She knew that she’d remember the sight of exploding children for a long time. “Let’s go!” she said, starting again to open a passage through the smoke.

“Voldemort just shot down a broom rider!”

Justin’s report made her feel even worse. She told herself that it could have been anyone, an Auror or a Hit-Wizard. But she knew that, if they could, both Harry and Ron would use their brooms to fight Voldemort.

It took her about a minute to push the cursed or poisonous cloud far enough away that they could safely move through the street. Far too long for her friends. At least Sally-Anne and John were waiting for them - behind cover - when they finally cleared the smoke.

“Take care of Louise!” Hermione shouted. “I have to return to the battle!”

“Alright,” John said, hefting his rifle.

Seamus nodded, setting Louise down for Sally-Anne to work on her.

Hermione looked at them, then nodded. They knew what they were facing.

She turned around and cast two more spells to keep the passage open, then ran through it. Ron and Harry needed her help.

***

Harry Potter found himself back in his body, on his speeding broom. Disoriented, he barely managed to keep his grip on the shaft before he crashed into Voldemort. If not for the Sticking Charm, he’d have been thrown off his broom. As it was, he spun around, scraping over the cobblestones until he slammed into the remains of a wall.

His shoulder hurt, but he’d had worse in training. Much worse.

He ended the charm and rolled off his broom, wand pointed at the Dark Lord. Or rather, at Voldemort’s corpse. The inhuman face seemed frozen in a grimace, sightless eyes staring at nothing. It appeared that Dumbledore had been correct - without his soul, the body the Dark Lord had created for his revival would not keep breathing.

Harry thought that he should feel bad - he had destroyed Voldemort. Had crushed the man’s mind, just like the prophecy had foretold and Dumbledore had planned. He might even have destroyed the Dark Lord’s soul - Dumbledore hadn’t really explained the exact consequences, past telling him that it would mean the end of Voldemort despite his soul anchors.

But there was no time to think about all that. He had to find Ron and Sirius! They had crashed, and
should be nearby. Somewhere.

Harry turned around, trying to orient himself. Sirius had crashed… about there. And Ron… there. For a moment, he didn’t know who he should be looking for first. Ron, he decided. He should be closer. He grabbed his broom, then looked up. The smoke was settling, it seemed. He didn’t know if it was still dangerous - Ron had flown through a cloud without being hurt - but he decided not to risk it, and sent a gust of wind upward before setting out on foot.

After a few steps he stopped, and turned around.

“Accio Voldemort’s wand!”

Harry didn’t try to catch the wand flying at him, but blew it up before it reached him. This time, no follower of the Dark Lord would pick up his wand.

Movement on his right side made him jump behind the closest cover and aim his wand before he checked who it was.

“Don’t curse, it’s me!”

Aberforth Dumbledore was standing there, leaning against the wall. The old wizard was breathing heavily, and his left arm hung down at his side, covered with blood. He coughed, then made a motion towards the body with his head. “Is he dead?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “He’s dead. Did you see the others? Ron? Sirius?”

“No.” Aberforth shook his head. “Moody’s dead,” he added, pointing at a stone sphere nearby.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked. It was a stupid question - the man was obviously hurt.

But Aberforth seemed to know what he had really been asking. “I’m not about to fall over dead. You arrived just in time.” Harry was about to move when the old wizard added: “But there’re still Death Eaters around. Be careful. They might not even have realised that their master has fallen.”

“I need to find Ron and Sirius,” Harry said. Mopping up the last Death Eaters could wait.

And, he added to himself, if either his best friend or his godfather had died, he wouldn’t take any prisoners.

*****

Ron Weasley glanced around the corner, wincing when his wounded side touched the wall, and spotted two Death Eaters running towards him. They seemed to be fleeing, paying more attention to their rear than their front. Unfortunately, if he tried to cast from around the corner, he’d have to expose himself since he was right-handed. Taking a deep breath, he leaned with his back against the wall, wand out, and waited. And hoped they ran past the side alley so he could curse them in the back.

Sadly, they rounded the corner and came straight at him. His Bludgeoning Curse smashed into the first Death Eater, shattering his mask and probably his skull, and sending the man tumbling towards the other Death Eater. That one dodged to the side, though, and whipped his wand around.

Ron dropped to the ground, then rolled to the side, gasping at the pain this caused to his bleeding side, and the Death Eater’s curse hit the wall behind him. No splinters or fragments rained down on him, so it hadn’t blown up, Ron noted as he came up in a crouch and sent two Piercing Curses at his
The Death Eater took a step to the side - a duellist move, Ron realised - but one curse still hit his shield, shattering it. A weak duellist, Ron added. His own Shield Charm withstood the man’s next curse, and another Bludgeoning Curse hit the Death Eater in the stomach, doubling him over before Ron hit the man with a Cutting Curse in the throat. A Piercing Curse to the head killed him before he drowned in his own blood, and Ron sent another into the first Death Eater. ‘Never leave an enemy where he could be saved by others’, as Moody always said.

A quick glance told Ron that his bandage was soaked through. He downed another Blood-Replenishing Potion, his last, and took a few deep breaths. Moving his wand arm was even more painful now than before, but he wasn’t about to collapse. Not yet.

Some of the dark smoke was drifting too close, and he sent it away with a quick spell. The bezoar powder should have neutralised it, but Ron didn’t know how far his dust had spread. He pressed his teeth together and forced himself to go on.

Hermione Granger whipped her wand around in a semi-circle, transfiguring the cobblestones in front of her into a makeshift barrier while ducking behind it. Just in time to absorb the shards from the conjured wall she had placed further ahead. “Death Eaters ahead!” she yelled, reinforcing the barrier. They were out of the range of her Human-presence-revealing Spell, but from the volume of curses hitting her cover, there had to be at least two.

A moment later, she heard Seamus and John open fire. Long bursts. Covering fire. She transfigured the cobblestones nearby into another wall, leading to the ruins of the closest building, then sprinted.

“Got one!” Seamus yelled.

“The other ducked inside the collapsed building.” John reported.

Hermione keyed her radio. “Keep firing, I’m going closer.”

Once they started to shoot again - slower, semi-automatic fire now - she took a deep breath, disillusioned herself, then ran towards the enemy position in a crooked, weaving path. She was panting heavily when she dropped behind the remains of a wall and could spot a marker floating above the corner.

“Avis!” she whispered, and sent a flock of birds at the Death Eater. They wouldn’t hurt him, but he wouldn’t know that, and they’d distract him. Then she rose from behind her cover, to cast two Blasting Curses at the base of the corner - and barely managed to drop down to avoid a barrage of curses, scraping her chin on some rubble in the process.

The enemy wizard was good. She rolled to the side and scrambled away on all fours. Behind her, a dark cloud appeared over her former position, followed by an explosion that pelted her Shield Charm with fragments - he must have banished a rock in the air before hitting it with a Blasting Curse, she realised. Definitely an experienced wizard.

John and Seamus were still providing covering fire, but if the enemy was this skilled, then he’d know his shield would stand up to several single shots. She dived around a corner, and pushed her radio’s button. “John, Seamus - his shield’s too strong. Move closer and flank him. But be careful - he’s very good.”

She kept moving - the unknown Death Eater, probably a member of Voldemort’s Inner Circle, had a
Human-presence-revealing spell of his own active. And he’d anticipate her course as well.

She stopped, then rushed back from where she had come. Behind her the area vanished in a dark cloud, followed by another explosion in the air. Almost predictable. She dived behind some rubble, then changed directions again, moving further into the building. That would hamper his casting.

“Avis!”

More birds sped towards the Death Eater. Would he expect them to be harmless still, or suspect a trap? She hoped for the latter.

Nearby, part of the wall blew up. She recast her Shield Charm after weathering the resulting hail of splinters. Where were Seamus and John? There! She spotted their markers appearing within range. The enemy was now flanked. Which meant he would either fall back, or charge towards her. And since he had been moving towards her when they met, trying to escape the Alley… Her eyes widened. Two Death Eaters, moving away from the twins’ shop, and no sign of the Dark Lord? Harry must have killed him!

Smiling, she moved to the side, reaching into her enchanted pocket. A quick Doubling Charm later, several bricks of Semtex were spread on the ground. She moved further away, to flank the enemy - and opening a path to escape at the same time. Straight through her former spot.

Suddenly, several explosions shook the ruins, forcing her to drop to the ground. She looked up even as her shield was hit by dozens of rock fragments, and saw the floating marker move - right towards her trap. Grinning, she yelled “Take cover!” into her radio, then pushed the button of the emitter in her hand.

Part of the ruins disappeared in a huge fireball while she pressed herself into the ground, mouth open and hands pressed over her ears. A wave of heat washed over her, and a rock the size of her head bounced off her shield. Then everything vanished in a cloud of dust and smoke.

*****

Harry Potter crept forward, forcing himself to move slowly, cautiously, instead of rushing. He wouldn’t be able to help either Ron or Sirius if he got himself killed by stumbling into an ambush. And Aberforth was not able to move that quickly either - the old wizard was certainly more hurt than he admitted. And splitting up would be a bad idea, with an unknown number of enemies in the area. But still… “Why are you taking the body with you?” he asked when he couldn’t contain himself any more, nodding at the corpse of Voldemort floating behind them.

“I don’t want anyone to take it. You never know what they’d try to do with it,” Aberforth answered.

Harry didn’t think there was much that anyone could do with the carcass. A zombie-Voldemort might scare the Ministry forces, if there were any left, but that wouldn’t really do much. He pushed the thought away. He had to focus on saving Sirius and Ron.

He quickly glanced around the corner, even though his Human-presence-revealing Spell didn’t show anyone close by. Moody’s training had emphasised not to trust any spell - someone, somewhere, would have a counter. The alley was clear. Or not exactly clear - there were the remains of a broom on the ground, the remains of a burned body further away, and some scattered body parts at the mouth of the alley.

Harry moved forward, barely covering the various broken windows and smashed doors with his wand. It was Ron’s broom. And his blood, he added to himself, spotting the stains on the ground.
But the body… he stepped closer, then saw the burned fragments of Auror robes. It wasn’t Ron! And the other body parts were too small. His friend was still alive.

Unless, Harry thought, he had been turned into a zombie. Like the kid who had been blown apart here. He pressed his lips together. Ron had to still be alive! He looked around, but he didn’t spot any other blood stains on the ground. Where had Ron gone?

“We need to move on,” Aberforth said behind him. “Nothing left here.”

Harry knew that, but refrained from angrily pointing out that he had just been thinking where to move. Instead he nodded, and moved past the corpse, into the Alley. Then he heard the explosions, and his eyes widened.

“Blasting Curses!” Aberforth muttered next to him.

Harry nodded. “Someone’s fighting.” Which meant someone needed help. Maybe Ron, or Sirius. He started to move towards the direction of the noise when a much louder explosion made him stop. A fireball erupted further ahead, far too big for a Blasting Curse or even a Bombarda.

That had to be a bomb! Hermione!

He sped up. If the Resistance was using explosives on that scale, they had to be in a bad situation.

*****

When he opened his eyes and didn’t feel much pain, Sirius Black first feared that he had died, and had become a ghost. Then he realised that someone was moving a wand over his face. He knew that wand.

“You’ve been very lucky.”

He knew that voice.

“I know,” he said, turning his head to look at Vivienne. The French witch looked radiant, even with her face smudged with soot and dirt, and her robes torn - and not in a sexy way.

“I saw you fall, but with all the cursed smoke around, I couldn’t fly to you. You were seriously ’urt.” The Veela stared at him with an unreadable expression.

He smiled. “Any curses?”

“No. But you’ll need Skele-Gro. I numbed your arm, but…”

He glanced at his arm. The arm he couldn’t feel, he realised. The arm that looked rather… floppy.

“You vanished my bones?” He looked at her. Harry had told him how much Skele-Gro that would take. And how much it would hurt.

“It was that, or let the splinters tear you up from the inside.” She smiled. “I mended the ribs, though, and your leg.”

He had been hurt worse than he had thought, Sirius realised. Of course, unlike a Quidditch pitch, the streets lacked Cushioning Charms. And he hadn’t managed to cast one in time himself. Or had missed the spot he was falling towards - his memory was a bit vague.

“It’s not my wand arm,” he said, and sat up - only to hiss in pain.
“You’re still hurt.”

“Now you tell me.” He had suffered worse, of course. Compared to losing your best friends, and suffering in Azkaban, a bit of physical pain was nothing. And Harry needed him. Harry!

He stood up, grunting in pain. “I’ll need to help Harry.” He looked around. Where was he? And where was Harry?

A huge fireball erupted a few houses away. He glanced at Vivienne. “Where are the others?” Where were the rest of the Delacours and d’Aigles?

She pressed her lips together for a moment, then shook her head. “I was separated from the ones on the ground.”

He didn’t ask about the others who had been in the air. Her expression told him enough. But people were still fighting. They were still needed. He ignored her hand - even short one arm, he didn’t need help to walk.

“Let’s go!”

*****

Ron Weasley almost fell over when he heard the explosion, and saw the fireball rise above the roofs - those left standing - of the buildings nearby. Close by, someone was fighting, and fighting hard. Harry, or Hermione, probably. Or if they weren’t, they’d be attracted to the explosion.

He snorted, and steadied himself. His side was still hurting, and he was now leaving a trail of blood, but he could still go on. Could still fight, if not for long, he added to himself. But staying where he was wouldn’t help him either.

Limping, he started towards the closest alley leading to the explosion. He felt a twinge in his ankle, and numbed it again before the pain grew too strong. If only he still had his broom! Or a replacement. Or another Blood-Replenishing Potion. Moody would simply tell him that he hadn’t been prepared enough.

While he stumbled through the narrow alley, he wondered where everyone was. He hadn’t met a single soul in minutes. Had everyone fled? Or had they died in the smoke? Had they forgotten him, and evacuated the area? Or had he died, and was now stumbling through the afterlife?

He snorted at the thought. He was quite certain that the afterlife didn’t look like the burning remains of a part of Diagon Alley. Another corner - he hurt himself some more when he lost his balance and had to catch himself against the wall - and he was in the main Alley again. The explosion had to be close… but so many ruins were burning.

Movement at his flank drew his attention, and he whirled around, wand raised, then blinked when he recognised the clothes - the uniform - of the Resistance. He lowered his wand, staring at the firearm - the rifle - aimed at him.

“Ron?”

He knew that voice. “Seamus?”

“Hermione! I’ve found one of your boyfriends!”

Ron snorted, then winced at the pain that caused. He was the boyfriend of Hermione, singular. And
he hadn’t been found - they had met each other.

He saw Hermione appear behind a heap of rubble. She was alive. And unhurt. He started to smile, and wave… then winced again when he felt a stabbing pain in his side. He saw her eyes widen, saw her rush towards him, her mouth was opening, but he couldn’t hear her words, and why was she turning sideways? Oh, he was falling.

Then everything went dark.

*****

“Ron!” Hermione Granger yelled, rushing towards her collapsing boyfriend. She flicked her wand, casting a Cushioning Charm just in time to prevent him from falling onto the rubble next to him.

Behind her, Seamus was cursing, but she had only eyes for Ron. She reached him, dropping to her knees, heedless of the sharp rocks hurting her legs while she ran her wand over his body. When she discovered the wound in his side, bleeding through a bandage, she hissed. And when her Charm failed to close it, she cursed herself. Of course, she should have expected that - Ron would have closed it himself, if that had been possible.

But… he was pale. Gasping, she reached into her potion pocket and pulled out a Blood-Replenishing Potion. While she flicked the stopper off and grabbed Ron’s head to pour it into his mouth, she yelled to Seamus. “I need more Blood-Replenishing Potions! And we need to get him to St Mungo’s!”

“The jinxes are still up,” John said, running towards her and pressing two vials into her hand. “And the explosion will attract some company.”

Hermione forced herself to calm down. She couldn’t panic. She had a responsibility for her group. “Seamus, cover the north! John, cover the south approach. I’ll stabilise him, and then we’ll fall back to Sally-Anne, to evacuate him.” Ron would be safe at St Mungo’s. He was a pureblood, and not a member of the Resistance.

To their credit, neither wizard asked if she could stabilise Ron as they took up positions nearby. She focused on her friend again, trusting the two to do their job. The bandage was soaked through, but a Cleaning Charm solved that. And yet… she bit her lower lip, then tried to pull the edge of the bandage off. She didn’t manage - Ron had used a Sticking Charm.

“Finite!”

When she saw the wound, and the amount of blood flowing from it, she felt as if she had been punched in the gut. A cursed wound, of this size… she hastily poured another potion into Ron’s mouth. She had to stop the bleeding, slow it down at least. And magic wouldn’t work. She did what she could using her first aid training. She really needed Sally-Anne. But if she moved Ron like that… she wiped some tears from her eyes, then put the bandage back on, doing her best to put pressure on the wound.

Then she had a thought. If St Mungo’s couldn’t counter the curse, and with Voldemort having cast it, that was far too likely, then they wouldn’t be able to do anything for Ron. It might be best if she took him to a muggle hospital… but they’d be unable to do anything about the curse either. And they wouldn’t be able to use potions to keep him alive.

She bit her lower lip so hard it started to bleed. What should she do?

*****
“Thicklestone! Take your squad and move ahead!”

Amelia Bones nodded in silent approval of Pius’s orders. The Hit-Wizards’ training focused on combat and they were therefore the best choice for such a task. Of course, given the casualties the Hit-Wizards had taken in this war, and how the training of the new recruits had been rushed, the differences between rookie Aurors and Hit-Wizards were negligible, but that wouldn’t stay that way, and it was best to do things as they should be done from the start.

A minute after Thicklestone had moved into the Alley, the main force followed, including Amelia, Pius and Dawlish. Amelia pressed her lips together to avoid cursing when she saw the smoke covering the lower parts of Diagon Alley.

“The Obliviators stated that the smoke is no threat to the Statute,” Pius said. “Not any more, at least.”

Amelia hoped that meant it wasn’t dangerous any more either. Not that she could do much about it - the broom riders in the air were needed to spot ambushes, and attack from above. They couldn’t be sent to chase smoke clouds. Not while there was still fighting in the Alley. Or what was left of the Alley, she silently amended when they reached the first ruin.

“The Death Eaters focused on Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes,” Dawlish repeated an earlier report. “But obviously, the fighting and the damage has spread out.”

“Obviously,” Amelia said, and Dawlish flinched slightly.

They had reached the first body - a French wizard, Amelia thought. Or someone else in a fancy robe. More corpses followed, most of them torn or blown apart, or burned horribly. One of the rookies vomited right next to a burned corpse small enough to be a child.

Amelia didn’t flinch. She had seen worse. And she had expected worse. They were facing the Dark Lord, after all. An alley further, they met the first survivors - two wounded French wizards, a Veela and a member of Dumbledore’s Order - Bill Weasley, Amelia recognised him. A former head boy of Hogwarts hiring on with Gringotts, instead of with the Ministry had been a small scandal, a few years ago. In hindsight, Amelia was glad that he hadn’t joined her department. He would have been trouble. Like Nymphadora Tonks, who hadn’t reported in when called upon. That Auror had better have been already engaged in the Alley, Amelia thought. She loathed deserters.

They left the rookie who had lost his lunch with the wounded and orders to help get them to St Mungo’s and moved on - through ruined houses, some of them barely more than patches of rubble, others still burning. As Mr Weasley had informed them, his parents had pushed on to reach his brothers’ shop.

Houses were not the only thing burning - a lot of corpses were burned as well, Amelia noticed. She didn’t smell the stench, fortunately, since she had cast a Bubble-Head Charm when they had set out, but once again, a few Aurors and Hit-Wizards either had forgotten to take the bare minimum of precautions against poison, or couldn’t cast the spell, and were now emptying their stomachs. They really were scraping the bottom of the cauldron here, Amelia thought.

She really hoped that the Order and the Resistance had managed to defeat the Dark Lord, or this would turn ugly.

They passed more burning houses, and reached the remains of the Weasleys’ shop.

“Looks like their wards didn’t hold,” Dawlish commented. “Fiendfyre, I think.”

Amelia didn’t say ‘obviously’ again. It wouldn’t do to undermine Dawlish’s authority. She studied
the crushed walls in the middle of the street instead. “Conjured cover,” Pius said. “Would have been the Curse-Breakers’ position.”

Amelia nodded in agreement. A few bodies in dark robes were strewn around the area, but there was no sign of either the Weasley twins, or their parents.

“Where are they?” an Auror asked near them. “Where is everyone?”

“Shut up, Baker!” Dawlish yelled, “And keep your eyes open!”

One of their broom riders descended. “There’s a group of people two alleys down! Didn’t look like Death Eaters. No masks or robes.”

Amelia nodded. Probably the survivors of the Resistance, then. Time to meet them.

*****

Harry Potter turned around the corner, wand out, expecting a fight - but there was no one fighting. That Ravenclaw, Emmet, was behind some rubble, aiming his assault rifle at him.

“Harry Potter?” The other wizard didn’t stand up, and his rifle didn’t waver.

“Yes.” Harry wasn’t that worried - his Shield Charm should stand up to a few bullets, at least. He hadn’t tested it, but Hermione had.

“Hermione! Potter’s here!” Emmet yelled.

“Harry?”

That was Hermione’s voice. Harry rushed past Emmet, around the corner hiding Hermione from view, then stopped, horrified. She was covered in blood! And kneeling next to Ron. It was Ron’s blood!

Harry muttered a curse under his breath while he moved to them. “Ron! What the hell happened?” Of course, he knew what had happened - Voldemort had cursed his friend.

“It’s a dark curse - healing spells have no effect. I think we better take him to a muggle hospital, they’ll be able to do something… but I am not sure if we can apparate him in his state.” Hermione sounded as desperate as she looked. “Do you have a Blood-Replenishing Potion?”

Harry dug the three he carried out from his enchanted pocket and handed them over.

“Blimey! That’s the Dark Lord!”

Emmet’s shout made Hermione jump up. She had drawn a pistol with blood-soaked hands before Harry managed to speak up. “He’s dead. I killed him.”

She whipped her head around, staring at him. He nodded. For a moment, she seemed frozen, staring at the corner where Emmet was, then she turned back to Ron.

“The Dark Lord’s dead?” That was Seamus’s voice, through the radio.

“He’s dead?”

And that was Justin, probably, Harry thought, as more voices filled the air. Aberforth turned around the corner, followed by the floating corpse of Voldemort. Even Hermione stared at it, for a second or
two, as the wizard set it down in the middle of the street.

No one said anything. Hermione made Ron drink another potion, and called for Perks on the radio. Apparently, that witch was their designated medic, or Healer.

“Harry!”

He whirled around. Sirius was there! Alive! And standing. Leaning on Vivienne, who looked rather battered herself, but he was standing. But his arm! Harry felt as if his blood had frozen when he saw his godfather’s left arm dangling uselessly.

He rushed forward. “Sirius! Your arm!”

His godfather smiled. “Oh, that? Vivienne had to vanish my bones.”

Harry sighed with relief. It wasn’t the Withering Curse, then. He went and hugged his godfather. Sirius was alive. Not too badly hurt, either. The Dark Lord was dead, and Harry’s friends and family were alive. He had done it!

“Sirius! Do you have Blood-Replenishing Potions? I need them! Ron needs them!” Hermione’s voice reminded him that not all of his friends were safe yet, and he felt guilty for forgetting, even for an instant, about Ron.

Then he felt like slapping himself, and hurried back to Ron, drawing the Elder Wand.

*****

Hermione Granger saw Harry kneel next to Ron, and aim his wand at the wound. She was about to tell him that they had tried that already, then she remembered just what wand Harry was using. Of course!

Harry was already casting, waving his wand above Ron’s wound.

Hermione bit her lower lip and stared at the wound. The wound hadn’t closed, but the bleeding had slowed.

“Best I can do,” Harry said, sounding desperate.

“It’ll be enough,” she said, forcing herself to smile. “Until we can get him to a hospital.”

He nodded, then got up, standing there for a moment.

Then Justin and the others arrived, and Hermione felt like hexing her friends - they were staring at the Dark Lord’s corpse, even though it wasn’t going anywhere. Ron still needed help right now! “Sally-Anne! I need those potions!”

Her friend jerked, then gasped: “Sorry!” She hurried towards them. “Sorry! I just saw the Dark Lord…”

Hermione nodded, restraining herself from yelling at Sally-Anne. It wouldn’t help Ron. “He’s been cursed with a wound that resists magical healing. It’s still bleeding, so we might need to transport him to a muggle hospital, but he can’t be apparated in that state.”

Sally-Anne nodded, her attention already on the wounded wizard, and started to remove the bandages entirely. Hermione almost grabbed her hand, but controlled herself - Sally-Anne had trained for this more than she had. Hermione had to trust her. As hard as it was. Ron would live, she
told herself - muggles survived such wounds without magic. And the potions would replenish his blood. He wouldn’t die.

“We’ve got company!”

Seamus’s alert made her look up. She saw the rest of the Resistance grow tense. Aberforth as well. That told her who had arrived even before she saw them.

The Ministry.

*****

Amelia Bones stared at the corpse on the ground. It was the Dark Lord. She had seen his face in a Pensieve before. Potter had done it. Like Dumbledore had planned, and the Order had promised. The Boy-Who-Lived was standing right behind the corpse, watching her. Next to him were Black, his Veela lover, and the muggleborns in their weird clothes. Granger wasn’t present, though.

For a moment, Amelia thought, hoped, that the other witch had been killed in the battle, then she spotted her, kneeling behind Potter, next to another body lying on the ground. Potter, Black, Granger. And what was left of the Resistance. All gathered in front of her. Wounded and outnumbered. Amelia doubted that there were many Death Eaters left either. Britain didn’t need the Resistance any more, nor the Order. Even weakened as it was, the Ministry could handle things from this point on. And she knew they’d cause trouble or worse for the country - that they extorted a blanket pardon from her proved that. Amelia had but to give the order and things would be settled once and for all. She wouldn’t be breaking any deals either - technically, with the Dark Lord dead, the war was over. And she had taken an oath to uphold the law and defend Britain against any danger.

But before she could make up her mind, her Aurors and Hit-Wizards realised what had happened and started to cheer, and the opportunity to secure Britain’s future had passed.

*****

Hermione Granger stood up as the arrivals started to fan out. There were more than two dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards, in their red and grey robes. Half a dozen more on brooms in the air. And in the centre was the Minister herself. Bones.

Hermione snorted - all of them were staring at Voldemort’s body. She stood up and took a few steps forward, standing next to Harry, right near the Dark Lord’s corpse, and stared at the Minister. She knew how she looked - covered in blood - but she didn’t care. Not any more. They had done it. Harry had done it. Had killed Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Without the Ministry. She saw Justin step up as well, followed by Tania, both holding their guns at the ready. Seamus and John were not quite aiming at the Ministry forces, but would be able to open fire within seconds.

Bones met her eyes, frowning, but the bulk of the Ministry wizards and witches started to talk loudly and excitedly, apparently unaware of the tension.

“It’s him!”

“He’s dead!”

“They killed him!”

“The Dark Lord’s gone!”
“It’s over!”

“The war’s over!”

Hermione snorted. The Dark Lord’s death might signal the end of the war. But, meeting Bones’s eyes, she knew that the real struggle had just begun.

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Repositioning

Chapter 42: Repositioning

‘Just as with the start of the Second Blood War, there is a considerable difference of opinion among scholars concerning its end. Some consider the death of the Dark Lord in the Battle of Diagon Alley the end of the war. I do not share this view. Leaving aside the fact that there were still several Death Eaters alive and free, the war had been about more than defeating the Dark Lord, and the underlying conflict that had led to the war, the blood status question, had not been at all resolved with the death of the Dark Lord. Quite the contrary. With their common enemy dead, the Ministry and the muggleborns were set on a collision course with each other as both struggled to shape the country’s future.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Amelia Bones kept smiling as she walked through the throng of celebrating people filling the Ministry’s Atrium. She had to make an effort, though - she wasn’t feeling like celebrating herself. Half a dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards had died in Diagon Alley fighting the Dark Lord but everyone just seemed to be talking about the Boy-Who-Lived. Just like fifteen years ago. Even her own people were caught up in it.

Once inside her office, she dropped the pretence. As relieved as she was about the Dark Lord’s death, she knew her and Britain’s troubles hadn’t ended. That Potter had killed the Dark Lord with the help of the Muggleborn Resistance and the remnants of Dumbledore’s Order made things worse.

If only she had dared to give the order to arrest the lot of them… but Amelia was aware that the majority of her Aurors and Hit-Wizards might not have obeyed, being far too inexperienced to understand the situation. They’d only see a hero who had taken down the Dark Lord, and not the danger Potter represented.

A danger of which Amelia was all too aware, even more so after she had seen the reaction of the public to the spreading news.

Her secretary - that one was reliable, at least, and hadn’t left her post like so many other Ministry employees - informed her that Pius had arrived. The Head of the DMLE lost his own smile as soon as the door closed behind him.

“What’s the status of Diagon Alley?” Amelia asked, seating herself behind her desk.

“The affected areas are still cordoned off while we wait for the Unspeakables to finish investigating the lingering smoke,” he answered, taking a seat of his own. “But the fires are under control. Dawlish is handling the situation.”

Amelia knew better than to ask for an estimate of how long they’d have to carry on waiting. The Unspeakables didn’t care about anything but their own interests. And Dawlish could handle the rest. “How’s the population taking that?”

Pius snorted softly. “They seem too busy celebrating the Dark Lord’s demise to care.” Shrugging, he added: “Those who lost their homes might feel differently, but I didn’t see any of them making a
They might have been killed in the fighting, Amelia knew. Or simply have been caught up in the celebrations as well. They were not a pressing problem either way. “What about Potter, Black and Granger?”

“They have left the area, presumably to treat their wounds,” Pius said, with a faint smile. “Although none of them have been seen in St Mungo’s according to my information.”

“Not even Granger’s lover?” That wizard had been seriously hurt. Probably fatally.

He shook his head. “It’s possible that their wounded were moved to France. With the Dark Lord dead, there would be no need any more for the Duc to maintain the fiction that this was an unsanctioned private affair by the Delacours.”

Amelia nodded. “If the muggleborns have access to a hospital with the capability to handle dark curses then they are far more self-reliant than we assumed.” Which would affect politics in a way Amelia didn’t like.

“Since they went to war I think they either have such support, or don’t care about it,” Pius said. “Although I doubt that the Duc d’Orléans would support the muggleborns. The influence he’d gain in Britain’s politics would not be worth the trouble it could cause in his own country.”

She nodded. “While it’s not impossible that he would want to gain some concessions from us in exchange for dropping his support for the muggleborns, I do agree that it seems unlikely.” But you couldn’t trust the French; not with Britain so weakened. With Dumbledore and the Dark Lord dead, Britain had lost a lot of its power and prestige. “But no matter where they are, if they are currently getting treatment, it means we have an opportunity here.” The Weasleys would be occupied with their wounded as well, at least temporarily removing another thorn in her side.

Pius nodded. “That is true. What are you planning?”

He was playing it safe, as expected. “We need to control how the country will be informed about the battle.”

“News of the Boy-Who-Lived defeating the Dark Lord has already spread,” Pius pointed out.

“Yes,” Amelia admitted. They’d never be able to suppress that - after Dumbledore’s death, people had put their hope in the Boy-Who-Lived. “But we can use that. The more people focus on him, the less they care about his friends. And we can emphasise the Aurors and Hit-Wizards who fought and died today.” The Daily Prophet knew to listen to the Ministry.

Pius’s smile widened. “And later, we can point out, subtly of course, that Dumbledore had to save Potter from Voldemort just two weeks ago.”

She nodded. Even Dawlish had noticed that. “They said themselves that Dumbledore had planned this.” And people still associated Dumbledore with the Ministry; few knew just how radical the man had actually been. Revealing the Muggleborn Resistance as the dangerous criminals they were would be easy as well, once Potter’s influence had lessened. They just had to point at the innocent victims of their attacks. And that would also affect Arthur Weasley and Sirius Black, thanks to their close ties to Granger.

“However, we might need the reputation of the Boy-Who-Lived, who has now twice defeated the Dark Lord, to keep other countries from getting ideas,” Pius cut in.
Amelia shook her head. “The muggleborns know that no other country would support them. They’d have to oppose international pressure.” The only countries - and Amelia was using the term quite loosely here - who cared for muggleborns were some of the warring enclaves in the New World. And those mattered about as much as muggle countries.

“That is true. But can we trust the muggleborns to realise that? Granger is still a student, after all.”

“She’s quite smart and it’s obvious that Black’s been supporting her.” And influencing the girl. “He’d tell her.”

“We still might need to grant them some concessions, to present the ICW with a unified front,” Pius said.

Amelia pressed her lips together. Grant those criminals anything? After they had used the dire straits the country had been in to extort a pardon for their crimes from her? “If needed we can throw them some bone. Maybe another pardon.”

Pius inclined his head, but didn’t comment.

“What about the flying carpets with the muggles the Dark Lord had kidnapped?” Amelia asked. She hated loose ends.

“The Obliviators told me that they have arranged a cover story for the muggles. A ‘bus accident’, or so I was told.” Pius shrugged. “There weren’t that many survivors.”

“Have them checked for curses before releasing them. I don’t want any other ‘surprises’ like the Withering Curse,” Amelia said.

“Yes, Minister.”

When Pius had left her office, Amelia called her secretary. “Inform the Prophet that the Ministry is releasing information about the battle in Diagon Alley.”

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London, London Bridge Hospital, February 2nd, 1997

Ron Weasley woke up, looked around, and started to panic - he was in an unfamiliar room. Not St Mungo’s, nor the Hogwarts infirmary. And his wand was missing! And his side… he glanced down, craning his neck. His wound was bandaged. And it didn’t hurt that much. Someone had healed him, then. Mostly, at least.

Then he realised that he was in a muggle hospital. The telly hanging on the wall opposite his bed was a dead giveaway. He should have realised that sooner. And his throat hurt, it felt parched. For a moment, he imagined his neck having been struck by the withering curse, and shuddered.

He tried to call for a nurse or Healer, but his throat didn’t want to cooperate. While he was looking for a rope to pull or something, the door opened.

“Hey!”

There she was. Hermione. He felt better at once. Warm. Safe. He smiled. “Hello,” he managed to say, mostly at least. She understood him, of course. She was smart.

She sat down on his bed, smiling at him. “I heard you wake up. I left a spell.” She picked up a glass
from the table next to the bed. “Here, drink!”

She must have been right outside. Wherever that was. The water helped a lot. He managed to speak mostly normally after a few tries. “What happened? Where are we?”

“We’re in London Bridge Hospital. A private muggle hospital,” she said, refilling the glass from a bottle he had missed until then. “The wound was resistant to magic.”

“I noticed,” he said, snorting, then winced at the pain that caused.

“Ron!” She had her wand out at once, running it over his body.

“I’m alright,” he said. He thought so, at least. But he had heard that some curses, you felt fine until you died. But he had been in too much pain for such a curse, he thought. “What happened? Did we… did Harry…?”

“Voldemort’s dead. Harry did it,” Hermione said.

He closed his eyes, sighing. The Dark Lord was dead. They had won the war. Then he jerked his head around, staring at her. “And Harry? And the others?”

“He’s fine,” Hermione said, then, noticing his expression, added: “Really fine.”

He chuckled, trying not to react to the pain that caused.

“Fred and George are fine as well.” she continued. “Bit ‘banged up’, as they put it, but they’re out and about. Bill and Fleur made it too. Your parents and Percy came through unscathed, as far as I know - they were looking for you in the ruins of the shop, after getting the twins out, so they missed us. Sirius was hurt when his broom crashed, but he survived, as did most of the Resistance. Tonks was cursed, and is currently in St Mungo’s.” Her smile vanished. “Moody died, though, as did Jeremy. Both were killed by Voldemort.”

Ron closed his eyes, relieved. His brothers were fine! But Moody was dead… he wouldn’t have thought that possible. The old Auror had seemed so tough, and always one step ahead of them in training… of course, he had been facing Voldemort. Ron himself had only survived through luck, and muggle Healers, apparently. “Jeremy? Who did he know with that name?”

“Former Hit-Wizard. A few years older than us.” Hermione smiled thinly.

“Ah.” He tried to keep his relief that it had been no one he had known out of his voice. He felt guilty too, for caring more about his brothers’ survival than the man’s death.

“The surviving muggle children the Death Eaters had used as human shields were taken to St Mungo’s. But too many of them died.”

He could see that she was biting her lower lip and didn’t pry further. He reached out to pat her hand, and she gripped his.

“Anyway,” Hermione went on after a moment. “Your wound resisted healing spells. Harry managed to slow down the bleeding, but that was all he could do. So, we took you to a muggle hospital, where they treated your wound, before we had you transferred here.”

“Did they sew me up?” Ron had heard his dad talk about that, once. He shivered - to think that he had threads inside him, like a ragdoll...
“It’s a bit more complicated, but effectively, yes.”

He stared at the bandages hiding the wound. He had stitches there!

“They’ll come out soon enough,” Hermione said.

He looked at her - she was frowning at him, but with an amused air. “Is my family here?”

Now she winced, and Ron gasped. Hadn’t she said that they were fine? Had something happened after the battle? She would have mentioned that earlier, wouldn’t she?

“They’re fine, but…” She sighed. “Your parents were asked to leave the hospital. They made a scene when they weren’t allowed to see you right away.”

“Oh.” He could imagine that. Mum would have been going spare at the thought of him in that state, and depending on muggle Healers. And Dad… he’d have asked all sorts of questions, both to distract himself and out of open curiosity.

“Yes.” Hermione shrugged. “They’ll be here as soon as they hear you’re awake, though. The muggle doctors thought it was just the shock of you having been wounded so seriously.”

“Good.” The last thing his family needed was the Obliviators on their case right when the war was over. “How long do I have to stay here?” Come to think of it… “How long have I been here already?”

“You’ve been unconscious for a day.” She sighed. “You’ll be here for at least a week - it depends on how well the wound is healing.”

“A week.” He nodded slowly. Could have been worse.

Much worse.

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Harry Potter arrived at London Bridge Hospital ten minutes after he had heard from Hermione that Ron had woken up. One minute to excuse himself from Sirius and nine minutes to reach the hospital from the closest Apparition spot he was familiar with. It took five minutes to reach his friend’s room.

He knocked. After a second, he heard a muffled “Come in!” and opened the door. Ron was lying in the bed, as expected, and Hermione was sitting at his side. Both had their wands ready, but stashed them when they recognised him. Moody would have told them off for not suspecting Polyjuice, he thought. But Moody was dead.

“Hi,” Harry said, entering.

“Our hero!” Ron said, chuckling, then wincing.

Hermione frowned at Ron, and Harry saw her draw and flick her wand, aimed at Ron.

Ron had noticed it as well. “I’m fine!” he said.

“You have a cut in your side eight inches long,” Hermione retorted. “With stitches,” she added with a fake smile.

Ron shuddered.
Harry chuckled. “So, how is he?” he asked, looking at Hermione.

“The wound seems to be healing as expected. Without magic, that is,” she said, glancing at Ron, who had been about to say something, or so it looked, but then closed his mouth without a word. “It appears that you managed to weaken the curse so that natural healing is now possible. Fortunately, we could remove the splinters under his skin with magic. That would have been a bit difficult to explain.”

“What was it, anyway? It wasn’t Sectumsempra.” Harry had been taught the counter-curse to that spell, as had, he presumed, all of the Order thanks to Snape.

“I don’t know.” Hermione frowned. “The wound would have to be investigated thoroughly to find out what spell caused it, and that would interfere with the recovery.”

And, Harry added to himself, it might reveal what wand he had been using.

“I’d rather not keep bleeding so the Unspeakables can do their research,” Ron said. “Staying in bed is only fun if you’re not wounded.”

Hermione actually blushed, Harry noticed with some surprise, and more than a bit of jealousy. Had they gone that far, yet? He didn’t really want to know.

“So, what’s been going on while I was out?” Ron asked. “Hermione told me who died,” he added, “but not much else yet. How’s Sirius?”

“Well… Sirius is resting. He had to take Skele-Gro.” Harry winced, remembering just how painful that potion was. “Wizarding Britain is celebrating,” he continued. “Like in 1981. Fireworks, and all. I bet the Obliviators are getting overworked.” He was a bit bitter about the fact that the vast majority of those celebrating hadn’t done anything to fight Voldemort, and many of those who had couldn’t celebrate, being dead or in a magical sleep.

“You don’t sound like you are celebrating,” Ron said, glancing from Harry to Hermione.

“With you in surgery?” Harry snorted. And then there were the dead. He was pretty sure that Moody would have wanted them to celebrate, but… if he closed his eyes he still saw the battle, scenes mixing and overlapping. Voldemort turning to dust, Ron bleeding, the dead stumbling around, Sirius crashing, corpses of children strewn about…

Ron grumbled something Harry didn’t catch. Hermione, who was sitting next to their friend, frowned. “We’ve been busy getting the word out to the muggleborns. John has set up a recording for the Resistance Radio, and we’ve mailed to all our contacts. But it’ll take some time for everyone to hear the news. And even longer for them to believe it.” She sighed. “We really need them to return quickly.”

Ron blinked. “What’s wrong?”

Harry pulled out the Daily Prophet and showed it to Ron. “According to the Prophet, I killed Voldemort by myself. With the help of the brave Aurors and Hit-Wizards killed in Diagon Alley.” Not that they were using the Dark Lord’s name. Not even now. “The Order and the Resistance are barely mentioned.”

“It’s a blatant attempt to marginalise the Resistance and the Order,” Hermione said. “But you’re no toddler any more, nor will you vanish from Wizarding Britain for a decade.”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t like being treated like this, but VANISHING FROM WIZARDING WOULD
mean letting his friends down. And that he’d never do.

Ron muttered a curse while he read the front page. Then he looked up. “They’re praising you, though. They’re almost calling you a second Dumbledore.”

“For now,” Harry said. Fourth year had taught him how quickly that could change. “There are also several articles about how the war’s over, and things will go back to normal.”

“Oh.” Ron’s expression told Harry that even on pain medication, he hadn’t forgotten about their talks.

“It’s 1981 again. At least if Bones has her way,” Hermione said. “Celebrate, and then forget, and do business as usual. Which is why we need the muggleborns to return to Wizarding Britain and make themselves heard. The Ministry needs to realise that they can’t simply go back to the status quo ante.”

“The what?”

Harry was glad Ron had asked the question before he had to.

“The state things were before the war,” Hermione explained. “I’ve been reading about peace treaties lately. Not that it is entirely applicable in our situation, of course. We’ve never really declared war on the Ministry.”

“They certainly hunted you,” Harry said. He was still mad at Tonks for that.

“Which is part of the problem. The Ministry wants to consider us as pardoned criminals, not as a legitimate faction in a civil war.” Hermione was clenching her teeth, Harry could tell.

“Sirius will support you in the Wizengamot,” Harry said. Once his godfather was back on his feet, at least.

“That will help, but we need more support. We need to show the Ministry that they can’t ignore the muggleborns, not any more,” Hermione said. She didn’t have to say that there would be another war if the Ministry tried - Harry knew that.

“What happened to Voldemort, exactly?” Ron asked, looking at him.

“What Dumbledore planned,” Harry answered, after a moment’s hesitation. He didn’t want to talk about that fight in their minds. Not even to his friends. “We met, we fought, I won.”

To his surprise, Hermione snorted in response to that report, instead of demanding more details. He went on: “I’m feeling well, though, with this gone.” He tapped his scar. It was as if a weight that he had carried all his life had vanished.

Then the door was opened without knocking. Harry had cast a shield and stepped in front of Ron, next to Hermione, before he recognised who had arrived. Ron’s family. Who had frozen at the sight of three wands aimed at them.

“I bet Moody’s laughing right now in the afterlife,” Ron muttered behind him.

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London, East End, February 2nd, 1997

Hermione Granger entered the Resistance’s safe house, and for a moment, she felt as if she had come
home. The sights and smells and even sounds had become familiar over the last few months. Even comforting. And yet, she added, looking at the stairs leading up to far too many empty rooms, it was also saddening.

“How’s Ron?”

Sally-Anne was peeking out of the kitchen, Hermione noticed. She looked quite apprehensive.

“He’ll live. The wound’s healing naturally,” Hermione said, stepping into the kitchen herself. She noticed that Sally-Anne was brewing tea. Quite cliched, but she liked to take care of her friends, so Hermione wouldn’t say anything. “But he loathes the stitches. His dad was fascinated, though. He wanted to remove the bandages to take a look, even.” And that had almost led to the Weasleys getting thrown out of the hospital again. At that rate, Sirius would have to make a donation to the hospital to smooth things over. Or, she added to herself, use a few spells.

Her friend shook her head and sighed.

“He’ll have to stay there for about a week,” Hermione went on. Which was better than she had feared, but even after getting released, Ron wouldn’t be able to do anything strenuous for a while. But he was alive, and that was all that counted!

“Are you going to play nurse for him?” Sally-Anne’s tone was teasing, but she didn’t seem to be happy. There was a hint of concern in her face.

Hermione frowned. Had something happened to their wounded? “How’s Louise?”

“She’s asleep. She was awake for a bit earlier today, and I filled her in about what had happened after she was hurt. She’ll be fine once she has rested. But the news...” Sally-Anne shook her head. “Have you read the Daily Prophet? Seamus wanted to go and blow up their office. We managed to get him to calm down.”

Hermione hoped that he hadn’t been serious. But she could understand his reaction - she had been livid herself when she had read the articles. Voldemort hadn’t been dead for a day, and the Ministry was already making a move. Though she had to admit that they were smart to do this while Sirius was recovering. She sighed. “We’ll have to counter that. Is John here?”

“Yes. Everyone’s in the living room.” Sally-Anne sighed. “I know it wasn’t likely, but... I thought with the Dark Lord dead, we’d have won. That it was over. So many of us died. And now...” She didn’t quite sob, but her sigh came close.

Hermione reached out to pat her on the shoulder. “We’ll win. Trust me.” She smiled when her friend slowly nodded.

But as Hermione went upstairs to her room to drop off her coat before heading to the living room, she wished she was as confident as she had sounded.

By the time she reached the living room, Sally-Anne had joined the rest of the Resistance there.

“Hermione!” Seamus jumped up from the couch. “Have you read the Prophet?” He waved a crumpled issue around.

“Yes, I have.”

“And what are we going to do about it?”
She looked around. Justin looked grim, but then smiled at Sally-Anne. Tania looked as angry as Seamus, but remained seated on the couch. John was frowning, a notepad in front of him. And Louise was still recovering. They had lost half their numbers, Hermione thought, in this war.

“We’ll tell the truth in our radio broadcast - and we’ll drop leaflets in Diagon Alley again.” She looked at John. “We’ll have to address not just muggleborns, but everyone - including the poorer purebloods. The more support we have, the sooner the Ministry will give in.”

“Do you really think they’ll just surrender?” Seamus scoffed. “The purebloods won’t give up their power.”

“The Old Families are the ones controlling the Wizengamot, and through it, the Ministry. But they are a tiny minority. We’ll have to persuade the muggleborns to return, and the half-bloods and as many of the purebloods as we can to support us.” Hermione said. “If we manage that, then we can force the Ministry to reform, and change the Wizengamot into an elected parliament.”

“We can demand trials for those who supported the Death Eaters and abused their power during the war. That will weaken the Ministry and the Wizengamot further,” John said.

“Unless the Wizengamot acquits them. They did so in 1981, after all.” Hermione didn’t trust the Wizengamot’s justice.

“If they do that...” Seamus clenched his teeth.

“Would they dare? There’d be riots in Diagon Alley,” Tania said.

Hermione couldn’t tell if either of the two was looking forward to such a crisis. She shrugged. “We’ll need to know how the Wizengamot stands on such trials, before we ask for them.”

“We can deal with the worst criminals ourselves,” Seamus said.

“The Ministry knows that. But they might just be waiting for a pretext to move against us. And they’ll blame us for any such action, whether we were involved or not.” Hermione didn’t want to deal with another Allan. “We need to focus on getting support from the population, not start a war.”

“But even if we do that, the Wizengamot might decide to fight rather than surrender their power,” Justin said.

“If they wish to die rather than enact reforms we’ll oblige them,” Hermione said. They had fought a war against a far stronger foe already; they wouldn’t give up now.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 2nd, 1997

Sirius Black was suffering. It wasn’t just the pain from the Skele-Gro he had had to take, though that certainly played a big part. Skele-Gro made you feel as if you had hundreds of splinters in your limbs and you couldn’t get them out! The Torture Curse was said to be worse, but Merlin’s Balls, he was certain the two were related, somehow - you couldn’t use magic to deal with the pain in either case. And to think Harry had suffered through this in his second year!

But worse than the pain was the knowledge that he had let his godson down. While he was being treated for his wounds, laid up, the Ministry had moved. Who’d have thought stubborn, rigid - and frigid - Bones would be as cunning as a Slytherin? He glared at the Daily Prophet on the floor next to his bed. The figures in the picture of an Auror group glared back at him, bunched together in the
A pack of lies, spread on the orders of the Ministry to fool the people and further the Minister’s agenda - and the Wizengamot’s, of course. That cesspit of bigots and scum! He hissed with anger and frustration, hitting the mattress he was lying on with his fist. If not for his wounds - more extensive than he had thought - he could have done something. But now half of Britain would already have heard and believed that Harry and the Ministry had saved them all.

He took a deep breath. Harry had saved them all. He had destroyed the Dark Lord’s mind. And his soul, or so Sirius suspected. Albus hadn’t gone into much detail past the necessity of defeating Voldemort in their minds, but Sirius had read up on the topic in his family’s library. He did not know for sure, though - and he’d certainly never tell Harry his suspicions. That sort of burden no one should have to bear.

Sirius sighed. He felt so useless, stuck in his bed while the cowards who had hidden during the war were crawling out of their holes, eager to take the reins of the country. Amos had informed him that the only reason they hadn’t managed to organise an emergency session of the Wizengamot was that the majority of them had not trusted the news enough to leave their safe houses right away.

But they’d gather tomorrow, and Sirius already knew what would be on the agenda: They’d try to save as many of their family members who had been involved with Voldemort as they could. He snorted. He would be able to move again tomorrow.

The door opened and Vivienne entered, smiling at him. Next to her floated a tray with food. She left it hovering next to his bed, then bent down to kiss him. For a moment, he forgot all about his troubles and pain.

“‘ow are you doing?” she asked when they broke off.

“I’m feeling better now.” He shot her a smile. “How is your family doing?” Vivienne hadn’t been hurt much, but her family hadn’t been as lucky. The Blacks, on the other hand, had fared better - Nymphadora was expected to make a full recovery, even though she was still at St Mungo’s so the Healers could keep an eye on her. Andromeda suspected that they were keeping her daughter for a few days longer just to be able to study her body, but after the Withering Curse, no one could blame them for being cautious.

She smiled, then sighed. “They’ve already returned to France.” Those who had survived.

“All of them?” He was surprised. That… it wasn’t quite rude, but he would have expected the French to stay and celebrate a bit longer. And wait until he was well enough to join in - he was their host, after all.

“The Duc sent a message, calling them back to the Court. ‘Onour has been satisfied, and blood has been avenged’.”

“Ah.” That explained it. The Duc d’Orléans had quite a bit more power than the British Minister for Magic - and he wasn’t elected by a parliament. “You stayed, though.”

“Of course.” She ran a hand over his cheek. “I’m not a Delacour, but a d’Aigle. I’m not a member of the Court.”

Sirius wanted to ask if she would have stayed anyway, but didn’t. Some things you did not ask. Not at the current stage of their relationship. Not when the reason she had come to Britain was no more. So he simply nodded. “Does that mean that the Duc will no longer support French involvement in
Britain’s affairs?”

“I think so. Though ’e might be concerned about the muggleborns.”

“Oh?” The pain was just a dull ache now. Focusing on talking helped.

Vivienne sighed again. She smiled, but he could see that it was forced. “The Court of Magical France has long been concerned about muggleborns. They fear that they might try to emulate the French muggles, and rebel.”

Sirius nodded. “And the Duc’s concerned about the British muggleborns.”

“Yes.” Vivienne nodded. “’Olour demanded that we took revenge for the attack on us, and the Duc wouldn’t ’ave denied us that. But now… ’E is the Duc, but some things even our ruler cannot do, or seem to support, without inviting trouble.”

Having seen the élan of the French, Sirius understood that perfectly. People who were willing to lose a dozen family members to avenge a single one would certainly pose a problem, should they feel their ruler was betraying them. And yet… “There might be trouble, though. The British Ministry is in dire need of reforms.” Reforms that would only happen at wand-point.

“It’s a country’s prerogative to organise itself. A peaceful change would certainly not be any cause for concern,” Vivienne said.

Sirius doubted that - Dumbledore’s changes would have certainly been a topic in the ICW if he hadn’t been so powerful - but he nodded anyway. There was no reason to poke this particular dragon, yet.

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London, London Bridge Hospital, February 2nd, 1997

“Voldemort is dead and his followers shattered, but his ideology still lives. The Ministry still believes that blood matters - that purebloods are better than half-bloods and muggleborns. The Wizengamot is still composed of people born into it, not elected, and they don’t just elect the Minister, but they also serve as both parliament and court of law. This cannot continue! The past year has shown just how easily such a system is abused!

“The privileges of the Old Families have to go! It doesn’t matter if you’re a pureblood, a half-blood or a muggleborn - we are all equal, and should be equal before the law! And together, we can change Britain for the better! We can and will win!”

Ron Weasley sighed and leaned back in his bed as Hermione’s voice faded and was replaced with muggle music. His girlfriend was correct, but her delivery needed some work. If that had been Lee on the wireless...

He resisted the urge to scratch the bandages on his side, even though the stitches were itching. The sooner he was healed, the sooner he could help his friends. And the sooner the stitches would be removed.

He didn’t know how many would be listening to the Resistance Radio anyway - not everyone might have noticed that the wireless was now broadcasting every day. And the muggleborns listening to it might hesitate to return. He couldn’t blame them - not with three horrible battles fought in the last month alone.
He sighed. He wished Hermione was here with him. Or his family. But visiting hours were over. And he was stuck in the muggle hospital. He glanced at the enchanted mirror Harry had left him. He could call her, but… she had a lot to do. A lot of important work. And he didn’t want to disturb her. She’d call at her usual time.

Ron pulled out the brochures Harry had brought from Quality Quidditch Supplies. Their latest broom line up. Harry had told him to pick one - any one - as replacement for the broom Voldemort had destroyed. Sirius would pay for it.

Ron didn’t like receiving charity. He had his pride - as did his family. But was this charity? He would need a broom, if things turned bad again. And judging by what he had read in the Prophet, that didn’t seem to be that unlikely. And Sirius was rich - he could afford it easily.

But that left him with the question of which model he should choose. The Firebolt would be the obvious choice - it was the best broom on the market, bar none. But to fly one of them, knowing that it had been a gift…

There was another thing, of course. The Firebolt was ideal for Seekers, Chasers and Beaters. But Ron was a Keeper. He didn’t need speed, he needed manoeuvrability, and there were better brooms for that. At least for the Quidditch pitch. If he wanted to go pro after Hogwarts, he would have to pick a Keeper’s broom.

If he wanted to go pro. Ron knew he wasn’t a Quidditch prodigy. Not like Harry. But he was good. Not as good as Wood, but Wood was among the best in the current league. So, coupled with his - small as it was - fame, Ron had a decent chance at a career in Quidditch.

But did he want such a career? It had been his dream to play professionally since he had first flown a broom. To win a game while thousands of fans cheered. But that had been before the war. It didn’t feel like such a great thing any more. It was a game, the best game in the world, but… there were more important things. The war had taught him that.

And he didn’t fancy looking and acting like Ludo Bagman in twenty years.

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“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! We have gathered here for a special session in order to decide the best course of action to lead our country through these trying times.”

Sirius Black scowled at the man. Philius Runcorn was the acting Chief Warlock by virtue of being the most senior member of the Wizengamot. And he was a blood purist who had been ‘missing’ since right before the Battle of the Ministry. Probably a Death Eater too.

“With the Dark Lord having been defeated by the Boy-Who-Lived, the war is over and it is time to mend the wounds it has caused our country! Far too many good wizards and witches have died in the war! Far too many good families have suffered greatly!”

Sirius was certain that Runcorn didn’t meant anyone outside the Old Families with his words.

“It is time to restore order to Britain. The necessities of war no longer hold sway over us, we can once again conduct our business according to our laws and traditions.”

Sirius glanced to Bones. The witch was nodding - she didn’t seem to mind that Runcorn had all but admitted to be working for Voldemort when he had fled the Wizengamot shortly before the
Withering Curse had struck. And she was standing up.

“The chair recognises the Minister for Magic.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot!” Bones started to speak, “You all know how many casualties the Ministry forces suffered during the war. With our current numbers, we can barely patrol Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. We need more recruits to provide Britain with the protection it needs. I therefore propose to extend the emergency funds allocated to the recruitment and training of Aurors and Hit-Wizards until we have restored our normal numbers and competency. The war has disrupted the social order, and in order to prevent unscrupulous elements from taking advantage of that, we need more wands in the Ministry’s service.”

Sirius saw many members of the Wizengamot nod in agreement. There was no point in trying to oppose this. But even with extended funding, the Ministry would remain weak for quite some time.

It didn’t take long for the proposal to be discussed, and it was passed with an overwhelming majority. Another proposal to allocate more funds to the DoM to research a cure for the Withering Curse passed as well.

“The chair recognises Mister Greengrass.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! I’ve heard people claim that the war is over, but my niece and others are still held in captivity by the muggleborns. What is the Ministry doing to save them?”

Amos scoffed loudly, and said: “They were fighting for the Dark Lord! They don’t need to be saved - they need to be executed!” It took a while for the excitement and outrage that this caused to die down.

“The chair recognises the Minister for Magic.”

“Mister Greengrass, the Ministry couldn’t take action previously since we had an agreement with the Muggleborn Resistance for the duration of the war. With the war over, the Resistance is obligated to hand their prisoners over to the Ministry, or they’ll be guilty of kidnapping.”

“And do you think they’ll listen to you?” Greengrass gestured with his wand. “They have murdered my family and started this war in the first place. Something far too many here seem to have forgotten!”

“The Death Eaters started this war when they murdered my son!” Amos yelled. “People like your family!”

“How dare you!” Greengrass stared at Amos, baring his teeth.

Runcorn called for order, but was mostly ignored. Bones’s face could have curdled milk. Sirius leaned back and enjoyed the show. It didn’t look like the Ministry would be able to easily push their proposals through. And he hadn’t yet had to stir the pot up himself.

Finally, the Wizengamot settled down again, and Bones continued: “The Ministry, as the only legal authority in Britain, will do its utmost to restore law and order. We will not let this country descend into anarchy.”

Sirius raised his wand.

“The chair recognises Mister Black.”
“Those are brave words, Minister,” Sirius said, smirking. “Even more so since the Dark Lord was not defeated by your forces, but by the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance.”

“He was defeated by the Boy-Who-Lived!” Weatherby yelled.

“Yes. With the help of the Order and the Resistance,” Sirius said, sneering at the man. “I was there. I fought the Dark Lord myself. I know what happened, unlike everyone else who believes the Daily Prophet’s lies.” Bones’s face looked like it had been petrified, Sirius noted with some satisfaction. “And I think some of my esteemed colleagues are a bit too quick to consider the war over.”

“What do you mean?” Rowle asked.

“Did you forget how this war started?” Sirius grinned widely. “It started when the Muggleborn Resistance struck back after the muggleborns had suffered a year of persecution at the hands of the Ministry. Do you honestly think they will simply go back to how things were, and let you rule them again as you please?”

“Most of them died in the war!” Greengrass yelled.

“More than enough are left,” Sirius retorted. He let his gaze sweep through the chamber. “Some of my esteemed colleagues here seem to think that you can simply ignore those who have killed the Dark Lord and go on as you used to. You are wrong. No amount of lies published in the Daily Prophet will make them go away. Before you try to make any decisions about Britain’s future, you should ensure that you actually have the power to make such decisions.”

“Are you threatening the Ministry, Mister Black?” Bones was glaring at him.

Sirius snorted. “I’m pointing out that you’re trying to treat those who killed the Dark Lord as if they do not matter. That’s not just stupid, that’s dangerous as well. They might think you’re planning to follow in his footsteps. The muggleborns certainly haven’t forgotten how quickly the Ministry turned on them a year and a half ago. And they do not think that just because you’ve been born into an Old Family, you should be able to rule them.”

“What do you want, Black?”

Sirius smiled. “You should ask that question to the muggleborns. Before they show you what they want.”

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Hogwarts, February 3rd, 1997

“There he is!”

“The Boy-Who-Lived!”

“Harry Potter!”

Harry Potter almost cringed when he passed the group of Hufflepuffs in the hallway. He wanted to yell at them that he hadn’t done it alone, that without his friends, he’d have been dead before he reached the Dark Lord. But that wouldn’t help - he had tried earlier today.

The latest Prophet had made things even worse, making it look as if Harry and Voldemort had duelled in the middle of the street, displaying unmatched skill at magic, houses tumbling and blowing up while they fought. Someone at the Prophet had had a really fertile imagination, and some talent
with a brush, and the students - who really should have known, and known him, better - lapped it up.

If that was what the rest of his time at Hogwarts would be like he had better quit…

Harry stopped walking. Quitting Hogwarts sounded horrible, at first. The school had been his home for years. The first place he could remember where he could be happy. But he had a real home, now, at Grimmauld Place. With Sirius. And he might have to quit Hogwarts anyway. If the Ministry decided to fight the Resistance rather than change, Harry would fight as well. And he couldn’t stay at Hogwarts in that case - the Aurors would come for him.

And even without another war, Harry wasn’t quite certain how he’d handle it if McGonagall tried to make him behave like a normal student again, with a curfew, detentions, and listening to prefects…

“Harry Potter! Finally!”

He looked up and saw Luna Lovegood walk straight towards him. Or stalk towards him. “Luna?”

“Yes?” She stopped and cocked her head sideways, looking at him.

For a moment, he was tempted to use Legilimency, but he controlled himself. He would respect her privacy. He blinked. “Ah… how can I help you?”

She beamed at him. “I need your help with an interview!”

“Ah…” It wasn’t a bad idea. The Quibbler had covered the war quite decently. Harry could use this to set the record straight. “Of course, Luna. With pleasure.”

“Good! When can you take me to Hermione’s lair?” Her head bobbed up as she spoke, smiling widely.

“What?”

“Hermione’s lair. She’s become the Boggart for so many purebloods, especially in the Wizengamot, that she might have become a new magical species from sheer sympathetic magic. And I think a lair sounds better than a home. More exotic.”

“Ah.” Harry stared at her. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. On the other hand… it gave him an excuse to leave Hogwarts, and it might help counter the Ministry’s lies. “Let me check…”

He just hoped Hermione was in a good mood.

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Walney Island, Cumbria, Britain, February 3rd, 1997

Augustus Rookwood looked around the old house, flicks of his wand clearing dust and dirt. It was quite small, but nothing a few Extension Charms couldn’t fix. More important was that the small cottage was unplottable, hidden in a nature reserve on the island. No one would find him here - not even the Dark Lord had known about this cottage.

He glanced at his left arm. He still had trouble accepting that the Dark Mark was gone. That the Dark Lord had actually died, despite his numerous Horcruxes. Augustus didn’t know how Dumbledore had managed to kill the Dark Lord - after dying himself, even - but he was determined to find out. He had to, to avoid the same fate. Augustus knew that there had been a special connection between the Dark Lord and the Boy-Who-Lived, and he hoped that this had been the cause of the Dark
Lord’s defeat. It would make it less of a concern.

He was alone, of course. The other survivors had split up - it had been every wizard for himself. Augustus expected at least one of them to turn traitor like Karkaroff any day now. He wasn’t bothered by that thought, though - he was already known as a Death Eater, so he had no cover to lose.

He also was the last member of the Dark Lord’s Inner Circle, not counting that pathetic Pettigrew, who had disappeared even before the Dark Lord’s death, and he knew that the Ministry would hunt him. Their Aurors were not much of a threat, but his former colleagues… with the fall of the Dark Lord, he had lost his protection against them, and they had the means to find him, or any other wayward Unspeakable.

He needed some leverage to cut a deal with them before his own precautions failed. And, he added to himself, looking at the notes he had gathered, he just knew what his leverage would be.

The lives of all the victims of the Withering Curse would make for a powerful bargaining chip. Once he had discovered its secrets, which shouldn’t take that long.

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Chapter 43: Interviews and Funerals

‘Without a doubt, Amelia Bones’s term of office occurred during the most critical and dangerous period of the 20th century for Wizarding Britain - she took the office of Minister for Magic at the height of the Second Blood War. Her predecessor, Cornelius Fudge, had been murdered, on the orders of the Dark Lord, and soon afterwards Albus Dumbledore himself fell victim to a dark curse. With the only wizard feared by both the Dark Lord and the Muggleborn Resistance dead and the Ministry’s forces depleted, Bones’s prospects were dire. And yet, Bones did not even think of surrendering Wizarding Britain to either faction - instead, she did what she felt was her duty to the Ministry and to the Wizengamot, no matter the opposition she faced.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, Greenwich, February 5th, 1997

“Hello,” Hermione Granger said with a smile when Harry led Luna into the one-room flat in Greenwich the Resistance had rented as an emergency safe house months ago.

“Hi,” Harry said.

“This doesn’t look like a proper lair,” Luna said with a pout. She was looking at the muggle furniture, and not at her.

“A lair?” Hermione glanced at Harry, who looked slightly guilty.

“As the purebloods’ Boggart, you need a lair!” Before Hermione could ask what she meant, Luna went on: “Although I guess the amount of muggleness here would serve well enough to scare most purebloods.” Luna nodded at her own words, cocking her head to study the microwave in the kitchenette. “A lair, hidden in plain sight, yes.” And she started scribbling down notes on what looked like a scroll of parchment stuck to a noteboard almost as big as her torso. Then she looked up with a hopeful expression. “I don’t suppose you’ll show me the dungeons where you keep the prisoners taken during the war? No?”

Hermione blinked, then glanced at Harry again, who was very busy studying the fridge’s contents. Which consisted of food that wouldn’t perish for a few months. She cleared her throat.

“Yes?” Harry looked over his shoulder.

“If you are done inspecting our store of emergency rations…” She couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or amused, or both. Probably both - her friend would give an interview himself, supporting the Resistance’s goals.

“Oh! Muggle food! Is it true that you eat stylised effigies of the god of war to prepare for battle?” Luna moved behind Harry and looked over his shoulder into the fridge.

“Effigies of the… do you mean Mars Bars?”

“Yes.” Luna nodded, hitting Harry’s shoulder with her chin a few times. “The Rotfang Conspiracy is fond of using them since they are so gooey that they easily adhere to teeth.” Turning around so fast
that her long hair hit Harry in the face she stared at Hermione. “Are you allied with them? They, too, plan the subjugation of the Ministry! Or was it just an alliance of convenience, and now you are rivals for control of Wizarding Britain?”

“I’m not aware of this Rotfang Conspiracy,” Hermione said, with a forced smile. She wanted to mention that her parents were dentists, but then Luna might mention them in an article. And she’d prefer it if her family were forgotten by Wizarding Britain. At least until things had changed.

“Oh? I’d have expected you to be aware of such threats. Or… are you trying to fool them into thinking that you don’t know about them? That won’t work since we’ve covered them in The Quibbler extensively. Or is this a double-bluff? You know that they know that you know…” Luna’s slightly protuberant eyes seemed to lose focus.

Hermione realised that her plan to oppose the Ministry’s quasi-monopoly in the press by using The Quibbler wouldn’t be quite as easy as she had thought. Apparently, Ron had been understating things a great deal when he had described the Lovegoods as ‘eccentric’. And it seemed that the rumours that her father printed stories accusing Fudge of butchering and cooking goblins were true as well.

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“What are your thoughts on the end of the war?” Luna asked, leaning forward on the couch, her notepad balanced on her knees. The scroll of parchment stuck to it seemed to never end and it could float in the air as if it was on a table. Hermione was very curious as to which spells had been used to create it, but now that Luna had finally started to act like a professional reporter and not a conspiracy nut, it was time to focus on the interview.

“I am relieved that Voldemort’s attempt to violently overthrow the Ministry and murder all muggleborns and so-called ‘blood traitors’ has been stopped,” Hermione answered. She was sitting on one of the two seats in the flat. Harry was in the other, reading through the stack of The Quibblers covering the low table between them. “But the Ministry is trying to ignore the fact that Voldemort wasn’t the only reason this war started. That is understandable, of course - the Ministry would rather not remind the people of its own guilt.”

“So, will you be continuing the war until the Ministry surrenders?” Neither Luna’s tone nor her expression changed when she asked this question.

“I do not think that the Ministry is willing to fight a war in defence of the very ideology of the Dark Lord they just fought,” Hermione said. “The Death Eaters thought that blood mattered, that purebloods were superior to half-bloods and muggleborns simply by the virtue of their birth. That sick idea has cost so many lives in the last two wars, who in their right mind would be willing to fight another war for it?”

“The Ministry hasn’t always acted in a rational manner in the past,” Luna pointed out - which meant a lot coming from a Lovegood as Hermione now knew only too well - she had tried to convince Luna that she really did not know anything about a Rotfang Conspiracy, which had resulted in a lengthy explanation that had strained Hermione’s self-control until she remembered that, not counting the insanity of the topic, this was how she had often acted in the past. Harry’s smile told her that he had made the connection as well.

“That is true.” Hermione nodded. Some of the past decisions she had read about boggled the mind, “But in this case, the decision lies not with the Ministry, but with the Wizengamot. And so many members of the Wizengamot have died in the last war, I do hope that the rest are fully aware of what would they unleash, should they attempt to keep oppressing muggleborns, half-bloods, and basically
anyone who is not a member of the so-called ‘Old Families’.”

“Weren’t the muggleborn laws repealed?” Luna asked. She cocked her head sideways until her ear touched her shoulder, then straightened up. “Even though I looked at it from another angle, your statement didn’t change.”

“Those laws were just the most outrageous result of the oppressive autocratic nature of the current system,” Hermione said, then bit her lip to avoid starting a rant. “They could be passed because, except for a few families, no wizard or witch, no matter their blood status, has any say in how Wizarding Britain is governed. The Wizengamot is composed of hereditary seats with a few seats appointed by the Minister - who in turn is elected by the Wizengamot. Why should a few purebloods have the power to decide how the rest of us have to live?”

“I think they derive their power from the way the Wizengamot was set up,” Luna said.

“That was before even the Statute of Secrecy and many of the most common spells we use every day had been created,” Hermione countered. “Wizarding Britain has changed drastically in the past centuries, and it is high time to adjust its government to reflect that. The last war has clearly demonstrated that it isn’t working any more.”

“Does that mean that if the Wizengamot does not relinquish its power, the Resistance will go to war?” Luna still didn’t bat an eye. Hermione didn’t know if Luna was simply far more professional than she had acted so far, or if she didn’t quite realise what that would mean.

Nevertheless, she had to answer that. “No. We do not want the Wizengamot to relinquish its power.” Not all of it, at least. “But we want the Wizengamot to be composed of members elected for a term by the population.”

“Like the Minister?”

“In a similar way. Everyone would be able to vote for the candidates, and those with the most votes would form the Wizengamot until the next election.” Since the population of Wizarding Britain couldn’t be split into districts easily, they’d need a system of proportional representation, not the First Past the Post system used in muggle Britain.

“But the Minister is usually chosen beforehand, and the election is just a formality,” Luna pointed out.

Hermione frowned, then forced herself to smile. It wasn’t Luna’s fault, and it wasn’t as if such things didn’t happen in the United Kingdom either. “That wouldn’t happen since you’d have to convince the entirety of Wizarding Britain.”

“Oh. But wouldn’t that make any decision impossible? You can’t convince everyone all the time, unless you’re using the Imperius. You’re not, are you?”

“No, there’s no plan to use the Imperius in politics. Not on the Resistance’s side, at least. I can’t speak for the Old Families, of course - many of them have been involved in such abuse in the past.” That kind of rumour Hermione and the Resistance could do without. “And the Ministry used the Imperius Curse on muggleborns, in an attempt to force them to spy on us.”

“Oh!” Luna paused her scribbling. “How did you deal with that?”

“We were forced to kill one of them, but we saved the other, keeping her safe until we could get her to a Thief’s Downfall.” Hermione pressed her lips together before she went into another rant about the Ministry’s tactics.
“Oh. So, are you concerned about the Ministry using the Imperius to win an election?” Luna asked, leaning forward.

“They haven’t yet withdrawn the special authorisation granted to Aurors and Hit-Wizards to use the Imperius Curse and the Killing Curse,” Hermione said. “They said there were still Death Eaters unaccounted for - Rookwood and Pettigrew, to name the two most prominent - but they also claim the war is over and everyone should go back to normal.” She shrugged. “A tiny contradiction, I’d say.”

“Will you be returning to Hogwarts?”

“No.” Hermione shook her head, frowning. “It would be quite irresponsible in the current situation.”

“And after this has been resolved? And will you restart your sixth year, or enter seventh?”

“I do not know how long it’ll take to reform Wizarding Britain. I’m planning to take my N.E.W.T.s after self-study.” She also didn’t want to study with people whose family she might have killed during the war. The potential for violence was just too great, and Hermione didn’t know if she could abstain from lethal measures when defending herself against an attacker at school. Or if she wanted to, in the first place.

Harry lowered his magazine and looked at her, sighing. Hermione knew that he had to deal with this as well, though his situation was not quite as serious. Unlike Hermione and the other members of the Resistance, he hadn’t killed quite as many Death Eaters and their, misguided or not, supporters. Still, she wondered if either Harry or Ron would end up maiming some of the purebloods who had fled Hogwarts, should they return. Moody’s training certainly wouldn’t help them to avoid killing an attacker.

She had planned to organise some PTSD treatment for the Order and the Resistance for a while now, but she hadn’t yet found a psychiatrist who knew about magic. Maybe one of the parents of a muggleborn was a licensed therapist.

“How will that influence your relationship with Ron Weasley? If he’s at Hogwarts for another year and a half, and you’ll only be able to see each other during the Hogsmeade weekends, that would put a strain on it, wouldn’t it?”

Hermione blinked. That was a rather personal question. A glance told her that Harry was focusing on his magazine again. She cleared her throat. “We’ll manage.” Neither she nor Ron cared about the curfew and other rules of Hogwarts any more, and would meet whenever they pleased, but she wasn’t about to announce that. It was one thing to ignore the rules, another to flaunt that fact.

Luna nodded. Hermione expected her to pursue the topic further, but the other witch changed the topic. “Now, let’s address the most important question for our readers: How do you handle your new status as a magical creature?”

Hermione blinked.

“What?”

“You are widely known as the worst fear of Britain’s purebloods - their Boggart. Just as the Dark Lord was, before his death. It’s quite likely that you will be transforming into a magical creature as well.”

“What?”
At first, watching Luna interview Hermione had been amusing, Harry Potter thought. But towards the end… He couldn’t tell if Luna had been serious, or simply used her magical creature speculation to discreetly ask more uncomfortable questions. And neither could Hermione, or so he thought.

And now it was his turn. Fortunately, she didn’t think he was turning into a magical creature, and he’d told her in advance that he wouldn’t go into the details of his fight with Voldemort.

“You have defeated the Dark Lord in single combat, saving Wizarding Britain. But at the same time, you also killed a unique magical creature - a human-snake-hybrid. How do you feel about that?”

Harry didn’t think that ‘I don’t give a damn’ would be a polite answer. “I’m relieved that this threat to us all is finally over. Anything else is, at best, a secondary concern.” He had dealt with several magical creatures over the last few years, after all, and it was hard to feel sympathetic for anything that wanted to kill him.

Hermione nodded approvingly. Harry felt like a politician already - they had talked about his statements in advance. He had drawn the line when Hermione had talked about a magical version of a teleprompter, though - he was no mouthpiece.

Luna frowned slightly, or so he thought - her face was mostly hidden behind her pad. “You were personally trained by Dumbledore for your confrontation with the Dark Lord. Did he have an opinion on the impact of this conflict on the magical environment?”

“That wasn’t a topic during my lessons,” Harry said. “Dumbledore was far more focused on the effect the war had on the people. He was quite adamant about the need to reform Wizarding Britain, and he warned us about the dangers of taking revenge for what happened in the war.”

Luna blinked at him. “You said ‘us’, not ‘me’.”

“The Headmaster spoke to me, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger.” In a message after his death, but that wasn’t important, Harry thought. “He also talked to Sirius Black, of course. He cautioned us against making the same mistakes that were made in the past.”

“Would those have been his own mistakes?”

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “Which is why I support Hermione’s proposal for reforming the Wizengamot. Wizarding Britain is currently a country divided against itself. In order to mend the rifts the war has torn open, we need a Wizengamot and Ministry that represent all of us, not just a few of us.”

“And what will you do if the Wizengamot is infected by Wrackspurts and will not agree with this?” Luna looked straight at him with an unreadable expression.

“The Wizengamot members claim that they have the right to rule us because they were born to the right families. The Dark Lord thought the same - he just thought that his own family was the only ‘right family’. That idea should have died with him.”

“Would you go to war over this?” Luna asked.

“We don’t want a war. But if we have the choice between a war and being oppressed… We fought the Dark Lord and his followers already, and we’ll fight against anyone else trying to oppress us.”

“Have you considered a remedy against Wrackspurts first? Teaching the infected to think positive thoughts would certainly avoid such a war.”
“I’m not certain that all of the Wizengamot members are in the habit of thinking at all.”

Judging by Hermione’s expression, she didn’t think that was as funny as Harry thought.

Outside Hogsmeade, February 5th, 1997

“So, what’s your impression of Hermione’s lair?” Harry Potter asked Luna while they were walking back to Hogwarts from Hogsmeade. He wasn’t looking at her, but at their surroundings, wand in hand, and had cast a Human-presence-revealing Charm, just in case there was an ambush ahead of them. There were still a few Death Eaters left unaccounted for, after all, and once his interview was published, some of the Wizengamot members might be stooping to such measures as well. If they weren’t already.

“I hoped for something more fitting. Looming shadows, dark creatures moving beneath the floorboards, ready to jump up and devour unsuspecting visitors, swarms of Heliopaths looted from the Minister’s secret office during the war. There wasn’t even a trapdoor to drop people into a dark pit or reach an escape tunnel. Or was there?”

He glanced at her. She was looking at him with wide, hopeful eyes. Harry hated to disappoint her, but lying to her would be even worse. “I don’t think so. You don’t usually find such things in a muggle flat.” Hermione might have a secret way out of the flat, for emergencies, but that wasn’t something to spread around. “Are you satisfied with how the interviews turned out?”

“They were a bit light on the information about magical creatures. Politics is not usually a topic that interests the majority of our readers,” Luna said. The witch didn’t seem to pay any attention to the patch of forest they were walking through, but it was hard to tell.

“Maybe not usually - but I think there’s a lot of interest in politics right now,” Harry said.

Luna sighed. “I guess so.”

Harry glanced at her. She looked concerned, even sad. A stark contrast to her attitude during the interviews. Or to her attitude at school, where nothing seemed to faze her. “You were quite calm and collected during the interview.” It wasn’t quite a question. More of an opening.

Luna nodded. “Daddy taught me that a good journalist will not influence the interviewee. We’re reporting the news, we don’t make it. So I did my best not to react.”

“Ah.” That was a far more professional attitude than Harry had expected from the Lovegoods, he thought with no small amount of shame.

“But I am afraid of another war. So many have died already, and so many friendships have been torn up by the war. Or prevented.” Luna took a deep breath.

Harry was glancing back at her, but then focused on a particularly dense patch of underwood on their right side before he could tell if there were tears in her eyes, or just a trick of the light. He should have waited to ask her until they were safely back at Hogwarts, he thought. “But if we simply go back to how things were before, then they will have died for nothing. We did that once already, fifteen years ago.”

“You were a toddler back then,” Luna said. “And not active in politics.”

“Yes. I meant Britain, as a whole,” Harry explained.
“Isn’t trying to justify more deaths with previous deaths what revenge is about?”

They were leaving the forest, and Harry kept looking at the sky now - a disillusioned attacker on a fast broom could surprise him despite his spell, if he was caught unawares. “It’s not exactly the same. It’s…” He sighed. “It’s about preventing more deaths in the future. If we don’t change Britain, then we’ll have a Third Blood War in ten or twenty years. The Dark Lord is dead, but he was just part of the problem. The real problem is the belief in blood purity. As long as the government sees muggleborns and half-bloods as being worth less than purebloods we’ll always be just a step away from another war. The muggleborns will not accept that. Not any more.”

“But are equal rights worth another war? Worth more deaths?”

Harry didn’t look at her when he answered. He didn’t want to see her reaction.

“Yes.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

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Hogwarts, February 5th, 1997

Someone was waiting for them. Harry Potter could see a marker floating there as Luna and he approached the side entrance to Hogwarts near the greenhouses. They were inside Hogwarts’ wards, but even after the flight of the Slytherins and the other blood purists, you couldn’t be certain that there were no enemies left at school. And with Voldemort dead, some former allies might be reconsidering their views of him.

Luna was about to go on, but he held her back with a raised hand. “Maybe we should take the main entrance.”

“What’s wrong?” Luna asked.

“Someone’s waiting for us.” Harry motioned with his head towards the door.

“Oh? Who is it?”

“I can’t tell from here.” He wasn’t pointing his wand at the door. Not yet.

“Maybe it’s a prefect. Or a teacher - we left Hogwarts without permission, didn’t we?”

“That would be nice.” Though Harry was mentally going through the prefects he knew. Could there be an enemy among them? The teachers should be safe, but then again… he didn’t know all of them well, and who could tell which side they’d pick, with both Dumbledore and Voldemort dead?

“Why would it be nice? We’d get detention. And our houses would lose points.” Luna made a humming noise. “Although we’re on school grounds now, so how would they know that we were away? They might have searched the school, but we could have been in the forest… no, that’d break a rule as well.”

Harry didn’t give a damn about that. Reforming Wizarding Britain, preferably without another war, was far more important than school rules. If the teachers wanted to make a fuss he could always leave Hogwarts. But he didn’t want to enter a fight and endanger Luna.

Before they could leave, though, the door was opened from the inside, and a figure peered out. Harry
recognised her just before his wand was pointing at her. Ginny. She must have used the map, he realised, to find them.

“What are you waiting for? Get inside before a teacher spots you!” She waved at them.

Harry hesitated another second - she could be an impostor, or under a spell, Moody would say - but Luna was already moving, so he followed her.

“How did it go?” Ginny asked as soon as they were inside.

Harry recalled that she had been very interested in the interviews as soon as she had heard of them. He cast a privacy spell just in time - Luna was already talking.

“Hermione’s lair was not very impressive, visually at least. Although the high muggle content might be scary for some purebloods. I didn’t get to see the dungeons, for security reasons, I suppose. She also faked ignorance about the Rotfang Conspiracy. I think she didn’t trust me with her knowledge.” Luna shook her head with a sad expression. “I was disappointed, though, that she didn’t reveal much about the changes she is going through as she transforms into a new magical creature. In fact, she said I’m not to print anything about that until the changes were complete.”

Ginny raised both eyebrows at Harry, who shrugged. Hermione hadn’t exactly said that, but as long as there was no article describing her as a creature, dark or otherwise...

“It was mostly about politics,” Luna finished, pouting. “And most of it is already known from the wireless broadcasts.”

“I haven’t been on the wireless,” Harry pointed out.

Luna nodded. “I suppose that’s true. And while people wrote and talked a lot about you, you haven’t been interviewed yet. Not by a competent and honest journalist, at least. And neither has Hermione.” She perked up. “That’s two scoops for The Quibbler!” Wrinkling her nose, she added: “It might be three, if I could interview Ron.”

“Ron?” Ginny looked surprised.

“Yes. He’s Hermione’s boyfriend - or would that be mate?” Luna cocked her head sideways, nibbling on her lip while she seemed to consider that.

“He always says that he is Harry’s best mate,” Ginny said.

She sounded earnest, but when Harry shot her a glare, she giggled.

Luna’s head whipped around, staring at him. “Really?”

“He means ‘best friend’,” Harry clarified.

“Oh.” Luna pouted. “That makes more sense.”

Harry wasn’t quite certain if he liked hearing Luna say that.

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London, Ministry of Magic, February 7th, 1997

“Mister Thicknesse to see you, Ma’am.”
Thank you.

Pius looked concerned, Amelia Bones thought when she saw him enter her office. At least he looked more tense than usual - the man was good, maybe too good, at hiding his emotions.

“Granger’s making her move,” he said, putting down a magazine on her desk.

“The Quibbler?” Amelia raised an eyebrow.

“Granger and Potter gave interviews to Lovegood’s daughter.”

Amelia frowned. That wasn’t a periodical so much as a collection of delusions. Most who had a subscription probably read it for laughs. The muggleborns had to be desperate if they were stooping that low. But then again, it would let them reach more people than with their leaflets, or their wireless broadcasts - which, she reminded herself, were illegal. And far too many would buy this issue just to read what the Boy-Who-Lived had to say.

She skimmed over an article on imaginary animals - including an Australian chimera made up of a beaver, a duck, and a venomous snake which Lovegood claimed was breeding true by laying eggs - and several outrageous rumours until she reached the interviews.

They weren’t overly long, but their contents… She was livid when she put down the magazine, but she tried not to show it when she looked at Pius. That cursed muggleborn was all but calling for a revolution, and Potter was threatening war should the Wizengamot and the Ministry not cave in and surrender. They wanted to rule Britain, just like the Dark Lord had wanted to! At least Dumbledore, for all his radical notions, had not tried to raze Wizarding Britain’s institutions and traditions.

“It seems our strategy to credit Potter with the lion’s share of Voldemort’s defeat has backfired,” he said. “We counted on the fact that the Daily Prophet wouldn’t print anything seditious, and that most people wouldn’t listen to the Resistance broadcasts.” He was talking as if it was their fault, but Amelia knew that she’d be the one blamed. And so did he. He wasn’t wrong, though - they were facing a serious threat.

She nodded. “With Potter’s support, Granger’s proposal will garner a much better reception than anticipated among the half-bloods and the purebloods.” Amelia didn’t think that the economic clout of the Old Families would be enough to counter that. Not after a bloody war. Too many of the ambitious purebloods who were too distantly related to the Old Families to be counted among them would see an opportunity to raise their status. And the half-bloods were always a potential source of unrest - many of them were too close to their muggleborn or muggle relatives, and their muggle ideas.

“It’s a problem, but not an insurmountable one. We’ve already emphasised just how young Potter is,” Pius said, smiling thinly. “And everyone knows that young wizards lose all sense when they are in love.”

“Granger’s with one of Arthur’s kids, not Potter,” Amelia retorted. Susan had been quite clear about that.

But Pius knew how to play politics. “It’s also known that muggleborn witches are very free with their affections. Granger is notorious for seducing important wizards, isn’t she?” His smile widened a tiny bit.

Amelia knew that he was referring to that article by Rita Skeeter during the Triwizard Tournament. There had been rumours about love potions being used as well. It wouldn’t do that much to damage
Granger’s reputation - anyone who didn’t loathe her for her murders would not care about other moral failures - but Potter’s credibility would suffer. She nodded. “Talk to the Prophet. See if Skeeter might reconsider her refusal to write about Granger.” That witch was odious, but she was the best the Prophet had when it came to tearing down famous people.

“We’ll need to focus on Granger, and make Potter out to be the victim manipulated by her. If we attack Potter some will want to defend him, but if we act as if we want to save him from Granger’s influence…” Pius’s smile was showing his teeth now.

“We’ll need to shut down those broadcasts too.” Amelia might not be the politician Pius was, but she knew that they needed to keep the muggleborns and their misguided allies from poisoning the minds of the population.

“That might be difficult. We weren’t able to stop them during the war, after all. I contacted the Obliviators, but they said that since Granger’s using the same channels the Wizarding Wireless Network is using, the Statute of Secrecy is not endangered.” Pius sighed.

Amelia stared at him. “Be glad about that. The ICW is already pressuring us. If they had the slightest notion that we were facing a threat to the Statute…” She shook her head. So far, the ICW’s attempts to meddle in Britain had been limited - they had no mandate to intervene in the internal affairs of a Magical Country. Threats to the International Statute of Secrecy, on the other hand, fell within the ICW’s purview. And Amelia really didn’t want any foreigners ‘helping to rebuild’ Britain. Too many countries had been bullied by Dumbledore and were looking to pay Britain back.

Pius nodded. He looked chastised, but Amelia couldn’t help wondering if he had counted on the ICW increasing its pressure - and her getting blamed for it. “We’ll call on the Resistance to stop their illegal broadcasting, and to apply for a license.” If they sent in an application, it would take a long time to be processed, given the current state of the Ministry. And if they didn’t, the muggleborns would reveal their contempt for the law.

Not that they hadn’t done so already in those interviews, of course. “We’ll also push them to release the prisoners they have taken during the war into our custody so they can be tried.” Nott, Davis and Greengrass were still alive, according to their families.

“That might cause the muggleborns to kill them, and claim they tried to escape,” Pius said.

“Either way, the Resistance will lose its leverage over those families,” Amelia said. She didn’t care much about them - they had been fighting for the Dark Lord, after all.

Pius nodded. “They will be publicly associated with Death Eaters, though, which will weaken their influence.”

That wasn’t a bad thing, as far as Amelia was concerned.

Once Pius had left, she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She had sworn to defend Britain against all threats, and to uphold the law. It seemed that those two goals had come into conflict with each other.

*****

Hogsmeade, February 8th, 1997

Hogsmeade’s cemetery was bigger than the spot of land it occupied, Harry Potter noticed when he entered through the wrought-iron gate. The small lot between the old church and the temple expanded into a wide field covered with various tombstones and statuary, and several crypts. Even
after almost six years spent at Hogwarts, seeing such magic still surprised him.

Passing so many fresh graves on the way to the open grave at the back was a sobering sight. Even counting the fact that many wizards and witches who didn’t live in Hogsmeade chose to be interred here instead of in muggle cemeteries, it showed just how devastating the war had been, for all that it hadn’t been waged for even a year.

For a moment, Harry doubted himself. Could he really risk another war, knowing its cost? Could he cause more death and destruction, even if it was for a good cause? While the houses destroyed in the attacks on Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley had yet to be rebuilt?

He shook his head. Hermione was correct - they had to push on, to turn this into 1945, instead of 1918. If the Ministry and Wizengamot were left in power, then it would just be a question of time until the next war started. Too much had happened, and yet too little - neither side could tolerate the current situation.

“There aren’t many mourners,” Harry commented, mostly to say something.

“Yes.” Neville, who had insisted on coming as well, even though he hadn’t known the real Moody for longer than a few lessons, shrugged. “But any funeral needs to have at least seven people in attendance, or it’s not decent. One to give the eulogy, six to levitate the casket.”

“Moody hadn’t many friends left,” Sirius, walking behind them, Vivienne at his side, said. “He lost most of them in the first war, and after the war he didn’t make many new ones.”

His godfather didn’t have to tell him why - Harry had been trained by the old Auror, after all. “And most of those he had trained were killed in this war,” Harry added. It felt weird to talk about the war as if it was over, knowing that it could restart any day, should the Wizengamot or the Ministry do something foolish.

Such as attacking a funeral, he thought. He wished that Hermione were there as well, but she hadn’t really known Moody and was with Ron, who was still stuck in the hospital. He spotted a red robe - an Auror - in the small gathering around the casket - closed, of course - as they stepped closer. Tonks.

The metamorphmagus was talking to a middle-aged wizard, who Harry didn’t recognise, next to a familiar-looking older wizard. He also noticed Aberforth, standing apart from the others, and a shady looking wizard on the other side.

“Elphias. Nymphadora.” Sirius nodded at the two, then looked at the wizard.

Tonks had narrowed her eyes, probably at hearing her given name, but then flushed. “This is Auror Cyril Selwyn. Cyril, this is Sirius Black. You know Harry Potter. Neville Longbottom. And this is Vivienne d’Aigle.” They shook hands. “He’s the only other trainee of Moody’s who made it through the war,” Tonks explained.

“And only because I was cursed early on, and missed most of the fighting,” Selwyn said, chuckling briefly.

Sirius nodded in a polite, but distant manner. Selwyn wasn’t an Order member, then. Harry excused himself and went over to Aberforth.

“Potter,” the old wizard grumbled before Harry could greet him.

“Mister Dumbledore.”
“Call me Abe. Albus was Mister Dumbledore. Until he was the Headmaster.”

Harry nodded. “Not many mourners,” he said.

“Even fewer than you think,” Aberforth said, snorting. “I’m just here to pay my respects since he was killed fighting at my side, but I certainly don’t mourn the bastard. And Fletcher over there is probably just here to be certain that Moody’s truly dead. He’s been arrested a few times by him, and never too gently.”

“Ah.” Harry didn’t know how to comment on that. He was not privy to the reasons for the hatred between Moody and Aberforth, and he didn’t want to start a row or rant by saying the wrong thing. So he nodded and returned to Sirius’s side.

Tonks was reading a scroll of parchment, mumbling under her breath. Harry looked at his godfather and raised an eyebrow.

Sirius shrugged. “She’s been picked to say a few words since Moody didn’t want a priest at his funeral.”

“It’s a tradition in the Corps that the duties no one wants go to the youngest Aurors,” Selwyn added. “And since I have seniority on her…” He chuckled again. Harry was starting dislike the man.

Fortunately, it was time to start the ceremony, so Harry didn’t have to make polite conversation with the man.

“We have gathered here to pay our respects to Alastor Moody, known among his friends and acquaintances as ‘Mad-Eye’,” Tonks started her eulogy. She briefly covered his career, and his exploits in the last war, then finished with: “He gave his life fighting the Dark Lord, undoubtedly saving others. May he finally be able to rest in peace.”

Harry had expected a better speech, something more personal - but then, this was Moody. The Headmaster had probably been the last person who had really known him.

He drew his wand together with the others - not counting Aberforth and Fletcher, they had just the right number for the ceremony - and pointed it at the casket.

“Wingardium Leviosa.”

The casket floated up, trembling slightly due to the six different spells affecting it, and then was lowered into the ground. Tonks mumbled something, then used her wand to fill the grave with earth.

As funerals went, this was one of the saddest Harry had attended. As morbid as the thought was, he really hoped that when he died, he wouldn’t be as lonely and isolated as Moody had been.

Tonks walked with them on the way out of the cemetery. “Merlin’s balls! That was horrible!” she complained.

“You were the one in charge,” Sirius said.

Tonks glared at him, but didn’t retort. She sighed instead, then looked at Harry. “I’ve read The Quibbler.”

Harry tensed slightly. “Yes?”

“Are you really willing to go to war?”
Harry rolled his eyes. He had said so in the interview; why was everyone asking the same question? It had been bad enough at Hogwarts. At least Neville hadn’t mentioned it - though that might not be a good sign, now that he thought about it. “I wouldn’t have said it if it wasn’t true.”

“But…” Tonks hesitated.

Harry sighed. “It’s quite simple: We won’t accept any rule based on blood status. All wizards and witches are equal, and should have an equal vote in how our country is run.”

“But the Dark Lord is dead, his followers fled, and the Muggleborn Laws were repealed,” Tonks said. Her lips were trembling, Harry noted.

“And yet the same people who passed those laws are still in power,” he said.

“Well, not the exact same people - Hermione blew up a lot of them, and we killed a few more during the war,” Sirius cut in, grinning coldly. Then he glanced at Neville, and flinched.

Neville seemed to ignore Sirius’s comment, though he wasn’t looking at any of them. “I wouldn’t mind losing my seat on the Wizengamot. It hasn’t done me or my family any good.”

Tonks didn’t give up. “And how democratic is it to fight a war to change the system?”

“A war is the last resort. We hope that the Wizengamot will see reason.” At least Harry did - he wasn’t quite certain if Sirius shared his views.

“Fat chance of that,” Tonks mumbled. “Hasn’t there been enough death?”

“That’s a question you have to ask the Minister, and the Wizengamot,” Sirius said. “Though I think it’s telling that neither Bones nor anyone from the Wizengamot showed up today.”

Tonks flinched, but then schooled her features. “They’ll say that it’s you who need to see reason to avoid a war.”

Sirius scoffed. “They’re fools. Even if Hermione gave in, and accepted pureblood rule, do you think the rest of the muggleborns would follow her lead? I doubt that even the rest of the Resistance would follow her lead, if she did that.” He shook his head. “No, the Ministry and the Wizengamot are the only ones who can avoid a war now.”

He didn’t have to say that they could only do so by giving in to the demands of the muggleborns.

Tonks muttered a curse under her breath. “We’re doomed then.”

Harry hoped that she was wrong.

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London, Greenwich, February 8th, 1997

“Merlin! Those muggle doctors were worse than Pomfrey! I thought they wanted to keep me there for a month!”

Hermione Granger chuckled at Ron’s exclamation. “The longer you stay, the more the hospital gets paid,” she said, flagging down a cab.

“What?” He turned to stare at her with his mouth open. “Don’t they get a fixed salary like in St Mungo’s?”
“The staff probably does, but the hospital gets paid by the patients.” She didn’t want to delve into the
details of private health insurance and the NHS.

“But…” He blinked. “Sirius paid for it, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“First the broom, now this…” Ron sighed, then held his side, wincing.

Hermione gasped. “Are you alright?” It was a silly question - he was obviously in pain. She pressed
her lips together. She shouldn’t have helped him get released, no matter how much he, and she,
 wanted it.

“I’m fi… I’m alright. Just a bit of pain. I’ve had worse.”

She glared at him, but he kept smiling at her, and then a cab stopped, and she couldn’t argue further.
Hermione noticed that he did wince again, though, as he was getting into the car. “I should tell the
driver to turn around and take you back to the hospital.”

“I'll manage. I’m not going back to Hogwarts yet, so I’ll be able to recover at Grimmauld Place for
another week or two.” He slowly wrapped an arm around her - she was sitting on his good side. “I
don’t know m… this part of London very well, but we’re not going to Grimmauld Place, are we?”

“No. I’ve made reservations at a restaurant for dinner.” She sighed. “But I should cancel. You need
more rest than you said.”

He shook his head wildly. “Certainly not! The doctors might have been competent, but the food…”

“All right.” Hermione sighed, then laid her head on his shoulder, taking a deep breath, smelling him,
feeling his warmth.

As selfish and stupid as it was, given his wound, she really wanted to have dinner with him. Just the
two of them. With no talk of war.

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London, East End, February 8th, 1997

It was almost midnight when Hermione Granger reached the Resistance’s home, but judging by the
lights and what she could hear, most of her friends were still up.

“There you are!” to her surprise, Seamus greeted her in the hallway with a wide smile. He was
carrying a pack of beers, so he had probably just come from the kitchen. “We’ve been waiting for
you!” He grinned at her. “You didn’t do anything with Ron that made his wound worse?”

She knew what he meant, even though he was technically correct - Ron had been in more pain after
the dinner, although he had tried to hide it. So she shook her head. “No.” She almost added
something about not wanting to see Ron bleed, but Seamus would make horrible and tasteless jokes
about such a slip. “We just had dinner.”

“Ah!” He sighed in an exaggerated manner. “Come to the living room! We’ve got good news!”

“Oh?” What had she missed?

“Tania and I were in Diagon Alley this afternoon, distributing more leaflets, when we noticed a
dispute. Witch in normal clothes was having a screaming row with a man in robes, so we took a
closer look. Turns out the witch was Camille Linnecker, a muggleborn who wanted her shop back from the pureblood who had bought it for a pittance when she had been forced to hide. The idiot fled quickly when we showed up, though!"

Hermione clenched her teeth to avoid an outburst.

Seamus didn’t seem to notice as we went on: “She won’t be the only one to return, either - after the interviews and the broadcast, and the e-mails, most should now know that the war’s over and we’ve won! The Ministry’ll cave as well!”

“Let’s hope so,” Hermione said. She smiled when she greeted the rest of the Resistance, even though she felt like cursing. That kind of scene could cause a lot of trouble in the current climate. But she wasn’t about to ruin her friends’ mood.

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Hogwarts, February 9th, 1997

Ron Weasley was walking slowly through the gates of Hogwarts - his wound hadn’t fully healed yet. The stitches were still in, even - he could feel them when he moved, he was certain, even though the muggle doctors had told him that it was just his imagination. But he couldn’t have stayed a day longer in the hospital. He couldn’t miss this. Dumbledore’s funeral.

“Tell me at once if you can’t handle it any more,” Hermione whispered next to him. She had her arm hooked into his, allowing him to lean on her.

Ron nodded, though he was determined to tough it out. He owed it to the Headmaster. They all did.

“I mean it. Your health is more important!” she hissed. In a softer voice, she added: “Please.”

“I promise,” he said, feeling guilty. But he had missed Moody’s funeral already. And he didn’t want to know what rumours would start if he left in the middle of this one. He heard Harry snort, and glanced at his friend walking on his other side.

“Better you than me,” Harry whispered, with a grin.

They slowly walked over to the fields overlooking the Black Lake. Ron had heard that the Ministry had wanted to erect a statue, maybe even a mausoleum, but Dumbledore had been quite clear in the instructions he had left. A modest tombstone, a plain grave. Ron also knew about the secret instructions - Dumbledore had wanted his body cremated and the ashes vanished, so there wouldn’t be any remains left that could be used for dark rituals. The ashes in the urn were actually from Fawkes’ last burning day.

The area was packed, all of the students and what looked like most of Wizarding Britain had gathered to pay their respect to the great Dumbledore. If not for the wards of Hogwarts, security would be impossible. And even so, they had delayed the funeral until the war had been over, and just about every Auror and Hit-Wizard the Ministry had left was here. A fact that didn’t make Ron feel as safe as others would expect. Part of the reason all of them had cast Shield Charms.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he asked in a low voice. The half-giant should have been easily visible in the crowd.

“He’s in the forest with the centaurs,” Hermione answered in an equally low voice. “They and the merpeople wanted to pay their respects as well.”
“Ah.” Ron nodded. That made sense - Dumbledore had done a lot for the magical beings as well.

They had seats in the first row assigned to them, once again on Dumbledore’s instructions, and people parted to let them pass. They also whispered a lot. About Harry, about Hermione, and about himself. And probably their relationship. By the time they reached their seats, Ron was not just tired, but annoyed as well.

“Welcome to fame,” Harry said, taking his own seat. Both of them were subtly casting a few spells to check for traps and curses while Hermione put down a few transparent walls around them - they wouldn’t last long, but they’d stop curses long enough for them to react.

“It’s like sitting in a glasshouse,” Harry whispered, “even literally.”

Hermione huffed, but she didn’t seem to be angry. At least not at Harry or Ron.

He sighed and turned to Harry. “Mate, remember how I was jealous of your fame?”

“Yes?”

“I should have known better,” Ron said, “and appreciated what I had.”

“The fame we have also allows us to influence Britain. A bit of unwelcome attention is a small price to pay for that,” Hermione said. “It’s better to be stared at and gossiped about than to be cursed.”

She wasn’t wrong. Ron chuckled, then fought not to wince when he felt his side hurt.

“Ron? Are you alright?”

Of course, Hermione hadn’t missed that. He shook his head when she leaned over in an attempt to check up on him. “It’s OK. I’m not bleeding.”

She huffed, but relented. He distracted himself by studying the other guests of honour. There was his own family and the other surviving Order members, at least those he knew, which were not too many. The entire staff of Hogwarts. And the delegation from the Ministry and the Wizengamot. Who didn’t look happy to be here. Not that people should look happy at a funeral, of course. But Bones looked like she wanted to curse the tombstone. And the glare she leveled at Ron and his friends…

“We might keep an eye on Luna and her father,” Ron said. “In case the Ministry wants to punish them for helping us.”

“We’re on it,” Harry said. “Luna’s usually with Ginny or me at Hogwarts.”

“And we’re in contact with her father,” Hermione added, “If anyone attacks him, we can move very quickly. Although,” she went on, “I think the Ministry will try to hassle them rather than directly hurt them.”

Ron nodded, then realised that he was already thinking the worst of the Ministry. That wasn’t a good sign for the future.

An hour into the funeral ceremony, Harry Potter had found a new appreciation for short, impersonal speeches like Tonks’s at Moody’s funeral. McGonagall’s speech had been good - touching, honest, and not overly long. But Philius Runcorn, the acting Chief Warlock… Harry didn’t think even a single word of the praise the man had heaped on Dumbledore had been honest. And the man had
gone on and on and on, in a manner that made Binns’s lessons about Goblin Rebellions sound exciting. Bones’s speech hadn’t been much better, but had at least been shorter.

The only good thing about this ordeal was that Harry was too bored to be nervous about his own upcoming speech - he would be speaking after the Supreme Mugwump, a wizard from one of the Princely States of India whose name Harry had already forgotten again, together with most of his speech about Dumbledore’s international career.

Then, finally, it was his turn. He stood up and walked to small pedestal behind the urn.

When he saw the sea of people watching him, he felt nervous again. But he couldn’t show such weakness, or people would be more likely to dismiss his words about Wizarding Britain’s need for reform. “Albus Dumbledore was a great Wizard,” he began. “Like many of us, I knew him as the Headmaster of Hogwarts. I think I am not wrong when I say that for many of us, he was a part of Hogwarts, like the Great Hall. Maybe he even was Hogwarts - old, friendly, full of knowledge and lessons, and more than a bit quirky.

“But he was more than just the Headmaster. More than the Chief Warlock, or the Supreme Mugwump. He was, first and foremost, the greatest wizard of his time. Not just because of his vast knowledge of magic, including Alchemy, or because of his famous duel with Grindelwald. No, what made him the greatest wizard was his compassion. He cared about all his students, all his teachers, about all of us.

“And he cared about Britain. He fought, he struggled, and he died for this, our country. For us all. But while he has finally gone to his next adventure, as he called death, his ideals live on. His legacy will not be forgotten.”

He was about to step down from the pedestal when he suddenly heard a familiar trill. Looking up, he saw Fawkes hover over him, wings flapping slowly, as the phoenix broke into song.

No one seemed to move while Fawkes sang, circling above the tombstone. Harry couldn’t have described the song afterwards, but it conveyed the phoenix’s feelings of love and loss. Then, the song fading, Fawkes rose in the sky, trailing motes of fire, until he disappeared in the sun.

Harry took a deep breath and resumed making his way back to his seat. Bones’s face seemed frozen, Harry noticed, while he returned to his seat. He hadn’t been too blatant, he thought - but she’d know what he had meant.

And, he added mentally while Madam Maxime, the first of the representatives of the other Magical Schools, walked up to the pedestal, so would others.

Just as, he was certain, Dumbledore would have wanted.

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Chapter 44: Trials

In a noticeable difference to other civil wars, such as the third succession war in the Kingdom of Magical Florida, public order did not break down during the Second Blood War. While the combatants fought without regard for law and order, the common wizard or witch did obey the law. With the exception of the riot in Diagon Alley, there were no widespread incidents of looting or robberies. Even stretched past their breaking point, the Aurors managed to enforce the law.

This changed after the Dark Lord’s death, when the muggleborns who had been hiding in muggle Britain started to return. They generally did not rely on the authorities to retake possession of whatever shops and homes they had left months ago, but preferred to simply drive away whoever had taken over the locations with threats and even violence.

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Amelia Bones folded the Daily Prophet and dropped it on her desk. At least the press was acting in a responsible manner and following ministerial directions, she thought. And in hindsight, it had been a good thing that Skeeter had refused to help them - the author of the article covering Dumbledore’s funeral had been far more subtle than she would have been, and had simply mentioned how close Granger was to the Boy-Who-Lived, together with pointing out just how young Harry was, still at Hogwarts even. That would hopefully be subtle enough to keep the Resistance from recognising their strategy.

If only everyone else would care more for Britain than themselves! But not even Hogwarts’ staff saw just how much Britain needed to be united right now. Although that was no surprise, given that Dumbledore had handpicked all of the teachers and other staff members.

Dumbledore. Even after his death, the man’s machinations continued. Potter was his creature, down to sharing the man’s ideals - no wonder, since the boy had been raised by muggles. And yet, without Dumbledore, Britain would have fallen to the Dark Lord - or Grindelwald. He truly had been the greatest wizard in Britain. If only he hadn’t been so radical!

She sighed through clenched teeth. At the start of this mess, right after the return of the Dark Lord, Dumbledore and she had been working quite well together, pushing for increased recruiting of Aurors and Hit-Wizards and trying to convince Cornelius to move against the Dark Lord before he could amass more power and influence. They had made progress as well, especially after the Dark Lord’s attack on the Ministry.

But then, Dumbledore’s reaction to the massacre at Malfoy Manor had shown the key differences between Amelia and the Chief Warlock. He was a politician, and for him, the end - the defeat of the Dark Lord - justified the means. In this case, mass murder. He didn’t care about the law at all, something Amelia couldn’t bear. If you started breaking the law in the name of expediency, you eroded the very foundation of civilisation. It would lead to ‘might makes right’ - exactly what Grindelwald and the Dark Lord had stood for. She remembered how Dumbledore had openly threatened Britain, later, in order to force them to accede to his demands, and ground her teeth. No, she didn’t mourn Dumbledore’s passing. For all his great power, he had been a threat to her country.
If only… Amelia shook her head. She couldn’t afford to dwell on fantasies. She had a country to rebuild. And she’d do her duty - even if half the Ministry seemed to be conspiring against her. She checked her watch. Especially the wizard she was about to meet, Arthur Weasley.

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“Have a seat, Arthur.”

“Thank you, Amelia.” The wizard sat down with that easy, almost shy smile he usually wore.

Amelia wouldn’t be fooled, though - Arthur had shown his true colours in the war, fighting for Dumbledore. He was far smarter and more cunning than he acted. Fortunately, as the Head of the Office of Anti-Curse Measures and Research, he was also far more vulnerable than he might have thought.

“How goes the search for a cure for the Withering Curse?” she asked. “The families of those afflicted are hounding me about this - with the Dark Lord dead, they expect the curse to be lifted.”

Arthur sighed. “Unfortunately, the Dark Lord’s death did not end his curses.”

Amelia interrupted him. “Dark Curses do not vanish because their caster dies. I have a number of scarred Aurors who can attest to that.”

Arthur coughed. “Yes. That’s because dark curses are tied into the very soul of those afflicted, sustaining themselves with the victims’ magic. Although the death of the caster usually lessens their power.”

“I did pass my Defence N.E.W.T., Arthur.” She was growing annoyed.

“I’m sorry!” He smiled in his usual, seemingly self-effacing, way, which annoyed her even more. “Many of the people assigned to my department didn’t. Pass their Defence Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T., I mean. So I had to explain the theory so often, it became a habit.”

Of course Arthur’s department wouldn’t get anyone even remotely capable in Defence Against the Dark Arts! Those were desperately needed in the Auror and Hit-Wizards Corps! “I distinctly recall that you received several Curse-Breakers.” She wouldn’t let him blame his own failures on her.

“I did. Although they were not among the most experienced,” he said.

“We don’t have that many experienced Curse-Breakers left.” Nor many other experienced wizards and witches.

“I know.” He kept smiling. “Hopefully, this will change with the muggleborns returning. A number of skilled Curse-Breakers were let go or left because of the Muggleborn Laws.”

Hiring muggleborns? The very people who had not only defied the Ministry’s authority and cheered the mass-murderers of the Resistance, but were now taking the properties they had left or sold back at wand-point? Amelia managed to hide her first reaction to that proposal. “That presumes that they want to return to the employ of the Ministry,” she said, carefully controlling her voice.

“I think that once they realise that most of those who forced them out are gone, they will at least consider it,” Arthur said. “The current Ministry should prove to be a far more welcoming place for muggleborns.” With a short chuckle, he added: “It’s not as if there are many other skilled wizards and witches left to hire.”
That was true, unfortunately. There were capable people left, but most of those already had well-paying positions in private businesses. Like the Quidditch League. And patriotism wouldn’t make many, if any, of them quit. But to hire muggleborns en masse… it was a transparent ploy of Arthur and Black to subvert the Ministry. “We shall see,” she said.

“Well, there’s not much I can do about the Withering Curse until I have experienced people working on it. The Department of Mysteries is working on the issue as well, but they have refused to coordinate our efforts, citing a need for secrecy,” Arthur said. He snorted. “Unless they’re dabbling in the houngan arts themselves, I don’t really see any secrets being endangered, but you know how the Unspeakables are.” He sighed and shrugged.

Amelia knew that better than anyone else outside the Department of Mysteries. If she had had their cooperation during the war… She forced herself to focus on her current situation. “You’re not the only one in this situation. All departments are understaffed and bereft of experienced employees. And yet everyone is doing what they can to do their duty.” Everyone else, at least, she thought, but did not say out loud.

“We’re doing what we can, but until Hogwarts starts offering courses in dark curses and necromancy, recent graduates won’t be able to do much about either.” Arthur didn’t lose his smile, but his eyes seemed to glint when he leaned forward. “We’re talking about a curse cast by the Dark Lord himself. Remember the curse he placed on the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor? Not even Dumbledore could break that one.”

Amelia hadn’t been aware that such a curse had ever been proven to exist, but this was not the time to debate that. “As you said yourself: With the Dark Lord’s death, the curse was weakened. You have the best employees we can spare, so I expect results.” It was technically true, even. But with the current situation, they needed every wand for more urgent tasks. There were the Dementors to deal with too - another task for the Unspeakables. And if public order or the Ministry itself fell, then the fate of the Withering Curse’s victims would be sealed as well. “Is there anything else?”

Arthur shook his head and rose. Just before he reached the door, he turned around, though. “If fresh Hogwarts graduates and inexperienced Curse-Breakers were a match even for a weakened Dark Lord’s curse, then the Muggleborn Resistance and the Order of the Phoenix wouldn’t have had to save the Ministry.”

Amelia managed to keep from snarling until the door had closed behind him.

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London, East End, February 10th, 1997

At breakfast, Hermione Granger put her cup of tea down next to the plate with her croissants and pressed her lips together to avoid muttering the sort of curses under her breath for which she used to chide others. The Daily Prophet’s coverage of Dumbledore’s funeral was, on the face of it, acceptable, but the details...

...The Boy-Who-Lived spoke touching words about his teacher, who had left him and his entire generation of students far too soon, in the middle of their education. The young student’s brief speech provided a moving contrast to the words from all the dignitaries and friends of the late Chief Warlock...

...Hermione Granger was seated between Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. The muggleborn witch had been close to the two younger boys for their entire time at Hogwarts, and so it is only logical that more developed from their friendship. Though given what the Boy-Who-Lived went through, he
will hopefully receive support from experienced staff at Hogwarts. They’ll have enough time, at least, since he has not yet finished his sixth year...

...Sirius Black seemed to have fully recovered from his ordeal during the war. More than one Healer had been worried about his mental state as he had spent more than a decade in Azkaban...

The Ministry was obviously trying to be subtle, coating their poison in sweet, caring drivel instead of the sharp attacks Skeeter was so fond of. But if you knew what to look for, it was plain as day.

Hermione took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment, then blew at a lock of hair that had fallen on to her face. She needed a haircut too, she thought with a snort, then brushed the lock back.

She had expected such an attack, even predicted it, but still… The question was: How should they respond? She had blackmailed Skeeter, which had put an end to the slander from that witch, but to try and blackmail the Daily Prophet… she didn’t exactly have much leverage, and even if she had, such an attempt might backfire. The Ministry might very well decide to get directly involved, and use the opportunity to take the newspaper over. Threatening the newspaper’s office and owners ran the same risk. Bones might even be expecting that, and be ready to denounce them as criminals.

But they had to react to that attack, before the British public saw Harry as a naive boy and her as some manipulative slag. She bit her lower lip. The Quibbler wouldn’t work well - it was a magazine, not a daily newspaper. And she doubted that the Lovegoods wanted to turn it into a militant newspaper.

Lacking television, that left the wireless. It was even better for propaganda, provided you could reach the majority of the population, and had a good orator. Which, she thought with a sigh, Harry wasn’t. Yet. And listening to speeches could get boring. They needed something new, something to catch the people’s attention. Apart from muggle music. Maybe a discussion show, or something… She’d have to take a closer look at what the BBC was broadcasting.

She sighed again. There was something more urgent to deal with. And she wasn’t looking forward to it.

*****

“I assume you have heard about the Ministry’s demand to release our prisoners into their custody so they can be tried in front of the Wizengamot,” Hermione said an hour later in the living room.

Seamus snorted. “As if! Releasing Death Eaters into the care of the Ministry, so they can let them go? Are they delusional?”

Tania and John nodded in agreement, Hermione noted. She took a deep breath. “Not quite.”

“What? You know they’ll let them go!” Seamus said, standing up.

“That’s quite likely,” she agreed. “But if the Wizengamot acquits them, then that will demonstrate to everyone just how corrupt the system is. Such a travesty of justice would serve as a perfect example of the need to reform Wizarding Britain.”

“You want to use that to generate more support.” Justin nodded. He didn’t look quite convinced, though.

“Yes,” she said. “On the other hand, if we keep them, or if we try them ourselves, then we’ll be portrayed as criminals.”
“They’ll do that anyway,” Louise said. The former Hit-Wizard was sneering.

“We’d make it easier for them, though. The Ministry is claiming that with the war over, there is no reason for vigilantes any more.” Hermione scoffed. “Unfortunately, I think that a lot of the purebloods, and even many half-bloods, would agree with them, believing that things have returned to normal. If we let the Ministry portray us as a bunch of kidnappers in defiance of the law, we’d be playing into their hands. On the other hand, if we let them acquit captured Death Eaters, we can build on that.”

“I see.” Seamus sat down and slowly nodded, then started to grin. “Give them enough rope to hang themselves, eh?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded at him. “And you know that our prisoners are not exactly hard-core Death Eaters.” Otherwise Nott, Davis and Greengrass would have shared Malfoy’s fate.

“That is true. But it also means that the Wizengamot will have an easier time justifying their acquittal,” Justin said, looking at her. “A group of teenagers who joined the Dark Lord because they were afraid for their lives and wanted to avenge their parents… It wouldn’t be that hard to portray them in a sympathetic way to the public.”

“Bloody Slytherins!” Seamus muttered.

“I agree. But on the other hand, we can point out how they tried to murder children at Hogwarts, then fled when their plan failed, only to attack pureblood supporters of Dumbledore.” Hermione grinned. “Not exactly the actions of innocents kids afraid of the Resistance.” Appearances mattered more in politics than the truth; that much she knew. She let the others consider that for a moment. “Besides, they’re not exactly our prisoners any more - we handed them over to the Order.”

“What does the Order want?” Sally-Anne asked.

“The ones who care for the prisoners want to hand them over to the Ministry.” So Sirius had told her. She shrugged. “Some of them might hope that the conflict is now over, and they can return to their normal lives.”

“Cowards!” Seamus muttered, then clenched his teeth. He probably wanted to call them even worse names.

“They fought bravely against the Dark Lord, but not all of them have realised just how bad the Wizengamot is,” Hermione said. “If they see the three prisoners get released, they might change their opinion.” Sirius and the Weasleys could work on them, she thought.

“It’s still a risk we’re taking,” Justin said, “but I don’t see a better alternative.”

“Could always kill them,” Seamus said. “Now or later.”

Hermione stared at him. That sounded too close to Allan’s words for her comfort. She wasn’t the only one staring at him. Seamus noticed, and frowned. “I’m just pointing out options!”

“They’re not good ideas,” Justin said. “It’s widely known that we captured them. If they suddenly disappear, we’ll be blamed as murderers.”

Hermione cut in. “Yes. Remember all those lies about us wanting to murder all purebloods? The Ministry would spread them all over Wizarding Britain, calling us as bad as the Death Eaters.”
Seamus seemed to understand the danger, since he winced and didn’t say anything else.

Hermione nodded. “So… all in favour of telling the Order to release the prisoners into the custody of the Ministry?”

The group agreed, some more slowly than others, though.

“Good. I’ll tell them.” She took a breath. “Now… we need to discuss recruitment for the Resistance. We need more people.” She didn’t have to point out that they had lost half their number during the war against Voldemort.

“Do you expect that we’ll have to fight the Ministry?” Sally-Anne asked, twisting her ponytail around her finger in that nervous habit she had.

“I’d rather be prepared for such a conflict than caught flat-footed,” Hermione said.

Justin nodded in agreement. “We’ll need to be careful when recruiting, though.” Hermione knew he was not just talking about Ministry spies, but people like Allan too. “And it’ll take time to train them.”

“And money,” Louise added.

“Money’s not an issue,” Hermione said. “Unless we want to recruit so many people that we couldn’t train them all, our finances are covered.”

“I don’t like depending on Black,” Seamus muttered. “He’s a pureblood.”

“He’s also an innocent wizard who was sent to Azkaban and spent a decade there,” Hermione countered. “He has no love for the Ministry.” Quite the contrary. He joked a bit too often about blowing up the Ministry. “But we digress. We need more people - at least half a dozen, though I’d prefer a dozen.”

“So many?” Tania frowned. “They would outnumber us.”

“Yes.” Hermione was well-aware that increasing the Resistance’s ranks by that many would change the dynamics of the group. “We’ll have to make sure that all recruits fit in.”

“We’re the veterans who fought in the war. They’d better listen to us,” Seamus said.

Mary-Jane spoke up for the first time. “I’m not exactly a veteran.” She wasn’t looking at anyone, Hermione noticed. “And I’m not exactly a member of the Resistance.”

“You’ve fought in the war,” Sally-Anne said, reaching out to pat the girl’s hand. “And you just need training.”

Louise cleared her throat. “I can contact a few of my friends from school; now that they are returning to Wizarding Britain owl post should be working again. They won’t be enough, though.”

“And if we pass out a general recruitment notice, we’ll get swamped - and alert the Ministry,” Justin said.

“I have a solution for that.” Hermione grinned. “We need to organise the returning muggleborns anyway. We can use that to find suitable recruits.”

“You want to hold a rally?” John looked at her.
“Yes.” Hermione nodded at him. “We’ll need to be careful about what we say - there’ll be spies from the Ministry at any public event - but we have to put pressure on the Wizengamot and the Ministry.”

“They’ll not cave in to a few demonstrations,” Seamus said. “Not the kind that involve waving banners around, at least,” he added with a snort.

“I’d rather not start a war,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. Not when they were not ready for it, and certainly not when there was still hope that the Ministry would give in.

“Such rallies and demonstrations can easily get out of control,” Justin said. “Imagine if someone sent a curse into the crowd. Or if someone starts shouting about hunting down the Death Eaters and their supporters on our list.”

“Most of those who were not killed in the war are still in hiding,” she said. And the Ministry wasn’t exactly working hard to hunt them down, according to Sirius. “But I know we’re risking a riot.” Security would have to be very tight, Hermione knew. They might even have to hold the rally in a warded building, even though that would lessen its impact. “We have to do this, though, or people will get used to the Ministry being in charge of their lives again. We have to show that we have the support of the population.”

Justin sighed. “There goes our spare time!” He was joking, Hermione thought, but the glance he exchanged with Sally-Anne showed that he knew what it meant for the couple’s relationship.

She didn’t feel too guilty about it, though - she wouldn’t have much time to spend with Ron either, and her boyfriend wasn’t living with her. And she needed to make time for studying the books Dumbledore had left her. And look into finding a cure for the Withering Curse. She sighed. “Unfortunately, we all will be very busy for the foreseeable future. In addition to recruiting, we need to contact the Major and the Sergeant, organise a training camp, continue and expand our broadcasts, and keep an eye on the Ministry’s actions.” She pointed at the Daily Prophet. “They already started their smear campaign against Harry.”

While the rest of the Resistance, except for Justin, Sally-Anne and John, who had read the issue already, gathered around the newspaper, Hermione leaned back in her seat and wondered how she would find the time to do all that needed doing.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 10th, 1997

Ron Weasley raised his wand and banished the Daily Prophet towards the corner of the kitchen. The newspaper hit the wall, then fell to the ground. He saw the dignitaries on the big picture of the front page stumble around, before realigning themselves, and briefly chuckled.

“Ronald!”

His mum was standing in the doorway, shaking her head.

“Sorry, Mum,” he said. “I just got fed up with the drivel in it. I didn’t know you hadn’t read it yet.”

“That’s not what I meant!” she said. “You shouldn’t be using your wand. You’re not yet of age.”

He stared at her, then laughed - and hissed through clenched teeth when his side hurt again. Laughing wasn’t a good idea.

“Ron!” Mum had gone from angry to concerned in a heartbeat, her wand flashing while she cast a
spell on his side.

“I’m alright,” he protested. “It’s just a bit of pain. The muggle Healer said it wasn’t dangerous.”

She scoffed. “They don’t know anything about magic.” But she stopped casting, apparently satisfied that he wouldn’t bleed out.

Ron sighed. “They saved me. And the wound’s not that bad. It can’t be healed with magic, but the muggles didn’t have trouble with it.”

“That was caused by a curse cast by the Dark Lord himself! You almost...” She shook her head, pressing her lips together. He could see some tears in her eyes.

“But I didn’t, Mum. I’m alright. Everyone is alright.” Everyone in his family, at least.

She sighed and sat down on the chair next to him. He gingerly reached over and laid his arm around her shoulders.

“You still shouldn’t use magic outside Hogwarts. It’s illegal,” she said after a while.

He snorted. “No one cared about that when I was fighting Death Eaters and the Dark Lord.”

“But they’ll care now. Percy told me that Amelia Bones is just waiting for any opportunity to hurt Arthur’s standing in the Ministry.”

Oh. Of course Bones would do that. That b... He pressed his lips together, not wanting to upset his mum by cursing, then shrugged. “They’ll not detect anything while we’re in this house. And I’ll be back at Hogwarts soon enough.”

“And when you’re out with Hermione?”

“Ah...” He stared at her.

She smiled, though she also looked a bit sad. “Did you think I wouldn’t know what my children are up to?”

“Well... you didn’t catch the twins that often when they were up to something.” At least as far as he could tell.

His mum sighed. “They were a handful. Worse than anyone else. But this is different. Of course you’ll sneak out to meet your girlfriend. You’d do that even if you hadn’t been...” She trailed off, but he knew what she meant.

“Yes.” He looked at the crumpled Prophet again.

“Will she be returning to Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He shook his head, slowly.

“That’s... surprising. She was always so dedicated to her education.”

“More like fanatical,” Ron said, chuckling as he remembered her parting words after their first encounter with Fluffy.

“Did she change that much?” His mum sounded more concerned than he expected.
He thought it over. “It’s not so much that she changed - though she did, too - but that things changed. She’s just got too much to do to go back to school. Important things. She’ll pass her N.E.W.T.s anyway.” And with the highest marks, he’d bet on it.

His mum didn’t seem to approve. “And what about you?”

“I haven’t left Hogwarts, have I?” He smiled at her.

It didn’t impress her. She knew him too well. “And if you think you have more important things to do than go to school?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.

She sighed.

They sat in silence for a while longer, until she spoke up again. “Why did you hex the newspaper? You were in a number of the pictures, even.”

He frowned. “They made it sound as if Hermione is sleeping with both Harry and me.”

“Oh!” She hugged him, a bit too forcefully - his side hurt again, but he didn’t react. “You know she isn’t doing anything of that sort!”

“I know. But it’s part of the Ministry’s plan. They want to discredit us. Make us look like children so we’re not taken seriously.” Hermione had predicted that.

“You are not yet adults.”

“I’ll be seventeen in less than three weeks, Mum.” And that made him sound like a child indeed. “And Hermione’s already seventeen.” Harry though would have to wait a few months more.

“I know. But you’ll always be my boy.”

He nodded, even though he thought he hadn’t been a boy since he had started taking part in the war.

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Outside Rawtenstall, Lancashire, Britain, February 11th, 1997

The first thing Daphne Greengrass saw when she woke up was the grey ceiling of her prison. The second thing she saw was the sleeping form of Tracey.

“Good afternoon.”

She knew that voice. She was tempted to ignore the speaker. Defy her captors. But she wasn’t a Gryffindor. She was a Slytherin. So she turned her head to look at the Weasley twins standing in the door of her cell, wands in hand. “Why did you wake me up?” she asked, making an effort to sound as calm as she could. “Do you want to extort more gold from my family?”

Fred snorted. “No. We woke you up to tell you what happened while you slept.”

She stifled a gasp. She couldn’t afford to let them know how much she hungered to know what happened to her family. “Ah.”

Next to her, Tracey stirred, groaning as she woke up. Daphne saw her friend blink, then heard her mutter a curse.
“Ah, the other sleeping beauty is awake!” George said, with mocking cheerfulness.

Daphne looked around. “Where’s Theo?”

Fred shrugged. “He wasn’t cooperative, so we didn’t bother waking him up.”

“Why did you wake us up?” Tracey asked, sitting up, then falling back on her bed with another curse.

“To tell you what happened while you slept,” George said, grinning widely.

Daphne glanced at Tracey. The two wizards were entirely too cheerful. That didn’t bode well. She kept watching him. He wanted to tell them; she wouldn’t lower herself to ask.

“So talk!” Tracey spat.

Fred chuckled. “It’s actually good news. The war is over.”

“What?” Daphne gasped, staring at the twins.


“Potter? Potter killed the Dark Lord in a duel?” They had to be lying. No one but Dumbledore could match the Dark Lord. Certainly not Potter - he was in the same year as Daphne!

“Yes. The Boy-Who-Lived defeated the Dark Lord again, and this time for good,” Fred said.

“You’re lying!” Tracey said.

“I’m not. It happened outside our shop. Or what’s left of it. The Dark Lord burned it down trying to kill us, you know.” Fred shrugged. “He failed.”

“Good riddance,” Tracey whispered next to her.

Daphne wasn’t really listening to her friend, though. She was staring at the twins. Were they telling the truth? Why would they lie? To torment them? “What’s the date?”

“February 11th.”

Two months. Exactly two months since she had been captured. And the war was over? The last war had gone on for years!

“That can’t be! Potter is just a kid!” Tracey was shaking her head wildly.

George laughed. “Did you forget why he is the Boy-Who-Lived? He defeated the Dark Lord as a toddler! And in his first year. And in his second year. And then again in his fourth year.”

“Technically, that one was a draw,” Fred cut in. “Anyway. Dumbledore had trained Harry for this, planned it all out. And the Dark Lord fell for it.”

Tracey hissed. “So, you don’t need us any more, and will kill us now?”

Daphne froze. Was her friend correct? Would they murder them now? They had murdered her family. What had happened to her sister? Astoria wouldn’t have joined the Dark Lord, not if only two months had passed. And if she had been killed, wouldn’t the twins have told her right away?
Fred frowned. “No. We’ll hand you over to the Ministry so you can be tried in front of the Wizengamot.”

“Once they get around to it,” George added. “Between rebuilding the Ministry and Diagon Alley, the Ministry might be too busy to bother with you. But that’s their problem. Ours is how to transport you two. And that’s easier if you’re not awake. So…” He aimed his wand at her.

“Wait! What happened to my family? To Astoria?” Daphne asked quickly, staring at the tip of his wand. She needed to know!

Fred shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably still in hiding.”

“Unless she was in Diagon Alley when the Death Eaters started to burn it down,” George added, raising his own wand. “Your friends didn’t really care about bystanders, you know.”

“Wait!” she yelled, raising her hands.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

Everything went black.

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When Daphne woke up again the first thing she saw was an unfamiliar ceiling. It was a lighter grey. She was alive! They hadn’t killed her! The second thing she saw was her uncle.

“Daphne.” He smiled at her.

“Uncle Eric!” She sat up - she was on a small bed, barely more than a cot - reaching out for him, but suddenly felt dizzy.

He rushed to catch her, before she fell, and held her while he gently lowered her back on to the bed. “Careful! The Healers said you might be disoriented. Stunned, after spending months under the influence of the Draught of Living Death…”

She closed her eyes, trying to stop the room from spinning. “Where am I?”

“In the Ministry. In a holding cell.”

She pulled back, out of his embrace, and stared at him.

He winced. “I’m sorry. The Aurors insisted.”

She was still a prisoner, then. The twins hadn’t lied about that. “Is it true? Is the Dark Lord dead?”

“Yes.” Her uncle nodded, then glanced at the door.

She understood - she had to watch what she was saying. “Astoria?”

“She’s safe as far as I know,” he said. But he was smiling. So he did know, but couldn’t say more.

She sighed with relief. Her sister was safe. Her smile didn’t last long, though - she was a prisoner, and she remembered what the twins had told her. Taking a deep breath, she said: “They mentioned I would be put on trial.”
“Yes. The Minister was adamant about that.” He must have seen her reaction, since he added: “Amelia Bones is the current Minister. Fudge was killed by the Dark Lord.”

She stared at him. “What happened? What happened since I was taken prisoner?”

He told her.

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Dumbledore dead. The Minister dead. Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade in ruins. Dozens of Ministry employees cursed so they had to be dosed with Draught of the Living Death - she shuddered at the memories that brought up. The Ministry allied with the mudbloods. Mudbloods forcing purebloods out of their homes! Had Britain gone mad during her captivity?

“I can’t believe it…” She shook her head, sending her hair flying back and forth.

“It’s true,” he said. “A lot has happened.”

“So much death… I thought Malfoy Manor was the worst that could happen…” She shivered, remembering how her parents had died, then sobbed.

He held her again, rubbing her back.

“But… if the mu… muggleborns are allies with the Ministry…” She bit her lips. How could she receive a fair trial under those conditions? The twins would have known that!

“Do not worry,” her uncle said. “The Wizengamot has lost a lot of its members, but it won’t bend to pressure from… them, and neither will the Minister.”

She slowly nodded, taking a few deep breaths.

“But,” he continued, “I need to know what you did. So I can speak in your defence.”

He was looking at her with apprehension, she realised. “I haven’t killed anyone. And I didn’t join the Death Eaters.” She hadn’t been marked, at least.

“But you fought for the Dark Lord.”

“I joined a group led by Draco Malfoy with the goal of protecting our families against the mudbloods trying to murder us. He didn’t mention the Dark Lord.” Not at the start.

Her uncle stared at her for a moment, then nodded slowly and smiled. “Good. I’m certain that the Wizengamot will understand that.”

Daphne hoped he was correct. She didn’t think that the Wizengamot would show much mercy to Death Eaters. Not after what they had done. “What about Astoria?”

“She hasn’t been accused of anything.” He smiled. “My colleagues, and the Ministry, understood her situation very well.”

“Ah.” Daphne felt more optimistic. If the Ministry didn’t go after Astoria, then her own chances were good as well. “Can she visit?”

Her uncle winced. “I would rather she stay safely wherever she is. The Ministry is… some of them might carry grudges.” He patted her shoulder as he rose. “I’ll coordinate with Cressida and Thaddeus.”
So Tracey and Theo were here as well. Daphne hadn’t had any reason to doubt that, but it felt good to have confirmation. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll push this in the Wizengamot. You’ll be home as soon as possible.”

With that, he left, and Daphne was alone in her cell. But she wasn’t insensate, at least. And she would be free, and with her sister, soon!

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Hogwarts, February 12th, 1997

His fame was useful, Harry Potter told himself when he entered the Great Hall and heard the whispers start up as most of the students stared at him. Many people listened to the Boy-Who-Lived. He could help change Britain for the better thanks to his fame. Even more so than he had already, after killing Voldemort.

But as much as he told himself that, he still didn’t like being the centre of so much attention. At least it wasn’t as bad as it had been right after the battle. Even people he went to classes with had been looking at him as if he was Dumbledore.

It wasn’t quite that bad now, though the Daily Prophet’s articles covering the Headmaster’s funeral hadn’t helped matters, despite the subtle dismissive comments sprinkled throughout the praise heaped on him. He shook his head - he didn’t want to think about that article. The things they had implied about Hermione, Ron and himself...

Harry wished his friends were here. But Ron was still recovering at Grimmauld Place, and Hermione was with the Resistance, wherever they were. He felt rather alone, especially since if there was an assassin hiding among the crowd, he wouldn’t spot them until it was almost too late… He shook his head. He was at Hogwarts, which was among the safest locations in Britain. And if a student attacked they’d regret it dearly.

He noticed Luna was waving at him, and he smiled and waved back before he took a seat opposite Neville, next to Ginny.

“There you are!” the witch said, smiling at him. “Been on a walk again?”

Harry nodded. He had been flying, disillusioned, but it amounted to the same thing, in his opinion. And while he trusted Ginny, she didn’t know Occlumency, so her mind wasn’t protected against Legilimency. Though if she had used the map, then she would already know what he had been doing.

She nodded, then pushed a plate with roasted chicken towards him. “These are really good.”

“Thanks.” She beamed at him, then turned back to her own meal.

Neville hadn’t said anything, just nodded at him when he had sat down.

“Is everything alright?” Harry asked.

Neville shrugged.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” Harry said, snorting.

“I’m just thinking,” Neville said. “Lots to think about, right?” He glanced at Harry, then looked
down at his plate again.

“Yes.” Though Harry couldn’t help wondering what Neville was thinking so hard about. He had inherited a seat on the Wizengamot, and while he wasn’t yet old enough to take it himself, his proxy would likely ask his opinion before voting.

It wouldn’t take much to use Legilimency. Harry wouldn’t even need to make eye contact. Not with the Elder Wand. He frowned and shook his head. He wouldn’t do that to Neville. Nor to anyone else.

“What’s wrong?” Ginny asked. “You both are looking so…” she made a gesture with her hand, instead of continuing.

“Nothing,” Harry said.

“Just thinking.” Neville said at the same time.

Ginny frowned, pouting. It was a cute expression, Harry thought, and he almost chuckled in response. She must have noticed anyway, since he saw her eyes narrowing.

“I was thinking of the battle,” he said.

“Oh.”

And now she looked ashamed for having brought that up. Harry felt guilty for lying to her, but he didn’t think telling her that he was pondering whether or not to invade their minds would be a good idea.

“They handed Greengrass, Davis and Nott over to the Ministry,” Neville said suddenly.

“Ah.” Harry had known of that in advance.

“They’ll be tried in front of the Wizengamot,” Neville went on. “Next Monday.”

Harry hadn’t known that. “That’s quick.”

“Their relatives are pushing for a quick trial.” His friend frowned. “I wonder how we should vote.”

“In the trial?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t you - your proxy - decide that during the trial?” Harry couldn’t quite hide his reaction to Neville’s words.

“We already know that they’re Death Eaters. They were caught with Malfoy,” Ginny said.

Neville nodded.

“They weren’t killed like Malfoy, though,” Harry said.

“Did Hermione tell you anything about that?” Neville was looking at him now.

Harry’s first impulse was to deny having spoken to her, as he had done for months. But the war was over, and everyone had seen her with him and Ron at the funeral. “We didn’t talk much about it. She said that they weren’t as bad as Malfoy had been.”
“Not exactly a rousing endorsement,” Neville said.

“They tried to kill my family,” Ginny said through clenched teeth. “It was Malfoy’s group who attacked the Burrow. They should be executed!”

Neville nodded, no doubt thinking about his dead gran.

Harry made a vague noise. While he didn’t want a repeat of what had happened after the last war, when Death Eaters had gone free claiming they had been under the Imperius, he couldn’t help thinking that this was part of what Dumbledore had warned him about. And a good reason to replace the Wizengamot with real judges.

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London, Ministry of Magic, February 17th, 1997

Sirius Black made certain to show a neutral expression while he made his way to his seat in the Wizengamot Chamber. He and his ‘esteemed colleagues’ were gathering for a trial, after all, and would decide the fate of three accused. And Sirius knew better than anyone else how important a trial was.

He sat down and watched the others file in. Not everyone showed the proper decorum. Some joked, some glared. Most were chatting. Eric Greengrass was talking with Cressida Davis. They were smiling.

Sirius frowned for a moment. They had not just pushed for a quick trial, they had also worked on their allies and acquaintances. Were they truly confident that the Wizengamot would acquit the three? Three Death Eaters, who had attacked not just the Burrow, but also a member of the Wizengamot? Barely two weeks after the death of the Dark Lord himself? And with half the Wizengamot afraid that the Resistance would start a war against them?

Would they claim they were under the Imperius? He wouldn’t let them get away with that. Not after what had happened in 1981.

Thicknesse, who was once again filling in for the acting Chief Warlock, entered, and called the chamber to order. As usual, it took a while for everyone to quiet down. Then whispers and murmuring broke out again once the three accused were brought in and chained to their chairs. They looked nervous, at least. Though not shaking quite as much as Sirius had expected - but then, they were Death Eaters.

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! We have gathered here to pass judgement over three accused,” Thicknesse started the trial.

Bones’s successor was as diligent as the Minister had been, and the list of the crimes of which the three Slytherins were accused took a long time to be read. Multiple counts of attempted murder, conspiracy, treason - all of them were members of the Wizengamot, even if they were too young to actually hold the seat - and even underage magic. Sirius didn’t laugh or chuckle at that accusation, but he was in the minority. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Daphne Greengrass, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty!”

Sirius’s eyebrows rose in surprise. He had heard firmer voices, but not many in that chair.
“Take note that the accused Greengrass pleads ‘not guilty’,” Thicknesse told the court scribe.
“Tracey Davis, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty!”

That one spoke firmly as well. Her plea was noted down.

“Theodore Nott, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty!”

And the boy sounded almost defiant.

While the accused were checked for spells and potions, Sirius watched them. They were putting up a proper facade. That would impress many of his colleagues. Sirius scoffed. That all of them were purebloods of Old Families, heads even, was far more important for many of the members. Wouldn’t do to set a precedent for a case against a member of the Wizengamot, would it?

“Since all of the accused are still minors, their guardians will speak up in their defence,” Thicknesse announced. “The chair recognises Mister Greengrass.”

Sirius saw Eric step down, to stand next to his niece. “Honoured members of the Wizengamot! My niece here stands accused of many crimes. Heinous crimes, even! But I tell you: All she has done is what anyone would have done in her situation. While it is true that she fought for the Dark Lord, she did so unknowingly, and later unwillingly, a victim of cruel circumstances.”

“Lies!” one member yelled - Sirius hadn’t seen who.

Greengrass didn’t ignore the shout, but took it up, to Sirius’s surprise. “Lies? No, it’s the truth! Do you remember the brutal attack on Malfoy Manor? Among the dozens murdered there were Daphne’s parents - my brother and his wife. My niece saw the attack, and only survived due to chance, being in the manor’s garden with her sister and friends at the time the muggleborns struck.”

He took a deep breath. “Having lost her parents, my nieces returned, grieving, to Hogwarts, thinking they were safe there. But they weren’t! Both of them almost died in that cowardly attack on House Slytherin!”

Greengrass ignored the murmurs this time, and went on: “Imagine their situation: Bereft of their parents, under attack in the school, with the authorities unable to find the attackers… what would you have done in that situation? Begged for mercy? Or would you have fought back to defend your family?

“My niece didn’t know that the group of students she joined was working for the Dark Lord! All she knew was that muggleborns were attacking her family, and herself, and she wanted to fight back. Misguided? Naive? Perhaps. But what kind of wizards and witches would we be, if we did not take up wands when under attack? Who among us would rather cower then stand up for their family?

“What else could she have done? She was a student, she couldn’t have joined the Aurors or Hit-Wizards. And when she realised just who the group’s leader was following, it was already too late - we all know what happened to those who defied the Dark Lord!”

“Like the Boy-Who-Lived?” Doge yelled.

Greengrass glared at the older wizard. “He is an exception. Even Dumbledore fell to the Dark Lord’s curses. My niece, once she knew who commanded her group, was trapped. Deserting the Dark Lord
would not have just doomed herself, but her family as well. So she fought on. And yet she neither took the Dark Mark, nor did she kill anyone. All she did was follow the orders given to her - orders I doubt many among us would have dared to refuse, had they been in her place.

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! All the crimes my niece has been accused of were either done with the aim of protecting herself and her sister, or committed under duress of the highest order. She did nothing anyone else wouldn’t have done in her place. I urge you to acquit her, so she may, after two months spent as a prisoner of the Muggleborn Resistance, finally return to her family!”

So that was their tactic, Sirius noted. And it was working, as he could tell from the reactions of the other members. He could have mentioned the fact that they had used a dark curse on Nigel Nye, a member of the Wizengamot… but then, that might lead to the revelation that that attack had been set up by Dumbledore, with the cooperation of Nye himself. Still, the Wizengamot had to know that letting a Death Eater go would enrage the muggleborns. He rose. “That’s a fair tale, Mister Greengrass, but there were a lot of tales told after the last war as well, and we all know how many of those were true.”

“My niece is ready to affirm the truth of her claims with Veritaserum. Though given her age, and her status as head of my family, she will only do so under the condition that I am the one to question her, lest others abuse the opportunity to expose my family’s secrets.”

Sirius had not expected that. Usually, the accused tended to try to use any excuse to avoid being questioned under Veritaserum. At least those who had not been prepared for it - but the girl was too young for that; not even Harry, who had been trained by Dumbledore himself, would be able to withstand Veritaserum. Was the story Sirius had heard actually true? He doubted it, still. And yet… would Greengrass dare to offer this, otherwise?

And the offer alone would impress many, and make others doubt themselves. If Sirius was allowed to word the questions… but he wasn’t. And Thicknesse wasn’t even trying to add that caveat. Greengrass must have been expecting this. They might have made a deal, even.

Well-played, Sirius thought. Well-played indeed.

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“Did you know for certain that Draco Malfoy was a Death Eater when you joined him at Hogwarts?”

Daphne Greengrass found it hard to think. Too hard. Everyone had known that Draco’s father was a follower of the Dark Lord - and Draco had followed his father blindly. But had she known for certain? He hadn’t come out and said it until they had left Hogwarts… “No.”

“Is it true that you wanted to leave, but couldn’t, since you feared what the Dark Lord would do to you?”

“Yes.”

“There you have it, honoured members of the Wizengamot!”

Daphne felt someone grab her head. “Open your mouth.”

She did - there was no reason not to, was there? Then she swallowed whatever they had just dropped in her mouth. It tasted terrible. It tasted like...

Daphne shivered when she recovered her wits. That had been a dreadful experience, her mind
clouded by the potion, unable to refuse anything. She wanted to hug herself, but she was still chained to the chair. She looked up. Was it over already? Her uncle was smiling at her, but Thicknesse was talking...

“Those in favour of acquittal, raise your wands!”

The chamber brightened as wands were lit. Daphne strained her neck, trying to count the wands. Was it enough? She couldn’t see the whole chamber from her seat, the backrest blocked her view. But her uncle was smiling. Did that mean…

“Daphne Greengrass, the Wizengamot has judged you not guilty. Aurors, release her.”

She was free. She was free! As soon as her chains were loosened, she rushed to hug her uncle.

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Chapter 45: Reactions

‘Despite the vocal criticism of Wizarding Britain’s judicial system, mostly by muggleborns, an unbiased examination of the Wizengamot’s record as Wizarding Britain’s court would come to the conclusion that it worked very well. Of course, mistakes were made - although contrary to popular opinion, the imprisonment of Sirius Black wasn’t the fault of the Wizengamot since he did not receive a trial - but no system is perfect. Composed of experienced, educated members, the Wizengamot was not quite as easily swayed as a single judge, or a small group of judges, nor as prone to forget that a court case might have ramifications past the immediately obvious ones, unlike those wizards and witches focused on law enforcement. Some point at the trials following the Dark Lord’s death as ‘proof’ that the system was inherently corrupt by allowing the Wizengamot to render judgment over its own members. To that criticism I point at the muggle jury system, which explicitly demands that an accused be judged by a jury of their peers.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 17th, 1997

“Ignorant? They attacked the Burrow! They tried to kill us all! What is the Wizengamot thinking, releasing those murderers! I’ll go and kill them myself before they attack us or anyone else again!”

Ron Weasley gasped at hearing his mum’s reaction to the news of the trial. “Mum!” He was angry himself, but he had expected such a result. Hermione had told him the Resistance was prepared for it.

“Molly!” Dad grabbed her arms with both hands. “Calm down! You can’t just go and curse them!”

“Of course I can! They tried to kill my children! I’ll hex their heads off!”

Ron winced. Mum wasn’t quite shaking Dad off, but he was having trouble holding on to her. He had rarely seen her like this. Not even when Ginny had been missing.

“You won’t find them. They’ll be cowering in their hidden mansions,” Sirius cut in. “I doubt they’ll be walking down Diagon Alley any time soon; not with so many muggleborns back.”

Ron’s mum turned to glare at Sirius, and for a moment, Ron was afraid she’d lose her temper at their host. But instead, she closed her eyes and made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a strangled cry.

“How can they do this? It’s a travesty of justice!”

“It’s the Wizengamot,” Ron said. Everyone turned to look at him, and he fought the urge to flinch. “They’ll not condemn their own.” He shrugged. “We expected this.”

“I expected a more blatant farce, actually,” Sirius said. “The Veritaserum was a rather accomplished move that might even convince quite a few people.”

Ron snorted. “Not the muggleborns, and not many of the half-bloods either. They know better.”

“But many of the purebloods will believe the Wizengamot’s verdict was just,” his dad said, looking
far more tired than Ron had expected. “Veritaserum is a powerful argument.”

“It’s all in the wording,” Sirius’s smile lacked any humour. “And that’s something you can bet the Prophet will not report accurately. Word of mouth will simplify it to ‘Veritaserum confirmed their innocence’.”

“That’s… that’s…” Ron’s mum was fuming again. “How could they do this?”

Sirius shrugged. “They played the Wizengamot almost perfectly. Although I think Thicknesse was in on it - he was remarkably agreeable to Greengrass’s demands. On the other hand, he is a shrewd politician, so he probably just saw which way the wind was blowing.”

“The Resistance will still spread the truth about this,” Ron said.

“Oh, yes.” Sirius grinned. “I’ll be sending her an exact transcript of the session.”

“You have a Pensieve?” Ron’s dad looked surprised.

“Dumbledore left his to us,” Sirius said. “We can certainly use it more than Hogwarts.”

“As long as something is being done!” Mum was shaking her head. “This cannot continue! They’ll let all those murderers go, just like last time!”

“If they do, there’ll be another war,” Sirius said. “Or rather, they’ll find out that the war’s not over yet,” he added with a grin.

Ron thought that Sirius sounded as if he would prefer that.

Hogwarts, February 17th, 1997

“… thank you, Sirius. Goodbye.”

Harry Potter, sitting on his bed in the Gryffindor dorms, sighed while he stashed the mirror in his pocket again. The three Slytherins had been acquitted. It wasn’t exactly a surprise, but… part of him had hoped that the Wizengamot would finally show some sense and not fall for their stories. It looked like the Old Families were still refusing to see reason.

He heard yelling from the common room and realised that the wireless had to have broadcast the news as well. Even if he stayed in his room, others would come and ask him about the trials. Better to set the record straight right away - he was all too familiar with Hogwarts’ rumour mill.

He was barely halfway down the stairs when he met Ginny coming up. “Harry! I was just coming to get you! They announced that Greengrass, Davies and Nott have been acquitted!”

“I heard.” He smiled. “It’s no surprise.”

She pouted. “I know, but still… do you think they’ll return to Hogwarts?”

He shook his head. “I doubt it.” Unless they were so delusional that they thought everyone would follow the Wizengamot’s lead. Or the Ministry took control of Hogwarts and stuffed it full of Aurors. Pureblood Aurors.

They reached the common room, and as soon as Harry entered, it seemed everyone present wanted to tell him about the verdicts. He raised his arms. “Calm down, everyone! I already heard about it!”
To his slight surprise, the room quieted down after a few moments.

“What do you think of this?” Neville asked.

The boy looked very tense, but seemed to control himself, Harry thought. Although he couldn’t tell what Neville was thinking. Not without using Legilimency… he buried that thought quickly, then took a deep breath. “Did anyone really expect that the Wizengamot would find those three guilty? They haven’t even tried to prosecute Astoria Greengrass, despite her attack on our third years.” He saw a few of the Gryffindors of that year shudder.

“But they were questioned under Veritaserum!” Romilda said.

“The questions were asked by their proxies and guardians,” Harry answered. “And carefully worded. But even if it were true that they had been afraid for their lives, they could have run away from the Dark Lord and gone into hiding. You know how well that worked for so many others. They were not forced to fight.” He scoffed. “They almost died attacking the Weasleys’ home” - he heard Ginny almost growl next to him - ”so they knew that staying with the Dark Lord and fighting was dangerous as well, but did they flee then? No.” He shook his head. “They were acquitted because they were the heirs of their families and members of the Wizengamot.”

That caused more yelling. Neville was one of the few who didn’t say anything, pressing his lips together.

“Will they let all of the Death Eaters go?” A third year asked, trembling. Her friends hugged her.

“Most of the Death Eaters are dead,” Harry said. Belatedly, he realised that smiling encouragingly while saying such a thing might look a bit… odd.

“But not all of them!” The little witch - a muggleborn, Harry thought, she was wearing jeans under her robes - tried to compose herself. “And the Slytherins? Will they return to Hogwarts?”

Ginny snorted, and mumbled something under her breath that Harry was certain would earn her a chore should her mum overhear it. He shrugged. “I doubt it.” Some had been killed, like Malfoy and his friends. “But even if some do, we’re prepared. They’ll not be able to do anything to us.”

“What if they send Aurors?” Will Banks asked.

Harry knew that the muggleborn third year had been afraid of the Ministry ever since he had been used to sabotage the Slytherin Quidditch Pitch stands. With good reason, he thought - if not for Dumbledore, the boy would have likely been punished for it. Harry smiled confidently. “They don’t have many Aurors left, and they need them elsewhere. And they have even less skilled Aurors left. If they try to take over Hogwarts… well, there are a lot of people who would object to that.”

“Like the Resistance!” The third year witch wasn’t trembling any more.

“Yes,” Harry said. “And many more. We won’t let the Ministry push us around any more!”

The yells and shouts filling the common room were even louder this time. Harry kept smiling, though for all he believed his words, he hoped that the Wizengamot would cave in, and soon.

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London, Diagon Alley, February 17th, 1997

Hermione Granger walked along Diagon Alley with her wand in hand and her rifle slung on her
back. Justin was behind her, his rifle in hand, while Sally-Anne was in front, pulling a rolled up paper out of her enchanted bag. A flick of her wand later, a poster was stuck to the wall next to the entrance to ‘Jamie’s Jellies’.

_Wizengamot lets Death Eaters go unpunished!_ was followed by a picture of Lucius Malfoy, with ‘1981: I was under the Imperius!’ superimposed over it on the left side, and a picture of the laughing Theo Nott with the caption ‘1997: I was too afraid to stop fighting’ on the right side. And at the bottom: ‘They persecute muggleborns, and protect Death Eaters! It’s time for a change!’

Sally-Anne stuck a leaflet with a more detailed - but not too detailed, just enough to counter the Veritaserum excuse - description of the trial next to it right when a man stepped out of the shop.

“Hey, what are…” he broke off and closed his mouth when he saw their uniforms, then turned around and disappeared back into the shop without a further word.

Hermione shook her head, wondering if the man had a guilty conscience, or was just afraid of the Resistance because he believed the Prophet. Another poster and leaflet later, they turned around a corner and entered the main part of Diagon Alley. Their appearance was noticed almost at once by the people on the street.

“It’s the Resistance!”

The crowd started to move towards them, eager faces and muggle clothes revealing them as muggleborns.

“They’re here!”

“Look at them!”

Hermione forced herself to keep smiling, even though she felt rather tense - it would be easy for someone to hide in the crowd and send a curse at her or the others, and their Shield Charms wouldn’t stop everything. Tania and Seamus, both disillusioned, were flying above them, keeping an eye out, but they too would not be perfect. And the Human-presence-revealing Spell was pretty much useless in a crowd.

She held up a hand. “Please give us some space.” She pulled a leaflet out of her own pocket and cast a Doubling Charm, then sent the leaflets up in the air, and above the gathering people. The people stopped crowding the Resistance in favour of grabbing the leaflets, but that relief didn’t last long - as soon as they had skimmed the contents, they turned towards them again.

“This is an outrage!” one man, about thirty years old - it was harder to tell with wizards - yelled. “We need to do something!” His next words were drowned out by the crowd.

Hermione cast an Amplifying Charm to be heard over the shouting. “We are doing something!”

She had to repeat herself twice before the noise died down. “It’s time to show the Ministry and the Wizengamot that we will not accept being ruled by an aristocracy! We didn’t beat the Death Eaters just to bow to the very Wizengamot that persecuted us! We demand a democratically elected Wizengamot!” She took a deep breath. “We’ll be holding protests and rallies soon, as more and more muggleborns return to Wizarding Britain! Watch out for leaflets and listen to the Resistance Radio! Spread the news - we will not submit! Blood doesn’t matter!” she yelled at the end, the spell carrying her voice over the Alley.

The crowd took up the words. “Blood doesn’t matter! Blood doesn’t matter!”
For a moment, Hermione basked in the crowd’s approval, more certain than ever that they would win, that they would reform Wizarding Britain. Then she heard Seamus over the radio: “Watch out, Aurors closing in from the North!”

“Hold fire!” she said through the throat microphone, moving forward.

The crowd parted in front of her, to her own surprise, and she saw two - no, four - Aurors approach, wands out. The crowd noticed them too - they hadn’t posted rear guards - and the mood quickly grew worse, with wands being drawn and even aimed.

The Aurors - all of them so young, Hermione recognised three of them who had been two years above her at Hogwarts - stopped about ten yards away. They looked nervous, no, afraid even. Their leader, barely older than the rest, took a step forward. “What’s going on here?”

Hermione held up her left hand, quieting the crowd down, as she met his eyes. “We’re passing out leaflets and putting up posters.” She didn’t want to escalate matters, but she would not budge if the Aurors tried to stop them. She couldn’t - she’d lose all the influence she had over the crowd if she did that.

Sally-Anne stepped closer to Hermione. She had stashed her posters and leaflets, and her wand was out, but at her side. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Justin step to the side so he’d have a clear line of fire. Fortunately, the crowd was not moving forward, but holding where they stood. As riled up as the muggleborns were, it wouldn’t take much to start a fight.

Fortunately, the leader of the Aurors must have realised that as well, since he pressed his lips together and turned around. “Let’s go!”

The rest of the group followed him, but Hermione saw that they were looking over their shoulders, as if they expected an attack any moment. And yet they were not in a defensive formation - though she suspected that this was due to lack of training and experience, and not a deliberate decision.

Once they had turned around the next corner, Hermione relaxed. If that had gone wrong… She turned to address the crowd again. “Spread the word! We’re not submitting! We’re not going away! We demand democracy! Blood doesn’t matter!”

“Blood doesn’t matter!”

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London, Ministry of Magic, February 17th, 1997

Amelia Bones checked the clock on the wall of her office and frowned. It was getting too late again. She had worse hours as Minister than she had had as Head of the DMLE. It couldn’t be helped, though. Not with the situation the Ministry found itself in following the trials of Greengrass, Davis and Nott. The acquittal of those three hadn’t been received well by everyone.

Amelia knew that the questions asked while the three were under the influence of Veritaserum had been very carefully phrased. If she had conducted the questioning, then she would have asked more and different questions. Nevertheless, the trial had been conducted correctly, and if the Wizengamot ruled that the accused had acted under duress, and were not to be punished for what they had done and admitted to, then that was the verdict people would have to accept. She would never let public opinion, much less a vocal minority, dictate sentences. Even though she couldn’t help feeling that Britain’s situation wouldn’t be as dire as it currently was if the Wizengamot had taken a harsher stance towards Death Eaters after the last war, she would never condone vigilante ‘justice’.
A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

“Yes?”

Her secretary opened the door and peered inside. “Mister Thicknesse and Head Auror Dawlish are here, ma’am.”

Amelia suppressed a sigh. They wouldn’t bother her, not at this hour, if it wasn’t important. “Send them in.”

The two wizards entered, and she waved at the chairs in front of her desk. “Please have a seat.”

“Thank you, Amelia,” Pius said. “There was an incident today, in Diagon Alley.”

Amelia sat straighter. “What happened?”

Dawlish handed over a scroll of parchment and a roll of paper. “An Auror patrol encountered a group of Resistance members putting up posters and handing out leaflets. There was a crowd of muggleborns with them.”

She quickly read the parchment, her anger growing, then looked at the poster and leaflet. “They were prepared for this. They expected the verdict.” Granger had been ready to plaster this filth all over the Alley.

Pius, ever the politician, nodded. “I’d even say that they wanted the Wizengamot to acquit the three.”

He was correct. “They’ll use this to rile up the muggleborns.” Amelia clenched her teeth.

“They didn’t attack the patrol,” Dawlish said.

“They were probably hoping that the Aurors would attack them.” Pius was smiling faintly.

“I don’t think so.” Amelia shook her head. “They are not yet ready for an open conflict. The muggleborns who left Wizarding Britain last year are still in the process of returning. Granger will want to recruit more of them to replace her losses too.” And today’s verdict would help them - the muggleborns didn’t trust the Ministry, and would believe the Resistance’s propaganda over anyone else.

“Should we let them do this?” Dawlish asked. “How’s our own recruiting?”

Pius lost his smile. “We haven’t been able to recruit as many suitable wizards and witches as we’d like. I’ve spoken with a few members of the Wizengamot, asking them to impress upon their extended family just how much the Ministry needs trusted employees. The situation should improve in the summer, when the current seventh years graduate, but until then...” He sighed and spread his hands.

Dawlish frowned. “What about hiring more muggleborns and half-bloods?”

Amelia raised her eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Pius. Dawlish knew what Pius had meant by ‘suitable candidates’ - loyal purebloods. Had he talked with Weasley? Was this another plot? “Their loyalty is a concern,” she said.

Dawlish nodded. “I know. But on the other hand, having muggleborns in the Corps would improve our reputation among the other muggleborns, and defuse the tension somewhat. The Resistance would also have to worry about their loyalty, and any talented muggleborn joining the Corps is one
the Resistance can’t train.”

“Would you trust them?” Pius asked, sneering slightly at his subordinate. “It’s not as if we can require an Unbreakable Vow from them, and we all know how many traitors we had within our ranks. And how that turned out.”

Dawlish flushed, but didn’t give in. “We aren’t at war with the muggleborns. The situation is tense, especially with the way they are retaking their old homes, but we just fought together against the Dark Lord, and they haven’t attacked the Ministry or the Aurors.”

“Not yet,” Pius said. “But once they are ready…”

“We’re not ready for a war either,” Dawlish said. “And if it comes to a war, it’s not just the loyalty of muggleborns we would have to worry about.”

Dawlish was showing more political awareness than Amelia had expected. He probably was talking to some of Dumbledore’s old friends and followers. Maybe Weasley, or even Black, she thought. “The muggleborns are breaking the law by forcing people out of their homes. That is something the Ministry cannot ignore.”

“If we intervene, we might start a war. And we don’t have the wands to intervene, much less fight a war,” Dawlish said.

“Our duty is to enforce the law. If you feel you are incapable or unwilling to do your duty, then I’ll accept your resignation,” Amelia said in a clipped tone. The Ministry had no need for cowards or traitors. Especially not in the current situation.

“If you wish that we intervene against the muggleborns taking over shops in Diagon Alley with our current strength, then we will have to strip the Ministry and Hogsmeade details of almost everyone. Otherwise, we will not have the numbers to do anything,” Dawlish said, staring at her. “I’ll need a direct order to prioritise this task above guarding the Ministry and the Wizengamot.”

Amelia glared at him. He was well aware that she couldn’t give that order. The Wizengamot would never allow it. He was undermining her, she realised. Was he working with Pius? She glanced at the Head of the DMLE. He was frowning as well. She knew that they didn’t have the numbers to do this, but they couldn’t let it go either. “If we don’t enforce the law, then that will encourage the muggleborns to push further.”

“They’re already demanding changes in the Wizengamot,” Pius said. “Unless the Wizengamot agrees to their demands, a confrontation is unavoidable.”

“If the Ministry is to go to war against the muggleborns, then we can’t count on all our Aurors and Hit-Wizards,” Dawlish said.

“You don’t trust all of your Aurors, and yet you want to recruit more whose loyalty is questionable?” Pius asked. He was acting a bit too offended, Amelia thought - it was his department, and ultimately his responsibility, after all.

“If all we can recruit are fresh graduates from Hogwarts while the muggleborns get the pick of the experienced Aurors and Hit-Wizards that left the Corps as well as their share of the fresh graduates, then the Ministry’s situation will not improve over time.” Dawlish winced. “My people aren’t too happy about the Wizengamot’s judgement either.”

“Aurors never are happy when someone they arrested gets acquitted,” Amelia said. She knew that from personal experience.
“That is true, but this goes beyond the usual grumbling. And these aren’t helping matters,” Dawlish pointed at the poster and leaflet on Amelia’s desk. “The Corps knows that the trial wasn’t exactly…” he trailed off.

“Exactly what?” Amelia asked. “The Wizengamot conducted the trial according to the law. Pius can confirm that.”

Pius nodded.

Dawlish held his tongue, but she thought it took him some effort. “Do you have anything else to add?” she asked, staring at him.

“No, ma’am.”

“Very well. I have a few things to discuss with Pius that do not concern you.” She dismissed him with a nod.

Dawlish glanced at Pius for a moment, then nodded and left her office. Once the door had closed behind him, Amelia sighed. “We not only do not have enough Aurors and Hit-Wizards to do our duty, but those we have are unreliable. And our long-term prospects are worse.”

“That is an accurate summary of the situation,” Pius said, his face a polite facade.

“Did you explain this to the Wizengamot members you talked with?” Amelia asked.

“I mentioned my concerns about the lack of trusted Aurors and Hit-Wizards,” Pius said. He was smiling faintly again.

“And what did they say?” Amelia knew that Pius wouldn’t have talked to those too stupid to understand the situation; even if he wanted her to fail so he could succeed her he knew that they were likely to lose a war should it start now.

“They acknowledged the problems we are facing.” Pius’s smile vanished again. “But they couldn’t offer much to the Ministry. There aren’t that many capable purebloods left.”

“Enough to matter,” Amelia said. “They’re not willing to risk their heirs and close family.”

“Yes.” He hesitated for a moment, then went on: “But there’s more. They hinted at looking for help abroad.”

Amelia hissed. “Mercenaries?” The Wizengamot was unlikely to ask another country for help; too many countries would jump at the opportunity to squeeze concessions out of Britain after decades of Dumbledore pushing them around.

“Yes. Ostensibly to protect their families, but…” he shook his head.

“More vigilantes.” She pressed her lips together.

“France created a precedent when they arrived to help Dumbledore.”

“But the muggleborns will jump on that.” Amelia could imagine the leaflets they’d print. “Will they be able to hire enough to even the odds?”

“I don’t think so. The Dark Lord himself had trouble recruiting mercenaries. With the record of the Resistance in the war, most of the experienced mercenaries would demand a lot of gold to risk their lives going up against them.”
Too much even for most of the Old Families, Amelia thought. “There’ll still be enough to cause trouble.”

“Yes.” Pius seemed to hesitate, then straightened. “Other countries might try to use this to meddle in Britain. Many of them are concerned about the muggleborns.”

Amelia narrowed her eyes. “That would likely push the muggleborns to return the favour.” She considered how fanatical Granger was. “They might already be planning to do that.” And that could start another war on the scale of Grindelwald’s War.

“They focused on the Death Eaters during the war, not the Ministry. And they haven’t attacked the Ministry. Not directly. I don’t think that they want another war.”

“Do you think that they’ll back down if the Wizengamot stands firm?” Amelia watched him. He hadn’t seemed to support his Head Auror, but the two had arrived together, and he was Dawlish’s superior. If Pius was leaning towards making a deal with the Resistance...

“I don’t know. Would they really rather start another war instead of accepting the status quo ante?”

That was a question Amelia didn’t think anyone but the Resistance could answer. And there was another question. “If they did, would the Wizengamot believe it?”

Pius didn’t look like he’d be smiling again any time soon.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 17th, 1997

Ron Weasley was about to eat a sandwich in Sirius’s kitchen when he heard a crash from the hallway, followed by hissed curses. He had drawn his wand before he recognised the voice.

“Tonks?”

“Shh!” The young Auror entered, limping slightly. “Nothing happened. The pot wasn’t damaged.”

“If you say so.” Ron shook his head. He checked his watch. It was close to midnight. “Late shift?”

“I wish! Dawlish made me do overtime by burying me in orders!” Tonks frowned, taking a seat at the table. “Where’s Kreacher?”

“Probably off cleaning or something,” Ron said. The house-elf was remarkably apt at avoiding guests he didn’t like - which included both ‘blood traitors’ and half-bloods - unless specifically ordered to assist by Sirius.

Tonks snorted. “As if!” She summoned some bread and then raided the dishes Ron had taken from the icebox to make her own sandwich. “Third time in a row I get a cold midnight dinner thanks to that b...Bones.”

“You could get some muggle money and get takeout,” Ron said, finishing his sandwich.

Tonks narrowed her eyes at him, then focused on her sandwich.

He shrugged. She probably just wanted to vent a bit. “Was Bones mad about the verdict?”

“Hard to tell,” Tonks said between bites. “We don’t exactly see her much since she’s not the Head of the DMLE any more. But she’s been an Auror; I can’t see any Auror being happy about the verdict.”
“Really?” Ron was sceptical.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean, not any current Auror.”

“Ah.”

The eye-rolling turned into a glare. “The Corps has lost a lot of Aurors fighting the Dark Lord. They don’t like to see any of his followers get off.”

The Ministry had lost a lot of Aurors fighting the Resistance too, Ron knew. He didn’t mention that, though. It was a sensitive subject. “They won’t be too happy with the Wizengamot then - they aren’t finished yet.”

“There aren’t many prisoners left,” Tonks said, glancing at him before she grabbed some pumpkin juice.

“But quite a lot of Wizengamot members who were supporters of the Dark Lord.”

That earned him another glare. “You can’t arrest a member of the Wizengamot without permission from the Wizengamot. Not unless you catch them in flagrante.”

“Huh?”

“Not unless you catch them while they are committing a crime.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good system,” Ron said.

“It’s better than the Minister being able to have any Wizengamot member they want arrested,” Tonks said.

Not by much, he thought. He shrugged and refilled his glass with juice. “Looks like changes are needed.”

“I saw the leaflets. Thicknesse wasn’t happy about them.”

“Well, it’s true. If the Wizengamot continues with this, there’ll be trouble.” Ron put the juice down and looked straight at her.

“Another war?” She scoffed. “I’m just about the last Auror of my year. Do you really want more deaths?”

He shrugged. “It’s only a war if the Wizengamot can find enough idiots to die for them.”

She stared at him, her lips forming a thin line. “I get enough of that from your father. I’m not about to fight the Resistance, unless they turn into crazy murderers. But I’m not about to stab my friends in the back - none of my friends.”

“Good enough,” Ron said.

They finished their midnight snacks in silence.

*****

Hogwarts, February 18th, 1997

Harry Potter was in the middle of breakfast in the Great Hall when the owls arrived with the morning
post - and with the latest issues of the Daily Prophet. Soon, owls carrying rolled up newspapers and letters were landing on the tables, and hands reached for purses. One brown owl almost crashed into his plate, avoiding his tea cup with an awkward hop, before Neville reached over from his side of the table, grabbed it and pulled the newspaper off.

“They’re worse than Errol,” he heard Ginny, sitting next to Neville, mumble.

Harry didn’t comment - he was watching Neville skim over the article. It didn’t take long until Neville threw the newspaper down on the table, sending a breadbasket sliding, and grinding his teeth. “They let them go!”

“We already knew that from the wireless,” Ginny said, then flinched when Neville glared at her.

He grabbed the newspaper again, and stabbed the front page with his finger. “We didn’t see them smile! Look at them, acting as if they were innocent! That’s… that’s…” Neville shook his head, apparently at a loss for words.

“That’s outrageous,” Ginny finished for him. “They attacked our third years, then the Burrow, and the Wizengamot treats them as if they were victims?” The witch muttered a few expressions that would have upset Molly Weasley, in Harry’s opinion.

“It’s the Wizengamot - they take care of each other, and of no one else,” Harry said.

He caught a glimpse of a familiar white owl entering the Great Hall, and smiled. Hedwig. The snowy owl dived at him, a few beats of her powerful wings stopping her descent just in time so she could land lightly on the table. She barked and held out her leg to which a small package had been strapped.

Harry chuckled. “I know it’s Hermione’s fault, Hedwig. You’d never be late otherwise,” he said while he pulled the package off. “Have some bacon.”

The owl started to feed from his plate while he tapped the package with his wand, unshrinking it.

“Hermione sent you something?” Ginny asked, leaning forward and craning her neck, trying to see what he had received. Neville, too, was watching intently.

“She did,” Harry said, pulling out the posters and leaflets. He grinned as he handed out a number to Neville, Ginny and the other Gryffindors. “Something to counter the Prophet’s lies.”

The leaflets were quickly passed on to the other tables - including the Slytherin table, he noted. He also saw McGonagall grab one herself, then walk over towards him.

The Gryffindor table fell silent when the witch arrived.

“Is this yours, Mister Potter?”

Harry was tempted to say that no, she could keep it, but he didn’t. Instead he nodded. “Hermione sent them to me. We want to let the students know the truth.”

“And not the Prophet’s lies!” Neville said.

McGonagall looked surprised at the outburst from the usually quiet student, but she soon schooled her features. “I see.” Looking the rest of the table over, she raised her voice slightly. “While it’s laudable to counter lies, I have to remind you that this is a school, not the Wizengamot, or Diagon Alley. You’re here to study and learn, not to wage war.”
“We’re not starting a war,” Banks said. “But if someone else does, we’ll finish it!” The young Gryffindor flinched when everyone, including McGonagall, stared at him, but then he thrust his chin out. “It’s the truth!”

McGonagall looked like she was torn between pride and disapproval, or so Harry thought - he didn’t know the witch that well, anyway. “Not you, Mister Banks. Not even the Resistance recruited third years.”

Banks’s pouting expression made Harry chuckle - but then he remembered the Creeveys, who had joined the Resistance when Dennis had been barely older than Banks. And now Dennis was cursed and in a coma, and Colin was dead.

He didn’t say much for the rest of the meal.

*****

“I want to train again,” Neville said when they were on their way to their dorms, to fetch the books and other supplies for the first lesson.

“Me too!” Ginny added, before Harry could respond.

He slowed down and looked at the two. “Moody’s dead.”

“So?” Neville scoffed.

“If the Slytherins return, I want to be prepared,” Ginny added. “Or if the Ministry tries anything.”

“Aha.” Harry was wondering what to say. Sirius was busy in the Wizengamot, and Remus was still in Europe, hunting Wormtail. Nymphadora… well, she was in the Ministry, and busy as well. Sirius would probably make time, though, to train with Harry.

“It’s not as if we haven’t been training, you know. Just not as hard as you with Moody,” Ginny added. She was not quite fidgeting, but she looked, if still stubborn, a bit more insecure than before.

It wasn’t as if it would do any harm, Harry thought. At least not permanently, he corrected himself - Moody’s lessons regularly left him hurting. And with things so tense, and the Wizengamot unwilling to do the right thing… He nodded. “Alright. Pass the word to the others - we’ll train in Defence. I’ll look for an instructor or two, but even without one, we can train.”

“Yes!” Ginny smiled widely.

Neville, though, simply nodded, his expression unchanging.

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London, Diagon Alley, February 19th, 1997

Sirius Black shook his head while he stared at the burned out ruins of the twins’ shop in Diagon Alley and the neighbouring houses. So much destruction… and the Wizengamot was dragging its feet about funding rebuilding efforts. He pressed his lips together so he wouldn’t bare his teeth as if he was Padfoot. Of course, the longer the Wizengamot delayed allocating funds to support those in need, the more those businesses that were being rebuilt by the Old Families on their own would profit.

In a way, he was doing the same, loaning the twins money to rebuild their shop. He snorted - he
wanted to simply give them the gold; as far as he was concerned, they had earned it playing bait for
the Dark Lord, but they were too proud to accept. Just like their parents, already talking about
rebuilding the Burrow on their own, with the help of some muggle ‘blueprints’, whatever that was -
Arthur’s explanation at dinner last evening had been enthusiastic, but not entirely clear.

He checked his watch. He had plenty of time left for a stroll through Diagon Alley to see how the
people were faring before heading to the Wizengamot for today’s session. He chuckled - that
 sounded like what a politician would say.

The parts of the Alley further away were looking fine, he thought. It was no surprise - the fighting
had not spread that far from the twins’ shop. It made the destruction stand out even more, though -
and seeing a café open next to ruins was more than a bit weird.

Sirius had bought chocolates from a shop on the way - not quite as good as those from Honeydukes,
but by no means bad - and started eating them while walking towards the Leaky Cauldron when he
heard yelling from a side alley.

He didn’t hesitate - he was a Gryffindor, after all - and entered the narrower alley. There was a group
of people - muggleborns, he could tell from their clothes, half a dozen of them - standing in front of a
small shop, wands out. A wizard in robes was facing them in the entrance.

“This is my shop! It was stolen from me when I had to hide from the Ministry!” a burly middle-aged
wizard was yelling. “Get lost!” The others near him yelled their agreement.

The wizard standing in the door flinched and was obviously scared, but he stood his ground. “I
didn’t steal it - I bought it from Matthias Selwyn!”

“So? It wasn’t his to sell! I’m taking my shop back!” The muggleborn snarled. “You can take it up
with the thief!”

“But…” The wizard was trembling now, and took a step back. “You can’t do this!”

“That’s enough!” Sirius yelled.

The muggleborns whirled around, all of them. Sloppy, Sirius thought - the shop’s occupant could
have cursed them in the back easily right then, not that the man looked as if he could do that; it
seemed as if he was as surprised as the others.

The leader of the muggleborns glared at Sirius. “What do you…” Sirius saw the man’s eyes widen
when he trailed off - he must have recognised him.

“Sirius Black.” Sirius inclined his head. “I was just passing by when I heard the yelling.” He popped
the last piece of chocolate into his mouth.

The shop owner walked around the group, towards Sirius. “Sir! I’m Melvyn Gibbons. They’re trying
to force me out of the shop! I paid for it - I even took out a loan - and now they are threatening me!”

“The shop was stolen from me!” came the angry retort.

“Not by me!”
Sirius sighed. That looked too complicated for his taste. “Calm down, everyone. Now, you bought the shop from Mattias Selwyn, you said?”

“Yes! Just three months ago!”

The man obviously hadn’t been too smart, Sirius thought. He turned to the muggleborn. “Did you sell the shop?”

“No! I simply locked it up and left!”

“Were you the owner, or were you a tenant?”

“I wouldn’t be trying to take it back if I weren’t the owner!” the man exclaimed. “I’m John Carrigan. Muggleborn,” he added unnecessarily.

Sirius showed his teeth. He thought he knew what had happened. “That means the building probably was deemed abandoned, and Selwyn bought it up from the Ministry.” For a pittance, Sirius assumed - that was how such things were handled, after all.

“I didn’t abandon it! I had to hide from the Ministry!”

“Yes.” Sirius nodded. He addressed the shop’s current owner again. “I’m sorry, but I think your best course of action is to demand your gold back from Selwyn. Provided he’s telling the truth.” He nodded at Carrigan.

“Of course I am!”

“But he’ll not pay me back - he’s the son of a member of the Wizengamot!” Gibbons said. “That was all I had!”

“Well, I’m a member of the Wizengamot myself. I’ll talk to him.” Sirius smiled.

“Thank you, sir!”

“That doesn’t mean you can stay in the shop, though,” Sirius said. He ignored how the man’s face fell - Gibbons should have known better than to buy a muggleborn’s shop.

He nodded at the men, then turned around and left, shaking his head. Another sign of just how corrupt the Wizengamot was.

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Twenty minutes later, Sirius entered the Wizengamot’s floor in the Ministry. The session wouldn’t start for another fifteen minutes, but many members and their entourages were already present, either talking inside the chamber to other members, or gathered in small groups outside the chamber. He didn’t see Maximilian Selwyn, though.

“Sirius!”

He turned around and saw Doge was heading towards him. “Elphas.”

“Good to see you… I need to talk to you.” Doge flicked his wand, and a privacy spell surrounded them. “We need to elect a new Chief Warlock. We can’t let this linger any longer.”

“We certainly can’t let Runcorn continue.” The oldest member of the Wizengamot was acting Chief Warlock by default, but he was a known blood purist.
Elphias made a dismissive gesture. “He’s irrelevant. But we need to find a candidate we can push through. If we leave that office to the purists…”

Sirius nodded. The Chief Warlock was in theory primus inter pares - the first among equal members - and could act as a tiebreaker. But more important was their control over the schedules, and how the sessions were run. While they couldn’t stop a proposal from a member, they could delay it quite effectively - or push another. “Are you volunteering?” he asked. Doge was known to have been a close friend of Dumbledore, and he had had quite a career in the Ministry as well, before he had succeeded his father in the Wizengamot.

“Unless you are,” Doge said.

Sirius chuckled. “Me? Merlin’s balls, Amelia would be frothing at the mouth!”

“I’ve heard about her opinion of you,” Doge said, shaking his head.

Sirius shrugged. “Albus would have done the same.”

“That he would.” Doge snorted.

“How are your chances?” Doge would have sounded out the other members already, Sirius knew.

“Unless most of the members who are still hiding return, I should have a simple majority.”

Sirius nodded. “But they might return once they hear about your running for the office.”

“If they are brave enough. That trial didn’t help,” Doge said. “They might expect to get off as well.”

“Not all of them. Our esteemed members haven’t forgotten just how many blood purists had left the chamber right before the attack started.” Sirius bared his teeth.

“Enough to affect the result. Best would be if they were split among themselves, but…”

Sirius nodded. He hadn’t been a member of the Wizengamot for that long, but long enough to know that you couldn’t count on your opponent making a mistake. “Let’s get more votes then!” With Doge’s friendship with Dumbledore, and Harry’s approval, they should get the support of a number of the more impressionable members.

And, Sirius added to himself, he might also convince some members that electing a friend of Albus Dumbledore would help appeasing the muggleborns. He would have to ask Hermione if she could increase the pressure some.

He checked his watch. It was too late to hunt down Selwyn. Maybe he’d have more luck after the session.

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“...and therefore I believe that the Order of Merlin, First Class, is an appropriate reward for the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Sirius was one among many who applauded when Chastity Milbrand finished, and probably not the only one who was as happy about the proposal as he was about the fact that Milbrand had finally finished - that witch could go on and on; she had started with a detailed if not quite factual account of Harry’s first defeat of Voldemort.

“The chair recognises Mister Diggory.”
Amos Diggory rose. “While I agree with my honoured colleague Madam Milbrand that Harry Potter deserves an Order of Merlin, First Class, I think this is not enough. The Boy-Who-Lived has saved Wizarding Britain twice now, and I think that we all know just how many of us here are only alive now because he stopped the Dark Lord before he could take the Ministry.”

Sirius glanced at Bones and Thicknesse; both showed no reaction while others loudly agreed.

“Therefore I think an Order of Merlin is not enough; the Boy-Who-Lived also deserves a seat on the Wizengamot!”

Now Amelia was showing a reaction, Sirius noticed - her lips were pressed together and her eyes had narrowed. The Minister for Magic didn’t share that view.

To his surprise the proposal was supported by several members of the Wizengamot Sirius knew for quite the bigots - if not followers of the Dark Lord. Were they actually hoping to bribe Harry into supporting the Wizengamot with this?

He mulled this over while Augustus Malfoy stood up and spent five minutes trying to convince the Wizengamot that Harry was immature and unfit without actually saying anything that could be construed as an insult towards the Boy-Who-Lived.

Some members might be naive enough to think that this could work. Sirius knew better, of course - Harry wouldn’t feel indebted to the Wizengamot, nor duty-bound to support their policies. And it wasn’t as if they could silence Harry, or pick his proxy for him. Unless… if they actually believed what the Prophet hinted at, then they might think they could influence Harry through a witch.

Sirius sighed. He’d have to warn Harry about that. He raised his wand.

“The chair recognises Mister Black.”

He stood up. “Honoured members of the Wizengamot! While I’m the first to support all accolades awarded to my godson, I have to point out that he was not alone when he faced the Dark Lord. I have no doubt that trying to honour him, but not his friends, will not endear you to him.” He smiled when he saw the expression on Amelia’s face. She knew what was coming. “Numerous brave people helped him, but foremost among them were his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, and the members of the Resistance and the Order of the Phoenix.”

His smile widened at the reaction that caused in the Wizengamot.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 19th, 1997

Ron Weasley jumped up from his seat when Hermione entered the living room in Sirius’s home and opened his arms wide. “Hermione!”

“Hello!” She smiled, but she didn’t jump into his arms, as he had expected - and hoped. Instead she approached slowly and hugged him rather tenderly, compared to her usual embrace.

“Is something… I’m alright, now,” he said. He wasn’t hurting any more, not much at least. “I’m returning to Hogwarts tomorrow.”

From the way she pursed her lips, he could tell that she had some doubts.

Rolling his eyes, he pulled his sweater up, then pulled his bandage away. “See? Almost completely
“Almost doesn’t mean fully,” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes as she bent down to inspect his wound with her wand.

“It doesn’t hurt any more,” he said, shaking his head while she cast several spells. He was smiling, though - she cared, and had cared ever since their first year.

Finally she seemed satisfied and straightened up. “It looks good, but it’s not yet healed. No strenuous activity. No Quidditch.”

He pouted, then smiled. “I wasn’t planning to. I lost my broom.” And they weren’t going out this evening, anyway - they would be eating dinner with his family.

“Sirius’s planning to buy you a new one.”

“Well…”

She shook her head, and once again he missed her long hair. “Typical.” But she was smiling.

He gathered her in his arms again, and kissed her.

“So, what have you been doing while I was doing nothing?” Ron asked, once they were both sitting on the couch.

“Same as yesterday - organising,” she said, sighing. “The plans for the rally tomorrow are keeping me busy, and John’s been trying to copy some BBC programmes, but… we don’t have the manpower to produce them, and simply copying them…”

He knew what the BBC was. “Magic can’t help there?”

“No.” She was frowning again. “We need more people.”

“Ah.” He felt guilty for making her think about the friends she had lost. “Have you heard about the Wizengamot’s offer to Harry?”

She snorted. “Yes. What a transparent ploy! And so stupid - first they start hinting that he was immature and easily manipulated, and now they want him to become a member of the Wizengamot?” She shook her head. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

“That pretty much sums up the Wizengamot.” Ron snorted. “Still, I’m a bit worried about what Sirius said.”

“What did he say?” She stopped leaning into him and pulled back to look into his eyes.

“He’s afraid… well, concerned, that they’ll try to manipulate Harry through a witch.” And if that hurt Harry, it would be, partially at least, Ron’s fault for being with Hermione.

“Do you think they’ll try love potions?”

“No. That would be easily detected, and can you imagine the reaction?” They’d have to form a line so everyone could get their curse in. Ginny would go ballistic as well, Ron knew.

“Well, he was famous before this. He’d have to deal with that anyway,” Hermione said. “I know that a number of witches would love to be the girlfriend of the Boy-Who-Lived.”
Among them Ginny, Ron knew, but didn’t say. His sister, going after his best friend… he sighed.

“Hm?” Hermione was resting her head against his chest again.

“Just thinking. And wondering why I’m so lucky to be your boyfriend.”

“Because you’re a great boy and a wonderful friend.”

He didn’t think so, but he would not argue. He just enjoyed the moment with her.

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Walney Island, Cumbria, Britain, February 19th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood rolled his wand between his fingers while he stared at the wireless without seeing it. The mudbloods were holding a rally in Diagon Alley tomorrow to demand the Wizengamot be ‘democratically elected’. Whatever they meant by that.

But he knew what that rally was: an opportunity for him. The Resistance would be there, leading the rabble. If he could eliminate Granger, then the Resistance would likely collapse. The Ministry would have the upper hand, once the rioting was over. And the Wizengamot would be more likely to make a deal with him without the pressure from the mudbloods. He might not even have to procure a cure for the Withering Curse; the mere prospect of finding one might be enough.

But eliminating Granger would not be easy - and quite dangerous. And, as much as he hated to admit it, he wasn’t certain that he could do it. Not without taking risks that were far too great. Something he was not fond of.

On the other hand, disrupting the rally would be easy - and safer. An Imperius on the right target, and a fragile vial of Exploding Fluid would turn the rally into a cull. He might not get Granger and the rest of the Resistance, but the mudblood rabble would yell for blood, and blame the Ministry. Which would keep them too busy to hunt him.

But the Unspeakables wouldn’t care, and would likely continue hunting him. And they were the real danger.

So, should he take a risk, or just take a bit of revenge on both the Ministry and the mudbloods?

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Chapter 46: Vacillation

‘The acquittal of Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis and Theodore Nott remains a controversial event to this day. From a legal standpoint, the trial was conducted in complete accord with the laws then in force. Further, the Wizengamot’s judgment was by no means out of line with the results of the questioning. And yet, it is also one of the most obvious examples of the many faults of the judicial system of that time.

More important, though, was the effect the trial had on the population of Wizarding Britain, who did not, as a rule, much care about the trial’s legal details. They either believed that the accused had been exonerated under Veritaserum, or that the Wizengamot had bent the law to set Death Eaters free after they had admitted their crimes. The muggleborns and most of the half-bloods, as well as a significant proportion of the purebloods, adhered to the latter view. Since the war had, owing to the timely exodus of the muggleborn and the subsequent focus of the Dark Lord’s attacks on so-called ‘blood traitors’, struck the purebloods the hardest, that meant that the solid majority of the population of Wizarding Britain was now convinced that the Wizengamot was corrupt and only concerned with protecting the interests of the Old Families.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn


Amelia Bones was livid - a state which had become, unfortunately, all too common since she had taken the office of Minister for Magic. The focus and cause of her anger was also a bit too common these days, namely Sirius Black. To tell the Wizengamot to grant a seat and an Order of Merlin to a pardoned criminal like Granger! And to one of the sons of Arthur - the wizard who was steadily trying to undermine her authority within the Ministry! The nerve of the man!

She wasn’t the only one his comments - he hadn’t made a formal proposal, of course, just delayed Milbrand’s proposal until the session had ended without a vote being called - had angered, though she hadn’t expected acting Chief Warlock Runcorn and Augustus Malfoy to request a private meeting with her this late - it was past eight already - over this. The two had arrived on schedule, though, and taken their seats in her office.

“You need to do something about Black! He’s sabotaging our efforts to rebuild Britain!” Runcorn said. The old wizard was trembling so much, Amelia was almost afraid he’d collapse on her carpet.

Augustus Malfoy nodded. “He is disrupting our sessions and his fear-mongering is unsettling some of our more inexperienced members.”

By which he meant those members of the Wizengamot who were not part of either the ‘blood traitors’ or the ‘blood purists’, as they called each other, Amelia knew. The numbers of those ‘fence-sitters’ had grown a bit during the war, some of the heirs of members killed by either faction being less focused on vengeance, and more concerned with their own survival.

“And Doge! He’s trying to get elected as Chief Warlock!” Runcorn shook his head almost violently.

Judging by the glance Malfoy sent to Runcorn, the younger wizard was put off by this outburst.
Amelia narrowed her eyes. “So far I haven’t heard of anything either of the two have done that would break the law.” She wasn’t about to police the Wizengamot’s politics.

“They are both members of a vigilante group,” Malfoy said. “I’m certain that they both committed heinous crimes during the war, given who they associate with.”

“They were pardoned for that,” Amelia said.

“That was granted under duress, during the panic following Dumbledore’s death - who was a member of that group himself. I do not think that such an act is legally binding,” Malfoy said.

Runcorn nodded. “Otherwise we’d have to enforce agreements made while under the Imperius.”

“In my opinion, annulling such a pardon would need an act of the Wizengamot,” Pius said.

Amelia glanced at him. He was wearing his polite smile again, but she knew he was not quite as calm as he appeared. He had to know as well as she did that annulling the pardon would push the muggleborns to war. She nodded. “I agree with the opinion of the Head of the DMLE.”

“You granted the pardon, therefore you can annul it as well,” Malfoy said.

“No. The law says otherwise.”

“That is a matter of debate. If you were under the Imperius such a pardon would not be legal.”

“I wasn’t.” Amelia sat a bit straighter. What were they insinuating?

“Are you certain?” Malfoy leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “Can you explain why else you would agree to such a travesty of justice?”

“Because the Ministry couldn’t afford to break the alliance Dumbledore and Fudge had made with the muggleborns.” Amelia remembered that meeting very well.

“They exploited the Ministry’s weak position as soon as it was possible. That’s a sign that they did not enter the alliance in good faith in the first place,” Malfoy said, a hint of a sneer on his face.

Runcorn nodded. “Exactly. They broke the alliance by renegotiating the conditions.”

“While we were not in an advantageous position during the negotiations, they did deliver, so to speak - they killed the Dark Lord a few days afterwards, at the first opportunity.” Pius sounded as if he was talking about the weather.

“I decided to grant the pardon, and I won’t withdraw it. Should any of the pardoned, no matter their blood status, commit a crime now, I’ll do my utmost to bring them to justice,” Amelia said. She didn’t like it - they were correct that Black and the muggleborns had forced her to grant them a pardon - but the law was the law; a pardon once granted couldn’t easily be annulled.

“Well, you need to investigate to determine if a crime was committed, don’t you?” Malfoy said with a thin smile.

“To start an investigation the DMLE needs sufficient reason,” Amelia said, staring at the man. She ignored the glance from Pius. She was not about to let the DMLE become the tool of politicians wanting to deal with a rival. “Political differences are not a sufficient reason.”

“We know you’re not any more content with the way the muggleborns act above their station than we are,” Malfoy said, glaring at her. “They are trying to take over Britain at wand point, and Black
and Doge are their willing tools in the Wizengamot. Something needs to be done, or they might scare the more weak-willed members into surrendering - something the Dark Lord tried as well, as you know!"

“So far they haven’t attacked the Ministry,” Amelia answered.

“But they are attacking purebloods in the streets! Forcing them out of their homes!” Runcorn gasped. “Imagine that!”

Amelia had heard about that. Pius spoke before she could answer, though. “We’re investigating those complaints.”

“Investigating? What’s there to investigate?” Runcorn was panting. “They are robbing good pureblood families of their homes and shops!”

“The circumstances that led to those pureblood families taking up residences there are currently under review,” Pius said. “Allegations that the properties were unlawfully acquired during the war were made.”


“I fail to see how a sale made under duress would be in any way different from a pardon granted under such circumstances,” Malfoy said with a sly smile.

He almost sounded like Lucius, Amelia thought. He had a point - though less of one than he thought. “That’s what we are investigating,” she said.

Pius nodded. “There are several things to consider - not the least of them the fact that the Wizengamot didn’t just repeal the Muggleborn Laws, but also passed a bill to compensate those who were hurt due to those laws.”

Dumbledore had snuck that in, Amelia knew. Probably planned for this situation. “As you can see, the Ministry is investigating.” She didn’t smile - she knew as well as they did that the muggleborns would never accept any outcome of this investigation that did not favour them.

“I see.” Malfoy’s smile had grown quite thin. Almost like Pius’s.

“What?” Runcorn was shaking his head. “You’re leaving purebloods to be attacked by mudbloods?”

“If they own the properties, then this is not an attack, but an act of self-defence, as stated in a ruling of the Wizengamot in 1824, when Dalia Shafiq attacked a group of wizards who had taken over one of her hunting lodges and were unwilling to leave,” Pius said.

“That was different!” Runcorn yelled. “It was her lodge, and they were thieves!”

Malfoy put his hand on the old wizard’s arm. “I see that we do not agree on how to react to such events. Maybe we all should sleep on this, and consider our stances?”

Amelia nodded. Runcorn grumbled, but Malfoy pushed him out of her office.

Once the door closed behind the two, she sighed. “I can’t help but blame Cornelius for this.”

“He was known to be rather accommodating to the requests of the Wizengamot,” Pius said.

“That’s putting it very mildly,” Amelia said, then snorted. “But I’m not him; the times of bending the law for the Wizengamot are over. They can change the laws, if they feel it’s needed.”
“I assume that, in the current situation, the Wizengamot would find it rather difficult to pass those particular changes,” he said.

Amelia shrugged. “As long as they are sticking to politics it’s none of our business.”

“And if they are looking for more direct solutions to their problem?”

She glared at him. “If they resort to committing crimes we’ll deal with them.” If they could - the Blacks had a reputation, and while Black abhorred his family’s views, Amelia didn’t doubt for a second that he was willing to use whatever secrets and items and spells they had gathered over the centuries to deal with a threat to himself.

“An attack on Black might cause the Resistance to get involved as well.”

She briefly closed her eyes. “Yes. We’ll deal with that if it happens.”

“Very well.”

“What are your dispositions for that muggleborn rally tomorrow?” Amelia hadn’t liked it when Cornelius had tried to meddle in her business when she had been the Head of the DMLE, but this was too important.

“With the numbers of qualified Aurors at my disposal, I can’t do more than send four of them to observe,” Pius said.

Amelia nodded - ‘qualified’ didn’t mean as much as it had once meant either. Moody had called it ‘able to cast a curse without hitting themselves’, in his last report before his death. “Keep an eye out for malcontents trying to disrupt the rally.” The last thing Britain needed was a clash between purebloods and muggleborns during such a public occasion.

Pius nodded at her, then left.

Amelia rubbed her temples once he was gone. Why couldn’t everyone simply follow the law?

*****

Kent, Greengrass Manor, February 19th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass stared at the leaflet her uncle had brought with him. She had known that the mudbloods wouldn’t be pleased about her acquittal, but this?

She dropped the sheet of paper on the low table and looked at her uncle, who was sitting on the armchair across from her. “What’s the Ministry doing about this?”

Astoria, who had tried to read over her shoulder, snatched it up. She barely glanced at it before gasping.

“Nothing.” Uncle Eric shook his head.

“What? They’re all but calling for my murder! Our murders!” She stood up, taking deep breaths.

“Technically, they’re just criticising the trial’s verdict,” he said. “They’re smart. They want to use your acquittal to pressure the Wizengamot into granting them political concessions. Given the speed with which those things appeared, I’ve no doubt that they expected the verdict and prepared in advance.”
“But…” She sank back on to the couch, shaking her head slowly, barely noticing Astoria gripping her hand. She briefly closed her eyes, forcing herself to calm down. She was the head of the Greengrass family. She had to keep her composure, for her and Astoria’s sake. “Will they succeed?”

“As expected, Black supports them,” her uncle said. She hadn’t missed his slight wince, though.

“And how much support does he have?”

He sighed. “Some of the … more impressionable members of the Wizengamot are faltering, and talking about making concessions to the rabble.”

Daphne pressed her lips together. “What concessions?”

“There was a proposal today to grant Potter both an Order of Merlin, First Class, and a seat on the Wizengamot.”

She nodded. That was to be expected - the vanquisher of Voldemort could hardly be rewarded with anything less.

“Appointed for his lifetime, of course. He is a half-blood, after all,” he went on.

“Yes.” Everyone knew that. “One seat won’t make much of a difference.” Potter wasn’t Dumbledore. He was the same age as herself, and apart from Black, he lacked any blood ties to the Old Families. And, she thought, he wasn’t even nearly as powerful as Dumbledore.

“Black said that Weasley and Granger should receive the same honours.” Her uncle’s wince was more pronounced this time, but that could be a reaction to Astoria’s shrill “What?”

“Three seats…” It still wouldn’t make that much of a difference, but the Weasleys were a pureblood family - technically, as the twins had emphasised - and both Weasley's father and brother were in the Ministry.

“Of course, the mere suggestion of Granger in the Wizengamot spelled the end of that proposal,” he said, “but I fear that some of your esteemed colleagues might believe granting Granger such a reward would defuse the situation with the mudbloods.”

Daphne snorted. That witch wouldn’t understand what an honour such an offer would be. She was far too radical even for a mudblood. Although, Daphne amended mentally, if those leaflets were any indication, then the mudbloods might have grown far more radical than she had previously thought. Or feared.

“You do not think that she would accept such a compromise?”

Daphne shook her head. “I don’t know.” She didn’t know how much Granger had changed in the war. Or Potter.

Looking at the leaflet, and at Astoria, who was now crying, she realised that there was a lot she didn’t know any more.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, February 20th, 1997

Hermione Granger felt as tense as before a battle, watching the crowd starting to gather. She wasn’t too nervous about the speech she would make, though, despite the potential danger of the crowd
getting out of control - she worried about the rally’s security.

They had chosen to temporarily erect a hall near the remains of the twins’ shop, close to the location where Voldemort had been killed. Thanks to Sirius’s help, they had a Thief’s Downfall installed at the entrance, which would take care of imperiused attendants, but the spells on the conjured walls were far weaker than she was comfortable with, and they would not hold up to a dedicated assault for long.

Even with Seamus and Tania up in the sky, providing cover and surveillance, and Louise and Justin manning the checkpoint, and the fact that most Death Eaters were accounted for, she didn’t feel very safe.

Most didn’t mean all. Remus hadn’t found Pettigrew, and no one had any idea of Rookwood’s whereabouts. He could have fled Britain, of course - indeed, Pettigrew had, last they knew - but she couldn’t afford to assume so. And even if neither was around, there were bound to be some sympathisers left. Or some of the purebloods forced out of the buildings the returning muggleborns took back. Although she doubted that an attack by those would amount to much.

She worried anyway. There was always the question of whether or not the Ministry, or elements of it, would try something. The Resistance had also taken other precautions, of course. Everyone was maintaining a Shield Charm. Transparent walls - she needed to procure some armored glass to study, so she could conjure a better variant - protected the stage on which she would be making her speech against curses cast from the audience. They had emergency exits prepared, and they were ready to conjure walls to contain Fiendfyre, for a time at least.

Still, she couldn’t help feeling that it wasn’t enough. Not if something happened.

She watched another group of muggleborns enter, drying themselves off after passing through the Thief’s Downfall. The idle thought that they hadn’t yet adapted the twins’ self-drying formula to the original crossed her mind, and she forced herself to focus on the matter at hand.

The makeshift hall was rapidly filling, faster than expected. She either had miscalculated the number of returning muggleborns, or their timing.

“This is a good turnout!”

She turned around and saw that John had stepped on to the stage without her noticing - sloppy of her. She smiled, though a bit weakly. “Yes. We should be able to gain enough support for the next steps.” If the muggleborns attending wanted to join a group mostly made up of teenagers and led by a teenager, she added to herself.

John didn’t show any such doubts. “Oh, of course we will! We’ve beaten the Dark Lord, and we’ve made the Ministry change course. Who else has done even nearly as much?”

“Dumbledore,” she said.

“Well… he’s dead, and he’s known to have been with us.” John grinned. “Don’t worry - they love us. And you especially.”

“Some of them might also have been hurt by our attacks,” Hermione said. “Knockturn Alley, for example.” That mistake still made her feel ashamed. To have missed that the explosion would throw up so much dust mixed with potions ingredients...

“I doubt that.” He shrugged. “That place has been neglected and the inhabitants harassed by the Ministry’s Aurors for decades. Compared to that, what we did didn’t really register much.” He
grinned widely. “The e-mails we receive certainly don’t mention it.”

Hermione doubted that anyone who was living in Knockturn Alley would even know what e-mail was, muggleborn or not. “Those who lost their lives or limbs would probably disagree,” she remarked.

Once again he shrugged. “Those are just a handful, at most. I don’t think many would support them even if they tried to raise a stink. Such things happen in war.”

That Hermione knew very well, though she still felt bad about her mistake. Nevertheless, she nodded - they had important tasks to do. “Alright.” She checked her watch. It would soon be time to start.

Then she heard shots being fired outside - a light machine gun and a rifle, both firing long bursts. Seamus and Tania, she thought.

Hermione was just turning to face the entrance, her wand in hand, when an explosion shook the hall, blowing one of the big doors open. The crowd started screaming - panicking, she realised. Wands were raised and waved around, and some were rushing to the exits on the sides of the halls. Others pressed against the transparent walls surrounding the stage.

She tapped her radio button, cupping her hand over her ear to be able to hear a transmission over the noise. “What’s going on?”

“Suspicious couple approached, and when stopped, threw a vial at us. They’re down, but Louise has been hurt,” Justin said over the radio. “As have others. About a dozen.”

“I don’t see anyone else approaching - the purebloods watching us have fled,” Seamus chimed in.

Sally-Anne, who had been at the back of the hall, was already rushing outside. For a moment, Hermione was paralysed - should she end the jinxes preventing magical transportation, and send the crowd home? Send them out, possibly into an ambush? The first attendees were already opening the emergency exits.

She clenched her teeth and cast an Amplifying Charm. “Stay calm! Someone has attacked the checkpoint outside and there are several wounded. Don’t panic - we have the matter in hand. Calmly leave the hall, and apparate home.”

People kept leaving, though not particularly calmly. Not all of them, though. One wizard waved his wand wildly and shouted: “Where are the bastards? Let’s kill them!” Others agreed, equally loudly.

The situation was rapidly getting out of control. She had to do something! Hermione pointed at the first wizard. “You! Go to that emergency exit! Once all who want to have left, close the door and watch it!” Stepping down from the stage at the side, where the walls had an opening, she pointed at two more. “You and you - help him!” She turned towards John. “Grab half a dozen and secure the other exits!”

“You!” She addressed the rest. “Follow me! People need help outside!” Belatedly, she realised that she should have asked for those with Healer or medical training first. But as the Major had told her - in such a situation, it was more important to give some orders at once, to regain control, than to worry about the best orders.

She reached the entrance, a flick of her wand pushing the half-open door out of the way, then winced at the sight. Behind her, others made gagging noises.

There was no crater in the street, so the explosion hadn’t been that powerful. But about a dozen were
strewn around, most of them bleeding and choking. Justin looked a bit banged up. And there were
two bodies riddled with bullets, on the ground in a pool of blood.

Sally-Anne was bent over Louise, frantically weaving her wand around, then stuffed a bezoar into
the former Hit-Witch’s mouth. “I’ve stilled the bleeding, but there was some poison too… and I don’t
have enough bezoars for everyone!” the witch yelled.

Hermione cursed under her breath before turning to the wizards and witches behind her. “Everyone,
grab one of the wounded and apparate with them to St Mungo’s!”

Two moved forward, each grabbing one of the screaming wounded. The others, though, hesitated.

“Move!” she yelled at them. Another witch obeyed, but one was shaking his head. “I never really got
the hang of Side-Along-Apparition!”

He wasn’t the only one, judging by the expressions of the others near him. Hermione refrained from
following the Sergeant’s example and cursing them out. Instead, she ordered in a clipped tone: “You!
Go inside and ask for anyone able to provide first aid or side-along-apparate someone to St Mungo’s
to rush to us here! Go!” With any luck, those who had evacuated wounded would return. She shook
her head and pointed at a witch. “You! Head to the next shop and use the Floo Network to go to St
Mungo’s. Tell them to send more help here!” She dug into her pocket to pull out her own spare
bezoars, handing them to Sally-Anne.

“Aurors coming!” Seamus interrupted her through the radio. “From the northern part.”

Hermione’s first impulse was to take cover and prepare an ambush. She managed to restrain herself,
though, and strode towards them.

“Hermione?” Tania said over the radio, just when Hermione spotted the red robes.

She pushed the button on her radio so the rest would hear and spoke before the apparent leader of the
Aurors could say anything: “Someone attacked the rally. There are wounded and poisoned there.
Give the poisoned your bezoars, and use Side-Along-Apparition to get them to St Mungo’s!” The
Auror blinked at her, mouth half-open. Hermione didn’t give her any time to think. “What are you
waiting for? There are wounded in need of help! Move!”

To Hermione’s relief, the Aurors - none of them looked much older than herself - didn’t question her
and started to run forward. She heard Seamus chuckle over the radio. “First time the idiots are doing
something helpful.”

She frowned, not that he could see it. “Keep an eye out for more suspicious people. We need to clear
the perimeter.” Unless this was just an ill-planned or spontaneous attack, there would be another.

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Hogwarts, February 20th, 1997

“While we were peacefully assembling to make ourselves heard, they tried to silence us with
violence. They failed! We will not be silenced! We will not accept being ruled by an aristocracy
based upon the very ideas the Dark Lord embraced! We fought for our lives, we fought for our
freedom, and if needed, we will fight for our rights! Democracy now! Blood doesn’t matter!”

Harry Potter closed his eyes, sighing, while on the wireless, Hermione’s speech was followed by
music. The news had spread quickly, over the wireless, and then through word of mouth, but not
many knew just how close they had come to a riot in Diagon Alley. Hermione had filled him in
through their mirror. If the Aurors had shown more backbone, if more muggleborns had wanted to fight, if Hermione hadn’t been listened to, or if there had been another attack…

“Merlin’s beard! We need to do something about the remaining Death Eaters!” Ginny, sitting in the seat next to him, said. “Not even the death of the Dark Lord stopped them - they’re still trying to kill everyone who opposes them!”

Harry started to shrug, then stopped. “We can’t do much about them. Those still alive are in hiding.”

“All of those on the Resistance’s list?” Ginny frowned. “Some of them are in the Wizengamot, like Runcorn.”

“That list included sympathisers too, not just Death Eaters.”

“Same thing,” Ginny said, scoffing.

“All of them will pay,” Neville added in a voice so low, even with the privacy spell active, Harry almost missed it.

“I think it’s more important to reform the Wizengamot,” Harry said. He wasn’t quite certain how he felt about Neville’s attitude, lately. He preferred it to Neville’s view of Hermione at the start of the war, but this felt like what what Dumbledore’s last message had been talking about to Harry and his friends.

“Well, I can’t do anything about that,” Ginny said.

“I told my proxy that he’s to support your godfather,” Neville said.

“Dad and Percy are doing their part in the Ministry,” Ginny added, glancing first at Neville, then at Harry.

“We use the Easter break,” Neville said. “We’ll be ready then. And the Death Eaters might have grown complacent.”

Harry thought that the Resistance would probably do something before that, if these attacks continued, which would drive most of the listed blood purists into hiding again, but simply nodded. Maybe the whole affair would be over by then, he thought, though he knew that was unlikely.

“Will you be getting your own seat in the Wizengamot?” Ginny asked after a brief lull in their talk.

Harry took a deep breath. “I don’t actually know. Sirius said that his remarks prevented a vote, and pretty much sent the whole proposal back to the drawing board.”

“The what?” Neville asked.

“He means that those who proposed it have to redo it,” Ginny said.

Harry nodded. “Sirius’s demand that Ron and Hermione be honoured too wasn’t received well. They might decide that they’d rather not grant me anything if it means the others get it as well.” It would be quite typical, he thought.

“Yes. That’s a common tactic in the Wizengamot,” Neville said. “If a proposal is popular, people try to add things that are not quite as popular to it - either to push them through as well, or to stop the proposal.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t matter much. The Wizengamot will be democratically elected soon
anyway.” Or there would be war.

“Will you run for a seat then?” Ginny asked.

“Probably,” Harry said. He thought the idea of being a member of parliament while he was still at Hogwarts was weird, but given his popularity, he could do a lot of good there.

And he didn’t trust many others. Not any more.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 20th, 1997

Sirius Black looked up from his book on dark curses when the fireplace in his home flared up. A moment later, Nymphadora stepped out of it, stumbling, but managing to catch herself before she fell. Sirius shook his head - the girl was still too clumsy.

She blinked, then stared at him. “Have you been waiting in the entrance hall for me?” she asked.

“The kitchen is occupied by Molly,” he said. The older witch was baking, mainly to keep herself busy, in his opinion - the news of the attack on the muggleborn rally had shaken her. She feared another war was about to start. “Let’s head to the living room. We need to talk.”

The metamorphmagus sighed. “I would have found you anyway - I have a message for you. Send for some food, though - I haven’t eaten since lunch.”

Sirius ordered Kreacher to fetch some leftovers from dinner - Molly had been cooking, and she always made too much - while the two entered the living room. No one else was there - Remus hadn’t returned yet, Arthur was still at the Ministry, Nymphadora’s parents had retired for the night already, and Ron was using the communication mirror to talk to Hermione in his room. “What kind of message?” he asked, taking a seat.

“Thicknesse took me aside, told me to tell you that Malfoy and Runcorn wanted to annul your pardon. Bones refused, apparently.”

“I wouldn’t know. Bones was unhappy about the fact that Hermione ordered an Auror patrol around. And that they listened to her.” She shrugged. “At least that’s what the rumours claim. Dawlish didn’t chew them out, though - he just told them not to take orders, but at the same time said they had reacted well to the situation.”

That sounded as if Dawlish was looking to reposition himself as well, Sirius thought. Unless it was a ploy. “What about the attack itself?”

She sighed. “The couple who attacked were killed, so we can’t interrogate them, but from what we know they had not been known as Death Eaters, or even blood purists. They hadn’t lost any family to the muggleborns either.”
“Imperiused?”

“It’s a possibility. We can’t tell for certain. But if they hadn’t been mind-controlled, wouldn’t they have waited to attack until they were inside the hall?” Nymphadora said.

“Not if they were spotted on the way,” Sirius said.

“How did they spot the couple anyway?”

He grinned. “They were dressed like purebloods trying to pass as muggles.” He had heard that from Hermione.

“Seriously?” Nymphadora stared at him again.

His grin widened, but before he could answer, she held up her hand. “No puns!”

He pouted. “It’s my house.”

“But it’s my sanity.”

“You’re not exactly a picture of mental health if a few puns endanger your sanity.” Good puns too!

“I’m half-Black, what do you expect?”

“Touché.” She had a point there - his family had a history of ‘eccentricities’. Like his late mother, and Bellatrix.

Kreacher arrived with the food. The little bugger was grumbling about having to serve a half-blood, or at least so Sirius assumed - the elf had quickly learned to keep his mutterings from being overheard.

“So,” he asked while she was starting to eat, “What’s the view in the Corps?”

He saw she frowned, briefly, before putting down her fork. “No one supports the attack. Everyone I have talked to knows that this could lead to another war.”

“And how many support the Wizengamot?”

She seemed to shrink a bit. “Bones is quite firmly stressing that we have a duty to the Ministry, and to Britain. The new Aurors seem to believe that too.”

“Would they fight for the Wizengamot?”

“No one wants a war!” She glanced at him, then stared at her food, stabbing it with her fork.

“But would they blame the Wizengamot or the muggleborns if a war happens?”

“Those with family ties to the Wizengamot would support it, but there’s not that many of them left. The others… hard to say. It’s not something we talk about.” She shook her head. “At least not many talk about that with me.”

That wasn’t a good sign. But maybe that would change, if Dawlish and Thicknesse were any indication. He nodded. “Try to talk to the ones who aren’t related to the Old Families. Well, not closely related.” A lot of purebloods and half-bloods were distant relatives of the Old Families. Relatives usually ignored, but in the current situation, even the biggest snobs would be trying to use that tie. Anything to remain in power.
Nymphadora tensed, then sighed. “I’ll try.”

He hid his smile. His cousin’s daughter was coming along, at last.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, February 20th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass stared at the wireless receiver. Someone had attacked the mudblood rally. She wasn’t certain if she should be happy, or terrified. That not everyone was rolling over in the face of their outrageous demands was a good thing, but if the war started again… she was certain that she and her family would be among the first targets.

“That should teach them that they can’t act so uppity!” Theo said, grinning widely. He either didn’t see, or ignored, the glance that earned him from Tracey.

“They died,” Daphne’s friend said. “Cut down by the mudbloods. And all they achieved was sending a few of them to St Mungo’s.”

“And they made the Resistance angry,” Daphne added.

Astoria, sitting next to her in their living room, lost her smile, and Daphne felt a pang of guilt. She suppressed it, though - her little sister needed to realise just how dangerous this could become. Before she did something foolish. Like Daphne.

Theo, though, scoffed. “There aren’t many of the Resistance left, and the rest of the mudbloods cowered in hiding until Potter killed the Dark Lord. Many of them will flee again after this.”

Daphne refrained from scowling at the boy. She didn’t particularly like him, and she wouldn’t have invited him, if not for the fact that the three of them hadn’t many friends or acquaintances left. At least none who wanted to associate with them right now. That didn’t mean that she wanted Astoria to listen to that sort of drivel. It sounded like what Draco had said. “They fled when the Ministry and the Dark Lord were after them. I don’t know if they will be that afraid of a few idiots with some Exploding Fluid.”

Theo’s grin widened. “They should be afraid. Now that they have crawled out of their holes, they are vulnerable to the same tactics they used against us.”

“What do you mean?” Tracey asked. Her friend had tensed up, Daphne noticed.

Theo glanced around, then bent forward, his elbows on his knees. “If the mudbloods can do it, we can do it better. Strike at exposed targets, then disappear. Sow terror until the mudbloods have been driven out of Britain again.”

“‘We’?” Tracey raised an eyebrow. “I’m not too keen on ending up dead like those two fools.”

Theo snorted. “We’ll be smarter. We’ll use mudbloods to attack.”

Daphne glanced at Astoria. Her sister was staring at Theo with rapt attention. Daphne frowned. “Have you forgotten what happened when we tried that with Draco?”

Theo glared at her for a moment, then started to smile again. “Draco was a fool. We’ll be more careful this time.”

“Really? So you know how we were found, and how to prevent that from happening again?” Tracey
shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Theo was frowning at her. “Someone must have slipped up. That won’t happen if we’re more careful. And we won’t even go near the mudbloods ourselves. We’ll send others.”

“Mudbloods?” Daphne asked.

“Or half-bloods, or blood traitors.” He shrugged. “Who cares about them?”

“The Ministry does,” Daphne said. At least they did now.

“They couldn’t find either the Dark Lord or the mudbloods; they are no threat.” Theo made a dismissive gesture with his left hand.

“I see that you have this all planned out perfectly,” Tracey said, sneering. “Like Draco.”

“And I see that you’ve become a coward who’d rather hide than fight for our rights!” Theo stood up, snarling.

“Theo! Tracey!” Daphne snapped.

The two turned towards her, and then sat down again. “Sorry,” Tracey mumbled. Theo simply nodded.

Daphne frowned. “Are you really willing to start a war? With the three of us?” She ignored Astoria’s “Four!”

“What choice do we have?” Theo said. “The Dark Lord is dead, the Ministry spent, and the mudbloods are trying to take over. Who else can stop them?”

“Do you really think you can stop them?” Tracey said. Daphne could almost see the scorn dripping from her words. “All you’ll do is make them hunt you down.”

“They’ll do that anyway,” Theo said. “Do you remember what happened after Grindelwald was defeated? What they did to his followers?”

Daphne had heard about that. France and the other countries had been quite thorough in their efforts to ensure that there wouldn’t be anyone left to continue in Grindelwald’s footsteps. Especially none of the mudbloods who had fought for him.

“Do you think the mudbloods have forgotten?” Theo scoffed again. “If we don’t stop them, they’ll kill us.”

Tracey sneered at him. “And you think you can stop them? Granger will kill you. Like she killed Draco. And the rest of our group.”

“The other countries won’t let the mudbloods take over Britain,” Theo said.

“They didn’t do anything about the Dark Lord, did they?” Tracey bared her teeth. “Do you honestly think they’ll dare go after Potter? The wizard who defeated the Dark Lord?”

“Potter’s no Dumbledore,” Theo shot back. “He’s just a boy.”

“The Boy-Who-Lived,” Daphne cut in. “The boy who survived the Killing Curse, won the Triwizard Tournament and was personally trained by Dumbledore to kill the Dark Lord - something Dumbledore himself couldn’t do.”
“That’s just propaganda!” Theo said, but his dismissive tone rang hollow in Daphne’s opinion.

“And he’s best friends with Granger, the purebloods’ bane,” Tracey added.

“That’s why other countries will support us. They don’t want another Grindelwald recruiting mudbloods to wage war against purebloods,” Theo said.

“As long as Granger’s not calling for mudbloods to rise up in Europe, the other countries will do nothing. The risks are too great.” Tracey sneered at him. “At most, they’ll send us some gold so we can fight and die for them.”

Theo flinched, and Daphne narrowed her eyes. “That’s it, right? Someone did talk to you!”

“Some people are concerned,” Theo said, glaring at her. “But they can’t intervene without causing an international incident. Not directly.”

She snorted. “How convenient.” Leaning forward, she met his eyes. “Did they ask you to ‘test’ Potter too?”

He flinched again. “Potter’s not our enemy, the mudbloods are.”

“They did,” Daphne said, looking at Tracey.

Her friend nodded, then turned to Theo. “You’re a fool.”

“At least I’m doing something, instead of waiting until they come to kill us all!” Theo stood up. “They’ll come for you, all of you!”

Astoria started to cry. Theo stared at her, then abruptly nodded. “I’ll take my leave. Think about this!”

He left while Daphne hugged her sister, trying to calm her down. Tracey busied herself by reading the latest Prophet until Astoria had stopped crying.

“What can we do? I don’t want to die!” Astoria said, sniffling.

Daphne caressed her head. “If things get worse we can move out of Britain.”

“And hope whatever country we’ll go to won’t send us back to appease Potter or the mudbloods after they take over Britain,” Tracey said.

Astoria started to sob again, and Daphne shot her friend a glare. Tracey flinched, and mouthed ‘sorry’. Daphne shook her head. They were all under a lot of stress, with the mudbloods crying for their blood, and the Ministry and Wizengamot wavering.

Unfortunately, Tracey was correct - if Potter and Granger took over, Daphne, her family and her friends would suffer.

And she couldn’t see a way out.

*****

London, East End, February 20th, 1997

“How is Louise?” Hermione asked as soon as she saw Sally-Anne enter the living room in their safe house.
Her friend looked tired, and smiled rather weakly. “She should be fine in a few days - the poison has been neutralised, and her wounds treated.” After sitting down next to Justin, and leaning against her boyfriend, she added: “She would be fine tomorrow, if we had taken her to St Mungo’s.”

Hermione knew that as well - or had expected it. “The risk that there’s some Death Eater or sympathiser left among the Healers is too great.”

“We took the other victims there,” Sally-Anne said.

“We couldn’t treat them all, and they’re not members of the Resistance,” Hermione answered. “I don’t think a spy would risk their cover to attack a random muggleborn.” Or so she hoped - Death Eaters were not always logical. Or sane.

Sally-Anne nodded, though probably more because she was exhausted than because she agreed. “Did you find out who attacked us?”

“The Ministry identified the dead. Purebloods, though they were not known as blood purists,” Hermione said. “They could have been imperiused - they certainly didn’t act like experienced Death Eaters. And Exploding Fluid mixed with poison is not exactly something normal wizards and witches have on hand.”

Sally-Anne sighed. “How did Mary-Jane react when she heard?”

Hermione winced. “Not well.” She glanced at Justin, but he was studying the papers in front of him.

Sally-Anne looked at her. “What happened?”

“She hasn’t left her room since she heard about this,” Hermione admitted.

“And no one went after her?” Sally-Anne sounded exasperated.

Hermione flinched. “We were busy. We had to talk to the other muggleborns who helped, make certain there wouldn’t be a riot - the Aurors obviously couldn’t handle one - and prepare the wireless broadcast.” And talk to Ron and assure him that she was fine, she added to herself, feeling guilty about being so selfish.

Justin nodded, then winced under Sally-Anne’s glare. “I’ll go talk to her,” she announced and stood up.

Hermione didn’t stop her, and focused on her notes again while her friend left. She had a contract to prepare so they could recruit more people without putting themselves at risk.

“You can’t do everything, you know.”

She looked up. John, the only other member of the Resistance in the room, was smiling at her. She shrugged. “I know that.”

“But you still feel you should.”

“Yes.” She should have sent someone after Mary-Jane. And been prepared better for such an attack. And have organised the response better. It certainly hadn’t been thanks to her that no one had died today. No one but the two attackers, who were likely victims themselves. John shook his head, and she frowned at him. “We need to learn from our mistakes.”

“Of course. But we shouldn’t wallow in guilt.”
She wasn’t. A good officer was most critical with herself, the Major had told her. “Did you set up a mailing list?” she asked, more to change the topic than because she needed to know.

“Yes. Though it will be of limited use, seeing as we’re about to recruit those on the list.”

“It’s not certain yet that we’ll recruit all of them. They might have stayed to fight, but that doesn’t mean they will make good recruits,” she said.

“If we don’t recruit them, will we keep them on the mailing list?”

“Probably not,” she admitted. Being refused entry to the Resistance could cause ill feeling - and potential spies or traitors.

“Did you manage to reach the Major and the Sergeant?”

“I did,” Justin said. “They should be back in Britain in a week.” Thanks to a generous offer of gold, Hermione knew.

“Should be fun, seeing others suffer,” John said, smirking.

She frowned. “We won’t haze them. And some of us will be joining them, to build trust and to help train them.”

He chuckled. “Then I guess we’ll get to see how much of a difference our experience makes.” He continued with a more serious expression: “Though they’ll be wondering just where we acquired such experience. And where the others are.” Those who had died in the war.

Hermione nodded. “In a pinch we can wipe their memories.” It would be easier if she could read their minds, but she wouldn’t be able to learn Legilimency in that time. She could ask Ron, of course, but…

“What about Ron and Harry?” John asked.

“What?” Had she spoken out loud?

“Are we going to recruit them as well?” John asked.

She bit her lower lip. Both of them would happily drop out of Hogwarts, if she asked, or offered - she knew that. But could she ask, knowing that?

“It would help with reaching out to the purebloods,” Justin said.

“Definitely,” John agreed.

“It might also damage Harry’s reputation,” Hermione pointed out. “They already claim that I control him with ‘my feminine wiles’,” she quoted the latest article.

Both boys snorted, and she frowned at them - she knew they didn’t mean it like that, and she knew she wasn’t ugly, but she certainly wasn’t a Veela, and she couldn’t help but have some doubts.

“They’ll try to wreck his reputation anyway, since he and Sirius support us,” Justin said.

“I know.” She sighed. “There’s something else, though. Chain of command.”

“Oh.” Justin rubbed his chin. “I hadn’t thought about that.”
John looked confused. “Huh?”

She sighed. “If they join the Resistance, then where would they fit in? Would they be like new recruits? I’d have to give them orders, too.” She wasn’t certain how that would work out, with either boy.

“I see,” John said.

“They don’t have to join us to train with us,” Justin said.

“If they don’t join, then how would it help us with the purebloods?” she asked.

“We’d still be working closely together,” John said.

“And it would help in a battle if we had trained together,” Justin pointed out.

Hermione wasn’t convinced that it would help against the Prophet’s lies, but if it came to a war, she’d prefer her best friend and her boyfriend to be as prepared as possible. Even if that meant neglecting their education for a bit. “I’ll have to sound out the others, though.”

“Seamus won’t mind,” John said. “Not after Diagon Alley.” She looked at him, and he nodded. “Trust me.”

She bit her lower lip, thinking, then sighed. “Alright. I’ll talk to them.”

She would make certain that they wouldn’t slack off their schooling, though. They could study with her for their exams.

Just like they used to, she thought, smiling.

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Dorset, Britain, February 20th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood flicked the wireless off when music followed the news. To think such noise was considered a hit these days!

He shook his head. His plan had worked, after a fashion. A dozen mudbloods in St Mungo’s, but the only fatalities had been his two tools, and there hadn’t been a riot, as he had hoped. Maybe he should have had more attackers, but two had already been pushing it with the Imperius. Or maybe he should have used a more effective poison. But if he had used some of his special stash, then Bones would have known that this had been a setup. Like this, she would at best have some suspicion - Exploding Fluid and Amazonian Flying Viper venom weren’t exactly rare among those who brewed their own potions.

No, it was better if the Ministry didn’t know he was behind this - it would make it easier to make a deal, later. He could claim he had been afraid of the Dark Lord, and not in his right state of mind after Azkaban. It would be enough to serve as an excuse to grant him a pardon, provided he could create a cure for the Withering Curse.

Which might be a bit more difficult than he had expected, lacking the Dark Lord’s information. He might have to travel abroad to acquire the right tomes. Not that he minded that very much - it would throw the Unspeakables off his trail as well.

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Chapter 47: International Complications

‘The attack on the muggleborns’ rally was condemned by many as a despicable act and a blatant attempt to restart the war, although opinions differed as to whether or not the two conducting the attack had acted of their own free will. Whether or not the assailants had been victims of the Imperius Curse ultimately didn’t matter a great deal for it was certain that someone was willing to attack the muggleborns.

Their motivation, though, was not, at this point, as certain. Were they remnants of the Dark Lord’s followers? Or simply purebloods who’d rather fight than let the muggleborns take over Wizarding Britain? Or even agent provocateurs, to create an excuse for the Resistance to openly attack the Wizengamot? Many wizards and witches must have asked themselves such questions during those days when the country seemed to be on the brink of another war.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn


“You want me to train with the Resistance?”

Ron Weasley didn’t quite stare at Hermione, though his surprise must have been obvious, since she bit her lower lip before nodding. “It’s an offer to you and Harry. We’re recruiting more members for the Resistance, and it’d be a good opportunity for you two to get some training as well.”

Of course, it was an offer for both of us, Ron thought. “You want us to join the Muggleborn Resistance?” he asked, to focus on something else while he took another sip from the hot chocolate he had ordered in the café.

“Not exactly.” Hermione sighed and put down her own cup of tea. “If you two joined, the Prophet would write even worse articles about how I’m controlling you.”

“That’s just about Harry.” Ron knew that the only reason he was mentioned in those articles was because he was the one going out with Hermione - it added a scandalous note to the drivel.

“It’s not just about him,” Hermione corrected him. “It’s also an attack, although indirectly, against your father.”

He hadn’t really thought about that. After a moment, he slowly nodded. Such ‘scandals’ affected the whole family, after all.

“So, joining the Resistance might not be the best course of action. But if it comes to a battle, it’d be better if you knew how we fight,” she continued. “Safer.”

That was correct, though Ron wasn’t about to drop the topic yet. “But me joining you would also show that you’re not just about muggleborns, wouldn’t it?”

He noticed that she hesitated for a moment. “It might. But the purebloods we are trying to reach are those who believe the Prophet’s lies. And they are not likely to see it like that - they would probably see it as me ordering you around.”
He hadn’t thought about that, Ron realised. Hermione was the leader of the Resistance. If he joined her group, she’d be giving him orders. Not that that would be something new, of course, but still… “Well, it’d be like revision times for exams,” he said, with a slight grin.

That earned him a glare and a frown, though he thought she was blushing a little as well. “It’s not quite like that!” she said, with a huff, before growing serious. “It’s… giving orders in battle…” she shook her head.

He understood, or thought he did.

“It’s also that even if I don’t treat you any differently, people might not believe that. Others in the Resistance, I mean,” she went on. With a frown, she added: “Some people think a girl will do anything for a boy.”

“They don’t know you, then.”

“Yes.” She took a sip from her tea, then frowned, and used her wand to reheat it.

Ron glanced around out of reflex - his mum had drilled into him and his siblings how to hide magic since they could walk - but their privacy spells were working perfectly.

“But our new recruits won’t know me,” Hermione said after another, apparently more satisfying, sip. “I’d rather not have them trying to curry favour like that.” She pressed her lips together before continuing. “Allan was bad enough.”

Ron scowled. He hadn’t liked that … scumbag … since their first meeting, but to know what the git had done… He shook his head.

“But there’s also your education to consider,” Hermione said after a brief moment of silence. “Taking off for a few weeks…” she winced.

He chuckled. “We’re in our sixth year. That’s just the breather between O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.” When he saw her frown, he reached out and took her hand. “Besides, you can make us study better than most teachers.” She snorted. “And,” he said, smiling, “you’re not going back to Hogwarts at all.”

She winced again. “There’s too much to do. Voldemort’s dead, but the Wizengamot hasn’t really changed. The Ministry’s set on rebuilding a flawed, failed system…”

He nodded. “I know. School feels… less important.”

“It is important. Education is important for your future. Our future.”

He cocked his head sideways, then smiled again. She didn’t sound quite as passionate as she used to when talking about homework. “Not as important as saving the country.” He paused for a moment. “We can study and learn outside Hogwarts, can’t we?” They hadn’t learned most of what had saved their lives and helped win the war in school, after all.

He shook his head. “It might be better, even. It’s hard to take Hogwarts that seriously, at least the rules, after we fought a war. Imagine getting detention for breaking curfew… We have fought Death Eaters, we have killed, and they expect us to care about some silly school rules made for kids?”

She looked guilty for a moment, but also wistful, then nodded. “Yes. It would feel weird, being a student again. At school, at least. It might be different if it was a university.”
“University?” Ron had heard the term before.

“The muggle… well, it’s a sort of school after school. For adults. You only visit it for the lessons, and for the library, but you live on your own, or with your family.”

That sounded, well, like a school. He said so.

She sighed. “It’s ‘higher education’, needed to get the qualifications for the best-paid positions. Wizarding Britain doesn’t have anything like it. Most graduates from Hogwarts become apprentices, or learn on the job.”

“Well, N.E.W.T.s are what you need to get the best jobs.” At least everyone said that. “So, muggles need longer to get their N.E.W.T.s?”

She frowned, then sighed. “In a way.”

He tried not to grin. “Anyway. I want to join your training. I can find an excuse for Hogwarts.”

“And your family?”

Now he winced.

“I don’t want to cause trouble between you and your family,” Hermione said.

He sighed. “I think with Harry’s and Sirius’s help, they’ll accept it. It’ll help keep me safe, after all. And I’ll be seventeen in less than two weeks.”

Hermione didn’t look like she was convinced, but she nodded.

And, Ron thought, if everything else failed, he was certain Sirius would help him out. Harry’s godfather knew what it felt like, splitting from your family. Ron wouldn’t like depending on charity, but he knew that he would like feeling weak and useless, staying at Hogwarts while his friend and his girlfriend risked their lives again, even less.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 21st, 1997

Harry Potter stumbled out of the fireplace in Sirius’s - his - home covered with soot, but he didn’t fall down. He was getting used to Floo travel - he was better at it than Tonks, these days.

Sirius was still chuckling, though, and the way Harry’s godfather made a point of vanishing the mattresses he had conjured only added insult to injury.

“Not everyone’s been using Floo powder since they were born,” Harry grumbled, cleaning the soot from his robes with a flick of his wrist.

“Hermione doesn’t stumble like that,” Sirius said, still smirking. “They’re in the living room.”

Harry glared at him as they left the entrance hall. At least he was the best flier!

“Harry!” Hermione stood up from the couch, where she had been sitting with Ron - not quite on his lap, Harry noticed - and moved to hug him.

“Hey!” Ron waved. He didn’t get up, though.
Feeling Hermione’s arms wrapped around him made Harry feel rather self-conscious. And jealous. But pushing her away would have made it awkward, so he did his best to return the hug until she pulled away. Which, he thought, happened a bit faster than usual. Or he was imagining it.

“So,” Harry said, taking a seat in an armchair while Sirius yelled for Kreacher, “What’s up? Not that I don’t appreciate the excuse to leave Hogwarts.”

“What’s happening at school?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. “Neville’s pushing for training, and half of our house is trying to join.” It was getting annoying, even though it was sensible, or should be, given the tense situation.

“Ah.” Ron nodded, then glanced at Hermione, who was biting her lip.

Harry narrowed his eyes - he didn’t like not knowing what they were up to, even though that felt petty and stupid.

Hermione took a deep breath - she was stalling, he realised, wondering why. “Well, we - that is the Resistance - wanted to invite you to train with us, and our new recruits, once our next training camp starts. Which should be soon.”

“Oh.” He blinked. “Boot camp?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded. “We thought it might be good for you and Ron to have trained with us, in case there’s another battle.”

“Should be fun!” Ron cut in, grinning. “Better than school, right?”

Harry chuckled while Hermione glared at their friend. Ron obviously didn’t know what boot camp was. Although, Harry thought, compared to training with Moody, it should be rather fun. However… “We can’t use magic during the training, right?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes. The two trainers will be muggle soldiers. Mercenaries. The same ones who trained us before.”

“Ah.” Harry didn’t have to think about it for long. “I’d like to,” he said. “Does that mean we’re joining the Resistance?”

His friends exchanged a glance again, and Hermione sighed and bit her lip. That didn’t look good in Harry’s opinion.

*****

“So, you’re going to be a muggle Hit-Wizard!” Sirius said once Harry’s friends had left - they were going on a date, before Ron had to return to Hogwarts and Hermione had to go back to planning the takeover of Wizarding Britain. By any means possible, Harry thought.

“Not exactly Hit-Wizards,” he said.

His godfather shrugged. “They fight and guard stuff. Sounds like Hit-Wizards to me, just muggle ones.”

Harry sighed - he was right, in a way. “Yes. It should be useful training.”

“In case we have to fight the Ministry and the Wizengamot,” Sirius agreed. “Not that either will be able to put up much of a fight.”
“Didn’t you say that the Old Families are hiring mercenaries?” Harry asked.

“According to Thicknesse and a few others, they are trying to hire mercenaries.” Sirius didn’t look concerned. “But they’re not going to be able to hire many good ones. Those who didn’t join the Dark Lord certainly wouldn’t join the Old Families. Or they’ll run should things turn ugly.”

“They could be hiring former followers of Voldemort,” Harry said.

“Certainly. But once again - the Dark Lord would have used his best wands himself. What’s left should be the dregs. Probably disgraced relatives of the Old Families, or similar.”

Harry wasn’t entirely convinced, but let the matter slide. He could ask Hermione for her thoughts on the matter later. Or rather, tomorrow - he wouldn’t want to disturb his friends during their date. Especially since he didn’t know how long they’d be out in London. Or if they’d be spending the night together. “So… how was the Wizengamot today?”

Sirius scowled. “Infuriating. A dozen idiots were trying to explain why you deserve a reward, but not your friends, without sounding like the bigots they are.” He scoffed. “And others think that it’s better to reward you than no one, not realising that this would just play into the hands of the bigots who want to split you up.”

“Even though, according to the Prophet, I’m being led by the nose by Hermione, and would therefore be her mouthpiece on the Wizengamot?” Harry shook his head.

“They don’t really believe that themselves. It’s just another lie for the gullible purebloods who still think the Old Families are better than everyone else.” Sirius snorted.

Harry frowned. “Don’t they realise that Hermione’s demands would grant them more power as well?”

“They’re too afraid of change - and many would rather be ruled by the Old Families, without any say, than see muggleborns on the Wizengamot.” Sirius snorted. “Small-minded bigots ruled by fear.”

That described a lot of people, Harry thought. Not just wizards - his relatives as well. “So… do you think you can make the Wizengamot see reason?”

Sirius shook his head, dashing Harry’s hopes. “It doesn’t look like it. Too many want to see you on the Wizengamot, for a variety of reasons, most of them stupid.”

“Great.” Harry scowled. “Now I have to consider how best to turn them down.”

“You might not want to turn them down,” Sirius said. “As the Boy-Who-Lived, and the wizard who defeated Voldemort in a duel, you could influence a number of the Wizengamot members.”

“It wasn’t exactly the kind of duel they think it was,” Harry grumbled.

“They don’t know that. Many see you as a second Dumbledore. We can use that to achieve our goals.” Sirius grinned.

Harry didn’t like it - it felt like lying to everyone, a bit like Lockhart - but if it avoided another war… He shrugged. “It’s not as if I could actually vote myself until I’m seventeen, anyway. It wouldn’t be much of a change to how things are - everyone knows you are my godfather.” Not to mention that it wasn’t as if he had any experience with politics, either.

His godfather smiled. “Oh, it would be different. It would be more difficult for the bigots to claim
you’re misunderstood, or manipulated if you have a proxy of your own.”

“Really?” Harry didn’t think so.

“Well… somewhat more difficult. After all, I have a certain reputation as a troublemaker and rogue myself.” Sirius grinned.

“Great. I have to enter politics because you’re not respectable enough?” Harry snorted.

His godfather laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. “Chin up! Just about every member of the Old Families would love to be you!”

“Well, I know better than them, of course.” His godfather grinned. “Though to be honest, it’s not that bad. We might even win without having to kill them all.”

Not for the first time, Harry wondered if Sirius was joking or not.

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Hogwarts, February 21st, 1997

Harry Potter returned to Hogwarts in a rather pensive mood. Taking a seat on the Wizengamot, joining the Resistance - though for training, only... He sighed as he entered into the castle proper through a side entrance. There was a lot to think about.

On the way to the Gryffindor dorms, he suddenly heard steps coming closer from ahead, around the corner, and drew his wand while moving closer to the shadows behind a suit of armour standing in an alcove. Not quite hiding - he wasn’t paranoid, after all. Just prepared.

The steps were odd, too - whoever it was wasn’t walking normally. More like… skipping?

A familiar blonde witch turned around the corner, and Harry relaxed, lowering his wand. “Hello, Luna.”

Others would have jumped, startled, Harry thought. Luna, though, simply stopped in mid-stride, her left foot raised, and turned her head towards him. “Hello, Harry,” she said in her usual tone.

“Have you already eaten?” he asked. It was dinner time, after all, and most students and staff would be in the Great Hall.

She shook her head. “I’m hunting Blibbering Humdingers. Today’s meal includes garlic and onions - and since they love garlic, but hate onions, I expect them to travel back and forth between the entrance and the Great Hall. If you skip in step with a goblin march, they get confused and lose their train of thought for a few minutes.”

“Ah.” Harry didn’t know what else to say - he had no idea if there even were such creatures, though he wouldn’t discount the possibility - he had seen weirder creatures and plants in school. “And have you had any luck?”

She shook her head. “No. You must have driven them off.” She put her left foot down carefully, then moved towards him, leaning forward and… was she sniffing him? Harry stared at her.

“Yes, as I thought.” Luna straightened up and nodded several times. “You smell like onions.”
He blinked. He had eaten some stew at Sirius’s - his - home, but did he really smell like that? “Ah… I’m sorry,” he said.

“It happens.” She shrugged, then smiled. “I’ll catch one next time. You didn’t know, after all.” She cocked her head to the side, her long hair falling over her shoulder. “What did you eat? It smells delicious, and I might like to eat it myself.”

“Ah…” he was repeating himself a bit much, Harry thought, but Luna had that effect on him. “I ate at … home.”

“Oh.” She pouted. “That’s a bit far to go to eat. And I fear I won’t get that meal at home. And I think the teachers wouldn’t be as understanding of such a trip if I undertook it. I’m not the Boy-Who-Lived, you know.” She nodded sagely, as if he hadn’t known that.

Although… Harry did feel a bit guilty - as the Boy-Who-Lived, and the Vanquisher of Voldemort, or whatever Wizarding Britain would settle for his new title, he was getting special treatment. And he hadn’t thought about how that would look to others. “I’m sorry,” he said - again. “I had to talk to Sirius. The Wizengamot might offer me a seat.”

“Oh? I hope it’s a comfortable one. Ask for a purple leather armchair, I hear they are the best!” Luna said. He blinked again, at a loss for words, until she giggled.

Shaking his head, he chuckled. “It’s just a farce anyway - I can’t vote until my next birthday, so I can’t even be a good mouthpiece.”

“I wouldn’t say that! I’m certain you’d be an excellent mouthpiece!” Luna said, nodding rapidly. “You did well in the interview, after all.”

Harry forced himself to smile - as might be expected, he had been coached by Hermione, but he hadn’t thought it was that obvious. And he hadn’t just repeated her lines, of course! “You know, I didn’t just read a script.”

“Mm.” She smiled.

“Anyway,” he said, snorting, “I’ll probably accept, if they actually make the offer. One more vote in the Wizengamot can only help things.”

“Yes,” Luna agreed. “Small things add up. Small minds as well, unfortunately.”

That summed up the Wizengamot perfectly, Harry thought. “I just hope it’ll be enough. The Wizengamot is proving to be rather stubborn.” And stupid.

“They are harboring the greatest Wrackspurt swarm in Britain,” Luna said.

“Yes.” Wrackspurts were the invisible creatures who entered people’s brains, if he remembered Luna’s descriptions correctly.

“Unfortunately, they won’t listen to us, and will not install Wrackspurt siphons in the Wizengamot Chamber,” Luna shook her head, looking rather sad. Then she brightened up and beamed at him. “But you can set an example, can’t you?”

Harry was quite tempted to ask his future proxy - he didn’t yet know whom he’d choose - to carry some siphons with them into the Wizengamot. But that wouldn’t help him change people’s minds on the more important matter of reforming the Wizengamot. On the contrary. Even if it would be very funny. “I don’t think it would help. We might have to wait with that until the Wizengamot is no
longer composed of such narrow-minded people,” he said.

“Oh.” Her face fell, and Harry felt surprisingly guilty. “That could take years!”

“Hopefully not.” If the Wizengamot proved to be too stubborn, the Resistance would take matters into their own hands, Harry knew. On impulse, he offered her his arm. “Well, let’s go ask the elves in the kitchen to make some stew with onions, shall we?”

“Haven’t you eaten already?” she asked - though she slipped her arm into his.

“I have. But I can keep you company while you eat, can’t I? A meal is more fun if you’re not alone.”

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded, and the two made their way to the kitchen.

*****

London, Soho, February 21st, 1997

Hermione Granger felt a bout of nostalgia as Ron and she entered the nightclub where he had taken her on their first date. Which had been back in November - barely more than four months ago, she realised. So much had happened since then! The Ministry wrecked, the Auror Corps bled dry, Voldemort defeated… She was glad the club hadn’t changed at all. Same decor, same prices, same music. Even the guests looked alike - as far as she could tell in the dim light.

They managed to get a small table - or half of it, the other half being occupied by two rather posh-looking girls who gave them the once-over when they sat down, then returned to watching the dancing crowd. Hermione felt slightly annoyed at the apparent dismissal, but then told herself to enjoy the evening. Who cared what two strangers thought!

While Ron fetched their drinks at the bar, she cast a few privacy spells and studied the crowd herself. She found her feet tapping in time with the music, to her surprise, before her boyfriend returned.

“Here!” he said, handing her a glass.

“Thank you.” She refrained from making a comment about how this time, they wouldn’t be interrupted by news of the attack on the Burrow. That too, was in the past. Although… “How goes the reconstruction?”

He shrugged. “They’re making progress, but it’ll take a while. Mostly because Bill needs to plan and set the wards - no point in building something just for the Death Eaters to tear it down again.”

Especially not with people inside, Hermione thought as she nodded. You couldn’t be too careful. It would have been different if they had chosen to relocate, but… the Weasleys had been living in Ottery St Catchpole for generations. They wouldn’t move. “Good.”

“How about your folks?” he asked, slipping an arm around her shoulders.

She leaned into him, enjoying the warmth of his body and the feel of his muscles. “It’s too soon yet to return to our home.” If things went wrong, if the Wizengamot wouldn’t give in…

He nodded. “Yes.”

Hermione sighed. As much as she hadn’t wanted to, they were talking about the war again. “Let’s dance!” she said, standing up and holding out her hand to him. He smiled as he took it.

She didn’t know the song that was playing as they stepped on to the dance floor, but it didn’t matter.
It was fast, and loud, and had a decent rhythm. And she felt good, dancing. She was too self-conscious to dance as if nobody was watching, especially since she knew that Ron was watching, but she gave it a good try. Good enough that she was feeling quite hot when the music changed to a slow song, and she found herself in his arms, gently swaying, her body pressed into his. She looked up into his face, smiling, and moved her arms up, around his neck, before their lips met.

She was feeling even hotter when they returned to their seats. Or their seat, as it turned out that they didn’t need more than one.

*****

Ron Weasley was both glad and sad that they were in a nightclub. It was great to see Hermione loosen up and enjoy herself, see her dancing and hear her talk about muggle drinks and fashion - though she could be quite waspish when discussing some of the girls’ dresses. Not as bad as Ginny, though. But when she was in his lap and he felt her body move while she grabbed her drink, when they kissed, when he smelled her, then he wished they were somewhere more private. Much more private.

He shifted his own body a bit, trying to get more comfortable, when he caught her smirking. Of course she’d know! He was tempted to pinch her rump in revenge, but refrained. As much fun as it was to tease her, he didn’t know when they would be able to go out again, and he wanted to enjoy the evening as much as possible.

If only the Wizengamot would give up! Then they would be able to do this every weekend.

“Stupid Wizengamot.”

“Hm?” Hermione pulled her head back and looked at him.

He realised that he had said the last words out loud, and winced. “Just… you know.” He shrugged. He didn’t want to put his thoughts into words. Wishing that the war, the conflict, was over so they could go out as often as they wanted? That felt rather petty.

She nodded, but didn’t say anything. But she leaned her head against his shoulder again. A year ago, that would have meant a faceful of hair for him. Not now, though - she still kept her hair rather short. He kind of missed her wild mane. Another casualty of the damned war.

He snorted. Now that was truly petty.

“Hm?”

“Nothing.” He smiled.

She narrowed her eyes, but once again let it slide.

She wouldn’t have done that a year or two ago - she hated not knowing something, anything. She had changed. They all had.

Fortunately, not always for the worse, he thought, as he held her and they started kissing again.

*****


Sirius Black caught his prey - not literally, even though it would feel good to change and bite the
man - right after the session in the Wizengamot Chamber had ended. “Mister Selwyn, do you have a minute?”

The older wizard obviously didn’t want to talk to him, but forced a smile. “Of course.”

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while, now,” Sirius said. “But this is the first session in a week you’ve attended.”

“Ah…” The man’s smile grew even thinner. “I was unfortunately busy at home. Family matters, you understand.”

Sirius nodded, though his smile was now closer to baring his teeth. “I do. In fact, I need to talk to you about a family matter.”

“Oh?” He seemed intrigued, but wary as well.

“Your son, Matthias, has apparently sold a shop in Diagon Alley to Melvyn Gibbons.” In fact, Sirius had seen the transaction papers in the Ministry archives. “A shop he acquired after it was judged derelict a few months ago and auctioned off.” Though, judging by the price the shop went for, the auction hadn’t exactly been a public one.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not familiar with my son’s business,” Selwyn said.

Sirius ignored his remark. “Strangely, despite being deemed derelict, it was sold for quite a tidy sum as a fully furnished shop to Mister Gibbons.” He smiled again. “It turns out the owner, a muggleborn named John Carrigan, had simply left it for a while, to go on a vacation.”

The other wizard was sweating now. “If there was a mistake in procedure, then that would seem to be a matter for the Ministry to correct.”

He was not wrong - but both of them knew that the Ministry wasn’t in a shape to handle such claims in a swift and thorough manner. And if the dispute went in front of the Wizengamot… Sirius’s smile widened. “Oh, yes. I already set things in motion. But I feel that it would be best, for the time being, to have all transactions involving that particular shop be reversed.” He leaned forward. “We both know what happened. In this regrettably tense situation in which we find ourselves, a conciliatory gesture would garner much goodwill from the returning muggleborns. Albus told me that you could be counted upon to do the right thing.”

Selwyn froze, taking a deep breath. “You…”

“Albus left me extensive notes,” Sirius said. “He used to say that for a well-prepared mind, death was but the next great adventure.”

The other wizard looked like someone had cast a Wasting Curse on him. He was pale and trembling. “I understand. I will talk to my son.”

“Thank you.” Sirius smiled, and handed him a slip of parchment. “This should allow you to reach Mister Gibbons.”

Selwyn took the small scroll as if he suspected it to be cursed, but nodded. “Of course.”

“I won’t hold you up any longer, my dear friend. I know you’re anxious to return home to your family,” Sirius said with faked joviality. “Good day.”

He kept smiling while Selwyn curtly nodded and walked away. One good deed done.
Hogwarts, February 24th, 1997

Returning to school hadn’t been as bad as Ron Weasley had feared. At least not the lessons. After a few weeks of convalescence, he was behind in some of his courses - not in Defence, of course, and some related areas in Transfiguration and Charms - but it was nothing he couldn’t make up in a week or two, if he applied himself. Or so he thought. In any case, it kept him busy enough not to be bored.

He wasn’t attracting too much attention either, not that he would had expected that anyway - he might have faced off against Voldemort, but Harry had defeated the Dark Lord in a duel, and Ron’s friend had been back at Hogwarts for a few weeks already. And he had been asked to tell his story a few times, both in the Gryffindor dorms, and outside.

Strangely, though, he missed the privacy and the quiet most of all. Sirius’s house was far smaller than Hogwarts, but he had had his own room there. And, most importantly, he had been reasonably safe there. Had felt so, at least. Here, though, he still drew his wand each time someone approached him.

Like right now, when he saw a witch walking towards the corner of the library where his table was. She might just be headed to the shelves nearby to grab a book, of course, but you never knew, so he tracked her with his wand under the table as she passed the shelves until she turned the corner.

“Hello, Ron!” she smiled at him. “Fancy finding you here.”

“She nodded, twirling his wand in the manner Moody had taught them, to make it appear as if he was just keeping his hand busy. “I’ve missed a lot of lessons.” He smiled politely at her.

“When you were healing from the Dark Lord’s curse.” She nodded gravely, as if that had been an impressive feat. Harry and Hermione and the muggle Healers had saved him. Ron had done nothing. But that wasn’t something he felt like sharing, so he agreed. “Yes. It couldn’t be healed with magic.” The Healers were not certain if the area around the wound would stay resistant to magic, but that was none of her business.

“Did it leave a scar?” Lavender sat down on the table and leaned towards him. “Like Harry’s?”

He snorted. He had a scar, but it wasn’t like Harry’s. “It’s a normal scar. Many muggles have one like it.” So he had been informed by Hermione.

“Oh.” She sounded taken aback, then smiled again. “Still, it’s like you were marked by the Dark Lord.”

Ron almost frowned. He wasn’t Harry. And he didn’t want to be Harry. He shrugged. “Not quite like that. I’m glad it’s healed, though.”

“And glad to be back at Hogwarts?” Lavender’s smile grew. “We missed you.”

“Yes,” he said. It wasn’t quite a lie. Though he would rather be with Hermione. Which he’d be, soon enough, once training started. Provided he was fully healed by then. Which was why he wouldn’t be playing Quidditch yet.
“Will...” She licked her lips. “Will Hermione return to Hogwarts as well? For the next year? Or Seamus?” she added.

“It’s not certain,” he said. “Things have changed. People have changed. There’s so much to do still.” He smiled, remembering Hermione’s face when she had talked about her plans. So passionate.

“Ah.”

“Hm?” He looked at her and noticed that Lavender’s smile had slipped some.

“Nothing.” She smiled again, but it looked rather forced. “You two are still together?”

“Yes.”

“I could tell from the way you looked when you were thinking of her.”

“Oh.” He needed to work on that, then - what good was Occlumency if people could read him like that?

“It’s not a bad thing, it’s romantic!” Lavender pouted. She must have read him again.

He really needed to work on that.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 25th, 1997

“Moony! You’ve finally returned home!” Sirius Black didn’t quite tackle his best friend as soon as he stepped out of the fireplace in the entrance hall, but he certainly came close. After slapping him on the back a few times - as usual Moony didn’t stumble - he drew back and looked his friend over. Remus was looking… a bit worse for wear, but that was to be expected. It had just been three days since the full moon, after all. He was looking more depressed than usual, though.

“Hello, Padfoot.” Remus was shaking his head with a faint smile, before he grew serious - too serious, in Sirius’s opinion - again.

“Kreacher! Get Remus’s luggage to his room!” Sirius yelled, then started to drag his friend to the living room. “You’ll need a drink while I fill you in on what has happened in your absence!” Remus flinched, which Sirius ignored - his friend probably felt guilty for not being there to help. He was too responsible for his own good. “You’ve heard about the Dark Lord’s death, I hope.”

“Of course. It made the news in Europe.” Remus sat down in the closest seat. “How many of our friends died?”

Sirius hadn’t wanted to start with their losses - Remus would feel even guiltier - but he wasn’t about to deflect his best friend. He told him who had died.

“Moody died?” Remus was shaking his head, holding his second drink.

“Killed by the Dark Lord himself. Voldemort took me and Ron out as well, before Harry killed him.” Sirius winced slightly - he had been very lucky. “All in all, it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.”

“Too many died,” Remus said. “If I had been there…”

“You don’t know what would have happened. And you were hunting Wormtail.”
“I failed.” Remus put his glass down. “I lost his trail a week ago. I only found the remains of a ritual he had been preparing in Magical Bavaria.”

“A ritual?” Sirius leaned forward.

“Failed ritual, as far as I could tell from the remains,” Remus said. “Necromancy.”

“Oh. Failed as in…?” Sirius made a gesture mimicking an explosion with his hands.

“No. It looked like he didn’t really start it. He’s definitely still alive. But the trail went cold in Hohenschwangau.”

“Gesundheit,” Sirius said. His friend just rolled his eyes, though. “So, what are you planning to do now?”

“Find out in which country he is hiding, then go hunting again,” he answered promptly.

“Through a Seer again?” Sirius raised his eyebrows.

“Yes. It worked the first time,” Remus said, though he sounded quite defensive.

“You were told that he was ‘near the Mad King’s Castle’. That’s not exactly helpful.” Sirius wouldn’t have known which mad king the Seer had meant.

“It was helpful enough.” Remus narrowed his eyes.

Sirius sighed. “And if he’s hiding as a rat again? He spent a decade as a rat, remember? Odds are, he’ll do the same thing now, with the Dark Lord dead.”

Remus didn’t say anything, just refilled his glass.

“That wouldn’t be that bad, actually. Wormtail living as a rat - not as comfortable as he had done with the Weasleys, of course, since now people know about him missing a toe - hiding from us, and from any cats in the area…” Sirius forced himself to smile.

“He deserves death,” Remus spat.

Sirius would have agreed, actually - he wanted Wormtail dead, preferably at his own hand. That traitor had done too much to Sirius’s friends, and to Sirius himself. But neither he nor Remus could afford to waste their lives hunting Wormtail across the world. They were needed in Britain. So Sirius shook his head. “Death is too good for him. And we need you here.”

His friend looked at him. “Me? I’m just a werewolf without work.”

“Yes, you.” Sirius nodded at him and refilled his own glass. “Things are changing. Britain’s changing. And we need every good wizard to ensure that it’s changing for the better.” He stood up. “Think of the children. Muggleborns, half-bloods, purebloods, werewolves,” he added. “They deserve to grow up in a better country than we did.”

Remus stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. “I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

He grinned widely. “I’m always...”

Remus’s Silencing Charm cut him off before he could finish his favourite pun.

Sirius made a show of pouting while he dispelled the charm. “That was uncalled for.” Contrary to his
words, he was glad, though - Remus seemed to be feeling better.

“It was very much called for,” Remus said, grinning slightly, then raising his glass. “I’ll be staying then, for a while at least.”

“Good!”

“So… did all the French return to France?” Remus asked once both were seated again.

Sirius knew what he was really asking. “Vivienne stayed.”

“Ah.” His friend smiled. “Where is she then?”

“Learning how to cook British meals,” Sirius said. His friend looked surprised. “That’s what she said.” He shrugged. He suspected - and hoped - that his lover felt a bit territorial, and didn’t want to leave the kitchen to Molly. He noticed Remus turning his head towards the door. “Did you hear something?”

The door was opened a second later, and he saw Nymphadora enter. The metamorphmagus’s frown turned into a smile. “Remus! You’re back!” She nodded at Sirius. “Sirius.”

“Nymphadora.” Remus stood to greet her.

Sirius simply waved. “How’re the Ministry’s finest doing?”

She frowned at him, then grabbed a drink herself and sat down in the seat next to Remus. “Overworked as usual.”

“That explains why you seek solace in alcohol,” Sirius said, nodding sagely. Neither Remus nor Nymphadora laughed. If he had less confidence in himself, he would have thought he were not quite as witty as he was.

She sighed. “Bones has a meeting with Aubrey Fawley tomorrow.”

“Britain’s delegate at the ICW?” Sirius rubbed his chin. “I wonder what they are talking about.”

“I can’t help you there - it’ll be a private meeting,” she said.

Remus looked concerned as well. “Is it a routine meeting?”

The witch shook her head. “No.”

“Great. The last thing we need is international trouble.” Sirius shook his head. It could be nothing, of course. But he didn’t think so. Maybe he should ask Vivienne if she had heard anything from her family.

*****


“Mister Fawley has arrived,” Amelia Bones’s secretary announced.

“Send him in,” Amelia said, putting the latest report from Pius away.

Britain’s delegate at the ICW entered. “Hello, Madam Minister.” His smile was too wide for her taste. It fit a man who had been a diplomat and politician for most of his life.
“Mister Fawley. Please take a seat.” She gestured at the chairs in front of her desk. Once he was sitting, she continued: “You asked for a meeting.”

“Straight to the point? You haven’t changed.” He smiled, a bit patronisingly, or so she thought. He quickly grew serious, though. “There have been… concerns raised at the ICW that Britain could become unable to fulfill its obligations to maintain the International Statute of Secrecy.” He spread his hands. “Many seem very concerned about the horrible toll the war took on the Ministry.”

Amelia refrained from scowling. “The Obliviators were unaffected by the war and have continued to operate as efficiently as always. The ICW should know that.” Neither the muggleborns nor the Dark Lord had been so insane as to attack or hinder the Obliviators. Everyone knew how important their work was.

“They do.” Fawley smiled weakly.

“So, what’s this about then?” He hesitated, and she added: “Don’t tell me the official excuses and pretexts.”

He sighed as if it pained him to be frank and direct, for a change. “A number of countries want to test us. They want to know just how much we were weakened by Dumbledore’s death and the entire war.”

“As long as we fulfill our obligations the ICW has no mandate to intervene,” Amelia said.

“But they are allowed to inspect countries if they suspect that they are endangering the Statute of Secrecy.”

“A pretext to spying, then.” She pressed her lips together. The carrion eaters were starting to gather, hoping for an easy meal.

“That would likely be the main motivation, yes.” He winced, and shifted on his seat. Amelia hoped that he was more composed at the ICW.

“And who are the countries behind this?”

“Well, I haven’t been at the ICW for very long yet,” Fawley said. “So, my contacts are not as extensive as they could be.”

She rolled her eyes at his excuses. “Just tell me what you know.”

“France, Prussia, and Jamaica seem to be pushing for an inspection.”

“Jamaica?” Both France and Prussia had various ties to Britain, and the two countries had been the main participants in Grindelwald’s War.

“Yes, they are still blaming us, Britain that is, for the incident in their ‘Library of Souls’.” He grimaced.

“I wouldn’t have expected many other countries to support them.” Houngans were not popular outside their own countries, to say the least.

“I fear that most countries are unwilling to antagonise them for our sake. Some might even look forward to see how we’re handling them.”

Bloody cowards. “So, is there any chance to stop this inspection?”
“Not unless Dumbledore rises from the dead, Madam Minister.” He chuckled at his tasteless joke, then cringed when she glared at him. “Our influence has been greatly diminished by Dumbledore’s passing, and the news of the devastation the war has caused…”

“I am quite aware of this.” Although she hadn’t been as aware of how Britain’s international reputation had suffered. “Stall them as long as you can. We need more time to prepare for this ‘inspection’.” The last thing Britain needed was meddling foreigners.

“Yes, ma’am.”

At least he could take orders, she thought when she dismissed him.

*****

Kent, Greengrass Manor, February 26th, 1997

Lying on her bed and staring at the ceiling, Daphne Greengrass was starting to feel like a prisoner again. Apart from visiting Tracey and family, she hadn’t left her family’s mansion since her acquittal. It was just too dangerous, according to her uncle - mudbloods were crowding Diagon Alley, and forcing purebloods out of their homes under the eyes of the Aurors. It was a miracle that no one had been killed yet. Officially, at least - Daphne didn’t know how many had simply disappeared, either captured or killed. Like her.

Would they come for her? Would the Resistance blow up the manor, as they had blown up Malfoy Manor? Her uncle didn’t think they would, but… maybe they should move to the hunting lodge? Or to a house no one else knew? But that would mean abandoning what friends she had left.

A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts. “Yes?” she called out.

“It’s me.” Astoria.

“Come in,” she said.

Her sister opened the door, then slipped inside, quickly closing it behind her. Daphne was struck by how furtive it looked - as if her sister was hiding from someone. She sat up and looked at her.

Astoria fidgeted with her hands folded behind her back. “Daphne?”

“Yes?” Whatever it was her sister wanted to talk about, it must be important. At least for Astoria.

“Why don’t you want to help Theo?” Astoria ducked her head slightly.

Daphne felt anger well up inside her. “Has he been talking to you?” Her sister’s flinch was all the answer she needed. “That… that…” she spat out, seeking for the right word.

“I called him!” Astoria said.

Daphne gasped. “Why did you do that?”

Astoria bit her lower lip. “I am sick of being afraid. And he is the only one I know who’ll fight for us.”

Daphne controlled herself. It wouldn’t do to snap at her sister - Astoria didn’t know better. Even if she should. “He is a fool.”

“Why? Because he wants to fight the mudbloods?”
“Yes.”

Astoria gaped at her. “But…”

“I have fought them, as you know. And I was lucky to survive.” Daphne shivered, remembering the disastrous attack on the Weasley’s home. And the fight in the twins’ shop. And, worst of all, the Resistance’s attack on Draco’s home. “Theo is an idiot. The Resistance will kill him, and anyone who helps him.” The mudbloods were likely to kill anyone even remotely connected to the fool - like they had murdered Daphne’s parents for attending Malfoy’s ball.

“He says he’ll be more cautious. More careful.”

“He says a lot.” Daphne scoffed. “He thinks that if he stays back and uses others he’ll be safe.”

“Yes. If he doesn’t fight himself, and only uses pawns, he won’t get caught,” Astoria said, nodding.

“He doesn’t understand the mudbloods. They won’t care if they have proof or not - they’ll kill him. Or they’ll capture him and interrogate him.” She stared at Astoria. “They might do the same to us, since they know we were working with him.”

“But… they can’t know who is doing it!”

She snorted. “They’re not stupid. They’ll suspect him. And us.” The mudbloods might already think that Daphne and her friends had been behind the attack on the rally.

“But that’s not fair! We haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Of course it’s not fair!” Daphne reined in her temper when she saw her sister was crying. Standing up, she went and hugged Astoria. “We’ll get through this. I promise.” She suddenly had a thought. “Did he tell you who was helping him?”

“No…” Astoria shook her head, her chin brushing Daphne’s shoulder. “He just mentioned old family friends who knew how dangerous mudbloods were.”

That could be any pureblood family from the continent, Daphne knew - Grindelwald had used a lot of mudbloods in his war. “Promise me not to talk to Theo without telling me beforehand, alright?”

Astoria sniffled, then nodded. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” Daphne rubbed her sister’s back. She had to talk to Tracey about this.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 26th, 1997

Sirius Black knew something was wrong the moment Vivienne stepped into his, their bedroom. The Veela moved with her usual grace, but she was still wearing her dress robes, and her expression…

“What’s wrong, cherie? Trouble with your family?” he asked. She had been out to meet her aunt for dinner. Without him.

Vivienne sighed, then nodded.

He drew a deep breath. “They don’t like our relationship, I guess.” Sirius was proud of his reputation as a rogue in Britain’s society, but the D’Aigles might see things differently.

She shook her head. “Non. Not particularly, at least. They ’ave some concerns about your past, and
your political views, but overall…” She shrugged. “You’re rich, and from an Old Family. Ma mére said I could ’ave done worse, and mon père knows better than to try to meddle in our lives without a very good reason.”

Sirius wasn’t quite certain if he should be flattered. Her parents sounded a bit too much like his own. He shelved the thought, though. He still didn’t know what had upset her. “But?”

She took a deep breath - he was briefly distracted by what that did to her chest - and went on: “I was informed by my aunt that the Duc is interested in British politics.”

Sirius frowned. “Yes? I thought that was clear when he allowed the Delacours to help us.”

“That was a family matter.” She winced. “This time, it seems it is a political matter. There ’ave been concerns at the court about the direction Britain is taking.”

He blinked. “They are afraid of what the muggleborns will do?”

She nodded. “They trusted Dumbledore to, ah, ’andle them. But since ’e is dead, they fear that the muggleborns will become too radical. The Duc ’as mentioned Grindelwald, or so I was told.”

“Ah.” Sirius winced. That wasn’t good news. If France decided to support the Old Families…

“They want me to spy on the Resistance.”

Sirius drew a hissing breath. That was even worse.

Vivienne nodded.

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them that I won’t betray your trust, or your friends’, but… I will not be the only one they’ll ask.”

Which meant Fleur would be contacted as well. And maybe others.

He sighed. “We’ll need to discuss this with the others.” The Order. And the Resistance. Or rather, Hermione. And Harry.

She was still standing in front of the bed, but when he held out his hand, she took it and joined him on the bed.

That, at least, hadn’t changed.

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**Dover, Britain, February 26th, 1997**

Augustus Rookwood stared into the night, towards the coast of France. Less than forty miles. A short trip with a broom. Disillusioned, there would be almost no risk of being detected, especially if he made landfall a bit further to the north or south. It was the easiest way to leave Britain as a fugitive from the law. And the most logical.

Which was why he wouldn’t do it, of course. But the Ministry would assume he had left for France, once they received his offer and tracked the owl back. And even if they didn’t fall for his ruse, they couldn’t ignore the possibility. Which meant there would be a few more of the Ministry’s resources wasted on a pointless endeavour.
He levitated the cage containing the owl he had acquired up and stared at the bird. “Take this missive to the Ministry of Magic. Do you understand?”

The owl hooted and managed to sound indignant. He chuckled - post owls could be quite prickly - while he shrunk the scroll and tied it to the bird’s leg.

“Off you go!”

He mounted his broom and disillusioned himself while the owl circled around him, then flew away. As soon as the owl was out of sight, he apparated. It would take too long to fly to the port on a broom - he had a ship to catch after all.

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Unlikely Alliances

Chapter 48: Unlikely Alliances

‘To understand the actions of Magical France, Magical Jamaica and the other wizarding countries following the final defeat of the Dark Lord, one has to understand the effect Albus Dumbledore had had on the Magical World. For more than five decades, following his defeat of Grindelwald, he had been acknowledged as the most powerful wizard alive. In addition to that, he was the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards for a significant part of that time - as well as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot in Wizarding Britain. And unlike others who had held those offices before him, he had been willing to use his power to change the Magical World. While he hadn’t advocated his views concerning muggleborn rights quite as openly on the international stage as he had in Britain itself, he hadn’t left any doubt as to where he stood. Those countries who had taken harsh measures against muggleborns following Grindelwald’s defeat had soon reconsidered their policies, none of their governments being willing to risk provoking Dumbledore into taking action himself. For they, especially those countries which had been ravaged by Grindelwald, had been all too aware of what Dumbledore could have unleashed, should he have felt the need.

And so his influence had been quite keenly felt, even though he had rarely taken action himself - his actions against the Caribbean houngans as well as the Barbary Coast raiders being notable exceptions - and had equally seldom used the threat of force. Therefore, even those countries sympathetic to the Blood purist cause had restrained from providing support, much less intervening in the First Blood War. They followed that policy in the Second Blood War as well, although France semi-officially intervened on the side of Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix following the incident in the Bastille in 1996.

Therefore, it wasn’t surprising that after Dumbledore’s death a number of countries re-evaluated their policies - only to discover that while Dumbledore had been killed, Britain had not been left powerless.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Bexley, February 28th, 1997

Hermione Granger had dressed up again, even though her cover as Justin’s girlfriend, weak to begin with, was obsolete now that Justin and Sally-Anne were a couple. But as Justin had said, it wouldn’t do to appear poor when hiring mercenaries.

So she stuffed her hands into the pockets of an expensive and fashionable jacket while she and her friend made their way through the park. She gripped her wand with one hand, and a pistol with the other, of course - just in case.

When the two reached the meeting spot, a small café, she spotted the two mercenaries seated inside. Her Human-presence-revealing Spell didn’t show any hidden observers, and the other guests seemed harmless - a few teenagers, probably out of school a little early. Not quite as early as the beers the soldiers were drinking.

Justin held the door open for her as they entered, but then took the lead as they approached the two men. “Good afternoon, Major, Sergeant.”
“Good afternoon, Mister, Miss,” The Major answered while the Sergeant grunted.

Hermione nodded at them, then took her seat and cast a privacy spell under the table. She noticed the Major tensing up before he seemed to force himself to relax. So, he hadn’t forgotten. The Sergeant simply scowled, but that was his usual expression, as far as Hermione could tell.

After she and Justin had ordered - tea for both of them - the Major leaned forward. “You paid us quite generously to meet you.”

“Had to cancel another contract,” the Sergeant muttered before drinking from his beer again.

“Yes.” Justin nodded at them. “We would like to hire you as instructors again. Like last time.” He smiled. “We are quite satisfied with the training you provided.”

“The same group as before?” The Major set his glass down.

“No. Some of them will attend as well, but mostly to supervise the others,” Hermione said. “You will be teaching fresh recruits.” Justin glanced at her, but didn’t comment.

“The next year’s out of school already?” The Sergeant scoffed.

Justin shook his head. “No.”

As Hermione knew, they had recruited all the suitable students in their years. And some they shouldn’t have recruited, like the Creevey brothers. If she hadn’t let them into the Resistance… but they had fought well, too.

“The new recruits are generally a bit older,” Justin went on.

Not that much older, though, Hermione knew. They had picked younger recruits. Less set in their ways, or so they hoped. And also, more willing to follow her lead.

“How many?”

“About one-and-a-half dozen,” Justin replied.

Hermione nodded. They had contacted a number, and would look up a few more, but she didn’t expect to find many more she’d trust. Even with the amendments to the contract for the Resistance she had prepared. There wouldn’t be another Allan on her watch.

“That’s more than your first batch. You’re expanding.” The Major was glancing at her, Hermione noticed.

She inclined her head. “Expanding and replacing.”

“Haven’t heard anything about a bunch of English kids fightin’ a war.” The Sergeant had placed his beer down as well. “Not in Ulster, and not anywhere else. Not even from the cartels.”

“You wouldn’t have heard of it,” Justin said. He wasn’t quite admitting that they had been fighting, but he might as well have. But this way, they wouldn’t be breaking the Statue of Secrecy.

The Sergeant scoffed again, louder, and drained his glass. “As long as the money’s good, and no one comes after me…”

“They won’t.” Justin smiled slightly.
“You mean, they haven’t so far,” the Major said, staring at him.

“They’re not in any state to come after you.” Justin’s smile was more feral than friendly.

The Sergeant snorted, but the Major nodded. “Why are you expanding then?”

“It’s better to be prepared,” Hermione said. “If all goes well, there won’t be any action.” She shrugged.

She thought that the Major really wanted to ask what they had done, but the man simply nodded. “Same place as before?”

“Yes. We’ll send you a note when the camp’s ready. It shouldn’t take longer than a week or two. You’ll be compensated for the time spent waiting as well, of course,” Justin said, his upper-class accent in full force.

“Alright.”

Hammering out the details, especially the compensation the mercenaries would receive, took a little longer, but the deal was done.

The Resistance would be able to replenish their ranks.

Just in case they should be needed.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, February 28th, 1997

“You want to what?”

Ron Weasley didn’t flinch at the volume of his mum’s yell. He didn’t take a step back, either - he had faced the Dark Lord, after all. His mum’s temper didn’t really measure up. And he had expected that reaction.

“I said I’ll be training with the Resistance for a month or so.” He folded his arms and leaned against the counter in Sirius’s kitchen.

His mum stared at him, while behind her, the ladles kept stirring the pots on the stove. “You want to leave Hogwarts for that?” she asked after a second, not quite yelling anymore. “For her?”

“It’s just a month.” Maybe he should have asked Harry and Sirius to be there as well, but… he would be seventeen tomorrow. He wouldn’t hide behind others when talking to his mum.

“That’s a long time, so close to the exams.” She shook her head.

“I’ll be able to study with Hermione. And it’s just the sixth year, not the N.E.W.T.s.”

“You’ll also be joining the Resistance.” Her wand twitched, and she pointed it at the floor.

“No. Just training with them, in case the Old Families try something.”

“They won’t care about the difference.” His mum was no longer speaking loudly.

“They don’t care about the difference anyway. Thanks to the Prophet, everyone knows that me and Hermione are a couple.” He couldn’t help smiling when he said it. “Someone’s bound to come after
me to get her.”

She drew a hissing breath. “They can’t get you at Hogwarts.”

“I wouldn’t stay at Hogwarts if there’s fighting.” He met her eyes and didn’t look away. Not even when he spotted the tears. “And the training will help keep me safe, if there is another battle.”

She turned away, checking on the pots. Or acting like she was. When she spoke again, it was in a rather small voice - for his mum - and with her back turned to him. “Just like my brothers…”

He was tempted to say ‘and mine’, but pressed his lips together instead. He didn’t want to hurt his mum, but he wouldn’t let Hermione down.

For a little while, neither said anything while she kept checking the pots and seasoning the meal. Finally, she turned around again. “I know I can’t dissuade you from this.” She took a deep breath. “But I doubt that your teachers will be pleased.”

He shrugged. “What can they do? They won’t expel me for helping Harry and Hermione.” Well, they could, but they wouldn’t. Not after Harry had defeated Voldemort for good. He tried not to be too blatant about it, but they had to know he left the school whenever he wanted these days.

She was frowning, but didn’t contradict him. “If I didn’t know you’d do it anyway…”

Ron fought not to smile. He knew that tone.

“At least she’ll make certain that you keep up your studies.” His mum sighed.

He nodded. He had done it. If his mum agreed, his dad wouldn’t raise a fuss.

Suddenly, her eyes narrowed again. “But I don’t want any grandchildren yet. Not from you, at least. So you better make certain you’re…” She made a vague motion with her hand. “You know, use the potion.”

Ron blushed - he hadn’t thought that topic would come up. He coughed. It wasn’t as if they had made plans, but… there was a sort of understanding. “Of course,” he mumbled.

“Good.”

When she returned to preparing the meal, he all but fled the kitchen.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 1st, 1997

The tension in Diagon Alley had grown worse again, Sirius Black thought while he walked towards the Leaky Cauldron. There were fewer people out and about than during his last stroll, and many passers-by seemed to be in a rush to get where they were going.

It was, he realised with a start, about as bad as during the worst days of the war after Dumbledore’s death. Even the muggleborns were not out in force, and the groups he saw looked quite tense, as if they expected to be attacked any moment. Which was probably true, he thought - all it took was one Imperius Curse, and anyone could be forced to attack them. And that spell was quite popular among Death Eaters.

He suddenly noticed that he had passed Quality Quidditch Supplies without checking the displays - he was hurrying towards his destination as well! Sirius cursed under his breath, then turned around
and took care to study the line of discounted brooms. Or at least act as if he was doing so - he kept an eye on the Alley, of course, lest he fall victim to an attack.

No one else followed his example, though. Not even the shop’s owner stepped out to praise his wares.

*****

Upon stepping out of the fireplace in the Ministry’s Atrium and passing through the Thief’s Downfall there, he was greeted by Arthur. “Good afternoon, Sirius.”

Sirius raised his eyebrows. “Have you been waiting for me?”

The other wizard nodded. “I heard you’re meeting with Amelia.”

It seemed that the rumour mill was still the most efficient part of the Ministry, Sirius thought. He nodded and cast a privacy spell. “You are correct. Do you know what this is about?” It would have to be important to be called to the Ministry on a Saturday afternoon, and he hadn’t heard about any emergency.

“Only rumours. Amelia has met with Fowley again,” Arthur said as they walked to the lift.

“That means trouble with the ICW.” Sirius frowned. That body was dominated by pureblood governments.

“Not necessarily,” Arthur said as the lift arrived.

“Maybe it’s about the general mood on the street.” Sirius shook his head. “One attack on a rally, and everyone is back in the war.” He was, as well, though he was making an effort not to be. “I hope we can get more Thief’s Downfalls installed - or whatever the twins are cooking up. The people on the street need to feel safer.”

“Indeed. Though they won’t be completely safe, not ever. All it takes is one wizard in the Alley casting one spell and then leaving, and we could have a war on our hands, if worst comes to worst.”

“It’ll help some,” Sirius said.

“It’ll be expensive as well.”

“I’m certain the Wizengamot will finance it,” Sirius said. Skimping on public safety wouldn’t go over well with the public, and he knew how to spread the word about that.

Before they could talk more, though, they arrived on the Minister’s floor and Sirius had to leave the lift while Arthur travelled on.

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Amelia looked like always - tense, frowning and far too stuck up, Sirius thought as he entered the Minister’s office. He smiled widely at her anyway. “Good afternoon, Amelia!”

“Good afternoon, Sirius.”

Amelia’s smile was about as honest as a Malfoy, in Sirius’s opinion. But, as he nodded at Thicknesse, he had to admit, if only to himself, that she was brave - he wouldn’t have allowed a snake like the current Head of the DMLE to stand behind him.
Sirius sat down and leaned back in his seat. “I don’t suppose you called me here on a Saturday just to exchange pleasantries.”

Amelia’s smile vanished. “Everyone is working overtime in the Ministry to rebuild the country. Over the weekend as well.”

“Everyone but the Wizengamot,” Sirius said, baring his teeth. “Isn’t that interesting?”

She didn’t take the bait. “I’m not about to comment on the work of the Wizengamot.” She smiled thinly. “The ICW has decided to send a delegation to Britain, to ‘determine if the current state of Britain’s Ministry endangers the International Statute of Secrecy’,” she quoted, handing a scroll to Sirius.

Sirius skimmed it. It was full of the usual drivel from politicians, taking far too many words to say very little. “That’s the proposal.”

“We haven’t received the official note yet,” Amelia said, “but our delegate informed me that it was passed.”

“With how many votes?” he asked.

“It was a comfortable margin,” Thicknesse threw in. Sirius caught Amelia frowning briefly. “The European countries pushed for it, mainly France and Prussia. But Jamaica supported it as well.”

Which usually meant that many of the American Enclaves would have opposed it on principle, Sirius knew. But the proposal had been passed. He shrugged. “Payback for Dumbledore’s policies?”

“In part,” Amelia said. “Fowley told me that there’s widespread interest in the state of Wizarding Britain now that the war has ended.”

“The vultures want to know what we have left after Dumbledore’s death,” Sirius said, scoffing.

“Yes.” Amelia folded her hands and rested her chin on them. “I’m very much aware of the state of the Ministry, as I know you are, also.”

Sirius shrugged. She knew that the Order had quite a number of members and friends inside the Ministry. “So, the ICW wants to spy on Britain, and you want to spy on us.”

Amelia’s lips almost disappeared when she pressed them together before answering. “The ICW’s mandate covers the Statute of Secrecy, but you know that many countries are concerned about Britain’s muggleborns. If they think Britain’s weak, they’ll start to meddle in our affairs.” She smiled toothily at him. “I don’t think either you or the Resistance want foreign countries involved in our politics.”

She was correct, of course - apart from some small enclaves in North America there weren’t any countries dominated by muggleborns. And those were usually too busy fighting wars with other enclaves and some of the native tribes to get involved in international politics. Most countries were dominated by purebloods and not particularly friendly towards muggleborns.

Sirius stared at her. “And why would you oppose them? I’m certain that the Old Families wouldn’t mind foreign help.”

Once again, Thicknesse cut in. “Foreign intervention could cause the conflict between the different factions of the Wizengamot to escalate into another war.” He spread his hands. “There’s not much popular support for foreign Aurors and Hit-Wizards.”
“What you mean is that if the Old Families call for foreign intervention, they’ll lose what support they have among the gullible purebloods,” Sirius said, “while the war turns into a war against foreign invaders and the traitorous regime that called them.”

Amelia’s expression told him he was on the mark. The Minister glared at him. “Britain cannot afford another war, no matter what kind.”

“Tell that to the idiots in the Wizengamot,” Sirius shot back. “They’re trying very hard to start another war.”

“They’re not the ones threatening violence if their demands are not met.” Amelia gripped the edge of her desk with her hands.

“I think that this current crisis is an opportunity to demonstrate just how damaging a war would be to both the ICW and the Wizengamot,” Thicknesse said, smiling faintly.

Amelia glared at him, and for a moment, Sirius thought the witch would curse her subordinate. She controlled herself, though. “That’s a point to consider,” she said.

Sirius almost rolled his eyes. “I fear some among our esteemed members of the Wizengamot do not realise how much Britain has been changed by the war.” He chuckled. “They might not even be aware how much the Ministry has changed due to the losses during the war. So, what exactly do you want? A demonstration by the Resistance? They could blow up another manor.” When he saw the glares from the others, he grinned. “Consider it a last resort. Though I have to point out that I cannot speak for the Resistance.”

“I believe it would be sufficient to show the delegation that while we have our differences, Britain is not as divided as it may look to outsiders.” Thicknesse smiled. “It might be better if we let them wonder about exactly what the Resistance is capable of.”

Such a demonstration of unity would also undermine the position of the Resistance among the rest of the muggleborns, Sirius knew. That would have to be carefully handled. “That is true, but in the current situation, the muggleborns would need a few concessions, or they could cause trouble.”

“Are you trying to use this crisis to coerce the Wizengamot into giving in to your demands, risking a war?” Amelia sounded scandalised.

He was, actually - but it wasn’t as if he had a choice. “Have you walked through Diagon Alley lately?” Sirius snorted. “It feels like a cauldron on the verge of boiling over. The Resistance won’t be able to control everyone, and it only takes one idiot at the wrong place to start something.”

“The Wizengamot will not agree to the radical changes that the muggleborns demand.” Thicknesse said. “Not at the moment, at least.”

“Further, the Muggleborn Laws were repealed already, and the Ministry’s working on determining the compensation owed to the victims of those laws, or their abuse,” Amelia said.

“That’s simply the restoration of the status quo ante anyway.” And the muggleborns wanted more. “Of course, refusing to reward the Resistance for their actions in the war against the Dark Lord didn’t help.” Sirius grinned. “I believe I made a proposal to that effect, which was, unfortunately, not accepted by the Wizengamot.”

“You want the Wizengamot to award Granger an Order of Merlin,” Amelia spat.

“And a seat on the Wizengamot. For her, and for Ron Weasley.” Sirius’s grin widened. “A fine
gesture, showing that the Dark Lord was defeated by purebloods and muggleborns and half-bloods, all working together. Something to celebrate as well.”

Amelia looked like she had just discovered bubotuber pus in her tea. Thicknesse, though, was nodding. “I think with the added factor of the ICW’s inspection, and the damage and loss of face a riot would cause to Britain, those concessions would be acceptable to the more pragmatic members of the Wizengamot.”

“Great. I have to discuss this with Hermione, of course.” Sirius smiled.

Amelia clearly didn’t like that either - she would have to know Hermione would have a few more things to say - but she didn’t comment further. “There’s the matter of Harry Potter as well.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes. “Yes?”

“He defeated the Dark Lord in a duel and was personally trained by Dumbledore. That leads to certain assumptions,” Thicknesse said.

Amelia glanced at the wizard, frowning, then stared at Sirius. “How powerful is the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Sirius had expected that. “You want to know if he can serve as the next Dumbledore, scaring the rest of the world into leaving Britain alone.”

“Yes,” Amelia said.

And that also would tell her if Harry could scare the Wizengamot as well, Sirius knew. He shrugged. “He received special training to defeat the Dark Lord, but he doesn’t have Dumbledore’s experience.”

Amelia seemed to grind her teeth. “I know that. Everyone knows that. But can he stand up to the ICW?”

Sirius chuckled. “Anyone can stand up to the ICW. But making it stick?” He shrugged. “Harry’s very talented in Defence. He faced the Dark Lord multiple times in the past. He drove away dozens of Dementors with a single corporeal Patronus Charm when he was fourteen years old.” Sirius managed not to shiver when the memories of that night flashed before his eyes. He had come so close to losing his soul… He shook his head. “I think his Patronus Charm should impress the ICW delegation enough.”

“Could he duel some of them? An exhibition, perhaps?” Thicknesse smiled as if he wasn’t trying to find any weaknesses of Sirius’s godson.

He scoffed and deflected the question. “He’s no duellist. That’s not what he was trained for. He certainly didn’t kill the Dark Lord using tournament rules.” Sirius couldn’t tell if Amelia and Thicknesse believed his bluff, but they nodded. So he decided to throw a curving Quaffle at them. “You should also contact Aberforth Dumbledore.”

“Aberforth Dumbledore?” Thicknesse sounded doubtful. “The owner of the Hog’s Head Inn?”

Sirius grinned. Aberforth wouldn’t be happy about this, but he had to deflect the attention away from Harry. If others learned about the Elder Wand… “He faced the Dark Lord multiple times and lived as well. He might not be as famous as his brother, but he certainly has far more experience than most people know.”
“I see,” Amelia said.

Sirius wasn’t certain what she was thinking, but he nodded anyway. “Good. How much time do we have until the delegation arrives?”

“We need to be officially contacted, and then have to make arrangements. One week, maybe two if they’re not as prepared as they could be,” Thicknesse said. “Having a houngan among the delegation might cause some delays.” He smiled. “That’s another possible spot of trouble.”

Amelia scoffed. “We don’t know anything about what Dumbledore was doing before he died. And we certainly will not let a houngan roam Britain.”

Thicknesse didn’t look quite certain, but nodded.

“If that’s all…” Sirius stood up. “I’ll have to talk to Hermione.”

“No, there’s nothing else to be discussed right now,” Amelia said. Thicknesse glanced at the witch again, so he had probably expected her to mention something else. Sirius made a mental note to look into that.

“I’ll be off then.” He smiled and waved before leaving.

*****

Arthur’s office wasn’t as large as Amelia’s, but far bigger than his last one, Sirius noticed when he leaned on the doorway and looked inside. There were quite a number of muggle items spread around the office as well, but not as many as there had been. “Still working?” he asked as Arthur looked up.

The other wizard smiled. “As the Head of the Office of Anti-Curse Measures and Research, I’m expected to work hard on finding a cure for the Withering Curse.”

“I thought the Unspeakables had taken the lead there.” Sirius stepped inside and closed the door.

“They have.” Arthur sighed. “Even though they are also busy dealing with the Dementors. And my own resources are rather limited compared to theirs. I have set the researchers I can spare on it, for all the good it’ll do.”

“You don’t sound too optimistic.” Sirius leaned against the door and crossed his arms.

“Even though it sounds callous, the Withering Curse is not an urgent problem. Unlike the Imperius Curse. We should focus our efforts on improving our defences against that danger.” Arthur shook his head. “But the Wizengamot doesn’t share my opinion, not when they are safely behind Thief’s Downfall already.”

“I’m certain that the public will not be as understanding. They are afraid to step outside their homes and shops.” Sirius grinned. “Not even the Prophet might be able to keep a lid on that, if we present it just right.”

“We can reroute Floo Network traffic through checkpoints,” Arthur said. “That will make travel to and from shops take more time, but it’ll be safer.”

“Provided there isn’t a traitor inside the Ministry,” Sirius pointed out. That was one of the reasons they hadn’t instituted such a measure during the war. The other was that the traitors had opposed it as well.
“I think we’re rather safe in that regard, now at least.” Arthur smiled wryly.

Sirius wasn’t quite that optimistic, but most spies and traitors left would think twice about taking any risks with the Dark Lord dead. “I certainly hope so.”

“What did Amelia want from you?”

“She wants to present the upcoming ICW inspection with a united front - the Ministry, the Order and the Resistance,” Sirius said. “I told her that more concessions for the muggleborns are needed for that to work. Like rewarding Hermione and Ron with an Order of Merlin and a seat on the Wizengamot.”

Arthur seemed surprised. “I thought you just did that to annoy the Wizengamot.”

“Well, not just.” Sirius chuckled. “But every vote in the Wizengamot counts.”

“But…” Arthur closed his mouth.

“If Harry can have a seat, then Ron can have one as well.” It went without saying that Hermione should have one; the witch had clearly defined political goals.

“Today is Ron’s seventeenth birthday,”

Sirius remembered his own seventeenth birthday, and smiled. “An important date for a wizard.”

“Yes. They’ll be celebrating in the evening, at Hogwarts.” Arthur smiled as well, though his expression seemed a bit off. “For a change.”

“Ah.” Sirius nodded. That was what Arthur wanted to talk about. “He told you about the training.”

“He told Molly,” Arthur said as they entered the lift. “And she told me.”

Those would have been interesting conversations, Sirius thought. He had heard about the former, but not the latter. “I see.”

“Harry’s going as well, or so I heard.”

“Can’t separate them.” Sirius grinned. With a more serious expression, he added: “It’ll keep them safer than staying at Hogwarts.”

“I know. But I worry anyway. And not just about possible battles.”

Sirius frowned. “Harry’s not going to be joining the Resistance. And everyone already knows that he’s very close to Hermione.” The idiots reading the Prophet thought he was even closer to the witch.

“I didn’t mean that either,” Arthur said. “We’re pretty much united in our desire to reform the Wizengamot.” He took a deep breath. “Are you certain that there won’t be trouble with the three staying together for a month?”

Ah! Sirius understood, finally. He shook his head. “I doubt it. They are friends, and they’ve never had trouble being together at Hogwarts.” And there were plenty of witches around to take Harry’s mind off his best friends’ relationship.

Arthur nodded, but didn’t look completely convinced.
“So, do you think Amelia can push those concessions through?” Sirius asked.

Arthur rubbed his chin, then fiddled with a muggle pen. “Amelia? I doubt it. But Thicknesse can probably achieve it. He’s been cultivating his contacts in the Wizengamot, and as far as I know, he’s trying to keep his options open in case the Wizengamot surrenders.”

“Smart of him.” Sirius still wouldn’t trust the man. He was a typical Slytherin.

“And Dawlish is doing all he can to avoid any conflict between the Aurors and the muggleborns.”

“I’ve heard that as well.” Sirius grinned. “It looks like the rats are getting ready to jump ship.”

“Yes. But they won’t take sides until they are certain who’s winning.”

“Well… then we just have to make sure that they are certain.” Sirius grinned widely.

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“Stay a moment, Pius,” Amelia Bones said after Black had left her office.

“Of course.” He nodded, and moved in front of her desk.

She stared at him without saying anything, but his polite expression didn’t waver. “What is your game?” she finally said.

To his credit, he neither flinched nor tried to act surprised.

“We need Black’s support, and we need the muggleborns to be at least neutral,” he said.

“Not at any cost!” she spat. “They don’t want foreigners meddling in Britain either!”

“Black has less to lose. He has Potter, he has the Resistance, and he has half the Ministry and more than a third of the Wizengamot in his pocket. He can afford to make the Ministry look weak since the delegation will still be impressed by any show of force he can put up.” Pius shook his head. “I don’t like it either, but we’re in the weaker position.”

“He’s bluffing! If Potter was as powerful as the Dark Lord, Black would have used that already to take over the Ministry,” Amelia said. “You heard how evasive he was.”

“He might be bluffing - we don’t know for certain. And the ICW is unlikely to call his bluff.” Pius sighed. “Potter did defeat the Dark Lord. That is certain.”

“He was just Dumbledore’s tool!” Amelia had seen Potter right after the battle in Diagon Alley. That hadn’t been the equal of the Dark Lord, but a kid.

“Perhaps. But who can tell if he hasn’t retained whatever power or means allowed him to defeat the Dark Lord?” Pius shook his head. “And even if we could safely discount Potter, that still leaves the Resistance and the muggleborns on the street.” He placed his hands on her desk and leaned towards her. “We can’t take them. Not in our current state. Dawlish knows it, and you know it as well.”

Was Dawlish on Pius’s side as well? Ready to betray the Ministry? How deep did the rot go? She met his eyes. “We don’t determine the Wizengamot’s policies. We enforce them.”

“The Wizengamot depends on the Ministry. Without our support, they are nothing.”
“That’s coming close to treason.”

“It’s the truth, not treason. If the Wizengamot wants to wage war, half the Ministry will refuse orders and either hide or join the muggleborns. And the other half won’t last long against those odds.” He shook his head. “You have to face reality, Amelia: We are in no shape to win this conflict.”

“They’re weakened as well, and we’re rebuilding.”

“So are they. The muggleborns are recruiting and Black and Weasley are busy suborning the Ministry and the Wizengamot.”

“And you’re helping them!”

“I’m trying to save the Ministry from being destroyed in a war we cannot win. If that means making compromises and concessions, then so be it.”

“You’re trying to save your career.”

He shrugged. “I’m not about to sacrifice myself for fools who try to ignore reality.”

She knew he included her as well in that description and snarled at him. “The law is not something that can be bent and broken for your convenience. It’s the foundation of our country. If we choose which laws to enforce, and how, we might as well not have any.”

“If we don’t adapt, we’ll be swept away - including our laws. Which would render the whole point of enforcing them moot.”

She shook her head. “You should be on the Wizengamot with that view, not in the Ministry.”

“My family’s not old enough for that,” he said, smiling faintly.

“Is that the reason for your insubordination? Do you hope to become a member of the Wizengamot as a reward?” She leaned forward. “Was that your price? Or do you intend to become the next Minister?”

“I intend to survive this conflict, unlike so many others.”

He was lying through his teeth. She knew it. “Get out!”

He left, and she fell back into her seat and closed her eyes. Merlin, where had things gone so wrong? Pius a traitor, Dawlish in cahoots with him, or with Weasley… the Wizengamot split, and the Ministry suborned. Everything she had fought so hard to protect was being swept away by greed and opportunism. And everyone she had counted on was betraying her, or dead.

She stared at the message on her desk. It wasn’t the original, of course - only a fool would touch a missive from a Death Eater - but a transcription. An offer, from Augustus Rookwood.

*****

London, Newham, March 1st, 1997

“Hello, Tim.” Hermione Granger smiled at the young man sitting down across from her. The small pub they were in - one chosen at random - didn’t have that many guests yet, not that early on a Saturday. It wasn’t quite perfect for a recruitment meeting, but it’d do.

“Hello,” Timothy Meyers, muggleborn Gryffindor, graduated in 1991, said. “I usually tell people to
call me Tim, but you already did.”

“Tania remembered you,” Hermione answered the implied question. “You were the prefect who introduced her to Hogwarts.”

“Ah!” He smiled. “I forgot how young you all are.”

She had expected such a remark, and let her smile slip a little. “We’ve been through so much, we tend to forget it as well.”

He nodded, acknowledging the point. Or at least acting like he did.

“Why are you here?” She watched his reaction. He seemed confused by the question for a moment.

“To join the Resistance,” he said.

“And why do you want to join us?” She leaned forward, her arms folded with her elbows resting on the table.

“Because you’re the ones who beat the Ministry and the Death Eaters!”

She hid her frown. “Do you want to fight?”

He hesitated for just an instant, licking his lips. That could be a good sign. “I don’t want to hide again, if things turn out badly.”

He either wasn’t bent on revenge, or was smart enough to hide it. She couldn’t tell either way. Justin... or Allan? She couldn’t tell. But she hoped to find out at the training camp. People had trouble keeping up a facade when pushed to their limits. She made a mark on her pad. “Can you fight?”


“That doesn’t mean that much, given how much time has passed since then.” He hadn’t been an Auror or Hit-Wizard, but a clerk.

“I’ve been training since I went into hiding.” He had completely lost his slightly patronising attitude by now. “Just normal spells, though.”

“Normal spells?” She narrowed her eyes slightly.

Tim shrugged, the action a bit too staged to be honest. “Stunner, Shield Charm, Reductor Curse... no dark curses. No Unforgivables.”

“We’re not using the Unforgivables,” she said.

“Oh.” He bit his lip.

“The tactical advantages do not justify the strategic disadvantages their use would cause,” she explained.

“I see.” He nodded.

She hoped he did. The last thing they needed was another wizard who thought you had to be as ruthless and brutal as possible in a civil war. “We’ll be training a lot. Military weapons and tactics. Boot camp,” she added, with a grin as close to the Sergeant’s as she could manage.
His own smile was looking a bit forced by now.

“You’ll be expected to comply with the Geneva Conventions.” At least the core parts, Hermione amended in her mind.

“I’ll have to read up on them.” Tim smiled rather weakly.

“Here is a summary of the rules we adhere to.” She handed him a sheet of paper. “Also, we’re not a democracy. We don’t hold votes during a battle. If your leader gives an order, you’ll be expected to obey.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re expected to blindly obey.” An imperiused leader - or an Allan, she added - could do far too much damage otherwise.

Tim nodded again.

“Good.” Hermione considered the man across from her for a moment. “I think you’ll do. Drink up.” She checked her watch. If the next interview went as quickly, they could sign the contract early this evening.

*****

Hogwarts, March 1st, 1997

“Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to y....”

“Finite!” Ron Weasley spat while he flicked his wand. The enchanted snitch, caught by a spell, finally stopped its loud shouting and fell down to the ground, barely missing the bowl of punch on the table in the back of the Gryffindor common room. He shook his head. Trust the twins to manage to prank him even when they were no longer at Hogwarts themselves! At least it hadn’t been too embarrassing. And if they could take the time to prank him, they were doing well, which was a good thing.

“Moody would say you deserved that for being careless,” Harry said, handing him a wrapped package.

“I wasn’t careless; the twins were just too sneaky. Transfiguring the snitch into wrapping paper, counting on me to dispel it…” Ron eyed the gift.

“As I said, too careless for Moody.” Harry grinned. “Open it! It’s safe!”

“It’s from you and Sirius,” Ron said. “That’s not really safe.” He tore the wrapping paper away and opened it anyway - another prank wouldn’t hurt him. Then he stared, openmouthed. “A Firebolt?” he managed to say, looking at Harry, as he pulled it out of the enchanted box.

His friend looked almost embarrassed while the rest of the Gryffindors cheered. “Sirius said that you should have the best broom on the market, just in case.” He shrugged. “I know you might have wanted a Keeper’s broom, but…”

Ron shook his head, interrupting him. “No, no. A Firebolt is more useful. And I can play Keeper with it as well. It’s still better than most brooms.”

“But if you want to go pro…”
“I doubt I will,” Ron said. “It… doesn’t seem to be that important, any more, you know.”

“What?” Ginny sounded almost shocked. She wasn’t the only one, Ron noticed. “But you’re an excellent Keeper!” his sister said, loud enough to be heard over the murmurs filling the room.

“Not as good as Wood,” Ron said reflexively. That summed up his Quidditch career so far.

“No one is as good as Ollie,” Harry said. “But I know what you mean.”

He would, Ron thought. They had lived through the war together, after all. Ginny, though, was looking from him to Harry and back, before pouting. He was about to ask her what was wrong, maybe tease her a bit - she was the one who had helped the twins prank him, he was certain - but right then the door nearby started open, and he flicked his wand up in response while Harry took a step to the side, his own wand in hand. It was probably McGonagall, here to check up on them. They still hadn’t picked a new Head of House. He wondered how the witch was holding up, with her and Flitwick teaching Defence as well, until they could find a capable teacher willing to brave Voldemort’s curse.

It wasn’t McGonagall, or any other teacher. It was Hermione, clad in jeans, sweater and a short jacket. Ron blinked and lowered his wand while she looked around, a faint, almost shy, smile on her face for the few seconds until she spotted him. Then he was hugging her, and kissing her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked when they broke the kiss. It was a stupid question, he realised as soon as he had spoken.

She didn’t laugh. “You told me about the party, remember?”

He did. And he remembered saying that he’d rather spend the evening with her. “You said you’d be busy when I proposed skipping the party.”

She grinned. “I also said it wouldn’t be fair to your friends at Hogwarts to ditch them. Happy birthday!” she whispered, handing him a gift.

“Thanks. Did you plan this?”

She shook her head, then brushed back a lock of hair that had fallen into her face. “Not exactly. I finished earlier than I had planned.”

“Well, I’m happy you’re here.”

Her smile grew wider. He lifted his hand to cup her cheek when he noticed that Harry and Ginny were standing next to them. And that the rest of the room was right behind them.

*****

Sitting in an armchair in the corner of the common room, Harry Potter watched his two best friends dancing in the middle of the room, next to a few other couples. They looked happy. They were happy, he corrected himself. And he was happy for them. Mostly. It still hurt a bit, seeing them so close. Seeing her with his friend, and not with him.

He summoned another Butterbeer from the now quite plundered drinks table and frowned. He should be happy for his friends, not jealous. Hermione had made her choice. There were other witches, as Sirius had said to him numerous times. Well, Sirius had also said to him that teenage relationships might not last forever.
He shook his head and opened the bottle. He didn’t want to dwell on that. He was better than that. Or he should be.

“Hey!” Ginny sat down, or rather, threw herself in the seat next to him.

He nodded at her, glad for the distraction. “Hey. Nice party.” Merlin, he sounded lame.

She didn’t seem to notice, though, and simply nodded in agreement. “Yes.” After a pause, she went on. “Did you see how quickly the chocolate cake disappeared? It was one of Mum’s.”

That explained the second cake the house-elves had brought up, he thought. He had at first assumed there had been a mistake, but the little creatures were quite territorial.

“I’m glad Hermione made it. I think Ron would have moped, or even snuck out otherwise.” Ginny was looking at the couple, Harry noticed. Or in their direction.

“Yes,” he said. “I would have expected him to sneak out to test his new broom.”

She snorted. “That’s love for you. Even Quidditch takes a backseat.” Then she winced and looked at him.

He didn’t react to her words and took another sip from his bottle. “He’ll spend tomorrow on the broom, I guess.”

After a moment, Ginny relaxed. “You weren’t surprised when Ron said he didn’t want to go pro any more.”

Harry nodded. “I didn’t know that, but I understand him.”

“You’re not going pro either, are you?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“It’s the war, right?” She looked very serious, even anxious.

He sighed. He didn’t really want to talk about the war. But he didn’t want to watch Ron and Hermione kiss, either. “More or less, yes.”

“What…” She trailed off, biting her lower lip. Not like Hermione, just a quick nibble. “What do you want to do instead?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know yet. It depends on how things go at the Ministry.” He didn’t really have any concrete plans for the time after the Wizengamot had been reformed. But that would take quite some time anyway, even if everything went perfectly. Which wouldn’t be the case.

She huffed. “Like Charlie…” Shaking her head, she went on. “I’ll have to make up for all of you then.”

“You want to go pro?”

“Any reason I shouldn’t?” She was glaring at him.

He shouldn’t have been surprised, he realised too late - Ginny was a very good flyer. “No, no!” he quickly said. “I just… you never mentioned that.”

“We never talked about our plans for the future;” she said, then blushed slightly. “I mean, our
professional futures.”

“Yes.” They hadn’t talked that often at all, he realised. The silence between them started to stretch again. “How’s Neville doing?” he asked.

“Brooding,” she answered. “I’ve tried to get him to loosen up some, but…” She shrugged, frowning. “He hasn’t moved from his seat in an hour or so.” She motioned with her head to the corner opposite them, where Neville was sitting, alone, a bottle of what Harry thought didn’t look quite like Butterbeer in his hands.

“He doesn’t look very happy,” Harry said.

“No. But then, you didn’t look that happy either.”

He turned his head back to her. She flinched slightly, then raised her chin and stared at him. “You didn’t.”

“I wasn’t.” He shrugged.

“Well, are you feeling a bit better now? Or did I fail twice today at helping others feel better?” She pouted in an exaggerated manner.

He chuckled at her expression, and after a moment, she joined him.

*****

It was past midnight when Hermione Granger left the Gryffindor dorm with Ron. The party was still going on, but had quieted down a lot, with most of the younger students already in bed, and a number of the older ones having retreated for some privacy with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

Like Ron and her. Even if he didn’t know it yet - she had asked him to escort her to the tunnel that led to Hogsmeade.

“I’m happy you could come to my party,” he said, taking her hand as they passed a hallway. “Even though you have to leave early.”

She bit her lower lip, then cleared her throat. “I don’t actually have to leave that early.” That hadn’t sounded as smooth as she had planned.

Ron slowed down and looked at her, puzzled, before his eyes widened. “Oh.”

She nodded. “I just wanted some privacy.” Snogging in a dark corner in the common room wasn’t really private.

“Ah.” He smiled, then wrapped his arm around her waist. “And where should we go?”

She wanted to go to the Prefects’ Bathroom on the fifth floor. From what she had heard, it was a luxurious place, perfect for a rendezvous with your lover. And it would be empty at this time. But if they went there, Hermione wasn’t certain they’d stick to snogging. The temptation would be too great. At least hers - she wanted more. But she’d rather do that where no prefect patrols could stumble upon them, and where no others could track her on an enchanted map. Not for her first time, at least.

She almost shook her head at where her thoughts had strayed. “Let’s go to an empty classroom.” She knew that such things were traditionally done in a broom cupboard, but she didn’t fancy hitting her
elbows and knees on the walls while groping around in a narrow space.

He nodded, and guided her towards the closest one. A few spells later, the door was locked, and a desk in the last row had been transfigured into a loveseat.

When she left Hogwarts, it was closer to sunrise than midnight. And she had come very close to giving in to temptation. Several times, despite the somewhat lacklustre surroundings. Next time, she thought, there’d be no resisting.

*****

Kent, Greengrass Manor, March 2nd, 1997

“Hello, Tracey!” Daphne Greengrass greeted her friend in the entrance hall of her home. “I’m glad you could come visit.”

The witch snorted while she brushed soot off her robes with a flick of her wand. “It’s not as if I have a full social calendar these days. And I can stand my relatives for only so long before I get the urge to hex them.” She sneered. “All those sycophants, acting as if they feel sorry for me. They just want my gold.”

Daphne nodded. She knew what Tracey meant. “It’s still better than the alternative, though.”

“Which would be? Poor and begging myself?” Tracey snorted.

“Dead.”

Tracey flinched, then scoffed. “Anything is better than that.”

Daphne opened the door to her room. “I agree.”

Once inside, she cast a privacy spell, which caused her friend’s eyebrows to rise. “Don’t you trust your own family?”

Daphne shrugged and sat down on her bed, cross-legged. “I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Her friend joined her, facing her. “Words to live by. So… what secret are you about to share with me that your sister can’t know? Do you have a suitor, maybe?” she added in a fake joking tone.

“No.” Daphne shook her head. “It’s about Theo.”

Tracey closed her eyes and sighed. “Damn. I won’t like this, will I?” she asked, looking at Daphne.

“He’s a tool, and doesn’t realise it. An expendable tool. And he’ll drag us down with him, if we’re not careful.”

“Tell me something new. It’s not as if I’m about to join him in his suicide-by-Resistance plan.” Tracey scoffed.

“It won’t really matter if we help him or not; we’re linked to him, and once he is caught, they’ll come for us,” Daphne said.

Tracey balled her hands into fists. “I’m aware of that possibility. But what can we do? Hide? Emigrate?”

“Report him.”
There, she had said it. Daphne watched her friend’s reactions. Tracey’s eyes widened, she opened her mouth, then closed it again, and drew a hissing breath through clenched teeth. “That won’t go over well with the other families,” she finally said.

“They’re not exactly lining up to visit us, are they? They avoid us already.” Daphne sneered. “We won’t lose anything on that front.”


Daphne shook her head. There were too many spies inside the Ministry, both for the Dark Lord, and for the mudbloods. “No. I was thinking of Dumbledore’s Order.”

Tracey gaped at her, but it didn’t take her friend long to realise what Daphne was proposing. And even less time to agree.

*****

Atlantic Ocean, March 3rd, 1997

Augustus Rookwood flicked the wireless receiver off. So, the ICW was making its move. He stood up and started to pace - even with the help of Extension Charms, the cabin he had secured for himself on this muggle ship was small, and staying inside so he didn’t have to keep obliviating the muggles who saw him was proving to be a bit more stressful than he had anticipated. He hadn’t fully recovered from his ordeal in Azkaban, he had realised.

Fortunately, this news proved to be a good distraction. How could he best use this development for his own goals? He had left a couple of tools under the Imperius back in Britain which he would be able to order around with a simple message, so he had a number of options. But this would require careful planning. If the Ministry collapsed and the ICW moved in, he’d lose all his leverage - foreigners wouldn’t care about the victims of the Withering Curse.

On the other hand, this might be an opportunity to find out how the Boy-Who-Lived had defeated the Dark Lord. Augustus still had no idea how Dumbledore had managed to orchestrate that, despite all the precautions the Dark Lord had taken. And as long as he didn’t know what had happened he couldn’t defend himself against it either.

A quite intolerable situation.

*****
Chapter 49: Resolutions

'The Second Blood War is often cited as a defining moment for muggleborns in Wizarding Britain, giving them the impetus to organise and militarise as a group. However, most muggleborns only started to band together and prepare for war after the Dark Lord had been defeated and the Ministry’s forces were in no shape to credibly threaten the Order of the Phoenix and the Resistance. For all the myth of the brave Resistance fighters facing overwhelming odds that some of my colleagues still propagate, joining after the Battle of Diagon Alley was a rather opportunistic move.

But even among purebloods there were also a fair number of opportunists who abandoned their ideals once the numbers no longer favoured them - even among the Old Families. That the Second Blood War left Britain with only so-called 'blood traitors' and muggleborns is not quite the hyperbole one might think.'

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Hogwarts, March 4th, 1997

Sitting on his bed, Harry Potter stared at the wand in his hand. The Elder Wand. It wasn’t his wand, and yet it felt like it. Warm. Almost eager, even, as much as a wand could be eager. And using it felt… he took a deep breath. He knew the legends about the Deathly Hallows. About the Elder Wand, in particular. How it changed hands through violence and death. To wield the wand was to court death, as one sage had put it. Harry wouldn’t go that far - but casting spells with it felt a bit like cheating. Too easy by far. It was a tool that he shouldn’t use outside of emergencies, if he didn’t want to grow dependent on it.

But what if he used it for training, to learn new spells more easily, and then used his own, real, wand to train with them? Wouldn’t that be a safe way to wield the wand? He took a deep breath and shook his head, then threw the wand on his bed. Was it influencing his thoughts? Or was that just his imagination and insecurities talking?

Sirius had warned him about showing off the wand. If the news that that he owned the Elder Wand got out, far too many wizards and witches would try to take it from him - by any means possible. And that wouldn’t help with the current crisis: the ICW inspection. Or the spies, as Sirius called them.

Harry clenched his teeth. He didn’t like having to put on an act, but casting a Patronus Charm to impress their ‘visitors’ was a small price to pay if it served to make the other countries - countries ruled by purebloods who did not hold muggleborns in high regard - back off. Even if the whole act reminded him of the Tournament.

At least his corporeal Patronus should impress them - it certainly had made an impression on dozens of Dementors, three years ago, and he had improved since then. And, he added, with a glance to the wand lying on his bed, there were ways to make it even more impressive…

Once again he shook his head. The wand was known as Dumbledore’s wand. If he used it in public, rumours would start, some of them quite close to the truth. Sighing, he turned and sank on to his bed, the impact of his back making the Elder Wand bounce a little. How had Dumbledore managed this?
He snorted. Maybe he should destroy the wand. Then he wouldn’t be tempted to use it recklessly any more. But then he wouldn’t be able to use it to save his friends either.

And that was a price far too high for his peace of mind. He looked at the clock on the wall. Almost time for dinner. Sighing, he sat up and grabbed the Elder Wand, slipping it into his enchanted pocket, before heading downstairs.

****

“Hey, Harry!”

Harry stopped on the way to the portrait hole out of the Gryffindor common room when he heard Neville call out to him from the corner opposite the entrance. “Yes?”

“Do you have a moment?” The other wizard made a gesture with his hand towards the seat next to him.

For a moment, he hesitated. He wasn’t really in the mood to talk with Neville about training sessions. His friend had grown worse than Wood had been about Quidditch. On the other hand, he understood why Neville was so set on this, and Harry would probably not do anything differently in his place. “Sure.” He walked over while Neville cast a privacy spell, and sat down.

Neville pointed at a sheet of parchment on the low table between their seats. “I’ve been going over the list.”

“The list?” Harry picked it up. There were dozens of names on it, many of them crossed out. But a large number were still legible. What... “Ah.” He recognised it. The list of Death Eaters and their supporters the Resistance had distributed a few months ago.

“Yes. I was thinking…” Neville paused, then took a deep breath. “I was thinking that there are too many of those people still around. Free, I mean,” he added. “If they haven’t fled Britain, then they’re in hiding. But I doubt that they have cut off contact with their families.”

Harry nodded. Neville was a member of an Old Family; he would know that better than Harry himself. And Sirius had mentioned tracking the Death Eaters through their less incriminated family members - though it hadn’t worked out that well.

“So... Easter vacation is coming up at the end of the month. I was thinking we could be doing something about this.” Neville pointed at the list in Harry’s hand.

Harry licked his lips, glancing at Neville. His friend looked eager, but also nervous. Fidgeting in his seat.

“What do you think?” Neville asked, looking as if he was pleading. It was quite a change compared to his attitude during training. It made him look more like he had been before the war, Harry thought.

Easter vacation would fall right in the middle of the training with the Resistance, Harry knew. He wouldn’t be able to help Neville with that, even if he wanted to - and he wasn’t certain he did. Neither did he want to let his friend down, though. And if they were working together, then Harry would be able to prevent Neville from doing something they would all regret... He nodded. “I’m not certain that I can help you - there are things coming up I need to do - but I’ll put you in touch with others who have some experience with this.” Sirius, and the twins.

Neville smiled. “Thank you, Harry.”
“No problem,” Harry said, getting up. Despite his own smile, though, he felt guilty.

*****

**London, Diagon Alley, March 4th, 1997**

Amelia Bones stared at the crater left in the middle of the Alley. It wasn’t much to look at - barely deeper than the height of the cobblestones they had blown away. “Report!” she snapped at the closest Auror - a witch who looked as if she was barely out of Hogwarts.

“Ah!” The witch straightened up, almost coming to attention. “At half past six explosions were heard from this area, and the patrol on duty responded. By the time they arrived on scene, the perpetrators had already fled, and the wounded were being cared for by bystanders. From the witnesses available, we have concluded that the attackers were on brooms.”

Amelia nodded, forcing herself to smile at the Auror. For such a hasty deployment, it was a decent report. Especially in an area taken over by muggleborns. They wouldn’t be too cooperative with the Aurors, to say the least. “How many wounded?”

“That is unclear… we’re awaiting a notice from St Mungo’s, Ma’am.” Now the Auror sounded uncertain, nervous. “There were no fatalities as far as we can tell.”

Amelia nodded, then pointed her wand at the nearest crater and cast a few detection spells. “No spell residue… this wasn’t a curse,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. A few more spells. “Traces of Exploding Fluid.”

“Like the attack on the rally, Ma’am?”

Amelia turned to the Auror, who was still standing at near-attention. So, she was paying attention, although Amelia couldn’t tell if the witch was still keeping an eye on her surroundings. “There is a possible link.” Same means, same targets. Same lackadaisical execution. But there was one difference. “The attack on the rally was done by imperiused victims. They didn’t try to get away. This, though…” She looked up at the angled roofs overhead. “They cared more for getting away than hitting their targets. That doesn’t match. Analyse the fluid remains, and compare it to the samples taken from the rally.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” The Auror saluted, and Amelia chuckled. “Relax a little. We’re in the field.”

The young witch nodded, with a smile. “Yes, Ma’am!”

Amelia stepped around the crater and looked around. There had been multiple explosions, but there was only the one crater. Which meant that the other bottles had hit the roofs. She couldn’t spot any damage, though - it looked like the wards had held.Rubbing her chin, she pondered the issue.

After the early bomb attacks by the Resistance, all house-owners who could afford it had strengthened their wards. It wouldn’t have stopped the Resistance - it hadn’t stopped them, as their following actions had proven - but it had been enough to foil this attack. Lackadaisical indeed. It might have been a pureblood lashing out at muggleborns without much of a plan, just copying what had been done before. Or it could have been someone smarter, faking it. Maybe...

“Minister? Should you be at the scene of the crime?” Dawlish’s voice interrupted her thoughts, and she was frowning when she turned around to face the Head Auror.

“Is there any reason I shouldn’t be?” She stared at him, daring him to contradict her.
He didn’t cave. “There is your safety to consider.”

“I trust the Aurors securing the scene.” Her tone implied that he might not trust them. Judging by his expression, he had realised that as well. And so had the Aurors nearby.

He schooled his features quickly, though, and nodded curtly. “Of course, Minister.”

She was tempted to take over the investigation. Show up Dawlish and cut out Pius at the same time. It wouldn’t have been the first time a Minister had done such a thing. And she certainly would do a better job than anyone else.

But she was better than that. And she had hated it when Cornelius had tried to meddle in her department. So she nodded, and left. At least the Aurors would know she could be counted upon. She had a feeling that she could use any allies, no matter how low they were placed in the Ministry.

A quick apparition had her back in front of the Auror post in Diagon Alley, and a brief trip through the Floo Network later she was back in the Ministry. Back in the snake pit, she corrected herself, surrounded by schemers and plotters and criminals of all kinds, and most of them untouchable due to deals made under duress.

She kept a confident but polite facade up until she was in her office, then cursed under her breath while she sank into her seat. The stack of parchment on her desk had grown taller in her absence, but most of it didn’t matter and would not take much time to deal with.

Unlike the parchment in her pocket. Rookwood’s offer. She shouldn’t even consider it. He was a Death Eater, a wanted criminal - one of two members of the Dark Lord’s Inner Circle still at large. She wasn’t corrupt, unlike others. She wasn’t bending the law as she pleased. She should pass the message on to the Unspeakables, so they could try to find him through it.

Of course, as a former Unspeakable, Rookwood would have anticipated that, and would have guarded against it. So, she wasn’t hindering the investigation or protecting a criminal. She wasn’t doing anything illegal, or wrong. And his offer - the cure for the Withering Curse in exchange for a pardon - wasn’t really different from the way in which the Resistance obtained their pardons. Britain needed help, and the price for said help was a pardon.

But she didn’t want to let another criminal go free just for expediency’s sake. She ground her teeth. It was bad enough that that mass-murdering Granger would probably be sitting on the Wizengamot in less than a week!

Besides, the Unspeakables were working on finding a cure. Arthur’s department as well, and while she didn’t expect much from his people, if she put some pressure on him, he might get help from his friends in order to keep his position.

She shook her head. No, there was no reason to make another deal with a criminal.

She didn’t vanish the missive, though.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 4th, 1997

Ron Weasley sighed as he refilled his glass with some pumpkin juice in Sirius’s kitchen. The news that there had been another attack on muggleborns in Diagon Alley had put his family on edge, what with the twins having started to rebuild their shop. At least, he added with a guilty feeling, Mum was focusing on them for now. Which meant he and Harry were not being bothered yet about Sirius’s
other news. That he could expect to be awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class. And a seat on the Wizengamot.

Ron still didn’t know how he felt about that. It was nice, no, more than nice, to be recognised as more than Harry’s friend. Or sidekick. An Order of Merlin. First Class, even. None of his brothers had ever achieved that. Of course, he had thought about that when he had heard about how Sirius had derailed that Wizengamot session. But he had known it was just a political ploy. Now, though, knowing that it was almost certain that there would be a majority supporting the proposal… well, it still was a political ploy. But one that would lead to him sitting on the Wizengamot. Right after his seventeenth birthday. He sighed. He, Ron Weasley, sitting on the Wizengamot with an Order of Merlin, First Class before he had even graduated from Hogwarts! He chuckled. It made the dreams he had had in his first year of being Head Boy and Quidditch Captain look humble.

“Someone’s in a good mood.”

Ron whirled around, raising his wand before he recognised Harry standing in the doorway. “Ah.”

His friend shook his head. “Must have been a really funny thought if you didn’t notice me arriving.”

Was there a hint of jealousy? Ron wondered. Harry hadn’t really said anything, but maybe he thought that more had happened during Hermione’s visit to Hogwarts than what the two had done after leaving Ron’s party. It wasn’t as if Ron could just say ‘Hey, Hermione and I haven’t slept together’, out of the blue. He and Harry didn’t talk about that kind of thing. Not since Hermione had made her choice.

And they wouldn’t be talking about it this evening either. Ron shook his head. “Just thinking about the Wizengamot and the Order of Merlin. It feels…” he trailed off, grimacing.

Harry nodded. “I know what you mean.” He stepped up to the ice box and pulled out a soft drink - a Coca-Cola, Ron noted - from the stack Sirius kept for them. “Welcome to being famous!” he added, with a wide grin.

Ron scoffed. “Welcome to being a tool for politics, you mean.”

“That too.” Harry popped the can open and took a sip.

Ron emptied his own glass and refilled it. He had a feeling that there wouldn’t be much pumpkin juice in the future for him, not while training with the Resistance. He didn’t mind, much - muggle beverages were tasty too. He sighed. “I just feel… you know, like a fake.”

“You risked your life and earned that Order,” Harry said.

“Others risked their lives as well.”

“Not many of them faced Voldemort himself.” Harry didn’t have to add ‘and lived’, Ron was aware how many had died.

“Sirius and Aberforth did,” Ron said.

“And neither wants an Order of Merlin.” Harry shrugged. “I’m glad I’m not singled out.”

Ron chuckled. “You would be.” He quickly grew serious again, though. “But I’m still not looking forward to sessions. And I feel like a hypocrite, with the Resistance demanding an elected Wizengamot, and me getting appointed.”
“Hermione is getting appointed as well,” his friend pointed out. “And once the reforms are done we’re off the Wizengamot anyway - unless you want to run for a seat in the election.”

“Yeah, right.” Ron snorted.

“Hermione will probably run for a seat,” Harry said.

“Probably.” They hadn’t talked about that, but he agreed with Harry. That was just like Hermione. She wasn’t the type to leave others to do what she felt she could do. At least she wouldn’t… he blinked. “Merlin’s beard! She’s so going to make us run as well, so there’ll be two more votes for her proposals!”

Harry stared at him, then muttered something that would have earned them a scolding from Hermione.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, March 5th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass had to struggle to control herself as she walked down Diagon Alley. It felt as if everyone on the street was staring at her. At any moment, she expected someone to point their wand at them and cast a curse.

“We’re attracting too much attention,” Tracey, walking at her side, said. She was whispering despite their privacy spell. “They know.”

“If they knew they’d attack us,” Daphne whispered back. “We look like muggleborns.”

At least they should look like muggleborns. They had carefully transfigured their robes into muggle clothes, dyed their hair and even wore those weird colored glasses. They looked like the muggle girls in the magazine that they had bought in Buxton.

“No one else is wearing the same clothes as us,” Tracey insisted.

“Of course not, that would be a gaffe,” Daphne shot back.

“Muggles mass-produce their clothes.”

Her friend was correct, Daphne had to admit - they had seen a number of people wearing the same jackets. “Just act naturally. We’re doing fine,” she said. At least with the recent attack, there were other people out on the street who looked nervous as well.

And that reminded her that currently, she and Tracey would look like just another pair of muggleborns to someone like Theo. She glanced at the sky above them, and started to walk a bit faster.

*****

The Weasleys had been busy, Daphne thought. According to the Daily Prophet, Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes had been utterly destroyed by Fiendfyre in the Battle of Diagon Alley five weeks ago. The building in front of her showed no trace of that. It wasn’t yet finished - part of the uppermost floor and the roof were missing - but they had already replaced the gaudy shop sign, and started to furnish the interior.

Next to her, Tracey hissed. “They’re here.”
Spotting a few bricks sliding into place on the upper floor, Daphne refrained from stating that they had expected the twins to be here - that was why they had come to Diagon Alley, after all. They didn’t know where the Weasleys were currently living, and Daphne would rather not meet the rest of the family anyway - not after she had almost been killed by the trap at The Burrow. She shivered, remembering how the others had died. “Let’s go,” she said, walking towards the door.

In front of the door, she hesitated for a moment. She remembered the fight inside the shop. They were once again here in disguise. If the twins thought this was an attack… or wanted to claim they thought so… But there was no choice. If Theo had started to attack muggleborns, Daphne needed to do this, or she’d perish with the fool.

She took a deep breath and touched the door knocker with her wand - only to jump back in fright when she heard a wailing scream. It sounded as if a poor beast was being tortured inside the shop.

“Merlin’s arse!” Tracey cursed next to her.

Daphne muttered a curse of her own when the door was opened and one of the twins appeared. “Hello. How can I help you?” He was staying behind the threshold, of course - and therefore behind the wards - and his right arm was hidden behind the door - probably holding his wand.

Daphne carefully stashed her wand and pulled off her glasses. “It’s us.”

He recognised her at once - his smile vanished, replaced by a hard stare, and his wand appeared, as expected. “What do you want?”

He was probably Fred, Daphne thought. George hadn’t been that hostile the last time they had talked. Really talked. But that had been before their trial, too. She wet her lips. “We need to talk to you.”

His eyes narrowed. “We don’t want to talk to you.”

Daphne looked around, then said in a low voice. “It’s important. Please cast a privacy spell.” She was quite certain that if she drew her wand, it wouldn’t end well for her.

Probably-Fred didn’t react for a second, and Daphne feared that she had botched it. Then he pointed his wand at her, and she flinched. Was he…

The tip of his wand swung away, and she recognised the movements of a privacy spell before she sighed with relief.

“Talk,” he spat out.

“They plan to attack muggleborns and their friends. Someone’s backing him. He tried to recruit us, but we declined,” she said, talking quickly.

“He might have been behind yesterday’s attack in the Alley,” Tracey added.

“Aha.” Fred - she was now convinced it was him - didn’t look any friendlier. “And why are you telling us this?”

“We don’t know who’s backing him. If they have spies in the Ministry…” Daphne shrugged.

He stared at her, then at Tracey without saying anything.

“Who’s at the door? Did they deliver the shelves?” Daphne heard his brother ask from somewhere
behind Fred.

“Just two snakes disguised as muggleborns,” Fred yelled back without taking his eyes off them. At least he had extended the privacy spell beforehand, Daphne noticed with relief. She still felt terribly exposed, standing in the street in front of the shop.

“What?” A few seconds later, George appeared next to his brother. “Oh.”

“They claim Nott was trying to recruit them to attack muggleborns and blood traitors,” Fred said.

“It’s the truth.” Tracey crossed her arms and raised her chin slightly.

Daphne fought the urge to fidget when George looked her over. “That’s a new look.”

“It’s a disguise,” his brother said.

“We couldn’t walk over as we are, could we?” Daphne said. “Someone would either attack us, or warn Theo.”

“Or both,” Tracey added.

“It’s probably a trap,” Fred said. “Like before.”

“It’s not a trap,” Daphne insisted, shaking her head. “We’re done with the war. We don’t want any more trouble.” She hated how desperate she sounded, but if the twins didn’t believe them...

“And what do you expect us to do?” George asked. “If this is true,” he added.

“To deal with Theo before he kills anyone and gets us killed by an angry mob,” Tracey said. She was staring at the twins as if she was daring them to curse her.

“Of course they’re worried about their own skin,” Fred said, with a sneer.

George, though, chuckled. “Well, you’re honest.” Daphne saw him glance at his brother. “I think we should pass this on.”

He had to mean the Order, Daphne knew.

“Good. Tell them that we warned you. Please,” Tracey said. She was smiling a little.

It looked like they had succeeded. Daphne started to smile.

“Come back here tomorrow, same time,” George said.

“What?” Daphne stared at him, her smile gone.

He grinned. “Someone else might want to talk to you.”

Black. It had to be Black. The twin’s backer. Daphne had considered that possibility. It wasn’t a bad thing, actually - Black had a lot of influence. If they could make a deal with him... But Black also had a certain reputation. Both due to his family, and his personal history. He was not a wizard anyone wanted to cross. She and Tracey had no choice, though - they were committed now.

So she nodded with a faint smile. “Alright.”
“So, Greengrass and Davis don’t want to fight for blood purity any more.” Sirius Black rubbed his beard while he leaned back in his favourite armchair. “And they’re willing to betray their friend - former friend, now, I think - to save themselves.”

“That’s what they claim,” Fred said.

Those girls were typical Slytherins, Sirius thought. Always thinking of themselves. Although if that meant that the perpetrators behind the latest attacks could be caught, then that was a good thing. If they were honest. “What do you think?” He looked at George.

“I think they’re telling the truth,” the younger wizard said. “We know from when we interrogated them that one reason that they joined the Dark Lord was because they were afraid of muggleborns. Now with the Dark Lord dead and the Ministry in shambles, there’s no one left who could offer them protection except for us.”

“Protect them?” Fred scoffed, waving his empty glass around. “They’re Death Eaters! They’ll betray us as quickly as they are betraying Nott if they see an opportunity.”

That, too, was typical for Slytherins, Sirius thought. You couldn’t trust them. But you could take precautions. He grinned. “Well, if Nott gets caught thanks to them, and this becomes known, they’ll never be trusted again by the other Death Eaters,” Sirius said. It went without saying that it would become known. “They’d have to fear reprisals, instead.”

“That’s true,” George said, glancing at his brother. “So, are you planning to meet them?”

“Yes, I think so,” Sirius said. “Although not in your shop. A safe house with good wards and a few emergency exits, just in case, would be best.” He didn’t think the two witches were trying to set them up, but they could be the unwitting tools of someone else. Someone smarter.

“Is the Thief’s Downfall installed already?” Remus asked. Sirius’s best remaining friend had been quiet so far - too quiet, for Sirius’s taste. Remus was taking his failure to capture Wormtail too hard.

“Our version of it,” Fred said, “will be ready tomorrow.”

“Good,” Sirius nodded in approval.

“And what are you planning to do about Nott?”

“Well… we need him to find his backer. And they’ll be careful, and aware of the risk of him getting captured. That limits our options somewhat.” Sirius said. He grinned. “I think we will have to prevail upon those two witches of your acquaintance to lend us a hand.” He checked his watch. “We can discuss the details after dinner. Molly will be calling us soon.”

“Oh… another meal where ickle Ronnie’s praises are sung,” George said, though with a smile.

“You know, I thought Ron was the safe brother. No Head Boy, no Ministry employee, no star Seeker. The one Weasley Mum wouldn’t be able to compare us to, and find us wanting,” Fred added with a mock-pout. “And then he goes and not only earns an Order of Merlin, but a seat on the Wizengamot as well! So much for family loyalty!”

“It’s not certain, yet,” Sirius said, chuckling. “It’ll be decided on Friday. Although it is looking very likely that the proposal will be accepted.”
“Your proposal, you mean!” Fred said. “It was all your idea!”

Sirius grinned. “Yes.”

“Although I can assure you that Sirius never thought his idea would amount to anything, nor did he plan this,” Remus cut in. “It was pure, dumb luck.”

Sirius shot his friend a hurt look, but he wasn’t mad - it was good to see Remus ribbing him. Hopefully, his friend would get over his issues. At least he had accepted some money ‘for expenses’, and was now dressed nicely.

Remus was correct, of course - Sirius hadn’t expected his spur of the moment proposal to bear such fruits.

Not that he minded being proven wrong. Harry and his friends deserved this. And who knew? Their votes might prove decisive as well.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 6th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass wasn’t as nervous when she and Tracey approached the twins’ shop as she had been the day before, but she came close. Meeting Sirius Black wasn’t something to take lightly. He was the only wizard, ever, to escape from Azkaban without outside help, and he had broken into Hogwarts several times while it had been guarded by hordes of Dementors. Some people even claimed he had sold his soul for revenge, and this was why the Dementors wouldn’t touch him any more. That was rubbish, of course, but there was no doubt that he was a very powerful wizard. And he was a Black.

The building was still lacking a roof, but the floor seemed to be completed now. They had worked quickly. This time, there was no howling when she touched the door knocker with her wand, but some infernal noise - muggle music, she realised after a second. She had heard it before, when she had listened to the Resistance on the wireless.

Once more it was Fred who opened the door. He stared at them for a moment, then stepped to the side, motioning with his head for them to enter while he kept his wand trained on them.

Daphne refrained from glaring at him, and stepped through the door. Cool liquid splashed over her. Thief’s Downfall, she realised, gasping and freezing up for a moment while she remembered the last time she had been inside this shop, when the Polyjuice-granted disguises had been stripped off her and Tracey, and they had barely managed to escape the twins.

She controlled herself, though, and kept walking as the liquid dried off in less than a second. She wouldn’t give Fred the satisfaction of seeing her tremble. She noticed George as well, a bit further in the back, behind the counter, his wand pointed at her as well, though he seemed more amused than angry.

Behind her, Tracey hissed when she stepped through the door, and Fred snorted. “Too cold? We improved on the formula some. Unlike goblins, we don’t have a monopoly, so we prefer our customers not to be inconvenienced.”

Daphne didn’t deign to answer the mocking comment. Instead, she turned towards George, then looked around to see if she could spot Black.

George tapped the counter. “Your wands, please.”
Daphne clenched her teeth. Being told to hand over her wand was not just an insult, it would also leave her defenceless. But she had no choice. “Of course,” she said. She noted with a small amount of satisfaction that the twins tensed up when she drew her wand. At least they took her seriously.

She dropped the wand on the counter, with Tracey following her example. George cast a few spells at them and put them away in one of his robes’ pockets. That done he smiled and offered her his arm.

Daphne blinked, then understood. They’d apparate from here. “Are you that afraid of us?” she asked, stepping closer to the wizard.

“Not really,” Fred butted in. “You can be handled, easily. But you might have friends waiting to attack us.”

Tracey was frowning at Fred. Daphne couldn’t fault her - her friend would have to apparate with him.

“Not that we’re afraid of whatever friends you might have brought, mind you,” George said. “We’ve faced the Dark Lord himself, after all. But it’d be a bother to deal with another set of fools.”

Such arrogance! Daphne glared at him, but he didn’t seem to be impressed. His smile widened. Pressing her lips together, she slipped her arm into his. A moment later, she felt the familiar and unwelcome sensation of Side-Along-Apparition.

She pulled her arm back as soon as they appeared at their destination, then looked around. They were in a muggle flat; the furniture was telling. And there was Black, just rising from an ugly armchair in a corner.

“Good morning, Miss Greengrass,” he said, bowing with the grace expected of a Black. “Miss Davis.” He was wearing robes, she noted. Expensive ones.

“Good morning.” Another man had stood up from the couch.

Daphne looked at him, and froze. She knew that man. No, that creature - Lupin. A werewolf. She was in the same room as a werewolf, and without any means to defend herself!

“Good morning, Mister Black, Mister Lupin.” Tracey inclined her head.

Tracey was handling the situation much better than herself, Daphne realised. But then, her friend had had a crush on their third year Defence teacher. Until he had been revealed as a werewolf, of course.

“Good morning,” Daphne added, with a slight bow. She told herself that the full moon was still almost three weeks away. Lupin couldn’t transform. That didn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous, of course.

“Please have a seat.” Black flicked his wand, and two seats appeared opposite his own.

Daphne exchanged a glance with Tracey, then sat down.

Black sat down, rubbing his beard with his free hand. “Would you like some refreshments?”

It would be rude to turn the offer down, Daphne knew, and nodded. “Yes, please. Thank you.” Her smile froze for a second when Lupin stood up and headed to where she assumed the muggles had placed the kitchen. To eat and drink anything touched by a werewolf… she managed not to shudder by focusing on her anger. Black was deliberately making a mockery out of pureblood courtesy! And she couldn’t call him on it because she needed his help. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was doing this for her sister, and her family.
Lupin returned with a floating tray full of snacks, putting it down on the low table between them and Black. Daphne hid her revulsion and grabbed a small sandwich and a Butterbeer, then watched as Tracey, followed by Black and the others grabbed or summoned snacks for themselves. She didn’t want to eat, she wanted to get this over with and leave, get her wand back and go home. Instead she had to make brainless conversation about the food and drink.

“So… your friend Theo Nott is attacking muggleborns,” Black said, finally.

“He wanted to recruit us and hinted at receiving support from others. We don’t know for certain if he’s behind the attacks on muggleborns, but it might have been him,” Daphne said.

“Yes. He said he’d be more cautious. Using the Imperius to command others, and cursing people from a broom, then flying away before they can react would fit that,” Tracey added.

Black nodded, a faint, cruel smile appearing on his lips. “But you’re certain that he at the very least plans to attack muggleborns.”

“And blood traitors,” Tracey added.

Daphne glared at her friend. They had no wands! If they angered Black and the others…

Their host snorted, though, apparently amused. “Of course.” He shrugged. “Well, it’s enough to take action.” Leaning forward, his smile widened. “But you’ll be helping us with that.”

Daphne wanted to refuse. She didn’t want to be involved in the war any more. She certainly didn’t want to risk her own and her sister’s life to catch Theo. But she had no choice if she wanted to weather this. “Of course,” she said, with a weak smile.

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London, Soho, March 6th, 1997

Waiting in the café, Hermione Granger was nervous. Even though she shouldn’t be, since she had planned this thoroughly. She had done extensive research, with multiple muggle and wizard sources. She bought everything they might need, for any eventuality, and had placed it all in the hotel room she had rented for easy access. She had warded the room as well, just so they’d be safe. She knew she was ready, too - had been ready for a while, in fact. She was as prepared as she could be.

And yet, she was nervous. It didn’t make any sense. Ron wanted it as well. She knew that. She was certain that it would have happened last weekend, at Hogwarts, if she had asked him to. Or if she had transfigured the desk into a bed instead of a love seat. Or maybe just a larger couch - they certainly had come very close.

She blushed, remembering the night of his birthday. She had thought about going all the way, but it wouldn’t have been right. She didn’t want to make this into something she gave Ron, as if it was a gift. They would do this together. She nodded at herself, reaffirming her resolve, then checked her watch. Fifteen minutes left. And no Ron yet.

Of course, Ron might have been held up. She hadn’t told him what she was planning, just that she would be surprising him, and that might have been too subtle a hint. With the Wizengamot session tomorrow deciding about their Order of Merlins and their seats on the Wizengamot, things might have come up that required him. Although Sirius would have informed her as well, wouldn’t he? She bit her lower lip and twisted a lock of her hair around her finger. Or tried to - her hair was so short, now, she didn’t really manage. But it was more practical, especially with the training camp starting in two days.
Fourteen minutes left until the scheduled time for their date. They’d have plenty of time for what she had planned. The whole evening. And discreet as well, since they would not stay the night. Not that there would be anything wrong if they did - both of them were adults according to Wizarding Britain, and above the age of consent in Britain. And her parents wouldn’t disapprove, if they knew. She was pretty certain of that. Ron was a fine boy. Man. Brave, handsome, attentive, talented… she almost sighed.

Thirteen minutes. If Ron wanted to be certain to be on time and had taken an earlier bus, then he could arrive any second now, according to the schedules she had memorised. Unless there had been a traffic jam, of course.

She caught herself tapping her fingers on the table, and clenched her fist. There was no reason to be nervous. She was as ready for this as she could be. She knew it wouldn’t be the stuff of romance novels, too - their first time wouldn’t be a mind-blowing event. They had no experience, well, as far as she knew. Not with sex. Real sex, at least. They had come close, and that had been… this time she did sigh.

And almost missed Ron’s arrival. “Ron!” She raised her hand while he stood in the door, looking for her. And she saw his face lit up with a smile when he spotted her, matching her own.

“Hi there!” he said, kissing her - on the cheek. He smelled nice, just a hint of aftershave. “Have you been waiting long?”

“No. You’re early.” She was telling the truth - it hadn’t been that long.

The waitress didn’t take long to bring his order - a soft drink he hadn’t tried before, as he told her. “So,” he said, after taking a sip, and frowning at the taste, “You mentioned a surprise?”

She licked her lips, suddenly nervous again. “Yes.” She nodded. “I’ve rented a room. In a hotel nearby.”

His eyes widened, and suddenly, he looked nervous too. “Oh.”

“Unless you…” she trailed off. If he didn’t want to, she wouldn’t pressure him; all the good books said that that would ruin it.

“No, no!” He blinked again. “I mean, yes, I want to. I’m just…”

“Me too,” she said.

*****

Ron Weasley was nervous, and grew more nervous the closer they got to the inn Hermione had picked. For their first time. He hadn’t expected this. He had dreamed of it, of course. But in his dreams, he hadn’t been nervous. He had known what to do, and it had been perfect, and Hermione had been all over him, and…

He took a deep breath. They were walking arm in arm, and he could feel her warmth through his jacket when she leaned into him and explained that she had rented the room for the night, that she had arranged for room service - apparently, the inn would bring a meal to their room - and that she had prepared everything in advance.

She was as nervous as he was, he realised - a thought that felt strangely comforting. He slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her close, and she fell silent for a moment, smiling at him.
They kissed, properly this time, no mere peck on her lips, before entering the lobby. He let her handle the muggle clerk while he looked around, taking in the muggle decor. And the other guests, sitting at the low tables. It all looked very expensive, but since Hermione had already paid for the room, he didn’t know how expensive.

The room itself was larger than he expected - larger than his own room at Sirius’s home, even, and that had been the largest room he had ever slept in. The largest bed as well. There was a muggle wireless too, and the biggest telly he had ever seen. “If that thing was any bigger, it’d be a cinema,” he said, shaking his head.

“I told them to bring the food up right away,” Hermione said. “Unfortunately, we can’t watch TV since I warded the room. And that means electronics won’t work in here.” She blushed slightly. “It’s not as if we’re going to be watching TV tonight.”

Ron nodded. He wasn’t disappointed - safety came first. The Death Eaters and their supporters would like to kill both of them, especially in light of tomorrow’s vote in the Wizengamot. Fortunately, room service arrived quickly.

“I told the reception not to disturb us,” Hermione explained while they ate. Ron nodded. He didn’t want anyone interrupting them either, of course. Or watching them.

Sighing, she stared at the telly and the wireless: “I don’t miss the telly, but I had picked out the best romantic songs I could think of too. But I haven’t yet figured out how to get reception inside a warded area.” She shook her head. “Of course, the muggles don’t know the reason for the unexplainable trouble with TV reception in London - it started when the purebloods began to hide.”

Oh. His own eyes widened when he made the connection. “The wards.”

She nodded. “Once we have the time to spare, we can use this to find the purebloods’ hideouts in London!”

He didn’t want to talk about the war. “But not right now, I think,” he said, looking pointedly at her, then at the bed.

She smiled, again blushing a little. “Of course not right now. And not tomorrow. But we’ll find the missing Death Eaters.”

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Almost too soon, they were finished with the meal and standing in front of the bed.

“So…” Hermione said, biting her lower lip.

“So…” Ron repeated, licking his own.

For a moment, they stared at each other, neither of them moving. Then Hermione took a step closer, and Ron opened his arms, and they were kissing, and neither was hesitating any more. They were on the bed, now. Hands started to slip under clothes, opening buttons and pulling on zippers, like they had done before, at Hogwarts.

Only this time, they didn’t stop with touching, and didn’t leave the clothes on. And Ron found himself on his back, with Hermione on top of him. And then...

It wasn’t perfect, of course. It was their first time. And their second. But it certainly was far better
than what he had dreamed of, Ron found out.

*****

Later they lay on the bed, with Hermione cuddled to his side. Resting, enjoying each other’s presence.

“I spent two hours picking out my lingerie,” she said, pointing at a crumpled piece of fabric on the edge of the bed. “Did you even see it?”

“Ah…” He didn’t know what to say - he remembered pulling it off, but not much else about it.

She chuckled. “Well, I can model it for you later. If you want me to.”

“Of course!” He gently squeezed her shoulder. “Anything you want.”

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London, Ministry of Magic, March 7th, 1997

Some people were more boring than Binns, Sirius Black thought, listening to Melvin Burke drone on about how you needed the kind of wisdom that came with age to become a member of the Wizengamot, and how teenagers, no matter their heroic deeds, lacked that. The hypocrite didn’t seem to realise how many of the members backing him were either barely older than Harry, or the proxies of even younger wizards and witches.

Of course, he should have expected this. Even though his proposal had the support of the majority of the Wizengamot, the Death Eater sympathisers wouldn’t be giving in and letting them take a vote without making them suffer through as many stupid speeches as possible.

Well, their time was running out as well, Sirius knew. People were already starting to ‘reconsider’ their views - the fact that Thicknesse was supporting Sirius’s proposal had made quite the impact on those members of the Wizengamot who lacked a spine. Still not enough to pass the reforms Britain needed, but they were making progress.

And so was Arthur. Sirius glanced at Bones, whose face was so devoid of any expression, it seemed like it had been transfigured into stone. She hated this, but couldn’t stop it. The stupid witch still hadn’t realised that Britain was changing, had changed too much for the Old Families to keep their power.

Burke had finished, and Longbottom’s proxy was now busy refuting his points. As if anyone cared! At least Elphias had been elected as Chief Warlock and would keep things on track - if Runcorn had still been acting Chief Warlock, the debate would never end.

Sirius sighed. Sometimes, he understood why Voldemort had used force to try to take over Britain, instead of politics.

*****

Florida, Key West, March 7th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood studied the small cove in front of him. Strong wards covered it, hiding it from muggles. Even wizards unfamiliar with the area might miss it - the cove was so small, there didn’t seem to be enough room for anything bigger than a hut and a canoe.
That was wrong, of course. The cove was known as ‘Smuggler’s Bay’ and one of the oldest magical enclaves in the Americas, older than the Statute of Secrecy. As the name indicated, it had been founded to provide pirates and smugglers with a safe harbour. And it had done well during all the wars in the region.

The times had changed since, but the business hadn’t. With all the North American magical enclaves starting wars with each other at the drop of a hat, the tensions in the Caribbean and the various countries in Central and South America vying for dominance on the continent, there was always demand for those who were able to transport cargo and people unseen from one place to another.

He glanced around, checked that his clothes looked like those of a local, took another sip from his vial of Polyjuice, and crossed the wardline, walking through a bush. He arrived at a busy, if still small, port, with a smattering of small boats and ships, of all kinds of builds and ages, swaying at their anchors. He paid them no mind, though - he knew nothing about ships or boats. He knew a lot about the kind of wizards who used such ships, though. And where to find them.

Smiling faintly, he walked towards the biggest building in the port. The kind of wizards he needed would be there, drinking and whoring. A man was leaning on the wall next to the entrance, clad in tribal garments. Augustus didn’t care if the man was a survivor of the Seminole Shamans or a deserter from the surviving tribal nations west of the Mississippi. Here, in Smuggler’s Cove, pretty much everyone had something to hide - like himself.

He nodded at the man, and entered. Inside, he found the expected mix of shady elements from all parts of the Americas and the wizards and witches of ill repute catering to their urges. One of them was already walking towards him, the smile on her face as fake as her Parisian robes. A slight shake of his head made her veer off, looking for another customer. He was here to hire a smuggler who would transport him to Jamaica, and he had no interest in such base pursuits.

While he made his way to the bar, he looked the crowd over. There were no obvious houngans, of course - but that didn’t mean anything. Plenty of people were disguised. Fortunately, the witch he was looking for wasn’t one of those. Mirabel Duchamp, allegedly from New Orleans, wouldn’t be one of the most infamous smugglers plying her trade in the Caribbean if she had the habit of hiding her identity. Of course, that just meant that when she did use a disguise, fewer men would suspect her.

He spotted her in a corner booth, wearing a loose shirt and breeches like many of the Caribbean wizards and witches, her long, red hair held tied back in a ponytail, and her left arm wrapped around a well-built, shirtless man. He started walking towards her.

She spotted him before he had covered half the distance, and he saw her right hand disappear under the table. She had kept her wits, then, despite the large number of empty glasses on the table in front of her.

“That’s far enough!” she yelled when he was about to reach her booth. “I don’t like craning my neck to look someone in the eyes, and I’m not about to push my pretty boy here away just so I can sit up. What do you want?”

He slowly pulled out a purse from his pocket and dropped it on the table. “Business.”

Her wand hand was still under the table, but he saw her arm twitch. She was casting something. Probably at the purse. After a moment, she grinned, and addressed the man at her side. “Get lost, Julio! Business calls.”

The young man stood up with a pout, but didn’t try to linger, or draw it out. If he had been a
gambling man, Augustus would have bet a dozen Galleons that Julio would find someone else to pay for his drinks in a few minutes. It didn’t matter.

“Take a seat, Mister…?” Duchamp said, gesturing at the table.

“Mister will do,” Augustus said as he sat down. He raised his wand. “If you’ll allow me to ensure some privacy?” She probably had some spells up herself, but he didn’t trust her, or anyone else.

At her nod he cast a few spells, and the noise of the other guests notably dimmed. There was no need to make chit-chat; he already knew her reputation, so he came straight to the point of his visit.

“I need a passage to Jamaica.”

Her eyes widened briefly, but she was smiling when she nodded. “That won’t be cheap.”

He pulled another purse out from his pocket. “That’s no problem.”

She opened the first purse. “British coin?”

“Yes.” He had no accent so she wouldn’t be able to tell if that was just some misdirection, or if he was actually British. And even if she did, she wouldn’t know if he was a fugitive, or someone hired by the Ministry. And this uncertainty would make her cautious, and lessen the chance of a double-cross.

“Gold is gold,” she said, twirling a Galleon in her hand. “Will you require a passage off the island as well?”

He shook his head. He didn’t know how long this would take.

“Good. Makes things simpler. It won’t be easy, mind you. The houngans keep a tight watch.”

And the haggling began.

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Chapter 50: Diplomatic Entanglements

‘The fact that the International Confederation of Wizards issued a mandate for an inspection of Britain’s ability to uphold the International Statute of Secrecy shows quite clearly how much the Second Blood War affected not just Britain, but the Magical World as a whole. The stated reason for the inspection was not just ‘a thin excuse’, as is often claimed. While it is true that no inspections had been sent to Magical Prussia after Grindelwald’s War, in that case, as with the other countries which had been devastated in that conflict, forces from the coalition opposing Grindelwald were acting as occupying forces and upholding the Statute of Secrecy until local government could be restored. Several wars between the various magical enclaves in North America ended with similar results. In contrast to those cases, Britain’s Ministry had been all but wiped out, and neither the Order of the Phoenix nor the Muggleborn Resistance were internationally recognised governments.

However, it was obvious that the main reasons for the ICW’s decision were to find out just how powerful Britain was after Dumbledore’s death and to check the effects of the growing influence of muggleborns on Britain’s politics. Dumbledore’s death had changed the balance of power, but no one yet knew how much, and many countries were afraid that their own muggleborn minorities might follow the example given by Britain’s Muggleborn Resistance.

Within Wizarding Britain, the authorities were very much aware that these circumstances meant that even an intervention was not out of the question should the inspection find sufficient grounds for one. And, as Britain had taken part in the last ICW intervention during the previous century, which had resulted in the extermination of a large part of the magical nations of Sub-Saharan Africa, they were also all too aware of the possible consequences of such an intervention. It goes without saying that this only made an already tense situation worse.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

Cumbria, Britain, March 8th, 1997

“You’re the sorriest lot of recruits I’ve ever seen! A bunch of spoiled yuppies who’ve never gotten sweaty outside the fitness centre! You’ve never even touched anything more dangerous than your cutlery! And you want to be soldiers?”

Harry Potter was torn between grinning and wincing. Hermione hadn’t been exaggerating when she had said that their instructor reminded her of ‘Full Metal Jacket’ - Sergeant Boones sounded like a muggle version of Moody. Which reminded him how Moody had died, making him wince.

“You there, with the hair that looks like it should be on a horse’s arse!” The sergeant pointed at one of the taller recruits, Eric Ballantine, if Harry remembered his name correctly. “Do you think you can crawl through mud and live without shampoo and conditioner and perfume for a whole month?” The mercenary was slightly smaller than Ballantine, but had him cowed.

“Yes, Sergeant!” Ballantine said loudly.

“What was that? Did a mouse just squeak? Do you think anyone can hear you cry for your mum on a battlefield like that? I’ve heard babies yell louder than you!”
“Yes, Sergeant!” Ballantine yelled.

Boones snorted and stepped away, glaring at the line of almost twenty recruits - including Harry and Ron - again. He pointed at a witch Harry readily recognised - Mary-Jane Milton, the survivor of the ‘Avengers plot’. “You, girlie! You ready to risk your life on the battlefield? Ready to kill? Huh?”

“Yes, Sergeant!” the witch yelled, her expression furious.

Boones snorted again, but didn’t press her further. He looked at Harry and squinted. “You there, with the scar! You look like you’d rather be in a warm café discussing politics with your mates and fantasising about the Spice Girls!”

Harry heard Ron snort next to him and set his jaw, meeting the Sergeant’s eyes.

“Did you lose your voice, or just your nerve?” The Sergeant was now looming over him.

“No, Sergeant!” Harry bellowed straight into the man’s face.

Boones narrowed his eyes, but nodded. “Looks like there’s someone here with more spine than a snail.” Then he turned to Ron.

“And you there, Ginger! You think this is funny? It’s all one big joke, huh?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron wince, and had to struggle not to grin himself while Ron got yelled at.

The mercenary took a step back. “Well, I’d say you lot are hopeless, but a few among you sorry excuses for recruits might prove me wrong - if you don’t puke your guts out after a bit of light exercise! Three laps on that course! Move!”

Harry took a deep breath while he started to run, Ron right on his heels, and tried not to glare at the smirking Resistance members watching the new recruits file past them. At least when Moody had drilled them, there hadn’t been a peanut gallery.

*****

Hermione Granger forced herself to look impassive while the Sergeant put the Resistance’s new recruits through their paces. They deserved respect, especially from their new leader.

Unfortunately, not all Resistance members were as restrained. Seamus was chuckling loudly, and Tania was smirking. Poor form, in Hermione’s opinion, especially with both Mary-Jane and Louise among the new recruits, since neither had received the original training from the two mercenaries. At least Justin, Sally-Anne and John weren’t joining in.

“We’re doing the course as well, once they’re done,” she reminded them. Seamus groaned. “We can’t let the new recruits show up the veterans, can we?” she added.

The Irish wizard snorted. “We’re in better shape than the lot of them.”

“Right now. Might be different at the end of the month,” Hermione answered. Especially with Louise and Mary-Jane, who had been exercising with the group since they had joined. And Harry and Ron were certainly very fit - Ron had demonstrated that quite thoroughly, Hermione thought to herself, smiling faintly despite her efforts to remain impassive.

She clapped her hands. “Now, check the camp and ensure that all tents are properly set up and the
supplies stashed correctly!” she ordered. Since the Major was standing near them, she couldn’t directly tell them to check if the anti-muggle wards on the tents were done, and the camp itself was protected against intruders.

Once everyone was busy doing something, Kolen stepped up next to her and watched the activity in the camp, and the glimpses of the recruits’ run they caught through the trees. “You’re missing some people,” he said after a few minutes, in a low tone.

“Yes,” she said.

“About half of you. Will they be joining us later?”

“No.” She couldn’t completely keep her emotions out of her answer.

He nodded. “I see.”

Hermione didn’t know why, but she added: “One’s in a coma, the rest are dead.”

She thought she heard him hiss through his teeth, but she wasn’t certain. “That’s a lot of casualties.”

“We had a lot of engagements.” She tried to sound professional. Distant. “We won, but there could be trouble in the future.”

“So your second in command said.”

Hermione nodded and made an agreeing noise while she watched Sally-Anne check the supplies they had stashed in the open for the benefit of the two instructors.

“Mick’s wondering about your group. He can’t place you. It nags at him - a bunch of soft rich kids, waging war, and he doesn’t know where, or why. You don’t fit his experiences.”

She turned her head to look at him, but didn’t answer.

“I’ve seen things in Africa,” he went on, meeting her eyes. “Weird things, unnatural even - but that’s Africa. I wouldn’t have expected to encounter such things in England.”

She watched him. He hadn’t said that he knew about magic. But he certainly had his suspicions. She should obliviate him. On the other hand, many people believed in magic, though no one would believe a few tall tales from the bush, told over a drink or three.

“Every place on Earth has legends and myths,” she said. She didn’t add ‘with the exception of Antarctica’, even though that would have been correct.

“Those are just that, myth and legends,” the Major said. He didn’t sound certain, though.

“Perhaps. ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy’,” she quoted Shakespeare - or what muggles thought he had written, after the ICW had instituted the Statute of Secrecy and had removed most knowledge of magic from them.

The soldier snorted. “So, should I watch out for three witches trying to curse us?”

“I wouldn’t be worried about three witches,” she said, “but a dozen of them could be trouble.” She chuckled, but she could see that he took her comment seriously.

*****
Ron Weasley winced when he sat down on the log facing the campfire, balancing the tray of his ‘mess kit’ containing his dinner on his knees. The Sergeant - he had quickly started to think of Sergeant Boones as simply ‘the Sergeant’ - wasn’t as brutal as Moody, but the lack of broken bones was more than made up for by the fact that Ron and the others couldn’t use magic to remove bruises. Hermione had been very clear about that.

At least Ron hadn’t fared too badly - thanks to Moody’s training regime and the Quidditch training sessions, he wasn’t as exhausted as the majority of the recruits. A bit of ointment would prevent any aching muscles tomorrow, and he had only fallen down twice on the obstacle course, and into mud. Others hadn’t been so lucky. He glanced at Emily, a twenty-something witch who was nursing a ‘sprained ankle’ - a broken leg actually, healed by Sally-Anne - and various bruises that hadn’t been treated and which would have Luna write an article about ‘spotted humans’, should she see the poor witch.

“Hey!”

He whipped his head around at the whispered word, hand going to his wand, before he recognised Hermione and smiled. He had almost dropped his tray, but the noodles were quite firmly stuck to it and hadn’t spilled. He wasn’t certain if that was a good sign.

She held out a mug to him. “Fancy some hot tea?”

He eagerly took it. “Thanks!”

She sat down next to him, on the log. “How was your day?” She had the same tray from a mess kit, though not quite as full as his.

He shrugged, tasting his first forkful of noodles. Edible, but nothing beyond that. “I’m a bit disappointed that we haven’t even touched a muggle weapon yet.” Instead, they had ran and jumped and climbed and swung from ropes over a muddy creek - or tried to. They had been allowed to use cleaning charms behind the curtains of the ‘shower stall’ the Resistance had rigged, and warming charms had taken care of the cold, but just about everyone, even Harry, had spent the day wet, covered in mud, or both, and Ron hadn’t been any exception.

She snorted. “That’ll start tomorrow.” Leaning into his shoulder, she added: “You held up well today.”

“I did my best,” he said - he couldn’t afford to look bad in front of everyone, not as the only pureblood in the camp, and the boyfriend of their leader. “Thanks for the lesson about guns, by the way,” he added, switching his mug to his left hand so he could wrap his right arm around her shoulder. He took a look around as well - he couldn’t let anyone else sneak up on him in the middle of the forest. To think that Justin’s family owned all of this land...

“It wasn’t a lesson, but just an overview. Pretty much every muggleborn knows that much about guns,” Hermione said. “Although pretty much every muggleborn has some serious misconceptions about guns as well,” she added, and he knew she was smiling. “You’ll have the advantage of not having to unlearn all the stupid things they do in the movies.”

Ron smiled. “I’m not calling them firelegs, either.”

She chuckled. “Good. The instructors are already a little suspicious.” She started to eat as well and he could see her frown slightly at the taste.

“No Mum’s cooking,” he said.
“No. Although I’ve been told by the Sergeant that it’s very good for camp food.”

He raised his eyebrows at that. “I would pity him, if he hadn’t tried to kill me today.”

That made her chuckle again. “It’s going to get worse, you know.”

“How?”

“In the exercises, he’ll be able to shoot at you. With paintballs, not real bullets, but they hurt anyway. Worse than a Stinging Hex.”

“Just like Moody,” Ron mumbled under his breath. “At least he’ll have to share his abuse between twenty of us.”

“More than that,” she corrected him. “We’ll be training as well.”

“Let me say that I fully approve of your sacrifice!” he said, grinning widely.

She snorted in response, took a few more bites of her noodles, then put the tray on the ground. After a brief glance around, she vanished the remaining noodles, and then followed up with a Cleaning Charm.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to use magic,” he said.

“That’s just so the muggles don’t see anything. We’re still wizards and witches, after all, and we’ll be using magic in the field.” She grinned. “The Major himself said we should train as we plan to fight. Don’t tell the others, though - I want to see how they handle the basic training first, before putting the Statute of Secrecy at risk.”

Ron nodded, and finished his own meal. It wasn’t all that bad and he had been hungry, but he really missed his mum’s cooking. “We’re not going to eat like this all the time, then?” He could stomach it, but he wouldn’t mind better food.

“Only during boot camp,” she said.

When he pouted at her she chuckled again, then leaned into him once more.

“At least we’re sleeping in wizard tents, and not some muggle contraption,” he said, sighing. “It’s like being back at the Quidditch World Cup.”

“Not quite,” she said.

“Well, without the Death Eater attack,” he amended.

She moved her head and he could feel her breath on his ear when she whispered: “We didn’t sleep together in the same bed back then, either.”

He stiffened for a moment, then nodded with a wide smile before kissing her.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, March 9th, 1997

Ron Weasley stared at the muggle firearm. He had seen them before, of course. The Resistance had carried them at Hogwarts, and in Diagon Alley. But this was the first time he had held one.
“This is an SG 550. It’s a very precise and very expensive and very finicky assault rifle,” the Major said, holding another one up. “If you don’t take proper care of it, it’ll soon not be that precise any more, nor quite as reliable either.” He set his jaw and stared at them. “And if you can’t rely on your weapon, your friends can’t rely on you.”

Ron nodded. Moody had said similar things about wands.

The Major went on. “It uses a Swiss GP90, a heavier variant of the standard 5.56 mm NATO cartridge.” He held one of the cartridges up. “It may look tiny, but those things can go through half a yard of wood, and still kill you. If I ever catch any one of you pointing this weapon at me or at anyone else, you’ll regret it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir!” Ron yelled, together with the others. The Sergeant and Hermione had been quite emphatic about that, even more so than Moody had been about the risks of blowing your buttock off with a broken wand. It was quite surprising, he thought as they lined up on the ‘shooting range’, how similar this muggle military training was to Moody’s training.

“Lay down on the ground, get the bipod out, and make sure that you’re aiming at your assigned target!” the Major yelled.

Ron quickly obeyed, taking up his position near Harry. Both of the muggles seemed to yell all the time. They probably were half-deaf from all the noise all the firearms made, Ron thought, checking that his ‘ear plugs’ hadn’t fallen out. Hermione had warned Harry and him about that danger, though she hadn’t said who among the Resistance had had that happen to them.

“Ready! Aim! Fire!”

Ron’s first shot didn’t hit, unlike Harry’s. Neither did his second. Fortunately, he didn’t take too long to realise what he was doing wrong - he had to ‘gently squeeze the trigger’, as Harry explained. It was quite easy, he thought, if done right.

Then they switched to shooting while standing and sitting, and then to moving targets, and things stopped being easy. At least, he told himself, he wasn’t breaking any limbs on the shooting range, though his shoulder felt quite sore when they finally stopped.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 9th, 1997

Sirius Black had gone through half a bottle of port when Vivienne entered the living room in his - their - home. He handed her a glass before she could say anything. “I take it that the meeting with your father wasn’t…” He trailed off, not certain how to word it.

“No, it wasn’t,” she said, sniffing at the glass, then wrinkling her nose and putting it down. “Ow you can drink this I’ll never know.”

He chuckled. “How you can eat snails and frog legs I’ll never know.”

“Ow you can drink this I’ll never know.”

He chuckled. “How you can eat snails and frog legs I’ll never know.”

“You’ve never tried them,” she retorted, falling back into familiar territory.

“I did, actually. Once. On a dare in third year,” he said. “Tasted horrible.” Granted, they had been raw, fresh out of McKinnon’s potion kit, but he didn’t think he had to mention that.

“You have no taste, then,” Vivienne said, shaking her head. “Though I should ’ave known that already considering your taste in beverages.” She sighed and pushed the glass away. Their brief
banter obviously hadn’t lifted her mood much.

“So, what did your father say?” He summoned the glass - it was a really good, expensive port. No reason to let it go to waste. A flick of his wand sent a bottle of a ‘proper wine’, as she’d call it, towards her.

“Mon père was, as you might say, diplomatic, but ’e was quite clear that the Duc ’imself ’ad asked ’im to contact me. Apparently, the Duc expects me to ‘do my duty for France’. Vivienne set her jaw while she filled a glass.

Sirius frowned. First her aunt, and now her father. “Was that a warning, or an order?”

“Eh?” She looked confused.

“I mean, did your father tell you that so you’d be warned of the Duc’s intentions, or did he tell you to obey?” Sirius clarified.

“Ah!” She shook her head and grinned. “No, no. ’E knows better than to try to order me around.”

That didn’t really reassure him. He knew that he was biased due to his own upbringing, but it sounded like Vivienne’s family was cut from the same cloth as the Blacks.

“’E did tell me that Fleur’s also being ‘stubborn’,” she went on.

That could just be a cover, of course, Sirius knew. Although he didn’t think Fleur would be betraying them either. He slowly nodded. “Do you think they’ll increase the pressure?” If they threatened her family...

She took a deep breath and shrugged, which had an interesting effect on her chest. “Not my family. It’s not as if France and Britain are at war. But the Duc will ’ave other agents working in Britain.”

“And the delegation from the ICW,” Sirius added.

“Oui! Sabine Beaumont is representing France in the delegation!” Vivienne sneered. “She’s a serpent. And she ’ates Veela - she was in the same year as my aunt at Beauxbatons.”

It sounded as if they had Slytherins in France too, Sirius thought. “Well, I’m more concerned about the spies we don’t know.”

“Don’t underestimate ’er! She is very good at plotting.” Vivienne scoffed. “Good at leading men around, and making friends with naive people, until she curses them in the back.”

“Literally?” That sounded like his own aunt Lucretia.

“No. She would leave that to others. She’s quite influential at the court - some rumours claim that she was the Duc’s mistress.”

And he had thought that the Jamaican delegate would be the most dangerous. “For someone who all but sent your family to help us, the Duc’s being quite hostile.”

“The Duc’s still keeping ’is options open, or so père said. But if ’e thinks that Britain’s too weak too keep the muggleborns in line…”

Sirius muttered a curse under his breath. “Great. And if we play down the power of the muggleborns, Jamaica and others will think we’re too weak to resist them.” He shook his head.
“The Duc’s been talking about improving the situation of the French muggleborns himself,” Vivienne said, finishing her glass. “Apparently, he plans to give them a voice at court.” She stood up and sat down on the armrest of Sirius’s own seat. “He might see Hermione’s appointment in a similar way.”

“Let’s hope so,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist. He was well aware that a number of Wizengamot members had supported his proposal in the hope that this would placate the Resistance and the other muggleborns and forestall further concessions. If they thought that making her a member of the Wizengamot would stop Hermione’s push for reforms, then they didn’t know her at all, of course. The smarter members of the Old Families, at least, were doing this to curry favour with her, in order to make the best deal possible for them once the Wizengamot bowed to the - in his opinion - inevitable. He didn’t think they had a great chance of success, but a vote was a vote.

And vote by vote, they’d change Britain - once they had weathered this latest crisis.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, March 10th, 1997

Amelia Bones forced herself to keep smiling, even though she didn’t want to. She didn’t like having to wait in the Atrium for the arrival of the ICW delegation. Not only was it wasting time, but it made her feel as if she was their subordinate. But if she were not present when the delegation stepped through the International Floo connection, it would be a diplomatic faux pas. It would feel good, though.

She wasn’t the only one waiting, of course - Pius was there as well, as were the other Department Heads. And Chief Warlock Doge, with Black, Malfoy, and Runcorn. The tension between those four made her relationship with Pius look downright cordial. At least she was reasonably certain that they wouldn’t curse each other in public.

Dawlish was inspecting the honour guard of Hit-Wizards lined up along the carpet leading to the fireplace. For appearance’s sake, they looked impressive enough in their grey robes, but their presence meant that Dawlish had lost all of his reserves. Since a number of Aurors had to provide security for - and surveillance of - the delegation, that left most of Britain bare of the Ministry’s presence. That wasn’t impressive at all, and Amelia didn’t doubt that the delegation would be aware of that in short order.

She gazed at the gathered Ministry employees who had come to watch the whole thing. Another drain on the Ministry’s resources, from both the time lost at work and the Aurors needed to keep an eye on the crowd. She caught herself frowning at the effort the Ministry had to make for this farce, and forced herself to smile again. She had to keep up appearances as well, after all, and the foreign reporters present were not beholden to the Ministry, unlike those from the Daily Prophet.

Finally, the fireplace lit up, and the delegation started to arrive. Two French Gendarmes Magiques were first - Amelia immediately recognised their robes - and took up positions next to the fireplace. She narrowed her eyes. If the Ministry couldn’t guarantee the delegation’s safety, then two more wands wouldn’t make a difference. So, it was a planned affront, if a small one.

The next person to step out of the fireplace was Sabine Beaumont, the French delegate. The witch was wearing robes meant for someone half her age, Amelia thought, but then, according to rumour, she was the mistress of the Duc d’Orléans. Or had been. She certainly had his trust, and she was known to be quite ambitious. Two ‘assistants’ followed her - probably spies.

Then the Prussian delegate arrived, Herbert Steiner, cousin of the Chancellor, followed by four
assistants of his own. He was a heavyset wizard in his seventies and wore the robes of the Prussian Feldjäger - another statement, Amelia thought. The man had been quite the fighter during the purges his cousin had launched following Grindelwald’s defeat. Four more Feldjäger followed him.

And then the last delegate stepped through the fireplace, and Amelia tensed up. John Reid was a houngan, rail-thin, and over a hundred years old - no one in Britain seemed to know his exact age. At least his four ‘assistants’ or guards didn’t look like zombies - Amelia wasn’t certain the Thief’s Downfall would remove that particular enchantment.

She wasn’t the only one eyeing the houngan with suspicion, of course - even the other two delegates looked as if they wanted to keep their distance. But protocol was clear - officially, they arrived together. Amelia stepped forward. “Welcome to Britain,” she said, bowing, “we’re honoured to host a delegation from the International Confederation of Wizards.” The words were a lie, of course, as was her smile.

And the smiles of the three delegates. Beaumont bowed - a shade less deeply than she had, Amelia noticed - and said: “We’re honoured to be here.” A snap of her fingers had one of her assistants hand over their credentials.

Amelia passed them to her secretary to check. It was just a formality, of course. “Mademoiselle Beaumont, Herr Steiner, Mister Reid - may I present Chief Warlock Doge, and Wizengamot members Runcorn, Black and Malfoy.”

“Enchantée, Chief Warlock.” Beaumont raised one perfectly styled eyebrow. “I am glad to hear that you have finally chosen Dumbledore’s successor.”

Amelia forced herself to keep smiling. If not for the delay caused by the stubborn refusal of Runcorn and his allies to let the Wizengamot hold an election, they’d have had a new Chief Warlock weeks ago. And Beaumont was acting as if she hadn’t been aware of that particular struggle.

Black smiled widely. “Ah, I can understand your confusion, Mademoiselle. Coming from a country ruled by a monarch, you would not be familiar with democratic customs. Choosing the next Chief Warlock is not something that should be rushed. Our system takes that into account,” he said, his tone of voice just shy of patronising.

Amelia glanced at the wizard. While she appreciated him rebuking the French witch, she didn’t like him taking the initiative. Not that she could do much about it - they were supposed to present a united front. She spoke up again. “I think such details can wait until later.” At her nod, the Hit-Wizards snapped to attention and raised their wands in front of their faces.

“They all look quite young.” Steiner remarked as they walked past the formation.

“Yes,” Amelia said. “But all of them are veterans of the war.”

Steiner grunted something Amelia didn’t catch. Beaumont smiled with just a hint of condescension, but didn’t comment. Reid remained expressionless - until he caught sight of the Head of the Department of Mysteries, at which point he started glaring. Which, in turn, added to the tension already present.

The inspection wasn’t off to a good start, Amelia thought. At least no one had cursed anyone.

Yet.

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Harry Potter was eyeing the Auror guards standing at the entrance of the Wizengamot Chamber with some suspicion. He didn’t trust them. Not fully. And, he added, glancing at Hermione and Ron, neither did his best friends. Not that Harry thought that anyone in the Ministry or the Wizengamot would be so stupid as to attack them. Not with half the Resistance - the veterans, at least - and half the Order, among them all of the Weasleys, present.

He watched another Ministry employee walk past them so quickly that the wizard was almost running. That wasn’t a good sign for the proposed reforms. Sighing, he leaned back. At least their three new seats would mean three more votes for reforms. More, if people followed Harry’s example. Sirius thought that they would, even though Harry was of the opinion that killing a Dark Lord was not exactly proof of a talent for politics. On the other hand, that was how Dumbledore had become a politician, and the Headmaster had certainly changed Britain. In Harry’s opinion, he had set a good example for them to follow.

After checking his watch for the sixth time - there were a few more minutes until the award ceremony would start - he glanced at Hermione. “You know, we didn’t have to arrive so early…” He grinned.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s better to be early than late.”

“They wouldn’t have started without us,” Ron cut in, “but we couldn’t look bad in front of the foreigners, could we?”

It didn’t seem as if Hermione agreed, but neither did she contradict him. She did frown, though, looking down at her dress. “It’s the only reason I’m wearing this gown,” she said.

“You look great!” Ron said, smiling widely at her.

“I meant that it’s the best, or rather, the most acceptable compromise between bowing to pureblood customs and wearing dress robes, and wearing a dress uniform, even if it’s also a bit sexist,” Hermione said.

“I wasn’t aware the Resistance had dress uniforms,” Harry cut in. Not that anyone would have worn them in boot camp.

“We haven’t actually made them, but Justin, Sally-Anne and I have thought about designs. Patterned after a British Army dress uniform, but in black.”

Harry wasn’t sure what uniform she meant, but he nodded. Three more minutes were left until the ceremony started. “It would have sent a message to the delegation,” he said, “but maybe the wrong kind.”

“Playing nice with the likes of Malfoy…” Ron scoffed. “They might have asked for this just so we have to unite against the foreigners, instead of kicking our Death Eaters out.”

“I doubt their influence goes that far.” Hermione shook her head. “Sirius said that the Malfoys were not well-liked in France. Some old feud with the Duc’s family going back to before the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Well, the French have some sense, then,” Ron said. “They did help us against Voldemort, too.”

“But they don’t like muggleborns,” Harry added. “Not since Grindelwald.”
“They didn’t like muggleborns before Grindelwald either.” Hermione sniffed. “But they didn’t fear them until that war.”

“It’s a bloody mess,” Ron grumbled. “And we have to deal with it.”

Before Harry could agree with his friend, the doors to the Wizengamot Chamber were opened, and a pompous-looking wizard Harry didn’t recognise walked towards them.

“Show time,” Harry mumbled, getting up.

“‘Show time’?” Ron whispered.

“Muggle idiom,” Hermione answered. “I’ll explain later.”

“Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, Miss Granger,” the wizard nodded at them, tensing up just a bit before addressing Hermione, “the award ceremony will start now. Please follow me.”

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“... and you have personally faced the Dark Lord several times in single combat until you finally defeated him for good in the Battle of Diagon Alley. In recognition of this extraordinary feat, Wizarding Britain awards you the Order of Merlin, First Class!”

For being awarded the highest honour of Wizarding Britain, the ceremony was remarkably short, Ron Weasley thought while he watched Minister Bones pick up the medal from a floating cushion and drape it around Harry’s neck. But then, that might just be Bones - he knew that the witch loathed having to award them anything. As soon as Bones took a step back, the Wizengamot erupted in applause.

“Thank you, Minister.” Harry bowed slightly to her, and, once the noise had settled down, turned to face the Wizengamot. “I hope I will continue to prove myself worthy of this honour. Albus Dumbledore taught me to do what’s right, not what’s easy, and I intend to heed those words in the future.”

More applause - though not as enthusiastic as before - followed while Harry took a few steps back to stand next to Ron and Hermione. Then Ron saw Bones turn towards him. He stiffened and raised his chin slightly. This was it.

“Mister Ronald Weasley. You have been instrumental in the war against the Dark Lord, several times facing multiple Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself, at the side of Harry Potter, at the risk of your own life. In recognition of this, Wizarding Britain awards you the Order of Merlin, First Class!”

Ron bowed his head slightly so the witch could reach his neck more easily. To his surprise, he felt rather unmoved. A year and a half ago, he would have felt elated. The first Weasley ever to receive such an honour. The first Prewett in generations. But it was just politics - he wasn’t really being honoured, he was being used to impress the delegation from the ICW. The Wizengamot might be applauding him, but outside his family, and Sirius’s faction, they didn’t mean it.

Nevertheless, he smiled at the witch. “Thank you, Minister.” Turning to the Wizengamot, he smiled at his family, sitting in the wings, and bowed once more. “I can but repeat what Harry said before me: I intend to prove myself worthy of his honor, and of the trust Albus Dumbledore put in us.”

He wasn’t certain, but he thought Bones twitched when he mentioned the Headmaster. His smile grew a bit while he retook his old spot, and Hermione stepped forward. He glanced at the rows in the
audience where the delegation was seated, and saw that all of them were staring intently at his friend.

Bones’s smile grew thinner as she picked up the last medal from the cushion. “Miss Hermione Granger. You have fought bravely against the followers of the Dark Lord, those who openly fought for him as well as those who supported him in secret. Without your efforts, the war might have been lost before the Dark Lord fell to Harry Potter. For your deeds, Wizarding Britain awards you Order of Merlin, First Class.”

The applause was noticeably less loud this time, but Hermione beamed as the medal was hung around her neck. “Thank you, Minister. I accept this honour for all the brave muggleborns who joined the Resistance, and fought for their rights, and the rights of every witch and wizard in Britain. Many of them died in the war, but rest assured that many more stand ready to take their place, should this be needed.”

Bones’s expression reminded Ron of Snape’s, back when they had snatched the House Cup from Slytherin right at the Leaving Feast. His own smile grew in response. They might have to put on an act, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t remind the Wizengamot just why they were here.

*****

Muggles and wizards were not that different, Hermione Granger thought while looking around the area of the Atrium that had been cordoned off for the reception following the award ceremony. Self-important politicians were mingling, trading barbed remarks and veiled insults while wearing false smiles. Like hers right now, as she nodded at Callista Shacklebolt, one of the less staunch allies of Sirius in the Wizengamot, despite her being related to the late Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“I wish they’d start serving the food,” Ron muttered next to her, when the old witch had left them. “It’s been hours since lunch.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t plan to actually eat anything here, do you?” She did not think an attempt to poison them would be likely, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Of course not!” he said. “Moody’s ghost would come back to haunt me for that! But if I start eating the food we brought with us before dinner is served, everyone will know just how much trust there is between us and the Ministry.” Ron snorted. “At least we’ll be eating Mum’s cooking, not the Ministry’s. Even using their recipes, it’ll be much better.”

Hermione nodded. After the camp food, Molly’s cooking seemed to taste twice as good. Briefly, she wondered if she’d ever trust the food and drink at such a reception - wizards and witches had long memories. Maybe she should work on a subtle way to detect poison.

“Harry’s still getting swamped,” Ron remarked, nodding towards the gaggle of wizards and witches surrounding their friend and his godfather.

“He is the Boy-Who-Lived,” she said. “Vanquisher of Voldemort.” Not that many used that title - people still feared to say the Dark Lord’s name.

“Should we head over to him and drive the crowd away with the power of the Purebloods’ Boggart?” Ron was grinning at her.

She scowled at him - she didn’t like that nickname. Not at all. It made her remember that lesson in their third year, when she had run from a Boggart. That failure still vexed her - and that she had had such a silly fear was doubly embarrassing.

Before she could voice her displeasure, though, his smile grew slightly vacant. “Heads up! French
witch coming towards us.”

Hermione turned slightly, and saw that Beaumont was walking towards them. The delegate was wearing quite daring robes, showing quite a bit more skin than Hermione’s own gown.

“Miss Granger, Mister Weasley.” The French witch smiled widely and nodded at them. One of her bodyguards was standing nearby, but too far away to be included in the conversation, even though he’d certainly hear every word.

“Miss Beaumont.” Hermione briefly inclined her head. Ron followed her example.

The other witch didn’t react to the slight snub - or, to be precise, the refusal to acknowledge her supposed higher status as a pureblood. “Your reputation precedes you, Miss Granger. While Mister Weasley is known as the stalwart friend of the Boy-Who-Lived, it is said that you parted ways with him to build your own organisation.” Unlike Fleur, Beaumont had a very faint accent, Hermione noted.

“That is not exactly true. ‘Parting ways’ implies that it happened voluntarily,” Hermione said. “I was expelled from Hogwarts by bigoted laws; it wasn’t my choice to leave Harry and Ron.”

“I doubt any witch would have chosen to leave such brave young wizards,” Beaumont said. “But you were not left alone, were you? You formed the Resistance.”

Hermione couldn’t tell if the older witch was insinuating that the Resistance had been more than friends and comrades with her remark. “Faced with mortal danger, and bereft of help from others, it was only natural that we banded together.” She almost said that she followed French examples when forming the Resistance, but that could have been mistaken for a threat.

“You are too modest, Miss Granger. No one achieves what you did by simply reacting to danger.” Her smile never lost its veneer of politeness even while her words and tone grew a bit sharper. “You brought the Ministry to its knees, after all, with a small group of muggleborns. That is a cause for concern for some parties.”

Hermione acted as if she was puzzled. “Really? I’m surprised to hear that. As far as I know, there are but a few Death Eaters left, and I can’t think of anyone else who’d have a reason to be concerned about the Resistance; the war is over, after all, and I doubt anyone is eager to start another one. We’re at peace.”

“Nominally. Weren’t there riots in the streets?”

Hermione plastered a fake smile on her face, hiding her growing annoyance. “A few holdouts launched attacks - nuisances, really, compared to the war’s battles.”

Ron nodded. “Between the veterans of the war and the new recruits, we could handle Voldemort at the peak of his strength right now. The real challenge is the restoration of the country. My father’s working hard to restore the Ministry - we have the essential services covered, of course, especially the Obliviators, who were not affected by the war at all, but there are a growing number of new employees who need to be instructed and guided.”

Hermione couldn’t tell if the French delegate believed Ron’s words - they were in a far weaker position than he insinuated, and they would only be able to defeat Voldemort if Harry had his special connection still - but Beaumont nodded. “I see. You say you will be focused inwards, then, for the foreseeable future? Britain, that is,” she asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It will take some time to remove the last remains of Voldemort’s influence,
and rebuild Britain into a country of which every one of its citizens can be proud.”

“As Dumbledore envisioned,” Ron added.

“Ah. He was your mentor, wasn’t he?”

Ron nodded. “He trained Harry and me, and he asked all three of us to continue his work.”

“We’ll do our best to follow in his footsteps,” Hermione added, “to prove that his trust in us wasn’t misplaced.” She didn’t like invoking the Headmaster this much, but the goal of this whole ceremony and reception was to impress on the ICW delegation how much of a mistake it would be to intervene.

“Ah, Dumbledore, one of the greatest wizards who ever lived! His death is the loss of the entire Magical World. I doubt we will see another one like him in our lifetimes,” Beaumont said, with a slightly theatrical sigh.

“I wouldn’t be that certain,” Hermione said, looking pointedly at Harry.

The French witch’s expression grew slightly condescending. “The Boy-Who-Lived is a talented wizard, we saw that at the Triwizard Tournament, but Dumbledore had decades of experience. Wisdom comes with age, after all.”

“Well,” Ron drawled, “Harry defeated Voldemort, a wizard who could stand up to Dumbledore and his decades of experience. He might not be as experienced as Dumbledore was, but I think we all have proven that that doesn’t matter too much in a war, does it?”

“As the muggle wars have demonstrated, innovation often trumps experience in a violent conflict,” Hermione added. “Although we all have gained enough experience to know that we don’t want another war. But,” she said, baring her teeth for a moment, “should anyone start a war, we will finish it.”

Beaumont was too experienced as a diplomat and courtier to show much of a reaction, but Hermione thought that they had rattled the witch somewhat. If they were lucky, enough to make her stop trying to meddle in Britain.

*****

Awarding a mass-murderer an Order of Merlin, First Class! More than an hour after that sham of a ceremony where she had been forced to decorate that witch herself, Amelia Bones was still furious. And she couldn’t even show, much less vent, her anger - she had to keep smiling politely at sycophants, traitors and criminals! And at the foreigners who were the reason for her situation. Like Steiner, who was currently talking to her. At least the wizard was a former Feldjäger of Magical Prussia, so they had a number of things in common.

“My compliments to the cook,” the Prussian said, holding up a canapé.

“Thank you, I will pass them on.” Amelia had no intention of mentioning that the food had been prepared by elves on loan from Hogwarts. The more capable the delegation believed that Britain was, in all areas, the better. Maybe it would even be worth rewarding that… muggleborn and her traitorous friends.

“I was impressed by the youth of Britain’s latest heroes,” Steiner went on. “Barely out of school, and yet able to win the bloodiest war in Europe since Grindelwald.”

Not counting the ongoing troubles in the Balkans, Amelia thought. Out loud, she said, “He’s the
Boy-Who-Lived,” picking up a canapé herself. “His whole life has been exceptional.”

“I would have dismissed most of what I heard about him as exaggerations,” Steiner said, “or luck. But you do not defeat Voldemort through luck, do you?”

And there was the attempt to gather information! Amelia kept smiling pleasantly, even though she was more than annoyed at the fact that Steiner thought she was so naïve as to fall for that. “He was trained by Dumbledore himself to face and defeat the Dark Lord. A task he completed as planned.”

“Indeed! What a duel it must have been - akin to Grindelwald’s legendary defeat! I assume that there isn’t a memory available to be visited in a Pensieve?”

“Mister Potter hasn’t provided us with one, and we respect his decision and privacy.” Not that the Boy-Who-Lived would share Dumbledore’s secrets with them, Amelia thought. In that, he might be the Headmaster’s successor indeed.

“A shame. But maybe he’ll change his opinion once he realises just how important this duel was - the memory of such events should be preserved for posterity, lest history repeats itself.” Steiner looked as if he believed his own drivel.

“Dumbledore never shared his memory of his duel with Grindelwald, either, so I fear the historical precedent has been set,” Amelia said. “It will only add to the myth, I think.”

Steiner sighed. “Alas, you may be correct. I must confess that I am very curious about the battles fought in this war. I’ve heard about very unconventional tactics - by the Muggleborns, I believe.”

Refining from grinding her teeth, she nodded. “Miss Granger has proven to be very innovative, and very effective in the war.” She put the canapé down; praising that criminal made her lose her appetite.

“She worked closely with the Boy-Who-Lived and Dumbledore’s Order, but I heard there were some issues with the Ministry.”

She narrowed her eyes before she could help it. “Issues related to traitors within the Ministry’s ranks. Who have since been purged. Dumbledore himself ensured that there aren’t any such issues left.”

And damn the man for sacrificing justice for convenience!, she thought while Steiner wound up his next probing question.

*****

“It was a mistake to attend this reception,” Tracey whispered behind the flute of champagne she was raising to her lips.

Daphne Greengrass rolled her eyes. “It would have been an even bigger mistake not to attend, after Black asked us to.”

Tracey scoffed. “They look as if they were about to curse us.”

There was no need to ask who she meant - the Resistance members present were openly glaring at them. But not even mudbloods would attack them in the middle of the Ministry, at a reception to honour their leader. “They won’t,” Daphne said.

“There’s just one person here people avoid more than us, and that’s the houngan,” Tracey said.
As if to prove her friend wrong, two wizards approached them right then - Augustus Malfoy and Philius Runcorn. “There you are!” Runcorn said, as if they had been hiding.

Malfoy was more polite. “Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis.” He bowed to them.

“Mister Runcorn, Mister Malfoy.” Long habit made it easy for Daphne to smile at the two men.

“I’m happy to see you return to your rightful place,” Runcorn went on. “Even in the Wizengamot too many fine purebloods seem scared of the rabble in the streets.” The old wizard shook his head. “And that leads to such travesties as today’s. At least you showed the spirit and conviction of an Old Family and voted against this farce. Your parents would be proud of you!”

They had had their proxies vote, but Daphne wasn’t about to correct the man. Nor would she tell him that Black had all but ordered them to. She nodded, and had no trouble faking the small tremble in her voice - thinking of her murdered parents was still painful. “Thank you, Mister Runcorn.”

Tracey, being a little less diplomatic, mumbled her agreement.

While the old wizard beamed at them, Malfoy spoke up. “It is indeed a pleasure to see young wizards and witches stand up for what is right, even though it might currently be unpopular. In these troubled times those among us who still hold on to our heritage and traditions need to work together.”

Daphne kept smiling, even though she felt as if her stomach was turning to lead. This was supposed to be a simple ploy to gain Theo’s trust. But judging by the look she caught from Black, who was standing next to Potter, some distance apart from them, this whole affair had just grown past catching a stupid teenager. And so far more dangerous.

*****

“Cheer up! We’re halfway done!” Sirius said under his voice, and Harry Potter didn’t have to glance at his godfather to know that he was grinning. They had finally managed to excuse themselves from the people crowding them, for a moment at least, under the pretext having to meet Doge near the buffet.

“I think I have already shaken the hand of every Wizengamot member,” Harry said in a low voice as they made their way through the crowd. “How many more can be left?”

“Enough to keep us busy for a little while longer,” Sirius said.

“You said I wouldn’t have to do much, just vote and maybe give a speech written for me,” Harry mumbled. “No one said anything about being mobbed like this.”

“It’s just for today,” his godfather said. “All the people who voted to grant you and your friends those awards want to be assured that their help will not be forgotten.”

“I’ve already forgotten most of their names,” Harry said. And those he hadn’t forgotten were mostly those he considered enemies.

“Fortunately, you have me to keep track of them.”

“You better handle them,” Harry said. “I don’t like this at all.” He grabbed a tray and loaded it with a few choice snacks, then cast a Switching Spell to replace them with the food he had brought with him.
“You handled our dear Prussian Feldjäger just fine,” Sirius said, picking up a few small sandwiches.

“He was just interested in details about the battles.” Harry had been able to talk about the different battles without revealing anything critical until the Prussian delegate had to end their talk or he’d have been rude to his hosts. “Unlike our own wizards and witches.” Whose questions were often far too personal for his taste. Too many had asked about his temporary absence from Hogwarts - and his ‘personal, private reasons’ had only seemed to fuel the rumours going around.

“Let’s grab our own Pureblood Boggart then - she should keep some of the cowards from bothering us.” Sirius had a waitress refill his glass and nodded towards Hermione and Ron.

“She hates that nickname,” Harry muttered.

“I know. Like Nymphadora hates her name.” Sirius’s grin widened.

Harry shook his head. Sometimes, he wondered if his godfather had a death wish.

They reached his friends, and to Harry’s relief, one of the Wizengamot members who had been about to intercept them actually veered off. Their Boggart was working, he thought, then corrected himself.

“Finally finished?” Ron said, one hand holding a bottle of Butterbeer.

“Not yet,” Harry grumbled.

“Ah, you came to Hermione so you could have a short break! Smart move, mate!” His grin vanished for a moment when Hermione elbowed him in the side.

“Indeed,” Sirius said, sighing and shaking his head. “My poor godson can defeat Dark Lords, but a few politicians are too much for him.”

Harry scoffed in response. “You should talk - you complain all the time about the Wizengamot when we’re at home!”

“Ah, but the best remedy against that kind of pain is seeing someone suffer even more!” Sirius’s wide grin suddenly vanished. “Reid’s heading towards us.”

Harry turned around, and he saw the old, thin Jamaican wizard - houngan - walking towards them, flanked by two of his assistants and possible zombies. If Hermione was the Wizengamot’s Boggart, then Reid was a Dementor; the crowd parted in front of him. He didn’t seem to care, though.

Ron muttered a curse, and Hermione said something under her breath that Harry missed.

“Mister Potter, Miss Granger, Mister Weasley, Mister Black.” The old man bowed. “A pleasure to finally meet you.” His voice sounded raspy, as if his vocal cords were about to fail - or had been replaced with something else. Harry almost shook his head, trying to banish the silly thoughts.

“Likewise, Mister Reid,” Sirius said.

Harry simply bowed his head. His friends followed his example.

“I’ve been following your exploits with a lot of interest,” the houngan continued. “Especially after the death of your mentor. I was hoping for a private talk.”

“Oh?” Harry didn’t like that. Not at all. He saw Sirius tense up as well, then slowly raise his wand and cast a privacy spell.
“Yes. You are without a doubt aware that Albus Dumbledore died after breaking into the most sacred part of my home country.”

“That is what was claimed. No one actually knows how he died,” Sirius said.

The houngan laughed - an eerie, rattling sound. “Please don’t play the fool, Mister Black. We all know that Dumbledore broke into the Library of Souls searching for a cure for that ‘Withering Curse’ the Dark Lord used on so many of your compatriots.” He sighed. “He was not successful, of course - and it cost him his life.”

“The Dark Lord claimed that it was his curse that struck Dumbledore down,” Sirius said.

“A claim likely made to boost the flagging morale of his followers,” Reid said. “But ultimately of no consequence. What matters is that something was taken from the Library. Something my nation wants back.” He leaned forward, and Harry had to struggle not to take a step back, away from that old, shriveled face. “And as the one wizard who was taught personally by Dumbledore and defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, we believe that you can help us.”

“And why should I?” Harry spat out before he could control himself. “We’re busy rebuilding our country, and Jamaica hasn’t exactly been friendly towards us, last I heard.” Otherwise, Dumbledore wouldn’t have had to break into their library.

“And your help could prevent relations between Britain and Jamaica from deteriorating further.” The houngan smiled, thin, leathery lips revealing yellowed teeth. “As your friend here said earlier - no one wants another war.”

Caribbean Sea, North of Jamaica, March 11th, 1997

Duchamp’s reputation was well-earned, Augustus Rookwood had to admit after a few days on her ship - or boat; he wasn’t quite certain what the muggle contraption was called. She was professional, discreet - she didn’t bother him at all with questions - and her spells had made the trip through heavy seas feel as if they had been travelling on a calm lake.

Although he was getting a bit impatient - they had been cruising close enough to see the Jamaican coast for two days now, without even trying to make landfall, as Duchamp called it. And the weather was changing - clouds were gathering. He didn’t like the look of that; not on a small boat in the middle of the ocean.

Duchamp, on the other hand, seemed pleased. “Finally!” the witch exclaimed.

“Pardon?” He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Storm’s brewing, at last.” She grinned, then must have noticed his slightly curious expression. “Ah, you wouldn’t know. The houngans are not like the other island rulers; they don’t just have wizards patrolling the borders. They have zombies planted among the muggle patrols, and that allows them to cast a much tighter net around their island. But with that storm? The muggles will head to the muggle ports, and even the magical patrols will be hindered. My ship’s going to hit the beach without anyone the wiser.”

He nodded. He wasn’t about to ask if they were safe - she had a reputation as a skilled smuggler, and if she trusted her spells to keep her ship safe, then that was good enough for him. Soon he’d be on Jamaica, beyond the reach of the Department of Mysteries or anyone else who was after him.
He stuck his hand into his enchanted pocket, caressing the skull inside. Soon he’d be able to find the help he needed to extract the secrets contained within.

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Inspections

Chapter 51: Inspections

‘At first glance, it seems difficult to understand why the Wizengamot, a bastion of pureblood traditions and values, would bestow seats on three young people from such atypical backgrounds - a pureblood from a family well-known for its abandonment of the customs of the Old Families, a half-blood and a muggleborn. Some of my colleagues claim that the Wizengamot acted out of fear, or in an attempt to placate the muggleborns, who were demanding more rights. This view fails to take into account that the Wizengamot was deeply split over the issue, and there was no one decisive reason, but rather a multitude of contributory reasons.

There were those who, afraid for their very lives, truly voted in an attempt to placate, by any means possible, the muggleborns. Next to them were those who simply followed tradition as those who had received the highest honour of Wizarding Britain, an Order of Merlin, First Class, were regarded as having proven themselves as both able and worthy to also lead Britain - a view more suited to a time when Order of Merlins were not awarded for political reasons, of course. Then there were those who followed the lead of Sirius Black - members of the Order of the Phoenix and old allies of Albus Dumbledore. They either simply voted as they were told, or came to the conclusion that three more seats for their faction were a good thing no matter who held them. Another group was those who naively thought that, as a member of the Wizengamot, the leader of the Muggleborn Resistance could be controlled or at least prevented from attacking that very institution. Others acted for more selfish reasons - they expected the Ministry and Wizengamot to fall, and hoped to attach themselves to the upcoming rulers in advance. And finally, there were those who were forced, through blackmail and other means, to support the proposal - Sirius Black was, in that aspect at least, a true scion of his family.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 11th, 1997

“Did Jamaica really just threaten us with war?”

Harry sounded as if he couldn’t believe it, Ron Weasley thought. That sort of thing reminded him that his friend had grown up among muggles, and not in Wizarding Britain.

“Well… a diplomat would call it ‘voicing their concern about a possible conflict’, ” Sirius said, “but, yes, they did.”

“Why would they go that far over a theft?” Hermione sounded doubtful too, in Ron’s opinion. But her expression - lips pressed together, eyes narrowed, a few wrinkles on her forehead - told him that she was already considering the implications.

Sirius snorted. “Given the relations between Jamaica and us, it doesn’t take much to start a war. We’ve had half a dozen wars with that island, not counting the war that won them their independence in 1752. It took a while for our ancestors to accept that the houngans hadn’t just beaten the British garrison there because most of our forces were tied up in a Goblin Rebellion at the time, and Jamaica hasn’t ever forgotten our attempts to reconquer it. It wasn’t until Dumbledore taught the houngans a lesson in the early 60s that relations with Jamaica improved somewhat. They knew that Britain could beat them thanks to Dumbledore, and so they played nice with the rest of the Magical
World. And with him gone…” The animagus shrugged.

“Wouldn’t the fact that Britain could have beaten them with Dumbledore, yet didn’t start a war, have shown the houngans that Britain has no intention of attacking them again?” Harry asked.

“Not really,” Sirius answered. “They probably assumed that this was all Dumbledore’s doing.”

“They wouldn’t be that wrong.” Ron cut in. “Houngans were evil, everyone knew that. “If not for the Headmaster, they’d have continued kidnapping and enslaving people. Which they might pick up again.”

Sirius nodded. “While I wouldn’t go as far as to claim that all houngans are evil - unlike Slytherins - there are more than a few reasons why they are pariahs in the Magical World. Well, in the parts of the Magical World that don’t support slavery.”

“But… the houngans are descendants of the Maroons, escaped slaves,” Hermione said. “Did they go and become slavers themselves after they won their independence?”

“Yes,” Sirius replied.

Ron nodded. “They went after muggles and muggleborns, mainly. Or so Dad said. Of course, that ended after Dumbledore became the Supreme Mugwump.”

Hermione muttered something about ‘bloody hypocrites’. Ron pondered if he should call her on her language, but thought better of it.

“Let’s focus on the threat, please,” Harry said. “The delegate mentioned a ‘Library of Souls’, from which something was stolen.”

“Careful with that name,” Sirius said. “The houngans killed to keep that a secret.”

“What?” Ron, Harry and Hermione asked in unison.

“According to Dumbledore, it’s a cave in the middle of Jamaica, where the skulls of dead houngans, containing all their knowledge, are stored.”

Ron winced. That sounded like the Dark Arts. Necromancy. But then - what else could you expect from wizards who created zombies?
“Do you mean their minds, like ghosts, or are their souls literally bound there?”

Trust Hermione to think of an even worse possibility, Ron thought.

“I don’t know,” Sirius said. “Since the houngans apparently choose this, I wouldn’t think they allowed their souls to be bound for eternity, but…” he shrugged.

“I’ve heard that a rumour that they sacrifice their souls for power,” Ron said. “And we know that some dark wizards risk spending eternity between life and the afterlife when they create a Horcrux.” He blinked. What if...

“Dear Lord!” Hermione gasped. “What if it is literally a library of souls, able to possess people? We know Horcruxes can do that, and voodoo has a tradition of the faithful letting themselves be possessed…”

Ron felt like vomiting. If that was true…

“We shouldn’t get too far ahead of ourselves,” Sirius said - though he looked queasy as well, Ron noticed. “But I think it’s very clear that we cannot treat this lightly. It doesn’t matter if there’s a Horcrux with the soul of a houngan missing, or just a skull containing their dark knowledge; either way, it is not something we can leave in the hands of a Death Eater - especially not someone like Rookwood.”

“We don’t know if it’s in his hands,” Harry pointed out.

“We can assume that it was in Voldemort’s hands, and that he used it to either learn or create his Withering Curse,” Hermione cut in. She looked at Harry and seemed to hesitate a moment. “You didn’t notice any sign of possession when you fought him, did you?”

Ron’s best friend shook his head. “No. That was just Voldemort.”

Ron was relieved - until he had another worrying thought. “We don’t know where the skull is. But will the houngans believe us?”

Sirius drew a hissing breath. “They won’t. I think the best course of action is for us to help them search for that skull.” He sighed. “Which might be exactly what they want, since it’ll give them ample opportunity to find out just what we can do without Dumbledore.”

“Great. And I thought working with the Ministry was bad.” Harry sighed. “Do you think the houngans have the counter-curse for the Withering Curse?”

Hermione frowned. “Wouldn’t they have mentioned that and offered it in exchange for our help instead of threatening us?”

Sirius shook his head. “They might simply prefer to see if they can force us to help them first, before offering us something in return.”

“And we still plan to help them?” Harry sounded like he would prefer a fight right then, Ron thought.

Sirius shrugged. “We’re not in a good position to refuse them. Not with the ICW’s inspection hanging over us.” He bared his teeth, and Ron thought he heard him growl. “We’ll just have to be subtle, then, to turn the tables on them.”

“Like Slytherins,” Harry said.
Sirius nodded. “Exact... what? No!”

Harry’s comment wasn’t that funny, but Ron chuckled anyway, if only to mask his fear. He glanced at Hermione, who was biting her lower lip so hard, he feared she’d draw blood soon. Reaching out, he gripped her hand and smiled at her. “We’ll get through this,” he whispered. “We beat the Dark Lord, after all.”

Her own smile was weak, but she nodded.

*****


“What went wrong at the Daily Prophet?” Amelia Bones asked as soon as Pius had closed the door to her office behind him. She banished the latest issue of the newspaper towards him. “They were supposed to cover yesterday’s awards and the reception, not stab the country in the back by promoting rumours about Potter, Granger and Weasley.”

“I assume you mean this line: ‘According to sources at Hogwarts, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley left the school to spend time with Hermione Granger in their love nest’.” Pius acted as if he hadn’t read the article before he arrived in her office.

She glared at him. “How exactly can anyone think that speculation about a ménage à trois between those three is acceptable right now?” She stood up. “I hate how we had to treat those three, especially Granger, as the greatest heroes of Britain since Dumbledore, but it was the price for presenting a united front to the ICW. Now, who is pulling strings to sabotage us?”

“I don’t know,” Pius said, “but I will find out.”

“You better,” Amelia snapped. There weren’t too many people who could influence the Prophet, and even fewer of those had any motive to betray the Ministry. “Now, what are the delegates doing?”

“The Aurors and Hit-Wizards providing security for our guests haven’t observed any meetings so far,” Pius answered. “Although given our forces’ current lack of experience…” He trailed off and spread his hands.

Amelia shook her head. “Get some competent Aurors on that. If whoever is behind this article meets Beaumont or Steiner, it could be a disaster.” Those two could influence the ICW, and were backed by powerful countries.

“Reid spoke with Potter and his friends at the reception,” Pius said, his expression bland.

“I expect that you have competent Aurors on his detail,” Amelia said. Leaving a houngan on his own in Britain was out of the question, after all.

“The best I could spare.”

Who might not be good enough, Amelia knew. She would have to ask Black to find out if the houngan had said anything important. And that article wouldn’t help.

*****

An hour later, Amelia was walking with Beaumont and Steiner through the offices of the Obliviators. Arlene Abbott, the head of the Obliviators, was all smiles and confidence.
“As you can see, we are ready to deal with any threats to the Statute of Secrecy,” she said, pointing at a group of wizards and witches in their distinctive robes. “Our Seers are under constant surveillance, and we are poised to react at once to their visions.”

The French delegate smiled politely. “I see. It does look in order - though, please, tell me: How did you deal with the additional strain that the recent war put on your department?”

Abbott wasn’t fazed. “Ah, it wasn’t actually much of a strain, was it, Oliver?” She turned to a middle-aged wizard sitting at a massive desk and sorting scrolls.

The man shook his head. “Not at all. In fact, we had less work during the war, since so many wizards were hiding, and children were much better supervised than usual. There were a few major events, but those were easily contained - all the factions took care to avoid bothering the muggles too much.”

“So, do you expect things to grow worse then, with the war being over?” Beaumont quickly said.

Abbott raised her hand and made a dismissive gesture. “Oh, no! Compared to the end of the last war, this was easy to handle. It was all in the report I sent to the ICW, too,” she added. “You’ve read it, I trust?”

“Of course.” Beaumont’s smile slipped a tiny bit, Amelia thought. “But the ICW was worried that the report might have been a bit too optimistic, given the wide-spread devastation that the Ministry suffered during the war.”

“Are you accusing me of falsifying a report for political reasons?” Amelia refrained from smiling when Abbott suddenly glared at the French witch. She didn’t know Abbott well - the witch wasn’t that closely related to Susan’s best friend at Hogwarts - but she knew her reputation. “We only answer to the ICW!”

“I am aware of that, of course,” Beaumont said, smiling sweetly. “But you are still British witches and wizards, are you not? It must be horrible to see all that devastation, while not being able to help your country.”

Abbott sniffed. “We know our duty.”

“Of course.” The French witch’s tone belied her words.

Steiner stepped in. “Well, it seems you have things well in hand here. But how are you set for replacements? Just from looking at all the young Aurors and Hit-Wizards, it’s obvious that many experienced wizards perished.” He sighed. “It reminds me of the aftermath of Grindelwald’s War.”

“None of us are about to retire for a few years yet. More than enough time to recruit and train our replacements,” Abbott said. “And while it might appear cynical, as a neutral department not answering to the Minister, we have an advantage when it comes to recruiting. There are a number of skilled and experienced muggleborns who left the Ministry’s employ prior to or during the war. Not all of them will be willing to return to their old posts to work next to those who let them go.”

Amelia pressed her lips together when she saw Steiner stare at the witch and Beaumont smile. Abbott was correct, but hiring muggleborns for the Obliviator Corps wasn’t something those two delegates would consider a good thing. A view Amelia thought she could understand, after the last war.

Nevertheless, the damage was done. All she could do now was mitigate it. She felt as if she were back as the Head of the DMLE and faced with some rather outspoken Aurors talking to the Minister.
about things Cornelius shouldn’t have been told. “Until replacements are needed, this is a merely academic question.” She glared at Abbott, and the witch fortunately took the hint. This was not the place to talk about on-the-job training and planning ahead. “Now, how about we take a look at the Seers’ offices?”

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**Cumbria, Britain, March 12th, 1997**

“Mate, those firearms might be useful, but they’re heavy!”

Harry Potter mumbled his agreement while the two were walking back from the range to the camp. The Sergeant had been drilling them for hours, to ‘make up for the time missed yesterday’, before it had been their turn at the range with the Major.

“We’ll be late for dinner, too,” Ron went on.

“Hermione will have kept some food for us,” Harry said.

His friend perked up. “Right! And we’ll have a bit more privacy with everyone else already done.” He stepped over a root that had sent a number of the recruits into the mud in the last few days. “Should we take guns with us, tomorrow?”

Harry knew what he meant. “I don’t think we’ll be able to use them that well against Reid. Should things come to that,” he added after a second. He patted the thigh pocket of his uniform, enchanted with an extension charm courtesy of Hermione, which held the Elder Wand. “You know what Hermione said about rifles being best used from far away.”

“Dunno. He’ll be ready for curses. Bullets might surprise him.”

“A Shield Charm will stop them well enough,” Harry said.

“That’ll stop curses as well,” Ron retorted.

“Most curses.” Harry looked ahead. They were close to the camp now. Ron glanced at him, but didn’t say anything else until they reached the perimeter.

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As it turned out, Hermione had kept their dinner. Unfortunately, she didn’t just have dinner waiting for them, but also the latest issue of the Daily Prophet. “It’s the talk of the camp,” she said with a frown while putting the newspaper down on the table inside her tent - and Ron’s, Harry thought, given that his friend hadn’t slept in the tent he shared with Harry for days now. “The Prophet’s again claiming that we’re in a sordid ménage à trois.” She scoffed. “Nothing about our speeches, but a whole column about our supposed love life! I’d have expected that from Teen Witch Weekly!”

Ron frowned. “That’s not a good sign. I would have thought that with the Ministry playing nice, the Prophet would follow suit.”

Harry craned his neck, then turned the newspaper around, sending a few of the Wizengamot members scattering when a bit of his meal landed close to their picture. There was a big picture of the three of them, on the front page, smiling with their Orders of Merlin. “We might be overreacting,” he said after skimming through the article. “It might simply be some journalist trying to spice up their article.”
“And the Prophet printed it?” Hermione looked doubtful.

“Maybe they’ve decided to demonstrate their independence? And took the muggle tabloids as their example?” Harry shrugged. “Just an idea,” he added when he saw the sceptical expressions of his friends. “We have bigger things to worry about, anyway.”

“Reid,” Ron said, finishing his meal. Harry’s friend ‘ate like a veteran’, the Sergeant had told them. They weren’t certain if it had been a compliment or not.

Hermione nodded. “I don’t think he’ll try anything tomorrow, but…”

“... you can’t trust houngans,” Ron said.

That earned him a glare from the witch, Harry noted. She went on: “I meant, Magical Jamaica might be planning to both take out ‘Dumbledore’s Heir’ and manufacture a pretext for war at the same time.”

Harry grimaced - the latest title for him that the Prophet had come up with was the worst so far, in his opinion. “I’m no Dumbledore,” he said through clenched teeth.

“But you’ll have to act the part,” Hermione told him. “We need to win the purebloods and half-bloods over so the Wizengamot will peacefully step down.”

He knew that. But he had thought that being the Boy-Who-Lived would be enough. “I can’t really act the part either. I’m no prodigy. I don’t have his knowledge or experience.” He glanced at Hermione. She had all the knowledge. And she had the experience as a leader.

“You’re a prodigy in Defence,” Hermione said.

He shrugged. He hadn’t been good enough to match Voldemort in a duel.

“You have Dumbledore’s wand,” Ron pointed out. “And you can wield it easily. That’s quite close to being his heir. Or would be, if it wasn’t the, you know.” He made a gesture with his hand towards Harry.

Harry put his hand on the pocket containing the Elder Wand. “And if I flash it around, people might realise which wand it is.”

“They didn’t notice it when Dumbledore carried it.” Ron shrugged.

“Dumbledore used his own, his other wand, in public, I think,” Hermione said. “I haven’t looked into that, though.”

“In any case, I don’t want to risk using it,” Harry said. “Unless there’s no choice. There are still people seeking the wand. And we can’t afford for everyone to come after me. Trying to win it.”

His friends winced. “Well, we can’t do much but play along with Reid, and be ready for trouble,” Ron said. “Or as ready as we can be, given that we don’t know what he is planning.”

“In other words, we’re back at square one.” Harry sighed and pushed his tray away. “I’ll take a walk. Good night.” He stood up and left the tent, ignoring the glances his friends exchanged. He doubted that Ron would leave the tent until morning.

Outside, the recruits and Resistance members were still gathered around the campfire. “Hey, Harry!” he heard Seamus yell. “Come sit with us!”
He hesitated for a second, then started to walk over to the campfire. It was better than walking around the forest and trying not to think about what his best friends were doing inside their tent.

Seamus scooted away from Tania and patted the free space on the log there. “Sit down here!”

Harry nodded at the others and sat down. When he saw that they had been reading the Prophet, he almost stood up right away. “You better not believe that rag,” he said, grabbing the lone can of Coca-Cola from the cooler filled with beer next to Seamus.

Slightly nervous laughter answered him, though Seamus and Tania were chuckling. “Left the lovebirds in their tent?”

“Yes,” Harry said, a bit sharper than he wanted, and opened the can.

“So… when’s your first session in the Wizengamot?” Another recruit, Matthew something, asked.

“I’ll only be able to actually vote myself once I’m seventeen,” Harry said. “I’ll have a proxy vote for me until then.” With a grin, he added: “Of course, I hope that by then, we’ll have general elections, so I can skip that.”

Seamus scoffed. “Fat chance of that! The pureblood idiots are too stupid to realise that they have lost. We’ll have to kick them out.”

Harry glanced at the former fellow Gryffindor. “It’s not the purebloods, it’s just the Old Families. The majority of the purebloods, like Ron’s family, haven’t had any say in Wizarding Britain’s government for centuries.”

Seamus snorted, but the other muggleborns seemed to be listening - he saw a number of them nod. Harry continued: “And even among the Old Families, things are changing. Sirius, my godfather, has a lot of allies who follow his lead in the Wizengamot. And there were a number of others who were starting to switch sides.”

“We still have to be ready for trouble,” Tania cut in. “Especially with the ICW’s inspection.”

“Of course,” Harry nodded at her. “But we’re close to our goals. Once we have the Wizengamot, the Ministry follows.”

“That’s what Hermione keeps saying,” Seamus muttered. But once again, the rest of the Resistance members and recruits nodded.

“Will you be running for a seat once there are elections?” Mary-Jane wanted to know.

“Probably,” Harry said. He wasn’t too keen on it, but Hermione was convinced that they needed him in the Wizengamot even after the reforms.

“You should,” someone else said. “You’ll do fine!”

“Better than the current members for sure,” another added.

“We’ll see. Hermione and Ron will sit in the next session,” Harry said.

“That’ll be a scene!” Tania chuckled, and even Seamus grinned.

Harry knew that Hermione would not make too many waves while the ICW’s inspectors were still in Britain, but he didn’t tell the others that while they were speculating about the Wizengamot’s reaction. He simply sipped his Coca-Cola, and enjoyed the evening.
Tomorrow would come soon enough.

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**Kent, Greengrass Manor, March 13th, 1997**

Daphne Greengrass was struggling to remain polite and composed. There was a werewolf in her home! She was standing next to a dark creature, a cursed beast! And it was all Black’s fault!

“Do you usually receive your guests, including Nott, in the living room?” Lupin asked.

Daphne wanted to ask where else she’d receive guests, but refrained from doing so, and nodded instead. “Yes.”

“Well, sometimes we gathered in the garden,” Tracey cut in, smiling at him. “We haven’t done that in a while, though. Theo won’t suspect anything if we meet him in the living room. And we’ll be able to wait comfortably.”

Her friend was far too friendly with the werewolf, Daphne thought. She didn’t know if Tracey was simply putting on an act, or if that crush she’d had on their third year Defence teacher had survived the revelation that he was a werewolf.

“Remus won’t be in the living room, though,” their other guest spoke up. “Just me, and you two.” Nymphadora Tonks - ‘Auror Tonks’, as she told them to call her - smiled a bit too sweetly. The witch was a metamorphmagus, and would be posing as Astoria during Theo’s visit. She currently looked like a tall and rather curvy blonde witch. Daphne would have been jealous, if she didn’t know that it wasn’t Tonks’s natural body.

“Well, Theo’s not here yet,” Tracey said. “There’s no need to split up.” She cocked her head at Tonks. “Although… don’t you need to spend some time with Astoria, to copy her manners?”

“Nott hasn’t even called yet,” Tonks said. “It’s better to get the lay of the land, first. Just in case there’s trouble coming. I’d rather not get lost in the mansion during a fight.”

“Of course.” Daphne once again forced herself to smile. It was a reasonable request - if one didn’t realise that the two would learn far too much about Daphne’s home and its defences as well. Black had planned this well - every step of his plan was making Daphne more vulnerable. And some people claimed he was but a rash Gryffindor!

She led them to the living room of the manor. “Cosy,” Tonks said as she looked around.

“Thank you,” Daphne answered automatically.

Lupin was studying the walls and windows attentively. Probing for weaknesses, probably. The man was a good actor, keeping his beastly nature hidden behind a polite, quiet facade. If she didn’t know better, Daphne would have never suspected that he was a werewolf.

“I think this is secure enough,” Lupin said. “Provided he doesn’t bring friends.”

Tonks shrugged. “We’re not about to fight them here anyway. That would give the game away, and warn Runcorn and Malfoy.”

Which wouldn’t be a bad thing, in Daphne’s opinion. Laying a trap for Theo was far less dangerous than trying to spy on those two, and their co-conspirators. Which was what Black expected of her and Tracey. “Theo needs to visit, first. He might consider us a lost cause.”
“I think that is unlikely,” Lupin said. “His proxy must have noticed how yours voted. He is probably simply being cautious.”

That sounded like Theo, Daphne had to admit. He had a tendency to hesitate, which he might mistake for being cautious. Not that she was currently acting very cautiously either.

“Well, if he is not visiting we can meet him at the equinox ceremony on the twentieth,” Tracey said.

Daphne glared at her friend. Bringing a spy to that ceremony… they’d be excluded if that came out. But Black had probably already thought of that.

“Mum told me about the ceremony, but I’ve never seen one,” Tonks said.

For a moment, no one said anything. Daphne knew very well why Tonks had never attended an equinox or solstice ceremony - her mother had been cast out by her family for marrying a muggle. “It’s a simple ceremony,” she said. “It’s easy to learn the rites.”

“Ah.” Tonks nodded.

“Astoria can probably teach you,” Tracey said, smiling like she did when she had been needling Pansy, back at Hogwarts. Before the war.

“Anyway, let me show you your rooms,” Daphne said, gesturing at the door.

“We just need one room,” Tonks said. “For safety.”

“With two beds,” Lupin added.

Daphne saw Tonks frown briefly at that. She wasn’t about to pry, though. “Of course. Please follow me.”

A few minutes later, with Lupin and Tonks in the guest room, conjuring furniture - a not so subtle sign that they didn’t trust her, Daphne thought - she was finally free of the werewolf’s presence. At least for the moment. She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed.

“We’re in quite a pickle,” Tracey said, her friendly smile replaced by a cynical expression.

“Yes, we are. We can but hope that Theo will visit soon, so we can get this done.” She knew it would likely mean Theo’s death, but she didn’t care. Not about him, not any more. All she wanted was to protect her family.

“That still leaves Runcorn and Malfoy.”

Daphne glared at Tracey. Trust her friend to ruin any silver lining Daphne might see!

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**London, Ministry of Magic, March 13th, 1997**

“So, who’s pulling the strings of the Prophet?” Amelia Bones snapped as soon as Pius had closed the door behind him.

The Head of the DMLE stiffened very slightly before answering in his usual calm manner. “I don’t exactly know. The author of the article was struck with a Confundus Charm, as was the editor.” With a sigh, he added: “The rest of the staff didn’t notice anything - or they didn’t question the article’s wording.”
“Were the two victims struck at the same time and location?” She had been an Auror for too long to have lost the mindset.

He shook his head, the edges of his mouth briefly turning down. “Not as far as we can tell. Someone manipulated their memories as well.”

Amelia pressed her lips together. She had expected to find a short-sighted member of an Old Family, not something like this. “So, either they’re playing it safe, or they lack the gold or influence to handle this the ‘traditional way’.” Which meant bribes or threats. “Or this is the work of our guests.”

Pius had already considered that as well, of course. “The journalist was talking to the delegates, asking for an interview. It would have been easy for them to arrange an opportunity to meet her privately.”

“Exactly. Can we exclude Reid from the suspect list?”

Pius hesitated a fraction of a second. That told Amelia enough, and she shook her head before he could start to explain the failures of his Aurors to keep an eye on their most dangerous guest. “I know we can’t prevent them from apparating.” She tapped her chin with the index of her left hand - as Alastor had taught her, so long ago, she always kept her wand hand free if possible. “He was talking to Black’s group.”

“Do you wish to track Black?”

She looked at him. As if she would suggest such a futile thing. Black and his group had evaded the Dark Lord’s assassins during the war. What was left of the Ministry’s Aurors wouldn’t be able to track them, if they could find them in the first place. Not least because he had moles inside their force. “Potter and Weasley have left Hogwarts; that much at least was correct in that article.” Susan had told her that the two boys were ‘excused from school for personal reasons’ according to the Hogwarts rumour mill.

“Do you think they are with Granger?” Pius asked. She couldn’t tell if he was amused or appalled by their attempt to use the Prophet as a source of information.

“Yes. Though not for the reasons stated in the article. They’re preparing something.” Amelia was certain of that. They were close, but not that close, as their behaviour had shown at the award ceremony and the reception. At least unless all of them were far better actors than their history at Hogwarts would suggest.

“The Resistance hasn’t been making that many appearances during the last few days,” Pius said. “That is helpful with regards to the current international situation, but it means we don’t know what they are doing. And we lack the Aurors to find out more.”

“We couldn’t find them back when we had the Aurors,” Amelia said.

“Which means they have the initiative,” Pius said. “Should it come to a fight.”

“I am well aware of that,” Amelia said, controlling her temper. “Unlike some of our esteemed members of the Wizengamot, I am not ignorant of just how weak the Ministry is.” It galled her to admit this; she had been working for the Ministry since her graduation from Hogwarts, and to see it reduced like this… She shook her head. “Our duty doesn’t change, though.”

“Until the Wizengamot changes,” Pius said. “We just enforce the laws, after all, we do not make them.” He didn’t bother to hide his sarcasm when he quoted her own words back at her. She glared at him, and his expression softened a little. “You know it’s coming, Amelia. The muggleborns have
grown too powerful, the half-bloods have been alienated by the muggleborn laws, and the Old Families are losing their grip on the purebloods. Arthur’s busy building his power base in the Ministry, and Black’s influence in the Wizengamot is growing. You can’t stop this unless you invite the Europeans to occupy Britain, and even that might not work.”

“It would also be treason,” she said.

“Yes.” He kept looking at her impassively.

She closed her eyes and slowly let out her breath, then looked at him. “I know that. I’m no fool.”

“Then why don’t you join Black?”

“Join Black? Compromise my integrity and abandon my principles? And for what?” She scoffed. “For whatever bribe he will offer?”


She snorted. “I’m not you.”

“I know.”

She almost cursed him for the pity she noticed in his tone. But he was wrong. Whatever power he imagined he could gather he’d lose. For all his political experience, Pius didn’t understand Black - or Granger. They were not interested in power for power’s sake; they wanted power to change things.

And they didn’t care how much they had to destroy to reach their goals.

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An hour later, she had another irksome visitor in her office. “Good afternoon, Madam Beaumont.”

“Good afternoon, Madam Minister.” The French witch inclined her head.

“I thought you would be accompanying an Obliviator squad in the field today,” Amelia said. That had been scheduled, at least.

“Ah, Herbert is with them. He is in his element - I guess Obliviators come close enough for a man who misses his past as a Feldjäger so much.”

Amelia wasn’t certain if that was a barb aimed at her as well, but she wasn’t about to discuss the Prussian delegate with the French one. “How can I help you? As far as I am aware, the goal of your visit is to judge Britain’s ability to preserve the Statute of Secrecy, which is handled by the Obliviator Corps.” And she wouldn’t find any fault with them. The Obliviators were about the only department of the Ministry who had come through the war unscathed.

“Oh, the British Obliviators certainly seem to be capable of fulfilling their duties,” Beaumont said with the sort of polite, empty smile Amelia had come to quickly hate after rising in the Ministry. “But we would be neglecting our duty if we were simply to inspect the current Obliviators, and not consider future developments.”

“Madam Abbott did explain the future plans and contingencies of her department quite clearly yesterday,” Amelia said. “Do you doubt her claims?”

“I am certain her proposed policies will be adequate - provided the situation in Britain does not undergo more changes. A renewal of hostilities, for example, could endanger the Statute of Secrecy.
Especially if muggleborns were recruited as Obliviators. They might have reservations about obliviating muggles, after all, being so close to them.”

The French witch hadn’t answered her question, Amelia noted. She narrowed her eyes slightly. “Madam Abbott mentioned that muggleborns might be able to be more effective in protecting the Statute since they are so familiar with muggles.”

“I don’t think that has ever been tried. At least not in France.” Beaumont dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. “There’s also the concern about possible future changes in Britain. A new administration might not understand the importance of the Obliviators.”

Amelia stared at her. “That’s rather vague.”

She thought she saw the French witch’s eyes twitch for a moment. “I assume you are aware of the developments in the Wizengamot. The balance of power is shifting, is it not?”

“You might not be used to it, coming from a country ruled by hereditary ruler,” Amelia said, “but that’s not uncommon for the Wizengamot.”

Beaumont wrinkled her nose. “I do not think that muggleborns and low-borns taking over has ever happened before, not even in Britain.”

If any purebloods overheard the witch talk like this about them, Black’s support would grow faster than a newly-hatched dragon left in a butcher’s shop, Amelia thought. She raised her eyebrows. “I can assure you that there is no danger of a coup.” Even if only because Granger and Black knew that they were winning anyway.

Beaumont snorted. “You’re rather more evasive than your reputation claims. So, I will be more direct myself: Sirius Black and his muggleborn allies are taking over. That is a cause of concern for the ICW. Their extremist views are well-known.”

She had a source in the Wizengamot or the Ministry, Amelia thought. She sounded too certain to be trusting an outside source. “There’s no reason for concern. They didn’t endanger the Statute during the war, after all.”

“That may be so, but things and views change. It has been decided that in order to fulfill our mandate, we will have to meet with them.”

“You already did,” Amelia said. “Mister Reid spoke with Black and his allies at the reception.”

“That was simply a courtesy call,” Beaumont said.

“You would know, of course.” Amelia was certain that the French witch didn’t know what they had been talking about either. She didn’t think either Steiner or Beaumont talked to Reid much, if at all. “I can inform them that you wish a meeting.”

“Thank you.” Beaumont smiled again, and once more nodded politely, if slightly condescendingly, at Amelia.

Beaumont could arrange a meeting herself, maybe even more easily than Amelia, given that Black had apparently taken a French Veela as a mistress. Unless, of course, there were French politics at work.

Amelia was already soured on British and international politics; she really didn’t want to deal with the domestic policy of foreign nations. And she could only hope that both Black and Granger would
show some restraint when meeting with a foreign diplomat.

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Meeting a Jamaican houngan in a muggle safe house in a rather deserted part of London’s East End - not too close to the home of the Resistance - might not have seemed the best choice at first glance, Hermione Granger thought while looking out through the window on the empty street below. But meeting Reid in Grimmauld Place had been deemed too dangerous by everyone. Despite the claims of traditionalists, the laws of hospitality were, in reality, more in the nature of guidelines. She wouldn’t put it past a houngan to exploit the opportunity for his own purposes. Hogwarts and the Hog’s Head Inn had been dismissed for the same reasons, and no one wanted to meet Reid in a clearing in a forest at night.

So, they had settled for one of the safe houses the Resistance had prepared. That gave them the advantage of having plans to secure it already - Tania and Seamus were providing backup outside, with John. They wouldn’t be listening in since some of the things they might end up talking about were too dangerous even for her friends in the Resistance to know, but they were ready to act if given a signal.

Hermione felt guilty about excluding them while they were helping her and her friends, but there were more secrets than her own at stake. And it wasn’t as if she hadn’t kept important things from them before. Like Allan’s fate.

She glanced back at the others in the living room of the safe house. Sirius was twirling his wand between his fingers and kept shifting around on the couch. Remus was studying the books on the small shelf - Hermione had stacked it with several useful reference books and a variety of novels meant to provide some entertainment for the Resistance, should they have to use the safe house. Harry was sitting in an armchair, tapping his foot on the floor, and Ron was flipping through the channels of the TV.

“Should have cast some wards,” she heard Sirius mutter.

Remus paused in his skimming through a copy of Jane Austen, and turned his head towards the animagus. “Since the intention is to invite Mister Reid, wards wouldn’t do us any good.”

“They’d stop his zombies.”

“I sincerely doubt that he has had the opportunity to create any zombies - of any type - in Britain. And even if he had, the diplomatic backlash would make it unlikely that he would do so.” Remus smiled faintly.

Sirius scoffed. “He’s a houngan; he doesn’t need zombies to attack us.”

“In which case the wards wouldn’t be of any use, as I have pointed out already.”

Sirius bared his teeth - Hermione told herself to research whether animagi took on aspects of their animal form - and hissed. “But we’d be doing something other than waiting!”

“You could watch the telly with me,” Ron said.

“We could - if you’d ever stop switching channels,” Harry said.

“Hey - I don’t want to miss anything!” Ron said.
“And that’s why you’re missing everything.” Harry shook his head. “Give me the remote.”

“Get your own!” Ron said.

Hermione’s radio chirped just when it looked as if the two boys would start to wrestle. “A cab’s driving up the street,” she heard Tania say while everyone stopped what they were doing, and looked at her. “They’re getting out… it’s Reid. And two others.”

“Or someone using Polyjuice,” Hermione muttered. She tapped her radio. “Keep them in your sights.” Looking at the others, she added: “They’re coming.”

“Cab’s leaving,” Tania informed her. Hermione wondered if they had hired the cab, or simply mind-controlled the driver, then berated herself silently for assuming the worst of the houngan. Even though Sirius insisted that doing so was just being prudent.

Then the doorbell rang, and Hermione glanced at Ron, who turned the TV off while Sirius and Remus went downstairs to open the door. A minute later, the houngan, in a white suit, stepped into the room, followed by two of his assistants, and Sirius and Remus.

“Good evening, Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, Miss Granger.”

“Good evening,” Harry and Hermione said while Ron nodded. They had spread out a bit - just in case, with Ron and Hermione flanking Harry.

Reid took a seat in an armchair while his two assistants - two men who might be zombies, Hermione thought, given their lack of expressions - took up positions behind and to the side of him.

Sirius sat down on the couch himself, and Remus leaned against the wall behind him.

For a moment, no one said anything, then Sirius leaned forward - he wasn’t holding his wand any more, she noticed - and nodded. “So, you wanted to meet us. Here we are,” he said in a tone that made Hermione wonder how he managed not to alienate everyone in the Wizengamot.

Reid seemed to be more amused than offended, though. “Here you are, indeed - the ones who have defeated Voldemort and are about to take Britain.”

Hermione bit her lower lip to avoid correcting the houngan that it was Wizarding Britain and that they would be reforming it, not taking it.

Sirius shrugged. “Voldemort thought that he had won when Dumbledore died. He was wrong.”

“Ah, yes, Dumbledore’s death. We have talked about it, haven’t we?” Reid had a faint accent, Hermione realised, but it was hard to notice given how raspy his voice sounded - and far less of an accent than she’d have expected from a Jamaican native.

“You claimed that he had stolen something from your island.” Sirius crossed his arms.

“Indeed, I did.” Reid smiled, and as at their first meeting at the reception, Hermione fought not to shudder at the state of his yellowed teeth. This time, though, he must have noticed her reaction since he turned to look at her, and smiled even more widely. “Do I make you uncomfortable, Miss Granger? Age is not always kind, and rarely pretty.”

“I was just reminded of my parents’ work, Mister Reid,” she said, smiling tightly.

Harry suddenly coughed in his fist, followed a second later by Ron snorting.
“And what do your parents do?” Reid’s smile had grown thin.

“They’re dentists,” Hermione said. She didn’t elaborate, and while he nodded, she wasn’t certain that he had understood. But he was not smiling at her anymore.

“Let us return to the matter at hand,” Sirius said. “You mentioned something that was stolen from you, which you want returned.”

“Yes, I did indeed.” Reid nodded slowly.

“What exactly are you trying to recover?” Sirius still had his arms crossed.

“I think you know what I’m talking about.”

“I certainly do not.”

For the first time, the houngan seemed to frown. “An enchanted skull containing lore from my country. Stolen from our most sacred place - a crime we will not let pass.”

“And you suspect Dumbledore. Who is already dead, though. And we didn’t find any skull among his belongings. No human skull, at least.”

“Ah.” Reid’s smile was back. “You know about it.”

Denying that they knew more about the Library of Souls wouldn’t serve any purpose, Hermione thought. Sirius shrugged anyway. “What else could it be? I doubt you’d use animal skulls for your most sacred place.”

“You would be surprised, indeed.”

“But as I told you - there was no skull with Dumbledore.”

“As a well-known master of Transfiguration, he could have changed it into anything,” Reid said. “I know a spell to find it, though, no matter its shape.”

“I’d have thought that such skulls were protected against spells,” Sirius said. “But if you know such a spell, then it should be easy for you to find the skull, wouldn’t it?”

“The range of the spell is somewhat limited,” Reid admitted. “I will require entrance to Hogwarts, to verify your claims.”

Sirius snorted. “Hogwarts’ wards are rather particular about some visitors.”

Hermione hadn’t read about that in Hogwarts: A History, but the Marauders would have had to study the wards quite closely to create their map, so she couldn’t tell if Sirius was lying or not.

“A guest would be admitted, though. Didn’t Karkaroff visit during the tournament?”

“He wasn’t a houngan. And we don’t control Hogwarts.” Sirius spread his hands apart.

“You have a lot of influence there, though.”

“Not really. McGonagall still hasn’t forgiven me for all the rule-breaking we did in our time.” Sirius grinned.

Reid obviously didn’t appreciate the levity. He scoffed. “I told you how important this is to my
country. You persist in such antics at your own - and others’ - peril.” His assistants didn’t move an inch, nor show any reaction despite the tension in the room skyrocketing. The houngan glanced at Harry. “Many sing your praises, boy, but no one could tell how you did it. Dumbledore was feared for his power. You ain’t.”

“I don’t want to be feared,” Harry said. “I don’t like threats, though.”

Hermione’s finger hovered over the button for her radio. If this was just a ploy by Reid to create an excuse to attack them…

Reid didn’t relax, but he didn’t seem to press the threat. “If you refuse to let me check Hogwarts as a guest, then I will be forced to use other means to find the skull. Means Britain wouldn’t like, indeed.” He cocked his head. “And a refusal to let us search for our stolen treasure would make you appear quite suspicious.”

“What assurances can you give that you won’t use such a visit to cause us or anyone else harm?” Remus cut in.

“I would expect the Vanquishers of Voldemort to be able to tell if I did anything out of bounds while under their eyes.” Reid was smiling again. As if they’d let him enter the school without iron-clad safeguards in place!

“Hogwarts is our Library of Souls,” Sirius said, growling again. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Then you should understand our grievances, indeed.”

It was a closer analogy than Sirius might have realised, Hermione thought. Hogwarts was the heart of Wizarding Britain. Each British wizard or witch learned magic there, and its library contained the country’s knowledge.

And woe to whoever harmed it.

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North of Magical Port Royal, Jamaica, March 13th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood hated posing as a muggle. He might have taken muggle studies as a student, mostly out of morbid curiosity, but that had been decades ago, and if he had learned anything, then it was that muggle customs changed all the time. And he hadn’t kept up with muggle customs since graduating.

But acting like a muggle was the safest way for a British wizard to travel to and around Jamaica. Especially a British wizard with a skull stolen from the Library of Souls - if the houngans caught him, he would be facing a fate worse than death. Far worse.

Posing as a muggle had one drawback, though, Augustus thought while studying the muggle town near Magical Port Royal through a telescope - he had no way to easily enter Jamaica’s capital. Port Royal had been one of Britain’s greatest accomplishments in recent times. Right after the Statute of Secrecy had gone into effect, they had hidden the entire town from the muggles by making them think it was destroyed in an earthquake in 1692. The pearl of the Caribbean, freed of the muggle filth in one elegant move.

And then the mongrels had taken it from Britain, together with the entire island, when they had revolted right in the middle of a goblin rebellion. Augustus pressed his lips together. The houngans had a lot to answer for.
He sighed. They would, in time, but he had to focus on his immediate needs first. He needed the knowledge contained in that skull, but without the help of a houngan, he couldn’t access it - the Dark Lord’s notes hadn’t covered that secret.

Fortunately, he didn’t actually have to enter the town. He collapsed the telescope and stood up.

*****

An hour later, his patience and self-control were severely taxed. He was surrounded by muggles, half-naked muggles even, gathered on a filthy beach. Loud, noisy children were playing in the sand and the surf while their parents tried their best to get a sunburn. Fools, the lot of them! If only he could curse them all, and cleanse the beach.

But Augustus needed the brats for his plan. He raised his wand, hidden behind one of the nonsensical muggle newspapers, and looked at the father of a particularly obnoxious brat. “Excuse me, sir.”

“Yes?”

“Legilimens!” Augustus whispered when the muggle looked up and their eyes met. A minute later, he knew where the family was staying. Now he just needed to vanish and then wait until the spoiled boy threw his next tantrum.

It took longer than Augustus had expected, and, even with magic, standing while disillusioned in the middle of a packed beach was wearing. But when the overweight sprog was refused another ice cream, he finally started to wail. Augustus smiled and moved his wand, and a miniature sandstorm sprang up around the brat, hiding him from sight and scaring the muggles nearby. He almost chuckled at the sight of the fools staring at something incomprehensible to their limited minds when the local Obliviators appeared.

Soon, the sandstorm was dispersed and the muggles taken care of. And, as Augustus had hoped, one of the Obliviators noted the name and address of the family whose boy had apparently had a bout of accidental magic.

He smiled. Dumbledore had forced the houngans to stop their disgusting practice of kidnapping mudblood children to raise as houngans. But with him gone, Augustus was certain that the mongrels would start up again. And the spell on the muggle boy would lead him right to the hideout of whoever wanted to pollute their bloodline.

And he would acquire the knowledge he needed.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 13th, 1997

The side alley looked like any other alley, no matter how long Bess Cox stared at it. It should look different, she thought. Teddy had died there, killed by an Auror while ‘resisting arrest’. She clenched her teeth - Teddy had been the first of her friends to die. Now only she was left of their group. Mark and Ricky had been killed in Hogsmeade, and Felix had been captured and then executed by the Ministry. Bess had been the only one to escape that day, three months ago.

She turned away, pushing her hands into the pockets of her jacket - it was still rather cold, especially in the evening - as she walked down Diagon Alley. She had thought a lot about their disastrous attack on the Death Eaters in Hogsmeade while she had been hiding in muggle London. Dumbledore was at fault - if he and his French friends hadn’t attacked them, Bess’s friends would still be alive.
The old wizard had even called them criminals, just for fighting the Dark Lord’s followers!

But now Dumbledore was dead, and the Ministry was collapsing. The muggleborns had returned to Wizarding Britain, too powerful for the Aurors to persecute. She smiled when she remembered how the purebloods who had profited from the expulsion and persecution of the muggleborns had run. The same Aurors who had persecuted muggleborns before hadn’t been able to do anything!

She slowed down when she heard music - muggle music - from the reopened muggle-style bar ‘Winston’s’ ahead, and her smile grew wider. It looked as if Toby, the owner, had bought a few new records! Bess was about twenty metres away from the entrance when the half a dozen people arguing with the bouncer there vanished in an explosion.

For a moment, she stood there, frozen with shock and horror as stone fragments fell down around her and a cloud of dust obscured the scene. She heard people screaming and saw spells flashing, followed by more explosions.

She was fumbling for her wand when a figure stepped out of the thinning cloud of dust, walking slowly towards her. His face was slack, his eyes seemed to lack focus - but his wand rose, and before Bess could react, the man next to her was struck by a curse that threw him back several metres.

She screamed and jumped to the side, towards the closest side alley. Behind her, another, smaller explosion threw up cobblestones, one of them clipping her shoulder and sending her sprawling. Shaking her head, panting, she cried out when pain lanced through her and clutched her shoulder.

Glancing back, she saw her attacker was still walking slowly in her direction, expressionless eyes staring at her, waving his wand.

“Protego!”

Just pushing her own wand out to cast a Shield Charm made her shoulder flare up with more pain, but it stopped the man’s curse and saved her life. She tried to scramble away, but the pain that caused was too much, and she fell down, screaming when her wounded shoulder hit the ground. Her shield had vanished, and she clutched her shoulder, trying to recast it, but failing.

Tears streamed down her cheeks when she saw the man was still advancing, with slow, measured steps.

“ReductAHH!”

She fumbled the wand movement, and the pain made her mess up the incantation, and what should have blown the man’s chest open did nothing except push him back a step. His wand was rising, its tip glowing, but his expression didn’t change at all.

She screamed, and didn’t stop screaming even when the man’s head blew up, blood and bone fragments splashing against the wall.

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Chapter 52: Under Pressure

‘An attack such as the one on ‘Winston’s’, a bar in Diagon Alley frequented by muggleborns, wasn’t unexpected. Both the Ministry and the Muggleborn Resistance had anticipated such an attack - the opportunity provided by the ICW’s inspection was simply too great for those trying to destabilise Wizarding Britain. And yet, even having anticipated such an incident, they had trouble dealing with its consequences. In that regard, the incident served to demonstrate quite clearly how the balance of power in Wizarding Britain had been changed by the Second Blood War.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Diagon Alley, March 13th, 1997

Hermione Granger drew a hissing breath when she saw the carnage in Diagon Alley. An attack on muggleborns, in the economic heart of Wizarding Britain, right when the country was being inspected by the ICW… this could be devastating, if things got out of control.

Ron wasn’t as restrained. “Bloody hell!”

She didn’t catch what Harry muttered under his breath, but after the better part of a week in the care of their muggle instructors, she doubted it was printable. She did catch what Sirius said, and she knew that his comment was unprintable.

Unfortunately, it was justified. There was a crater in the street, part of the bar’s front was caved in and more debris was strewn across the width of the Alley. She saw at least half a dozen bodies covered by sheets, laid out next to the crater. A lot of people were gathered in the Alley. A perfect target for a follow-up strike, she realised.

She tapped her radio’s button. “This is Hermione. We’ve arrived on site.” Late, unfortunately - they had still been at Grimmauld Place, discussing the houngans’ demands with Sirius, when the news had reached them.

“We’re in the shoe shop nearby,” Justin answered her. “Sally-Anne’s treating the wounded who don’t want to go to St Mungo’s. Tania and Seamus are up in the air.”

She glanced up but couldn’t spot them. They had to be high enough to be out of the range of her Human-presence-revealing spell.

“I’m checking with witnesses,” she heard John over the radio.

“Let’s head to the witnesses,” Hermione said, both into her microphone as well as to her friends. “Stay with me,” she added when she saw Sirius was about to move towards the crater.

“Huh?” He turned towards her.

Stepping closer, she whispered: “You’re wearing robes.”

He blinked, then looked at the crowd, all of them wearing muggle clothes. “But why would that…”
“Not everyone knows you on sight,” Harry cut in.

“Ah.” Sirius shook his head. “Just two years ago, I had to avoid being recognised to be safe…”

She snorted while they made their way towards John, whom she had spotted on the other side of the Alley - close to the shop Justin had mentioned. The muggleborn was easy to spot thanks to his fatigues - like herself.

“It’s Granger!”

“And Potter!”

The cries quickly spread through the gathered crowd - and the mood rapidly started to change.

“Purebloods attacked us!”

“Hermione, give ’em hell!”

“Kill the bastards!”

“Revenge!”

“They still try to murder us!”

“Kill ’em all!”

“Kill them!”

Cursing under her breath, she stopped trying to reach John. They had to stop this, at once, before it was too late. A flick of her wand conjured a pedestal, and a swish enlarged it, pushing a few people who had stepped too close to their group away. She cast an Amplifying Charm while she climbed on to the makeshift stage, trying to gather her thoughts. If she messed this up…

She shook her head. “Everyone, listen! Those who attacked us here, those who killed our friends here, they want us to lash out in anger! They want us to become like them - to attack people just because of their blood! I know you want revenge - we all lost friends to those monsters - but we can’t just attack any purebloods!”

“Of course we can!” Someone yelled from the back. “Enough is enough! Let’s kill ’em all!”

Some in the crowd yelled back, but others supported the heckler. Hermione bit her lower lip, then spoke up again: “Do you want to be like the Death Eaters? Do you want to kill pureblood families? Children?”

For a moment, the crowd grew silent, and Hermione thought she had won them over. Then the heckler yelled again: “There are no children in the Wizengamot!”

Another voice rose over the noise - aided by an Amplifying Charm: “There are no children in the Ministry either!”

“Where’s the Ministry anyway? I don’t see any red robes!” the first heckler joined in.

Hermione had a good idea where the Aurors were - staying out of sight so they didn’t get lynched. She wanted to curse the damned heckler, but that would make her a hypocrite. “Many purebloods fought Voldemort,” she said instead. “Do you want to kill them too?”
“Where are those purebloods now?” the man yelled back.

Hermione was livid - so many friends and Order members had died fighting Voldemort, and that cretin was acting as if they had done nothing! But before she could yell back and ask where the idiot himself had been during the war, Harry stepped up on the stage.

“They’re here,” he said, pointing at Sirius and Ron, who followed him up on to the now crowded stage. “My godfather, Sirius Black. My best friend, Ron Weasley. Both purebloods. Both of them fought Voldemort himself here in the Alley. And so did their families. Purebloods, and half-bloods too. And so did many more - they fought and died fighting Death Eaters. Like the Resistance. Like myself. We all fought together. We can’t let a few madmen tear us apart now.”

The crowd fell silent, then started to yell their agreement. Hermione sighed with relief. They had done it. Or rather, Harry had done it, she thought with a tiny bit of jealousy.

And she had learned two things. She needed to work a little more on her speech for tomorrow’s Wizengamot session. And Harry was needed in politics.

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London, Ministry of Magic, March 14th, 1997

The Minister for Magic was not looking well, Sirius Black thought when he entered Bones’s office. Too tense, too stressed. Alas, her state wasn’t the result of his and his friends’ efforts to tear the Wizengamot down. Although she was still too inflexible, of course. Thicknesse was looking as he always did - unflappable, or as close to it as was humanly possible, in Sirius’s opinion. “Good morning, Amelia. Good morning, Pius.”

“Good morning, Sirius,” she said, her expression stating that the morning was anything but good. Thicknesse simply nodded.

She had a point, of course - it was why he was here, in her office, instead of at home, preparing for today’s session in the Wizengamot. “What did your people find out about yesterday’s attack in Diagon Alley?” he said, sitting down and crossing his legs in the slightly too casual manner he knew the witch hated.

She frowned. “None of the attackers survived. According to the few witnesses we could interrogate, they acted as if they were under the control of the Withering Curse - blank expression, unfocused eyes.”

He ignored the implied complaint about the fact that not that many muggleborns had been willing to talk to the Aurors, when the latter had finally dared to show up, and nodded. “But their limbs were unaffected.” The Order and the Resistance might not have the same experience and resources as the Unspeakables, but they had investigated the incident as well - especially the bodies of the attackers.

“‘Yes.” Amelia pressed her lips together. “‘The Department of Mysteries detected residue of the Imperius Curse on one of the attackers.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes. “Imperiused victims do not look like the attackers did.” That was what made the curse so dangerous - you usually couldn’t tell if someone was affected.

“Unless they were ordered to act like it,” she retorted with a faint and - in his opinion - rather bitter smile.

“Ah.” His eyebrows rose. That was something he hadn’t thought of - but it would make sense.
“Someone is trying to stir up more trouble than between the Ministry and the muggleborns.”

“Yes,” she spat out.

Sirius caught Thicknesse glance at the witch, before the Head of the DMLE spoke up. “While we have no leads on the culprits, the fact that someone is trying to frame the houngans for the attack points at a foreign origin for this plot.”

“The French? Or the Prussians?” Sirius asked, although he had his suspicions already.

“Both are possible,” Thicknesse said.

Amelia snorted. “The French would love to see Britain and Jamaica at war - especially if it keeps the British muggleborns pointed across the ocean, instead of across the Channel.”

Sirius saw Thicknesse frown for a moment before the man said: “Both countries have had issues with muggleborns in the past, and both have also opposed Dumbledore’s policies in that area. The Prussian delegate might not be prone to using such subterfuge, but that doesn’t mean his government - or another faction in Prussia - wouldn’t attempt such a plot.”

“Unlike the Prussians, the French have recently meddled in Britain.” Amelia stared at Sirius.

He stiffened. “That was a response by the Delacours, after Antoine Delacour had been struck by one of Voldemort’s traps.”

“And condoned by the Duc d’Orléans,” Amelia said. “Who sent his mistress to Britain as the French delegate.” She put her elbows on her desk and folded her hands. “Do you honestly think the Duc hasn’t milked the surviving Delacours for all they know, after they fought with the Order and the Resistance, and inside the Ministry?”

Sirius frowned. He didn’t like what he thought Amelia was getting at - his relationship with Vivienne wasn’t exactly a secret, but neither was it publicly known. “Of course the French are concerned about our situation, but that doesn’t mean they’d go so far as to try to start a war between us and the houngans.”

“They have more to lose. They took more drastic measures than the Prussians against muggleborns following the end of Grindelwald’s War,” Amelia said.

“There are still those in Prussia who adhere to at least some of Grindelwald’s ideals,” Thicknesse said. “While the country is not quite as welcoming towards muggleborns as it once was, they do have a stronger voice there than anywhere else.”

“Outside Britain, of course,” Sirius cut in.

“Yes.” Thicknesse nodded, acknowledging the point. Amelia, of course, frowned. The wizard went on. “However, since the muggleborns are more influential in Prussia, the Chancellor might be inclined to prevent Britain’s muggleborns from taking over, fearing that this would lead to his own subjects reaching out for support.”

Sirius wasn’t an expert in Prussian politics, but he was leaning towards the French being behind this plot. Unless someone wanted the British to believe that. “Would anyone outside the Department of Mysteries have expected the investigation to uncover evidence of the Imperius?”

“It’s not impossible, but it seems rather unlikely,” Thicknesse replied, appearing to cut off Amelia’s answer. “Not all of the capabilities of the Unspeakables are secret, but to predict such a result…”
“It would just need one traitor in the Corps,” Amelia pointed out with a sneer. “The Aurors are aware of the forensic capabilities of the Department of Mysteries.”

Sirius sighed, even though he was quite glad about the apparent rift between the two. “So, we don’t have a real suspect.”

“Beaumont wants to meet you and Granger,” Amelia said in an apparent non-sequitur.

Another delegate wanting to meet them, in the middle of a crisis, and with Reid’s ‘request’ hanging over them as well! Sirius had to force himself to smile politely and nod, instead of curse. “That can be arranged.” The current crisis could serve as an excuse to delay such a meeting, but that would make Britain appear weak. Weaker.

“Good,” Amelia said. “The sooner that witch is gone from Britain, the better.”

“If she is behind this plot, then her return to France will not stop hypothetical agents from continuing their work on her behalf,” Thicknesse remarked in his calm voice.

Sirius couldn’t tell if the man was hinting at Vivienne being a suspect. He wished he could tell them that his lover was not working for the French, despite the pressure from some of her family, but that would be breaking her trust - and he doubted that either Amelia or Thicknesse would believe him anyway. “We will be careful.” He made a show of checking his watch - a replacement for the one his uncle had gifted him on his seventeenth birthday, which had been lost following his arrest in 1981. “However, I need to go now - the Wizengamot session is starting soon. I can’t miss the debut of my godson’s friends.”

The expression on Amelia’s face that appeared in response to that comment made him smile all the way to the lift.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 14th, 1997

“Thank you again for doing this for me,” Harry Potter said when he saw Andromeda enter the entrance hall of Sirius’s - and his - home.

“Serving as your proxy is an honour,” she responded. With a grin that reminded him a lot of his godfather, she added: “My parents must be turning in their graves.”

Harry smiled. He felt a bit guilty for not mentioning that originally he had planned to ask her husband to serve at his proxy. He had assumed that Ted Tonks, being a lawyer and a muggleborn, would have been the better choice. Sirius had corrected his assumptions, though - apparently, Andromeda’s temperament was far more suited for politics. “It’s just until my birthday, though,” he said.

She chuckled. “The Wizengamot might not last that long, anyway. But I’ll serve faithfully in your stead until then.”

That had the ring of formality to it, and so he nodded. “Well… just support Sirius. And Hermione.”

She sniffed. “Who’d have thought that one day, I’d be following my cousin’s lead in anything.”

“You did follow my lead in rebelling against our misguided family,” Sirius said from the top of the stairs, grinning at them. “Where’s the rest of our illustrious gang of esteemed members of the Wizengamot and assorted proxies?”
Andromeda snorted while Harry answered: “Hermione was still going over her speech in the guest room, and Ron went to fetch her.” He shrugged. “I don’t know why either is nervous. Ron doesn’t have to do anything but read a few lines, and Hermione is, as always, over prepared and still she worries.”

Sirius chuckled. “Well, says the wizard who will be simply watching from the audience.”

Harry sniffed. “I’m not the one who made the Wizengamot elect me at my tender age.”

His godfather looked him over, rubbing his beard. “At least you’re dressed for the occasion.”

“You picked out my robes,” Harry retorted.

Sirius nodded. “Indeed. Which is why you look so good.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes. “Are you finished lauding yourself?”

“For the moment, yes. I might have to do it again once Hermione gives her speech and you can see the heads of the old fossils and young bigots explode.” Sirius beamed at his cousin.

“I doubt that your esteemed colleagues will show such a blatant lack of decorum,” Andromeda answered. “That would be too tacky for the Old Families.”

“Right. They would rather topple over dead in dignified silence.” Sirius nodded. “But we all know that they are hypocrites anyway.”

The two Blacks shared toothy smiles, while Harry snuck another glance at the clock on the wall, wondering what Ron and Hermione were doing… he didn’t think they would actually do anything, not before such an important event, but… Ah!

Ron and Hermione appeared at the top of the stairs. Harry almost snorted, remembering how much of a pain it had been to outfit them. Ron hadn’t wanted to accept charity, and had taken some persuading to accept from Sirius the expensive dress robes he was now wearing. Hermione, on the other hand, had no qualms about accepting Sirius’s gold, but the witch had been wavering for days over whether or not she’d flout the Wizengamot’s dress code, until Andromeda had found a recently re-opened muggleborn tailor’s making dress robes that were sufficiently muggle while still being ‘sufficiently wizarding’, as Ron had called them.

“Let’s go, or we’ll be late!” the witch in question said, rushing towards the fireplace. Harry glanced at Ron, who winced - it didn’t look as if he had succeeded in calming her down.

“We have been waiting for you,” Sirius said, which caused Hermione to huff right before she stepped into the green flames.

“Let’s just get going,” Harry said. There was no point in trying to argue with her when she was like this.

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London, Ministry of Magic, March 14th, 1997

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! I’m proud to have been chosen as a member of the Wizengamot, and I will do my utmost to keep serving Wizarding Britain and its people to the best of my abilities.”
Ron Weasley took a bow, and sat down again on his seat. As far as first speeches went, he had been told by a reliable source that his wasn’t the shortest by far, but after several hours of listening to Hermione practise hers, he still felt as if he was slacking off.

“The chair recognises Madam Granger.”

Next to him, Hermione stood up. He could see her taking a deep breath, before she raised her chin. Ron smiled at the sight of the witch he loved facing down the assembled Wizengamot with the same expression of determination and conviction he had grown so familiar with in the years he had known her. No one who saw the confident witch right now would have thought that she had been very nervous just a little while ago, at Grimmauld Place.

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot!” she began, “I stand here, not just for myself, not just for my friends who fought against Voldemort at my side, but without receiving the same recognition I did, and not just for my fellow muggleborns.” She shook her head, and once more Ron missed her long mane. “No, I stand here for all those who have not had a voice in this assembly until now: Muggleborns, half-bloods and many purebloods, all those who have not been born into Old Families.”

Many Wizengamot members started whispering in response to that, Ron noticed. Not just the cronies of Malfoy and Runcorn.

Undaunted, Hermione continued: “This last war has brought Wizarding Britain to the brink of ruin and opened deep rifts within her population. If our country is to survive, it must change. No longer will we tolerate a few, simply by accident of birth, deciding for the many! Everyone - muggleborn, half-blood and pureblood - needs to have a voice in how the country is governed. Everyone needs to have a stake in this, needs to know that this country is their country. Our country. Only then will we have a future without yet another war laying waste to our beloved country.”

That caused even more murmurs. Ron heard an old wizard near him exclaim “Preposterous!”

“Just as I did my best to defeat Voldemort, so too will I do my best to achieve a better Britain for everyone.”

Hermione nodded curtly, and sat down again. Ron reached over to squeeze her thigh in support, and earned a smile. “You did well,” he whispered. “Scared the lot of them, I bet, too.”

“I just hope that I scared them enough for them to stop fighting the inevitable,” she said.

“You don’t have to scare all of them, just enough to give us a majority.”

And seeing the glares leveled at them by the bigots, Ron was certain that they were close.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, March 14th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass sighed with relief when she stepped out of the fireplace in the entrance hall of her family’s manor, safely behind her wards. Her manor, she reminded herself - she couldn’t afford to think like the girl she had been. She was the head of her family now.

“How did it go? Did Potter make a speech?”

Astoria had apparently been waiting for her to return, Daphne noticed - her sister was standing in the door to the hallway, hands behind her back - she’d be wringing her hands, Daphne knew.
She shook her head. “No. He’s not seventeen yet, so he had to pick a proxy. I told you that.”

“But he’s the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Daphne refrained from rolling her eyes. “That doesn’t make him exempt from the rules.”

Astoria pouted. “It did at Hogwarts.”

“The Wizengamot is not Hogwarts.” Daphne started to walk towards the living room, then reconsidered. Their ‘guests’ would be there. The metamorphmagus, and the werewolf. She shuddered, and changed direction. The kitchen would do.

“So, how did it go?” Astoria skipped next to her, craning her neck to look at Daphne. “In the Wizengamot, I mean.”

Daphne sighed. Her sister was being a pain, even though she could understand how starved Astoria was for news. “As expected,” she said. “Weasley didn’t say anything more than what was expected, and Granger announced to everyone that she wants to destroy the Wizengamot.” Of course, that hadn’t come as a surprise to anyone with a working brain - which, sadly, excluded half of the Wizengamot, in Daphne’s opinion.

“And Potter’s proxy?”

Daphne frowned. No complaint about the mudblood murderer of their parents? “Why are you so interested in Potter?”

Astoria shrugged. “Everyone is interested in him. He’s the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“His proxy was Black’s cousin.” The only one left alive. “She showed more decorum and class than Black. More wit too, but it’s a facade - she’s supporting him and Granger.”

Astoria nodded slowly. “I see.”

“What?” Daphne asked, opening the door to the kitchen. Then she blinked. Astoria was sitting at the kitchen table, frozen in the act of loading up a tray with biscuits.

“Mistress! Young Mistress told Biffy that she was allowed to!” Their house-elf squeaked while Astoria flushed.

Daphne didn’t care. She whirled around, staring at the Astoria who had walked with her. “Tonks!”

The metamorphmagus’s wide grin was very unlike Astoria’s.

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Tracey, of course, chuckled when Daphne later told her what had happened. “So, we know she can fool even you. Theo won’t suspect anything.”

“Only if she refrains from grinning like that,” Daphne said, pointing at Tonks.

“I’ll be the picture of a demure pureblood maiden,” the metamorphmagus said.

Daphne wasn’t the only one who snorted in response to that claim. Even the werewolf coughed into his hand. “Just complain about the mudblood murderers of our parents, and otherwise stay silent,” she said. “And best leave once you’ve tagged him.”
Tonks shook her head. “That would leave you unguarded.” And unsupervised, Daphne thought. “And the best opportunity to hit him is to do it when he’s turning his back to us when he’s leaving.”

Daphne filed that information away. Not that it would do her much good - she was committed now. She nodded. “Very well.” She glanced at the clock on the wall.

“I’ll be monitoring the meeting from the guest room,” the werewolf said. He didn’t say how, of course. “If anything suspicious happens…”

“…then you’ll charge in and save us?” Tracey cut in, smiling. Daphne really hoped that her friend was only acting like this to rile up the metamorphmagus. Even if that wasn’t exactly a smart course of action either. Not for someone in their position.

“…then I’ll be ready to intervene, should you need the help,” he went on.

“Which we won’t,” Tonks said. “I can handle Nott.”

“Provided he arrives alone,” Tracey said.

“I doubt he’d be so rude as to bring strangers to you without sending word ahead. That’s not done in his circles, is it?”

The mocking undertone of Tonks’s words was more obvious than the subtle hint in her mother’s speech in the Wizengamot. Daphne knew that the Auror was a half-blood, born to a pureblood cast out of her family. Of course she’d have similar views to the twins’. And maybe similar experiences, she added to herself.

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As it turned out, Theo arrived alone. “Daphne! Tracey! You’re looking well! You too, Astoria,” he added with a smile at the disguised Tonks.

Daphne nodded at him. “So do you, Theo.” In fact, he was in a very good mood, for someone who had just seen the murderer of his parents join the Wizengamot.

“You sound far more chipper than I’d have expected.” Tracey cocked her head, her expression turning the statement into a question.

“How could I not be, seeing as others have taken up their wands to strike back at the mudbloods?” Theo smiled widely. “Britain’s noble spirit has not yet been squashed under the mudbloods’ heels!”

Daphne blinked - so it hadn’t been him behind the attack on Diagon Alley? Or was he simply lying to protect himself? Did he distrust them?

“Have you been reading Lockhart again?” Tracey sniffed. “That sounds like something he’d write.”

Daphne shot a glance at her friend. She was being too direct. And too rude. “You mean the attack in Diagon Alley.”

“Of course!” Theo seemed to ignore Tracey’s comment. “It showed that we’re not alone.”

“It also riled the mudbloods up,” Tracey said. “They could attack others in revenge.”

“Yes.” Theo nodded. “And so the mudbloods will show the entire world how dangerous they are. Other purebloods will flock to Britain to deal with them.”
Tracey opened her mouth, no doubt to deliver another scathing rebuke, but Daphne cut her off. “With the ICW delegation in Britain, the eyes of the world are on us.”

“Exactly!” Theo grinned. “It’s a unique opportunity. For all of us.”

“It could also be a foreign country meddling in Britain for their own reasons,” Daphne said. “According to what I heard, the attackers acted like zombies.” She didn’t have to spell out what that meant.

Theo sneered. “The houngans might be hoping to weaken Britain with this ploy, but this goes beyond our country. Mudbloods are a danger to everyone. And the other countries are aware of that.”

“You mean your mysterious ‘friends’ who can’t intervene directly without ‘risking an international incident’.” Tracey scoffed.

Theo glared at her. “They have done more for our cause than you. I thought you had grown a spine when you voted against Potter, Weasley and Granger, but apparently, you’re still cowering in fear.”

“I’m not about to serve as a mindless tool for some foreigners with an agenda of their own,” Tracey said, sneering at him.

“You have to admit that it sounds rather dubious,” Daphne said. “The houngans would love for Britain to weaken itself further in a civil war.”

Theo snorted. “Even if we couldn’t handle them, the rest of Europe wouldn’t tolerate the houngans attacking us.”

“You mean France and Prussia would fight the houngans to the last British wizard,” Tracey said.

Daphne held up a hand before the two butted heads even more. “It was Dumbledore who cowed the houngans. Without him, Britain either needs help from foreigners, or from the mudbloods.”

“Or from Potter!” ‘Astoria’ piped up.

Daphne glared at the metamorphmagus. “In any case, we’d have to beg for help, and we’d likely have to make a number of concessions.”

“I told you already: This is bigger than Britain. This is a fight for every pureblood!”

“A fight every pureblood wants to see fought by us, so they can stay safe.” Tracey narrowed her eyes at Theo. “And you are even eager to serve as their curse fodder.”

Theo stood up, shaking his head. “You wouldn’t understand. You’ll end up murdered by mudbloods if you don’t stand up and fight now.”

“We almost were murdered because we stood and fought,” Tracey snapped.

Daphne shot her friend a glance. She was overdoing it, Daphne thought. “It’s not as if we like mudbloods, you know that. But we were almost killed several times in the war. We’re not going to risk our lives recklessly, not when we don’t even know who is involved in this affair.” She held up a hand again when Theo opened his mouth. “We’re not going to act like obedient little Hit-Witches. Your ‘friends’ can hire enough ruffians from Knockturn Alley, or whatever it’s called in Paris, for that.” She noticed how Theo flinched. “We’re members of the Wizengamot, not tools.”
Theo frowned, but nodded. “I see. You think you’ll be more useful in another capacity. If you have
lost your nerve, then that might be for the best.”

Tracey, for once, didn’t respond to the barb, though her glare spoke volumes. Daphne bowed her
head at Theo. “That may be so.”

The wizard turned to ‘Astoria’. “I hope we didn’t frighten you with our discussion, my dear. Rest
assured, things will work out for all of us in the end.”

The metamorphmagus beamed at him. If Theo had known the real Astoria better, he’d have realised
that she was a double - Daphne’s sister would have bristled at the patronising tone. Fortunately, that
wasn’t the case.

Theo bowed to Tracey and Daphne. “I’ll take my leave, then.”

Daphne knew what was about to happen, and she still almost missed it when Tonks whipped out her
wand and sent a spell at Theo’s back, right before he stepped into the fireplace. The Auror was far
quicker than her apparent clumsiness would suggest.

As soon as the flames had change back to their natural colour, Tonks leaned back in her seat and
shook her head. “What a pompous arse!”

Tracey snickered, then grew serious. “I wonder if he really believes what he told us, or simply thinks
he can manipulate us.”

“We’ll soon find out,” Tonks said.

Daphne knew what she meant, and told herself that the fool had doomed himself.

She still felt guilty about selling him out, though.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 14th, 1997

Bess Cox rubbed her shoulder. It had been healed, but she still could feel a twinge from time to time
when she moved her arm too much. The wizard who had treated her hadn’t been the most skilled,
but she couldn’t go to St. Mungo’s. She couldn’t risk that.

She kept looking around while she walked through Diagon Alley. Anyone could be a threat.
Imperiused, or disillusioned, or disguised. It would have been safer to stay in muggle London, she
knew, but she wouldn’t let the pureblood scum drive her out of Wizarding Britain. She wouldn’t
betray her dead friends like that!

Not everyone thought like her, though. There were fewer people on the streets, and most of them
were hurrying to wherever they were going. No one was loitering outside a shop or pub. Bess
pressed her lips together. Muggleborns were afraid again, as if the war had never ended. She
couldn’t stand that!

She reached the site of the attack. The damage to the street had been repaired already, unlike the bar.
Of course - the bar was owned by a muggleborn. If it had been a pureblood’s business, then it would
have been repaired as well, Bess knew. She cursed under her breath, then turned to look at the side
alley where she had almost died. Where she had almost been murdered. She hadn’t been saved by
Aurors, of course. She hadn’t even seen them until long after it had been over. The red robes
wouldn’t show themselves to help muggleborns.
She wasn’t the only one to visit - the ground in front of the entrance to the bar was covered with flowers and candles, and she saw half a dozen other muggleborns standing there. Bess summoned a piece of debris from the bar, then transfigured it into a rose. Or tried to - McGonagall wouldn’t have rated it as passable, but it would do for this. She walked up to the entrance, and put the misshapen flower down next to a flickering candle. None of the others standing there were saying anything, so she remained silent as well.

So many had died here. Murdered by bigots. Just like her friends. Just like so many other muggleborns. Murdered just for being born to muggles. She ground her teeth. The war was supposed to be over. They had won! The Dark Lord was dead, and the Ministry beaten! This shouldn’t be happening any more!

She realised that she was crying, and wiped the tears from her cheeks, then turned and walked away, her hands, stuck in the pockets of her jacket, balled into fists.

A few minutes later, she had reached Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips, a muggleborn food shop located in a side-alley, barely big enough for a dozen people. It wasn’t packed, despite the fact that it was dinner time, but she saw a number of people waiting for their orders, and stood in line herself.

“Does anyone know how many died in the attack?” she asked after a minute. The Resistance Radio hadn’t gone on air yet, and she didn’t trust the wizarding media.

The wizard next to her looked her over. Not to check her out, but to check her clothes. She was wearing jeans, a leather jacket, a sweater, and trainers. Muggle clothes, used ones. He nodded. “I’ve heard there are a dozen dead, twice that number wounded.”

She hissed and rubbed her shoulder. “Bastards!”

He cocked his head slightly to the side. “Were you there?”

Bess pulled her hand away from her shoulder. “Yes. One of them almost killed me, before someone blew his head off. Hit me in the shoulder,” she added.

“Ah.” He slowly nodded again. “Did you lose anyone you knew?”

She shook her head. “Not in that attack, but... “ She sighed. “Three friends during the war. And one was ‘killed while resisting arrest’ before the war.”

“My brother was killed in the riot.”

Before Bess could say anything else, Freddie handed the man his order. A single portion, she noted, and a beer. “What’ll it be for you?” the owner of the shop asked her.

“Same as him,” she answered.

The other man seemed to hesitate, then took a seat at a table. After a moment, Bess joined him. “The purebloods still haven’t learned their lesson.”

He shook his head, blowing on a chip before biting into it. After swallowing, he said: “Did you hear Granger and Potter talk?”

“No. In the Wizengamot?”

He shook his head again. “No. Yesterday, at the attack. They don’t want us to do anything.”
Bess hissed. “What?”

“They don’t want us ‘to act like our enemies’, or some such.” He snorted, then stuffed a piece of fried fish into his mouth.

Bess ground her teeth. “They killed dozens of purebloods in the war,” she pressed out. “And now they want to play nice?”

“They’re on the Wizengamot now.”

She muttered a curse under her breath. “Talking won’t help us. They haven’t even called for another rally. There’s only one language those pureblood bastards understand.”

He nodded.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 15th, 1997

“Why are we letting them into our home? We’re not letting Reid into Hogwarts like that.”

Sirius Black smiled despite Harry’s words - knowing that his godson considered the Black’s ancestral house his home felt very good. “Well, they won’t be casting any spells here. My family has a reputation, after all.”

“So has Hogwarts,” Harry countered. He had stopped fiddling with his new dress robes, at least.

“Hogwarts isn’t known for all the Dark Arts done there. My family, on the other hand, is known for their mastery of dark curses.” Sirius wasn’t proud of that legacy, but it was handy at times - both the reputation and the curses. He doubted that either Beaumont or Steiner would risk both the wards’ response, and the loss of reputation by trying anything while they were guests in his house.

“If you say so,” Harry muttered.

Sirius looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

His godson shrugged. “I should be with the rest, training. Not dining here.”

“Ron and Hermione will be joining us soon. And weren’t you pretty much exhausted when you arrived earlier?”

Harry glared at him. Sirius chuckled. “They want to meet all of us. That way, we can present a unified front.”

“Beaumont is a vipère. Don’t trust ’er. She just wants to find out ’ow powerful you are,” Vivienne was standing in the door, clad in dress robes straight from Paris that hugged her curves. She looked ravishing.

Sirius smiled at her. “We’re aware of that. Our honoured guests will discover that we’re not to be trifled with, and that should persuade them to leave Britain alone.”

“Or they’ll think we’re too dangerous to be left in peace,” Harry muttered.

“They fear the example you’re setting for their muggleborns,” Vivienne said, walking up to Sirius and wrapping one arm around his waist. “If they think you are more like Grindelwald than Dumbledore…”
Sirius twisted around so he was facing her, then planted a kiss on her brow. “Don’t worry. We’ll be polite and refrain from proclaiming a crusade for muggleborn rights.” That was the agreed upon plan, at least.

“I hope you told Hermione that,” Harry said.

“She knows,” Sirius said. The witch was smart; she wouldn’t blurt out her long-term plans.

Which, Sirius was certain, did include a campaign for the rights of the European muggleborns.

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“Madame Beaumont, Herr Steiner, welcome to my humble abode!” Sirius bowed with all the grace his parents had taught him as soon as Beaumont and Steiner had cleaned themselves of soot and dust from their trip through the Floo Network. Since this was technically a private invitation, they hadn’t brought their assistants along.

Beaumont’s smile was as honest as his own as she curtsied in return. “Thank you for the invitation, Mister Black.” It slipped a tiny bit, he noted, when she saw Vivienne standing there. Probably jealous, he thought - the French witch was beautiful, but she couldn’t hold a candle to Vivienne in his, entirely objective, opinion.

“Thank you,” Steiner said, bowing more stiffly.

“May I present to you my godson, Harry Potter,” Sirius said, gesturing at Harry, who bowed as well. A bit roughly, of course - he had grown up among muggles. Sirius suppressed the familiar pain he felt when thinking of James and Lily. “Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger.” Curt bows. “And Vivienne d’Aigle.”

“Enchantée.” His lover curtsied with the grace the Veela were famous for. Sirius thought Beaumont’s smile slipped a tiny bit more.

“We have prepared an aperitif in the living room.” He opened the door behind him with a flick of his wand, then the one to the living room with another. “After you.”

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Kreacher had taken a few bottles from the good selection in the cellar, but not the best. That was reserved for guests Sirius actually liked, and special occasions. Steiner would probably not notice it, but Beaumont would.

Judging by her expression after tasting her drink, she already had. Sirius raised his glass. “To a successful conclusion of your inspection,” he toasted. After everyone had taken a sip, he added: “It is pretty much finished, isn’t it?”

“No quite,” Beaumont said. “There’s still Hogwarts to visit, and of course the current political situation to consider. Which is why we are grateful for your invitation.”

The witch wasn’t wasting any time, he noted. He’d have expected that from a Prussian, not a Frenchwoman. “I see.” He slowly inclined his head as the others gathered around them.

“You’re the leader of the most influential faction in the Wizengamot, as well as the leader of the Order of the Phoenix,” Beaumont said.

“What’s left of it after the war,” Steiner cut in, shaking his head. “I haven’t heard of such carnage
since Grindelwald’s War.”

“The brunt of the losses were borne by the Dark Lord’s forces, and by the Ministry,” Sirius said. “We didn’t escape unscathed, of course.”

“Neither did the Resistance, but we’re already rebuilding,” Hermione added. The young witch was a bit too honest for her own good, Sirius thought.

“Ah, yes. The famous Muggleborn Resistance.” Beaumont’s smile grew cold. “Your deeds in the war made waves at the Court. Quite brutal, and ruthless. Many wonder what you’ll be doing now that the war is over.”

“If the war is actually over. That attack on Diagon Alley…” Steiner shook his head. “Nasty business, that. Reminds me of the aftermath of the war in Prussia.”

“We’ll continue our struggle for equal rights with means adequate for the situation.” Hermione’s smile showed more than a few teeth.

“Those who attack us will regret it,” Harry said. “We beat Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and we’ll beat whoever is behind these attacks.”

“Do you mean the Ministry, or your own organisations?” Beaumont asked with a faint smile.

“We’ve been working together during the war,” Sirius said. “There’s no reason to stop now. Dumbledore wasn’t a Ministry employee either, and did what he could when he was needed.”

“But that was Dumbledore. Britain’s greatest wizard since Merlin,” Steiner said. “The one who defeated Grindelwald.” His implication was clear.

“Harry’s defeated Voldemort,” Ron spoke up. “We all fought the Dark Lord - more than once. And we’re members of the Wizengamot. My family’s working in the Ministry.” He shrugged. “Whether you’re a Ministry employee or not doesn’t matter, as long as you’re doing what’s needed.”

“Ahh.” Steiner nodded.

Beaumont, though, frowned. “That sounds rather unorganised. Without a clear hierarchy, responsibilities can be easily neglected.”

“It’s not so different from the Cour de France,” Vivienne said, smiling innocently. “The Duc often ’as friends and family ’andle issues, instead of using ’is employees.”

Beaumont didn’t even bother to hide her frown now. “But Britain lacks a Duc. They have an elected Minister who answers to the Wizengamot.”

“The Wizengamot hasn’t taken any steps to dissolve the close relationships between the Order, the Resistance and the Ministry that were created during the war,” Sirius said, “and I doubt it will in the future. As you said, I am the leader of the most influential faction in the Wizengamot.” He spread his hands.

“I see.” Beaumont was smiling cynically, but she seemed satisfied.

Sirius looked at his now empty glass, then at the clock on the wall. “Dinner should be ready now.”

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Sirius sighed with relief and let himself fall into the closest seat when his guests had finally left. “That
was exhausting,” he said, closing his eyes for a moment.

Harry snorted. “They didn’t ask you about the fight with Voldemort.” He badly imitated Beaumont. “But you ’ave to admit that a boy of your age defeating a wizard with decades of experience in a duel is unheard of. I cannot even fathom ’ow that could have been possible.”

“Her accent wasn’t that bad,” Sirius said.

“That’s not the point, Sirius.”

He shrugged. “We knew that they would try to find out just how we killed Voldemort. Or what exactly the Resistance is capable of.”

“I didn’t expect them to be so blatant about it,” Hermione said, leaning into Ron. “Steiner sounded as if he was planning to write a book about our operations.”

“They weren’t ’appy,” Vivienne remarked.

“I don’t care if they’re happy or not.” Sirius scoffed. “All I care about is whether or not they think that we’re too powerful to provoke into a conflict, so they’ll leave us be.”

“Beaumont thinks that you’ll be taking over Britain,” Vivienne said, sitting down on the armrest of his seat. “At least that’s my impression.”

He patted her thigh. “As if I’d be that insane!” The others chuckled, and he mock-glared at them.

“Actually, we are taking over Britain - we need to, to reform the Wizengamot,” Hermione said. “And you’re leading the movement in the Wizengamot.”

“If I’m stuck in the Wizengamot, then so are you,” Harry added.

Sirius glared at them both, but they didn’t look as if that impressed them.

The worst thing was that they were correct.

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Worcestershire, Nott Manor, March 16th, 1997

Ron Weasley studied the manor through his Omnioculars. It had sturdy walls, good lines of fire, and while he wasn’t an expert, he could see that the wards were powerful - and lethal. The Notts were an Old Family, after all, and their manor’s protections had been created in a time when sacrificial magic hadn’t yet been illegal.

He turned to his brothers. “Can you sneak your wireless ears inside?”

“Of course!” Fred answered, pouting. “We did it before, after all.”

“With a temporary hideout,” Ron said.

George shrugged. “The principle is the same. Without specific counter-charms, they can’t stop us. And they’d need to know how our invention works to develop such charms.”

“And the wards of those old manors are a bitch to work with, or so Bill says,” Fred added. “So, even if they knew about our wireless ears, they would be unlikely to manage to protect the manor.”
“But they would be casting privacy charms all the time,” Hermione said. She wasn’t looking at them, but staring at the manor through her own omnioculars, taking notes about the strength of the wards, Ron knew. She’d have to calculate how much explosive would be needed to take them down.

“We should take Nott out,” Fred said. “Before his next attack restarts the war.”

Ron could see George rolling his eyes. “And break the cover of our spies? If Nott gets captured so soon after his visit to Greengrass, his backers will know they betrayed him.”

Fred shrugged. “Diagon Alley’s a cauldron about to boil over. What good does it do if we find the traitors after their plans succeeded?”

“It’s a risk we have to take,” his brother said.

Ron had heard the argument before. Twice, actually. He wasn’t happy with letting Nott continue either, but he understood that next to Nott’s allies, Malfoy and Runcorn were the real targets. And Greengrass and Davis needed to earn their trust. “Just get your ears into the manor, and we’ll be able to stop him on the way to his next attack.”

“Easier said than done - that’s a big manor. Moving them takes a lot of time.” Fred grumbled.

“Then talk less, and work more,” George said.

Fred shot his brother a glare, but returned to the contraption with which he was apparently moving the wireless ears to the manor. Adapted from a muggle toy, or so Ron had heard. As long as it worked, he didn’t care how it worked.

“I’m done.” Hermione stashed her Omnioculars and turned around. She nodded at the twins. “Inform us as soon as you’ve installed the ears.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am!” Fred barked, standing up to salute, followed by George.

Hermione shot Ron a glare that had him wince - he really shouldn’t have told his brothers about muggle boot camp. Even if it was funny.

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Near Morant Bay, Jamaica, March 16th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood frowned. His plan had worked - the muggle boy he had chosen as bait had been taken an hour ago from his parents, under the cover of an accident at sea - but the wards protecting the houngan’s hideout were stronger than he had expected. Breaking through them would take too much time.

Fortunately, there were other ways to bypass wards, even without the resources of his former colleagues in the Department of Mysteries. They involved certain risks, however. But he had no choice - he needed the knowledge this houngan, whose name he didn’t yet know, could provide.

He slid down the trunk of the tree from which he had observed the manor and started towards the fields he had spotted behind it. He hadn’t much time left - the houngan would quickly notice that the boy he had had kidnapped wasn’t a wizard, and suspect a trap.

He still gave the manor a wide berth - it wouldn’t do to get spotted now - until he reached a patch of dense forest bordering the fields. A number of muggles were working there, clearing weeds from what he could tell - he hadn’t done much herbology since Hogwarts.
He didn’t spot an overseer, which meant that the muggles were magically controlled - or zombies. That might even be an advantage for him. It all depended on how much the houngan valued his muggles.

For a moment, he hesitated. Then he aimed his wand at the closest muggle worker.

“Imperio!”

As ordered, the man stepped closer to the edge of the forest, then suddenly stumbled, and threw his farming tool into the forest. It wasn’t the best acting, but the muggles were too stupid to notice anything amiss. Augustus waited until the man had stepped past the tree he was hiding behind, then stunned him and quickly stripped him of his clothes before pulling out a vial from his enchanted pocket. A plucked hair later, the Polyjuice was ready.

Once more he hesitated, disgusted. To wear the form of a muggle… he shook his head. It was only temporary, after all. A sip later, he was wearing the man’s form, and pulling on his dirty clothes. His enchanted pocket went behind the man’s sash. A Killing Curse and a Vanishing Spell later the muggle was gone.

A flick of his wand conjured a banana spider, one of the most venomous muggle spiders of the island. He rubbed some powder on his skin, causing a red swelling, then took a sip from another vial. At once he started to shiver and tremble. He managed to put a bezoar into his mouth, but didn’t swallow it, before crushing the conjured spider and stumbling out of the forest while waving its carcass around. His screams caught the attention of the other muggles, and a few minutes after he collapsed, acting as if he was in severe pain, they carried him to the manor.

Augustus swallowed the bezoar when he passed the wards. When he stopped trembling and shivering, the muggles started yelling even louder for their master in their weird dialect.

“What is going on?” he heard a rough, harsh voice demand in decent English.

Half of the muggles who had carried him started to explain about his spider bite. Augustus used the distraction they provided to summon his wand from the sash in which he had hidden it.

The houngan noticed, but Augustus was already casting when the man swung his wand up.

“Imperio!”

The man’s expression went slack and his wand hand fell down. Augustus opened his mouth to give his victim his first order when he realised that the houngan was far too young to be the owner of the manor. And that meant…

He managed to cast a Shield Charm just in time to save his life from a curse that showered the area with yellow liquid. While the muggles around him started to scream, covered with poison - acidic poison, he noted - he ran past the imperiused houngan, towards a stone bench that would provide some cover.

Another spell transfigured the stone bench into a stone snake but he had been expecting such a move, and slid to the side, moving over the short grass with his wand waving. The snake was rearing up to strike when his Banishing Charm smashed it into the porch of the manor, narrowly missing the houngan standing there.

His enemy - his target - flinched, and Augustus followed up with a Killing Curse, which drove the houngan into cover behind the next pillar. He was already rushing forward, two, four, five steps, but then the lawn in front of him was ripped open as Inferi tore out of the earth. Cursing, he flicked his
wand, a fire whip cutting the undead apart, but stopping his charge.

And that gave the houngan the time he needed to turn the tables. Augustus saw a wave move through the lawn, ripples spreading as if the earth was water, leaving brown, shriveled, dead plants in its wake. Some sort of rotting curse, but one he hadn’t seen before.

Two could play that game, though. He sent a volley of quick, exotic but weak curses at the houngan, just to keep him busy, then turned the earth in front of himself into a curved stone wall. The wave smashed into it, and was parted, a trail of dead plants surrounding him. A second later the wall was shattered, fragments of it bouncing off his shield.

He countered with an explosive curse that blew up most of the porch and - more importantly - covered the area with dust and smoke. That bought him a few more seconds. He cast an Amplifying Charm, then yelled “Help me!” at the houngan under his control.

The young man turned around, lifting his wand, but collapsed before he could cast anything. Either the poison spell had hit him as well, or his master had taken precautions against betrayal.

Two green curses flew at him, Killing Curses! Augustus jumped to the side, then rolled back - he didn’t want to touch the rotten grass. He grit his teeth - his target was proving to be more troublesome than he had expected. And he wasn’t the duellist he had once been.

A quick conjuration turned the now rotting grass between him and his enemy into a forest of stone pillars. He could deal with this, though - his greatest strength had always been his mind. While the pillars started to rot - that was a powerful dark curse, he noticed - He filled the area with a cloud of smoke, then transfigured the remains of his wall into a stone figure in his likeness. A spell later, it was running away from him, towards the wardline.

It wouldn’t fool the houngan, of course - he would have cast a Human-presence-revealing spell. But it would serve as a distraction from his real attack. He hadn’t wanted to use it, but there was no choice. And the houngan might survive it. Or his library would.

He pulled a small pack out of his pocket and banished it in a high arc towards his enemy, then started to run towards the wardline at the side of the manor. The pillars had crumbled by now, and the smoke had thinned so he could see curses shooting at him. He dove towards a green patch on the ground, his wand whipping back and forth while his shield shattered under the impact of a spell. The ground opened just before he touched it, and he fell six feet into the earth. He managed to take a deep breath before the grave filled up with earth and rock.

Then the earth shook as the package he had thrown hit the porch and exploded.

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Chapter 53: Missteps

‘The houngans of Jamaica had a fearsome reputation, especially among the nations of the New World, and certainly were skilled in their arts, especially sympathetic magic and the creation and control of zombies. However, a thorough examination of the various wars between Britain and Jamaica clearly reveals that for all the fear their particular traditions caused in the ignorant, a houngan was not significantly more powerful on the battlefield than a skilled British Hit-Wizard. The only reason their 1752 rebellion succeeded was because they launched it exactly when Britain was occupied fighting the goblins on her own soil, and if not for the sheer distance between the British Isles and Jamaica, which presented insurmountable logistical challenges for an invasion force without muggle support, they would have lost all of the following conflicts.

Of course, at the end of the Second Blood War, skilled British Hit-Wizards were in very short supply.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century' by Albert Runcorn

Near Morant Bay, Jamaica, March 16th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood felt the earth that surrounded him press into his back, forcing the air out of his lungs. He wouldn’t suffocate right away - his spell was designed to let the victim suffer as they were buried alive - but it wasn’t a pleasant feeling. Taking a shallow breath, he moved his wand, vanishing the earth at its point with a quick motion. That allowed him more space to cast, and soon, he could roll over inside the space he had cleared of soil.

Another stab of his wand, and the earth above him vanished, transfigured into a staircase. A few seconds later, he had climbed high enough on the stairs to peer at the manor, leading with his wand. The muggle explosives he had thrown had wrecked the porch, shattered the windows, and caved in part of the wall. Nothing a package of Exploding Fluid wouldn’t have done just as well, but he hadn’t had enough left, and so had been forced to resort to using muggle means as if he were a mudblood. That the Dark Lord himself had used such means to kill his blood traitor enemies and frame the mudbloods was a small comfort - Augustus hadn’t planned to use a bomb here.

He recast his Shield Charm and climbed out of the hole. There was a body lying in the ruins of the porch, half-buried under a fallen pillar. He kept his wand trained on it as he closed. The houngan could still be alive.

He wasn’t, as Augustus saw as soon as he reached the porch - the entire lower half of the houngan’s body had been crushed. Frowning, he muttered a curse under his breath. He needed a captive to interrogate, not a corpse. A glance to the side told him that if the younger houngan hadn’t been killed before the explosion, he was certainly dead now.

Shaking his head, Augustus entered the manor. He had no use for the corpses of his enemies, but their library might prove of use.

One way or the other, he would gain the knowledge he needed.
Daphne Greengrass took a deep breath while she cleaned the soot from her robes in the entrance hall of Augustus Malfoy’s home.

“Well, it’s a step up from Draco’s home,” Tracey muttered under her breath.

Daphne closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. “Thanks, Tracey,” she muttered, “for reminding me what happened the last time we visited a Malfoy.” The attack by the Resistance, the desperate attempt to flee, the deaths of their friends, their capture… She shook her head, banishing those memories from her mind, just as she had forced the memories of her dead parents away.

She wasn’t in Malfoy Manor, no matter what Augustus Malfoy called it. Everyone knew that it was originally a summer house of the Malfoys, before Draco’s grandfather had given it to Augustus. This was no Summer Ball either, just a dinner for members of the Old Families. Not even two dozen guests, including her and Tracey. And she wouldn’t die, crushed by falling ceilings or burned alive. The Resistance wouldn’t attack this gathering. At least she was reasonably certain they wouldn’t. But not certain enough. She had no doubts that the mudbloods wanted her dead for fighting them.

“Miss Greengrass! Miss Davis! Welcome to my home!”

“Mister Malfoy.” Daphne’s face showed none of her thoughts when she smiled and bowed to Augustus Malfoy, Tracey doing the same next to her.

“The other guests are already in the salon,” he said, gesturing towards a door to the side.

“Of course he has a ‘salon’,” she heard Tracey mutter while they followed their host. “Bloody French.”

Daphne didn’t mention that the Malfoys had been British purebloods for almost a thousand years. Tracey knew that as well. But in the current times, emphasising such roots sent a message - if it was done deliberately. Which, seeing as it was Malfoy, would be the case. Whether what that affectation was hinting at was true was another question, of course.

A question Daphne hoped she’d be able to answer after this evening. Hoped, but did not expect.

Philius Runcorn was surrounded by a group of Wizengamot members - Daphne recognised most of them. Older ones, who had survived the war. Mainly by hiding, and fleeing. Not the kind of people she’d expect to support another civil war. Unless they were desperate - but they didn’t look like it as they greeted her and Tracey. Did they actually think this was a safe course of action?

“Miss Greengrass! Miss Davis!” Runcorn beamed at them. “Two heroes are among us,” he declared. “Two brave witches who fought for our culture and traditions.”

“And our very lives,” Malfoy added.

Daphne forced herself to keep smiling. Did they know about her and Tracey’s meeting with Theo, and this was an attempt to shame them? She didn’t see her - former now, probably - friend here, but certainly, if Malfoy had invited her and Tracey, he’d have invited Theo as well. “We were lucky,” she said. “Many of our friends didn’t survive.”

Tracey simply nodded.

Malfoy looked sombre for a moment. “Draco among them. They murdered him like muggles.”
“And now they are poised to take over our country,” Runcorn added. “Their leader is now a member of the Wizengamot. To think that a mudblood murderer is counted among our ranks…” he shook his head, taking a shaky breath. “The fools following Black have lost their minds.”

“Black has the support of Weasley, Potter and Granger, and through them half of the Ministry, Dumbledore’s Order as well as the Resistance,” Tracey said.

“He is powerful,” Malfoy said, “but his power is more fleeting than he - and others - may think.”

Daphne didn’t have to fake her sceptical expression. “That isn’t my impression. He is about to gain a solid majority in the Wizengamot, he already has more wands behind him than the Ministry can muster, and his influence is growing.”

Several of the others nodded in agreement with her. Tracey added: “And the other families can’t match Black’s resources.”

“Oh, but the alliance between the blood traitors and the mudbloods is fragile. Black is no Dumbledore, and Granger may have Potter twisted around her finger, but she has trouble controlling her own. The attack in Diagon Alley showed that. The same tactics that brought the Ministry to its knees are now being turned on the mudbloods.” Malfoy smiled. “Sooner or later they will go on a rampage and show everyone that they are but rabid animals. All of the purebloods, even the blood traitors, will realise that.”

“That will cost a lot of lives,” Tracey pointed out in a flat voice.

“Regrettable, but unavoidable.” Runcorn sighed. “Far more would die if the mudbloods took over - you know that they want to wipe us all out.”

More people voiced their agreement. Daphne slowly nodded. “They want revenge, and they want the Old Families broken and gone. None of them care for our ways and traditions. Not even the blood traitors.” She knew that very well from her talk with Black and the twins.

“Exactly. We’re fighting not just for us, but for every pureblood true to our heritage. We’re fighting for what it means to be a British wizard,” Runcorn declared. “Or a British witch,” he added, with slightly less pathos.

“Voting in the Wizengamot is not exactly fighting,” Tracey said. She might be rushing things, Daphne thought, but neither Malfoy nor Runcorn had so far admitted to being behind the attack.

“If we lose the Wizengamot, we lose Britain,” Malfoy said. “Our enemies are aware of that as well.”

“There’s a flaw in your plan.” Daphne shook her head. “You can’t hope to stop the mudbloods with the Ministry and whatever scared purebloods you can recruit once the Resistance has started to fight seriously. You need far more wands for that - and you need them before things escalate.”

“We are aware of that,” Malfoy said, “and we’re taking appropriate measures.”

“Better hope that whoever’s doing those attacks doesn’t push the Resistance too far before you’re ready,” Tracey said.

Daphne saw a smile flicker over Malfoy’s face, before he nodded in a solemn manner, and she was certain that he controlled those attackers, or at least knew who was controlling them.

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“You know that you don’t have to wait here? You could be networking with your allies in the Wizengamot, or spending time with Harry or Vivienne. I’ll call you as soon as they return.”

Sirius Black turned his head to his best friend - best friend still alive, that was - and frowned. Remus sounded honestly concerned, but he was staring at Sirius’s hands, which were fiddling with some knick-knack he had grabbed from the shelves in Greengrass’s living room. The animagus scoffed. “Harry is back at that camp. He said he didn’t want to miss out on any training that he didn’t have to.” Privately, Sirius thought Harry still wasn’t too comfortable spending time with Ron and Hermione - he had felt the same, at the start of James and Lily’s relationship, and he hadn’t been in love with Lily. Not much, at least. “And technically, I’m networking with my allies.” Not quite willing allies.

Remus raised an eyebrow, and Sirius sighed. Of course his friend was still as perceptive as ever. “Vivienne is visiting family, Andromeda and Ted are spending the evening with some friends, Arthur and Molly are with Bill and Fleur, and I’d go mad if I stayed alone in the house with Kreacher.”

Sirius half-expected his friend to crack a joke about him being mad already, but Remus was too serious for that and simply nodded in understanding - he knew all about being alone, of course.

“How’s the little Death Eater doing, by the way?” Sirius asked after a quick Mending Charm fixed the thing that had suddenly broken for no reason while he was examining it.

“Astoria” - Remus stressed the name - “is behaving.” With a subtle sigh, he added: “Although mostly out of fear, I think.”

“It’s a week until the full moon!” Sirius shook his head at the stupidity of the family. And of everyone else in Britain.

“Fear is not rational,” his friend said, with that sad smile Sirius hated.

“Oh another point in favour of the muggleborns - they at least have no irrational fear of werewolves,” he grumbled. Most of them did not, at least. Although that could be because they thought silver was a deadly weapon against a werewolf.

Remus shrugged. “Tonks is keeping an eye on her as well.”

“I don’t trust her. Greengrass’s sister, I mean,” Sirius clarified.

“She’s young and inexperienced.”

“She’s also a risk.” If she spilled what she knew about this… Sirius dropped the knick-knack on the floor and started to twirl his wand around his fingers. He had spent months learning how to do that without dropping it, back in third year.

“She knows that her sister’s life is at stake.”

“Wouldn’t have stopped my brother from running to Voldemort.” Regulus had been a dutiful Death Eater, after all.

Remus sighed. “For one, there is no Dark Lord around any more. Just a bunch of Old Families. Astoria isn’t likely to bow to them.”
“Proud little pureblood, isn’t she?” Sirius chuckled.

“You haven’t met her,” his friend answered, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“I’ve heard about her. Nymphadora was quite vocal about her. And about Greengrass and Davis.”

“Tonks is not exactly unbiased.” Remus pursed his lips slightly.

“Good! Neither am I!” Sirius grinned briefly, baring his teeth. “Though I think she has more of an issue with Davis than with the Greengrasses. I think while she loathes their irrational fear of you, she dislikes the fact that Davis apparently isn’t afraid of you even more.”

Remus coughed, just like he had when they had teased him about Marietta, back in their fifth year. “It’s not a crush, just a young girl trying to shock and tease her friend.”

“She’s just a few years younger than Tonks,” Sirius remarked, in a casual tone, while he watched his friend.

“Seven years.”

Sirius shrugged. “As I said, just a few years younger.”

Remus sighed and closed his eyes, hunching over while he sagged back in his seat.

“So…” Sirius drawled, “Any plans to do anything about the witch with a crush on you?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Sirius shifted in his seat, abandoning his casual pose to lean forward. “And don’t give me that nonsense about your curse making a relationship too dangerous for her.” Remus opened his mouth, and Sirius cut him off. “And no remarks about the age difference. Vivienne is barely a year older than she is.” He paused for an instant, then went on: “And nothing about how such a relationship would ruin her life or her career. The muggleborns don’t care about the prejudices of the purebloods, and you know Hermione’s plans for anti-discrimination laws.”

Remus glared at him. Sirius smirked in response, until his friend sighed again.

“You don’t have an argument, do you?” Sirius said.

His friend didn’t answer, which was enough of an answer.

“Well… seems to be a case of irrational fear, in my expert opinion.” Sirius chuckled at the expression on Remus’s face.

“Emotions as a whole are rarely rational.” As an argument, that was weak, especially for Remus.

“And fear is unbecoming for a Gryffindor!” Unlike Sirius’s own reasoning.

Unfortunately, the fireplace flared up and saved Remus from answering.

Greengrass and Davis stepped out of it, soot-stained but well enough.

“Welcome to Greengrass Manor,” Sirius said, idly spinning his wand around his fingers again.

Greengrass glared at him, probably for the presumption of welcoming her to her own home. “We have no proof, but it’s obvious that Malfoy and Runcorn are connected to the latest attack in Diagon
Alley,” she stated, before cleaning her robes with her wand.

Sirius thought he saw her jaw clench, and rubbed his beard. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Greengrass spat out. “They all but said so.”

“That’s the difference between proof and assumption,” Remus said.

“They insinuated that they can know, or even control when the next attack will happen, and plan accordingly,” Davis said, smiling at Remus. “They wouldn’t risk so much if they had no control or at least prior knowledge.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes at that smile. He wasn’t a Slytherin, but he had grown up in a family of them, and he didn’t think the little witch could act well enough to fool him. Maybe she had a weakness for older men, and for the kind of boys her parents warned her away from. Or would have, in Davis’s case, since they were dead. He shook his head, focusing on more important matters. “That means that unless Nott is a better liar than you assume, they also control him. Or someone controls both of them.”

“They didn’t act like wizards acting under orders,” Greengrass remarked.

Sirius inclined his head. “They might not realise that they are being manipulated.” After all, if they had any sense, they wouldn’t try to restart a war they had already lost once.

“Is it enough to question them with Veritaserum?” Davis asked. She didn’t have to say that she wasn’t talking about an interrogation by the Ministry.

“Maybe.” Sirius saw the two witches exchange brief smiles. “But we’ll need you to capture them, should we decide on that course of action.”

He grinned when their smiles vanished.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 17th, 1997

After another hour of waiting, and without company, Sirius Black was ready to change into Padfoot and chase Kreacher just to vent some of his frustration. Then Vivienne returned from her family dinner, and his heart lifted. He stopped his pacing and turned towards her, opening his arms.

She slid into his embrace, and he knew things hadn’t gone well - she was stiff, and tense, and taking deeper breaths than usual while she rested her chin on his shoulder.

“What happened?” he asked, when he released her.

“My suspicions were confirmed,” she said.

“France is supporting these attacks?” Even though he knew that the French had asked her to spy on him, Sirius had trouble believing they’d go that far.

“Not officially, of course. But the Duc is turning a blind eye to the machinations of Beaumont and ’er co-conspirators. Like ’e turned a blind eye to our intervention in the war.” Vivienne smiled weakly. “Ma mère said that they do not trust the muggleborns. Not with Dumbledore dead.”

“Your family?”
She shook her head. “The Court, or the majority of it, to be exact. Ma famille is split as well.”

“And the Duc supports this?” Magical France was supposed to be a monarchy, wasn’t it?

“That is not known. Some think ’e condones weakening Britain and especially British muggleborns. Others think ’e wants Beaumont’s faction of the Court weakened.” Vivienne looked rather dejected.

“And what do you think?” He ran a hand over her cheek, then cupped her chin when she looked up at him.

“I think ’e prefers to remain ignorant - officially - of what is being done, so ’e can later claim whatever serves ’is interests best.” Vivienne snorted. “It wouldn’t be the first time that ’e ’as done something like this, but so far, it was always internal politics.”

“So, in order to stop this, we need to convince him that the faction trying to sabotage us won’t win,” Sirius mused. “Or we threaten him with organising a rebellion among the French muggleborns.”

Vivienne hissed. “That would confirm the Court’s fears. And lead to war.” She shook her head, her long hair whipping around.

“That leaves dealing with the French agents in Britain then. Whom we first have to find.” Sirius sighed. That meant they couldn’t take out Nott, or Malfoy and Runcorn. They needed them to find their contacts. But at the same time, they couldn’t let them start a war with another attack…

He sighed. Even with the new information they had gained today, things had become more, not less complicated.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 17th, 1997

Hermione Granger rubbed her wrist, then checked her watch. It was far too late to continue her attempts to learn a new spell. Especially a houngan spell. But she had to learn this spell, so she could tell if Reid was trying to double-cross them at Hogwarts. And with this latest crisis threatening to turn into another war, she did not have much time.

At least John had done a good job with the radio broadcasts, and the leaflets. If they were lucky, the muggleborns would take heed and not start indiscriminately attacking purebloods. She frowned, dropping her wand. Not all would listen to them. Those hecklers… she ran a hand through her hair, twisting some strands in frustration. They wouldn’t listen to mere words, or leaflets. But, or so she hoped, they would stay their hands until the rally in Hogsmeade next weekend. Although organising and securing that rally would take a lot of time and effort.

And Hermione knew that the Resistance would need something more than words to placate the muggleborns by then. If they could catch those behind the attack on Winston’s, then that should suffice to keep the muggleborns from lashing out by rioting, or worse. Should.

She frowned. They didn’t have any clues as to the attackers’ identity, though. Not yet. Nott wasn’t responsible, or so it appeared, But he was responsible for other attacks. Probably. And they knew where he lived. If they made no progress with the investigation into this attack, then he’d have to do. Also, Nott had escaped justice once; many muggleborns would cheer his capture or death just for that.

She snorted - this was how Dumbledore must have felt, she thought, weighing sacrifices and ploys in an attempt to keep the country from destroying itself. She rubbed her eyes, and went back to
studying the notes the houngan had provided. At first glance, the spell appeared to be a simple detection spell, not that different from the Human-presence-revealing spell, if more focused. But something felt wrong - the casting instructions were too complicated for such a spell. Not something she’d expect from a spell that had undoubtedly been refined over centuries. And she didn’t think the houngans, who had stalemated the British wizards in half a dozen conflicts, would have developed a spell that was more complicated than needed.

She finally realised what was bothering her when she used Arithmancy to cross-check the wand movements and the incantations with similar spells she knew. It was a ritual. A very efficient ritual, not that much slower to cast than a regular, if complicated, spell, but a ritual nonetheless.

And that changed everything.

Hermione pressed her lips together. Rituals could be varied. Enhanced. Empowered. Often with sacrifices. With the right sacrifice, this spell could cover a lot of ground. It wouldn’t need to be cast that many times to cover the British Isles.

Maybe Reid was so determined to inspect Hogwarts because he had already checked the areas of Britain that were not as heavily warded as the school? But that would have cost lives. A lot of them. And Reid wouldn’t have had enough time since his arrival, even if he had captured enough victims. Unless… she hissed. Unless he or accomplices had been in Britain already, trying to track the missing skull with such rituals. Dear Lord - how many people could have been killed for such an attempt?

She shook her head. She had no proof, not even a shred of evidence - missing muggles wouldn’t be noticed that quickly if their kidnappers were even a little skilled - but… if she was correct, then they’d be taking a monster to Hogwarts.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 18th, 1997

Bess Cox glared at the two Aurors she saw walking down Diagon Alley. She wasn’t the only one - none of the muggleborns out on the street bothered to hide their disgust at the Ministry’s lackeys. It was telling that they hadn’t shown up in increased numbers until now.

She scoffed, and turned away. She walked a bit faster, both because anger drove her on, and because she was already a bit late. Stuffing her hands in the pockets of her jacket with a huff, she turned into the next side alley.

After three days straight of going to Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips for dinner, the owner greeted her with a nod and a friendly smile. And so did Randall.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

She took the seat opposite his, at the same table where they had first met. There was no need to order - Freddie was already frying up their dinner. “Sorry I’m late.”

He dismissed her apology with a flick of his hand. “Happens.”

She smiled, then she saw the folded leaflet next to his wand on the table, and scowled. “Another one?” she asked, nodding towards it. “Did they finally stop sucking up to the purebloods?” The Resistance had been spreading hundreds of those, all with the same message as their recent radio
broadcasts: Don’t attack purebloods.

He shook his head. “The Resistance is holding a rally in Hogsmeade this Sunday. The leaflet is mostly about that.” With a grin, he added: “But they also stress that it’ll be a peaceful rally.”

Bess shook her head. Now that Granger was on the Wizengamot, she was supporting the regime. Just like so many revolutionaries in history. The Resistance’s soldiers would probably soon do joint patrols with the Aurors. Maybe they’d dye their uniforms red as well, to better fit in. “They’re selling us out,” she spat. “The Resistance killed every pureblood they could get during the war, but suddenly, that’s wrong? I guess shagging Weasley and Potter is more important to Granger.” She ground her teeth.

Randall snorted, but he was shaking his head. “I heard Potter, and he had a point - purebloods fought for us as well. Not all purebloods are bad.”

“Just most of them,” Bess said. “During the war, Dumbledore claimed to fight for us, but he stabbed us in the back when we fought as well.”

Before Randall could answer, Freddie called out their orders. “I’ll get them,” Bess said, and summoned them. She was quite proud that she didn’t lose any chips on the way - her first attempt two days ago hadn’t been that successful.

“You were talking about the attack on Hogsmeade,” Randall said, almost whispering.

Bess tensed. She was still wanted, as far as she knew - the Pardon only covered the Resistance and the Order of the Phoenix. There was a reason she hadn’t told Randall her last name.

“Don’t worry.” Randall smiled. “I often wish I had done something myself.”

Bess slowly nodded and grabbed a few chips to buy some time for her answer. They were too hot and she hissed before taking a sip from her beer.

He chuckled. “One thing the Resistance got right, though: We can’t simply lash out at the first pureblood we see. That would play into our enemies’ hands.”

“We can’t let them get away with it either, or they’ll never stop,” Bess countered. She’d love to find the scum who had killed her friends, but she couldn’t exactly search the Ministry reports, not as a wanted witch. And neither could she talk to the French and the Order members who had caught them at Hogsmeade. At least, she consoled herself, odds were that they were killed in the later battles anyway.

“We’d need to find them first. And that might prove a bit difficult.”

“We can at least try,” Bess said. “We’ve got a list.” She didn’t have to say which list she meant.

Randall nodded. “They can’t exactly blame us if we catch Death Eaters they are hunting as well.”

Bess nodded. “Won’t be easy, though.”

“It won’t. But I think I have an idea.”

“Oh?”

Randall smiled. “Have you heard about the ‘TV trouble mystery’?”

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“This is torture!” Ron Weasley let himself belly-flop on the bed in his tent as if he was acting the part of one of the wounded for an exercise.

He heard Harry chuckle. “It’s still not as bad as Wood’s training.”

“Says you,” Ron grumbled into his pillow.

“And I’m the one who had him as Team Captain for three years, so I would know.”

“It’s been three years since, and you were but a boy back then,” Ron said.

“So?”

“You probably misremember it. All those bludgers to the head won’t have helped.”

Harry didn’t answer, but a pillow hit Ron’s head a second later. He counted that as a win.

Rolling on his back and sitting up, he banished the pillow back to his friend. “So… when’s dinner?”

“In half an hour.”

“Enough time for a nap then.” The Sergeant had told them that soldiers slept whenever they could, since they never knew when they could sleep again.

“Clean the paintball stains off your fatigues first,” Harry said.

Ron considered arguing that he was protecting the Statute of Secrecy by not doing it, but decided not to - the two muggle instructors already suspected something, after all, but everyone was carefully avoiding the subject. He pointed his wand at his chest. “Scourgify! Now let me nap.”

He had barely closed his eyes, though, when he heard another voice. “Ron? Harry? Are you decent?”

“Hermione?” Ron sat up.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” she said, entering their tent.

He stood up and moved to hug her. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon. Did you learn the spell already?” He’d have thought that even for her, a houngan spell might prove more of a challenge.

“More or less,” she answered when he let her go. “And I found out something that we need to talk about. With Sirius.”

“Weren’t you just at Grimmauld Place?” Harry asked.

“Yes. But I want you to be there when we discuss this.” Hermione looked at Harry and at Ron. “And Sirius was busy in the Ministry today anyway.”

That didn’t sound good to Ron. He sighed. “Let me guess: We’re in deeper trouble than we thought.”

She pursed her lips. “We’ve discussed worse situations.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Ron said, glancing at Harry.
Harry snorted, but nodded. “Let’s go home then. We can eat there.”

“Mum’s cooking?” Ron asked. The camp cook, one of the recruits, tried her best, but his mum beat most professional chefs, in his admittedly biased opinion.

“Yes,” Hermione said, with a faint smile.

“Let’s go then!”

“Don’t you want to take a nap first?” Harry asked.

Ron didn’t bother with a reply.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 18th, 1997

“So, if my theory is correct then Reid or one of his allies have already searched most of Britain for the missing skull. Only the most secure places - Hogwarts, Gringotts, perhaps the Ministry - are left. And they have murdered people for that. Sacrificed them in dark rituals.” Hermione said in Sirius’s living room, standing next to her seat with her arms folded over her chest.

Sirius nodded, looking rather grim. “How certain are you of this?”

Hermione bit her lower lip. “I haven’t tested it, for obvious reasons, but the Arithmancy supports it, although some houngan peculiarities might be different enough to throw the calculations off, but the general principles are universal for spell crafting, and in this case the indicators are almost identical to some of the works in your library... “ She took a deep breath, then raised her chin slightly. “We cannot afford not to assume the worst here. I’m certain of that.”

Ron Weasley smiled, despite the grave news she had just delivered. He loved how passionate she was.

Harry grumbled a curse under his breath. “Even assuming the worst, what can we do?”

Vivienne held up a hand. “Could ’e have given you misleading notes and information?”

That was a good question, Ron thought. Judging by Hermione’s frown, she didn’t share his opinion. “I’ve cross-checked what I could with books from Sirius’s library. I do not think that Reid could have been aware of all of my references to anticipate that.”

“But ’oungan magic is different, and we don’t know much about it,” Vivienne said.

“Magic is, essentially, magic. The basic principles are the same for all spells,” Hermione countered. “Houngans cannot get around the laws of magic either. Those which have been proven, at least,” she added with a frown.

“There aren’t that many of those, though,” Sirius said.

Ron shook his head. “Hermione’s right, though - we can’t afford to dismiss this.” The smile that support earned him from her made him smile in return.

“And what can we do?” Harry, ever the practical wizard, asked again.

“Watch him, as we planned. And send him on his way as soon as possible,” Sirius said. “Even if we knew for certain and could prove that he murdered people, we can’t arrest a delegate from the ICW.”
Ron glanced at Harry, then at Hermione. Sirius must have caught it, since he added: “We can’t kill him either. Or rather,” Sirius held up a hand, “We could, but the consequences would be devastating. You do not kill a delegate. That’s about as bad a crime as conspiring to break the Statue of Secrecy. And as harshly punished.”

Ron shivered - he had heard about the Intervention in Africa. Every magical child, except the muggleborns, of course, was taught this, to make them understand how important it was to keep magic a secret from muggles.

“And what if he tries to kill us? To keep any knowledge about this spell a secret?” Harry asked.

Hermione gasped, and Ron stiffened - the whole problem had started because the houngans wanted to keep the knowledge in their library secret, hadn’t it?

“He’ll know we’ll have taken precautions, should something happen to us. And he’ll know he can’t overcome all of us to control us,” Sirius said.

“He’ll have help,” Hermione countered. “His assistants, and whoever he has infiltrated into Britain. Or controls.”

“The Death Eaters?” Ron blinked. “Do you think they are working with houngans?” That was impossible - the feud with Jamaica went back for centuries. The Old Families hated the houngans.

Sirius looked rather sceptical as well, but Hermione shrugged. “Why not? They’re hypocrites anyway. And they don’t even have to know who they are working for.”

“If they don’t know who they are working for, then that would make any attack on us dangerous for Reid as well, as long as he is with us. And coordinating such an attack nigh-impossible.”

“And I doubt that the Death Eaters would be so foolish as to attack a delegate,” Ron pointed out.

Hermione looked unconvinced, but that was probably just because she loathed being proved wrong. She didn’t argue, though she frowned. Then she took a deep breath. “Speaking of Death Eaters, we need to do something about Nott.”

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked.

Hermione turned to face him. “We’re doing what we can to calm people down, but you saw the crowd in Diagon Alley, and you heard the hecklers - if we don’t catch the ones behind the attack, the muggleborns, at least some of them, will attack purebloods indiscriminately,” Hermione said. “My friends from the Resistance have been in Diagon Alley regularly, and the mood is growing worse despite our best efforts.”

Ron nodded. He had seen that crowd, and he could easily see them turning into a mob and starting a riot. Like the one in Diagon Alley last August. He had seen the carnage, had fought in it himself. So many had died in it...

“But we need them to find whoever is behind this,” Sirius said. “We need to put a stop to this.”

“Finding whoever is behind this won’t matter if another war has already broken out by that point.” Hermione shook her head. “They will have succeeded.”

“But if they know we’re on to them, they’ll be on their guard. We won’t get another good chance to find them.” Sirius stood his ground. “And we would need to catch him in the act to prove his guilt.”
“We can stage something,” Hermione said. “We know he’s guilty.”

“’E could be just grandstanding,” Vivienne cut in. “I ‘ave a ’ard time believing that French plotters would work with the likes of ’im.”

“Why? Do you think they’d be above working with Death Eaters? The French purebloods don’t really like muggleborns, do they?” Hermione narrowed her eyes at the Veela, and Ron almost stood up to intervene.

“No. But ’e sounds too stupid to be used in a plot.” Vivienne met the younger witch’s stare.

Sirius cleared his throat. “Before we start duelling each other, let’s get back to plotting how to defeat our enemies. If we truly need a sacrifice - a success - to placate the muggleborns, then Nott is the best choice. But in order to stage an attack by him, we need to capture him first. And for that, we need to break into his manor. Doing that without leaving traces that not even the Aurors can’t miss will be difficult.”

“We can stage an attack without him, claim we saw him, then attack his manor in retaliation,” Harry said. He shrugged. “Anyone who knows him won’t be surprised that he took a shot at us.”

“The Ministry won’t be pleased,” Ron said. “Dad said that Bones is growing worse each day. She’s not cut out to be a Minister.”

“The Ministry is never pleased.” Sirius sniffed. “We can claim that we didn’t want to risk spies in the Ministry warning Nott. We’ll need a good excuse for how we identified him, and of course he can’t be allowed to survive. And we need enough time to interrogate him thoroughly.”

That sounded quite impossible to Ron. Even the current, gutted Ministry with so many inexperienced Aurors wouldn’t buy that.

“We don’t need to interrogate him. Just force him to copy all the memories relating to the attacks he took part in; we can analyse them at leisure in the Pensieve.” Hermione crossed her arms. “We won’t be able to ask him what he knows, but he probably won’t know anything important anyway.”

Ron nodded. It was a good plan. Even though it meant someone among them would have to use the Imperius - they had to be certain that Nott wasn’t tricking them with the wrong memories. Legilimency would be an alternative, but they would still have to force him to give them his memories - and the means used for that would likely be illegal as well. That meant the stakes had just risen even higher.

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A muggleborn rally. In Hogsmeade. This weekend. Amelia Bones wanted to curse and rant, to vent her anger. But she was better than that. Instead, she simply nodded. “I see.”

Pius hesitated a fraction of a second before continuing. Had he expected her to lose her composure? “Miss Granger has also requested that the Ministry refrains from ‘provocative gestures in light of the tension between muggleborns and the Ministry’.”

“They want us to stay away from the rally.” Amelia translated.

“Yes.”
“And yet, if something happens, they’ll blame the Ministry for the very absence they require.” She let some of her frustration leak into her voice.

“I do not think the Resistance would go that far. Miss Granger strikes me as being rather concerned with appearing to be fair and a person of integrity,” Pius said. “Other muggleborns, however, do not seem to share those traits.”

She scoffed. “She wants to appear fair and honourable, but she’s a murderess trying to stuff the genie she unleashed back into the bottle she broke.” She looked at Pius, who was standing in front of her desk, but he was carefully not saying anything. She shook her head at him. “You know that she’s planning to do away with the Wizengamot and replace it with a muggle-style parliament. And the Ministry will follow after that.”

“The Wizengamot is the ultimate authority in Wizarding Britain. Their power includes ceding their authority.” Pius wasn’t looking at her, but at the wall behind her seat.

“So, that’s it, then.” Amelia snorted. “I hope you got a good deal for your ‘help’.”

Pius didn’t say anything, but she saw him tense, and smirked. It was a cheap and small victory, but she’d take what she could get. “The delegates aren’t happy about the lack of progress in our hunt for the ones responsible for the attack on that pub,” she said. Privately, she was certain they were very happy about having an excuse to stay and keep harassing the Ministry.

He wasn’t thrown by the sudden change in topic. “I have a source investigating a possible link between the attackers and certain members of the Wizengamot.”

She hissed. “Malfoy and Runcorn?” Since they had failed to gain her help, it would make sense for them to stoop to such means.

“So far they haven’t found anything incriminating. But the two are in contact with Greengrass and Davis.”

The two Death Eater witches who had been acquitted by the Wizengamot. If the Ministry managed to get them to trial this time, with the changed balance of power in the Wizengamot… that should placate the muggleborns, at least for a little. “Put surveillance on both of them! Use only your most trusted wands. I will not tolerate any leaks. To anyone. We’ll be doing this by the book.” There would be no warning for the two witches. And there would be no vigilante action by the Order.

Pius nodded. “I’ll get on it, then.”

Right before he reached the door, she said. “I’ll hold you personally responsible for this, Pius.”

This time she was certain that he stiffened before nodding.

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Near Morant Bay, Jamaica, March 20th, 1997

It had taken three days for someone to notice his actions, Augustus Rookwood noted when his spells alerted him to an attack on the wards. The houngans apparently were as private - or divided - as he had heard from Duchamp.

He would have liked to have more time, of course - he had barely managed to sort through half the library of the manor, and most of the tomes were still cursed. And while he had found some fascinating volumes, including a few books on dark curses thought lost which had to have been
looted from a British wizard during the rebellion in 1752, he hadn’t found much about the skull in his possession.

He was tempted to simply summon and shrink the remaining books, but given the protections on them, that would be foolhardy. And he wasn’t a fool.

He would have to try again to capture a houngan. For a moment, he was tempted to do so right away - the wards of the manor were still effective, and would hinder the attackers as much as they would himself as soon as he left the house, and whoever was attacking the wards would certainly be tied up in them. But they wouldn’t be alone. Unless this was a rival of the houngan he had killed - Markus Williams, not that he cared - there would be several powerful wizards waiting for just such an attack. No, discretion was the better part of valour here. He was a Slytherin, after all, not a Gryffindor.

He tried apparating to the door of the library, and, as expected, failed. His Portkey didn’t work either. He snorted - as if he’d rely on such obvious methods of evasion. But if the attackers had taken such measures to restrict magical travel, they would be covering the sky as well. Which would further stretch their forces.

He cast a Shield Charm and a Human-presence-revealing Spell before stepping out of the library and into the dusty hallways of the manor. Except for vanishing the corpses of the staff, lest they might rise as zombies, he hadn’t bothered wasting any time on cleaning up. He hadn’t heard the sounds of breaking wards yet, so they seemed to be holding just fine, despite Williamson’s death. Good crafting - maybe the original owner of the mansion had been killed while away, and the wards had never been destroyed?

He had no time to dwell on such matters; the attackers wouldn’t take too much longer if they truly had come in force. He hadn’t laid many traps. Too time-consuming, and it only took one trap going off to make an attacker expect more, and slow their advancement to a crawl anyway. There were other means, however. A flick of his wand transfigured some of the debris into man-sized stone statues. A stabbing gesture later, half a dozen stone guardians ambled towards the back of the manor. At the next intersection, he repeated his actions, but sent the animated statues to the front. That should buy him more time.

He opened the door to the cellar, and went down the stairs, his wand swishing back and forth as he conjured rocks and transfigured them into various animals, including a few swarms of bees and hornets. A few Colour Charms cast on them would make them appear more dangerous than they actually were, and make the attackers even more cautious.

He smiled as he reached the door to the cellar - proper planning and cunning beat numbers and power, as usual. Inside the cellar, he locked the door with a charm, then strode straight to the back. A touch of his wand opened the escape tunnel Williamson - or rather, one of his ancestors - had built there. It looked pristine, and he could feel a small draft of fresh air. He cast a Bubble-Head Charm anyway, just in case.

Augustus was smiling when he closed the entrance behind him. Everything was going according to plan.

Until the tunnel collapsed and buried him under tons of earth.

There was something to be said for quick thinking and quick reflexes as well, he admitted to himself minutes later. His shield had protected him just long enough to conjure a metal table above him and make it unbreakable. It had held against the massed earth trying to crush him - long enough to
transfigure the earth and, more importantly, the ground beneath him into stone. That prevented the legs of the table from sinking into the earth and formed a protective hole made of stone for him to work in.

He was still buried alive - and this time against his will, and far deeper than six feet. But he was alive, and had his wand, and enough free room to use it. And since there hadn’t been a follow-up attack, this hadn’t been an ambush by the attackers.

But time was running out - this cave-in would be noticeable above ground, and the attackers would quickly realise what had happened. By that time, he needed to be gone from this spot. And from the closest path to the wardline.

He started to vanish the earth below him, conjuring metal plates and supports, while he dug an escape tunnel from the escape tunnel as quickly as he could.

He would have laughed at the irony, if he hadn’t been so angry at the fact that he had almost been killed by a dead man’s trap.

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Hogwarts, March 20th, 1997

“That wasn’t the plan. The plan was for you to cross the edge of the wards, cast your spell, and then be gone. You cast the spell, so now it’s time to get gone.”

Harry Potter tensed up while Sirius faced down the houngan. Ron had moved to his left, Hermione to his right, and Vivienne and Remus were with Sirius. In a fight, Reid would be in a crossfire that not even Moody would be able to deal with - they had tested that once.

Reid didn’t seem to be impressed, even though he was alone and facing the ‘Vanquishers of Voldemort’, as an article in the Prophet had dubbed Harry and his friends. He really hoped that Reid simply was a very good actor, and not actually that confident.

The houngan shook his head. In the pale light of the moon - it was close enough to the full moon for Remus to feel it - it looked almost like a skull. “I did cast the spell, but part of the castle interfered. I will have to be inside the actual castle walls for the spell to work properly.”

Sirius muttered something too low for Harry to hear, then cocked his head without letting the houngan out of his sight. “Hermione?”

Harry quickly glanced at Hermione. The witch was biting her lower lip. “Hogwarts is so old, and has so many enchantments, it’s probable that they’d interfere with a detection spell.”

Reid smiled, his face looking even more like a skull’s. “I assure you, I have no ill intentions. Besides, I doubt that a school as old and renowned as Hogwarts could be threatened by a single wizard.”

“Voldemort was a threat,” Harry said. “One we dealt with, of course.”

Sadly, Reid didn’t react to the threat. The houngan kept smiling. “Our agreement was to let me search the school for our stolen… relic.”

“‘Relic’,” Harry heard Ron mutter. “Bloody necromancy.”

“You did not tell us that you’d have to enter the actual castle. We didn’t agree to that.” Sirius said.
“That was implied by allowing me to pass through the school’s defenses. Are you breaking our deal? I wouldn’t feel bound to my concessions if that were the case...” Reid’s smile showed even more teeth. If he was bluffing, Harry thought, then he would make a fortune playing poker.

They had defeated Voldemort, Harry told himself. And they had the houngan covered from multiple angles. It didn’t make him feel any more confident.

Harry heard Sirius sigh after a few seconds, then say: “Very well. Follow me then.”

Reid’s smile widened, and he walked after Sirius, apparently not at all concerned with the five people trailing behind, wands ready to curse him in the back.

*****

They reached the closest side entrance to Hogwarts in a few minutes. It was late at night, so the students would be in their dorms, and the patrolling prefects rarely covered this part of the school. Sirius opened the door with a quick wave of his wand and the group entered.

“We’re here. Now cast the spell and get it over with!” Sirius growled.

“Of course,” Reid said, his tone full of condescension.

Harry took a step back when Reid started to wave his wand around and mutter the incantation. He was certain that he wasn’t the only one who wanted to curse the suspected murderer.

“Stop!” Hermione suddenly yelled, her wand raised to point at Reid. “You were altering the spell!”

“Merely an adaptation to indoor areas.” Reid seemed unfazed despite half a dozen wands being trained on him.

“That makes no sense!” the witch protested.

“Of course it does not - to you. You are ignorant of houngan traditions,” Reid said.

Harry tensed - his friend was sensitive to having her understanding of magic disparaged.

“I understand enough to notice a sacrifice,” Hermione spat.

Harry saw Reid’s eyes widen for a moment. “I see. I might have underestimated you. Slightly.”

“A sacrifice?” Ron asked.

“An animal,” the houngan said, pulling a squirming but strangely silent rat out of his pocket. “Surely not even British wizards are so squeamish as to object to sacrificing a rat for a good cause. We all know how many animal parts are used in common potions, after all.”

“That makes no sense,” Hermione said. “A rat wouldn’t work for the ritual…”

“And you’ve become an expert in houngan magic based upon the scraps I gave you so you would not quiver in fear at magic beyond your understanding?” Reid scoffed. “Do you presume to lecture me?”

Sirius intervened. “Even if it’s a rat, it’s still a sacrifice.”

“We had a pet rat, once,” Ron said.
Harry snorted. That was one rat he wouldn’t mind seeing sacrificed. Then he blinked. What if…? He turned away, as if listening to something in the hallway behind him, and stuck his hand into his enchanted pocket, the one containing the Elder Wand. Switching the wands didn’t take long. When he turned back, his wand was aimed at the rat.

“Finite.”

Before his eyes, the rat turned into a woman, whose screams filled the hallway when she slipped out of the houngan’s grasp and staggered on the stone floor.

Harry was already casting, as were his friends, but the woman - a muggle or muggleborn, he noted, judging by her clothes - was blocking the line of fire for Sirius and Remus, and Reid was far quicker than expected. Harry’s curse and a few more splashed against the houngan’s Shield Charm, which had instantly appeared, and then the houngan’s own curse caught the woman in the back. She blew up in a cloud of blood and bone and flesh that filled the entire hallway for a second, blinding everyone. Harry reacted as he had been trained to, dropping to the ground and rolling away from his position, so he wasn’t cursed while blinded. A quick Scouring Charm cleaned his face and a Shield Charm followed.

By that time the hallway had cleared, but the group - everyone had spread out as well, as they had been drilled - was covered in blood and worse, and Reid had fled through the door. Harry charged after him, but the houngan had sealed the door with a wall of bones. It took a few seconds to dispel that, but then a wall of flames blocked their path and line of sight. A few water spells later, he saw that Reid had used the time to conjure animals and obstacles to cover his retreat - and gain more distance. He was already too far away to hit him with a curse. Maybe if Harry used his broom...

Shots rang out behind Harry. He glanced over his shoulder while dispelling another wall of bones - a moving one - and saw Ron was on the ground, firing an assault rifle, with Hermione about to join him.

“Clear a line of fire for us,” she yelled.

Harry dropped the idea of flying after him. He and the others did what they could, but he already knew it wouldn’t be enough. Reid was protected by a shield, and too close to the wardline. A wall sprang up in front of the fleeing houngan, but was blasted apart right away. Harry was still dispelling a charging skeleton when the houngan passed through the wards and vanished.

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Expediency

Chapter 54: Expediency

‘As already explained, the main goals of the ICW’s inspection were to discover just how powerful Britain was without Dumbledore and how much of a factor the British muggleborns would play in national and international politics. Both questions were answered by the events which occurred during and following the Houngan Ritual Crisis, although one can state with certainty that the manner in which those answers were given was not what any member of the delegation had intended. Not at all.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Hogwarts, March 20th, 1997

“Reducto!”

Another skeleton exploded into bone fragments. Harry Potter turned and looked for another target, but there weren’t any left. He saw Ron vanish what looked like the front half of a stone leopard trying to drag itself towards them with its paws and Sirius had just finished dispelling the last moving bone wall.

“Moody would rip us a new one, if he had seen this,” Harry’s godfather said, looking at the rest of the group gathered at the side entrance and sighing. “We had Reid surrounded and at wand point, and he managed to escape anyway.”

“The woman appearing in our midst was a distraction,” Ron started. “And he had a shield up that blocked our curses, and then…” Harry saw his friend wince when he trailed off. Ron wasn’t the only one. That hadn’t been a Blasting Curse, but something far worse.

“Yes.” Remus gestured at himself and Sirius. “We couldn’t cast at him without hitting her, until he turned her into a cloud of blood and gore.”

“Terrible,” Vivienne said. The Veela was moving her wand over her body, vanishing the blood and other things stuck to her skin and robes.

“It might actually have been a Transfiguration spell,” Hermione said. “An explosion, like from a Blasting Curse, wouldn’t have reduced her whole body like this, not so evenly.” She shook her head. “Though there would have to be a blasting component as well, to spread it out. Unless that’s the result of the effect that rendered the body down to…” she trailed off and closed her eyes for a moment, taking deep breaths. “Sorry.”

Harry saw Ron move towards her to hug her, but he pulled back at the last moment, staring at his blood-covered arms.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” Sirius said. “Before…”

A loud, piercing shriek from inside the castle interrupted him. Harry was through the door in an instant, leading with his wand, Ron hot on his heels. They found Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein, the Ravenclaw prefects of their year, staring - and in Padma’s case, shrieking - at the remains of the woman Reid had killed.
“Ah…” Harry began, catching their attention, but before he could explain, Anthony started to scream as well and wave his wand around. Harry disarmed them both. “Calm down! No one’s going to hurt you.”

They didn’t seem to listen, though. The others had spread out to cover the hallway.

“Shut up!” Hermione suddenly shouted at the two students. “Or I’ll silence you two myself!”

They shut up, but didn’t look any less scared.

“Ravenclaws,” he heard Ron mutter under his breath in the sudden silence. “No wonder Padma’s not in Gryffindor.”

“Shh!” Sirius said. “Someone’s coming. A group of them.”

Harry stepped behind one of the suits of armour - covered in blood and gore like the whole area - and aimed his wand. Ron followed suit on the other side of the hallway, and Hermione took up a position in the open doorway. Sirius and Remus stepped forward while Vivienne moved the two students - now silenced, Harry noted - around the next corner.

“Harry?”

He knew that voice. Ginny.

“Ginny?” Ron asked. “Blimey, she brought half the house!”

He was correct, Harry noted. Behind Ginny, who was marching towards them, came Neville, Parvati, Lavender and several more Gryffindors. And, he noticed, one lone Ravenclaw. Luna.

“We noticed the fight and came as fast as we…” Ginny trailed off when she caught sight of them and gasped. “What…”

“It’s not our blood,” Ron quickly said.

Judging by the expressions on the students’ faces, that didn’t reassure them. But at least no one screamed. And one or two dozen Cleaning Charms took care of that problem.

It would take a lot more than a few spells to take care of the teachers who had arrived by then, though.

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“I bet McGonagall would be happier if this had been a tasteless prank,” Ron said, looking over his shoulder. “And if she could give Sirius and Remus detention.”

Harry chuckled. The joke wasn’t really funny, but it was better to laugh than to cry.

Hermione shook her head. “I hope they won’t take too long with her. We have bigger problems to deal with than this.”

“Bigger problems than an angry McGonagall?” Ron gasped theatrically.

She rolled her eyes at him. “We had a fight with an ICW delegate. That’s a major diplomatic incident. We need to get the truth out before Reid accuses us of trying to kill him.”

“Well,” Ron said, “we did try to kill him - after he murdered that woman.”
“Tried and failed,” Harry added. That hadn’t been one of their best performances. “We didn’t look too competent there.”

“You ended his spell easily easily enough,” Ron remarked. “That surprised him. And he fled at once.”

“I couldn’t get through his shield, though,” Harry said. “Not with the spell I hit him with.” Anyone would have fled in that situation, he thought. Anyone but Voldemort or Dumbledore.

“There’s nothing we can do about that right now. We need to focus on providing evidence of Reid’s crime to the Ministry,” Hermione insisted. “We need to find out who the woman was, but…”

Ron snapped his fingers. “The map! Ginny would have seen her name on the map, when she noticed the fight. We need her memory for the Pensieve.”

Harry nodded. “Let’s take a detour to the Gryffindor dorms.” And then hurry on to the Headmaster’s - Headmistress’s, he reminded himself - office. They could use the Floo connection there to return to Grimmauld Place. And take a bath. Despite the Cleaning Charms, he needed one to feel clean again.

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“Let me see if I have understood you correctly.” Amelia Bones was hoping - really hoping - that she had misheard. “You took the Jamaican ICW delegate to Hogwarts, without informing McGonagall, and then fought him there, causing him to escape and flee?”

Black, sitting in her office and looking as if he didn’t know that he had just caused the biggest crisis with Jamaica since Dumbledore’s visit in the 1950s, shrugged. “He was trying to sacrifice a woman. Stopping him seemed to be the right thing to do.”

Amelia controlled her temper, even though she longed to hex the idiot. “You didn’t stop him, though, did you? The woman died - covering a hallway in Hogwarts with blood and body parts, and traumatising a dozen students, according to McGonagall - and Reid escaped.”

“Well, yes. He used the woman as a shield, first, and then as a weapon.” Black shook his head. “Not our finest hour, I’ll admit that, but at least he couldn’t sacrifice her for whatever he was planning.”

“Ah, yes - the reason you were sneaking into Hogwarts in the first place: Because you were searching for a stolen houngan artefact. Without informing the Ministry!” Amelia glared at him.

Black spread his hands. “He insisted on the utmost secrecy. Spreading their secrets to the Ministry wouldn’t have gone over well with the houngans.”

“Trying to kill their envoy will not go over well either,” she countered in the coldest voice she could manage.

“That’s why we need to get the truth out first: That Reid was murdering muggles under the cover of a mission for the ICW.” Black showed his teeth and dropped a few pictures on her desk. “We took them from a Pensieve. Evil houngan murdering a poor muggle with dark magic, and this in Hogwarts - that will stop the ICW from complaining too much about this.”

“They would do much more than simply ‘complain’,,” Amelia spat out.

“Not now, though. The houngans have few friends in the ICW, and far more enemies. And even
some who supported their demands to join the inspection will now feel betrayed.”

“If they believe our claims.”

“They will. Half of them would believe them even if they were not true.” He shrugged, acting unconcerned. “The fruits of a thoroughly tarnished reputation.”

He would know about that, Amelia thought - the Blacks had a somewhat similar reputation in Britain, in certain circles, at least. “Even if the ICW accepts this, the houngans won’t.” They couldn’t admit to their envoy committing such crimes - endangering the Statute of Secrecy by sacrificing muggles, even! - on a mission for the ICW.

Black shrugged again. “I doubt that they’ll start a war over this. Reid escaped, after all.” He cocked his head to the side. “Unless your Aurors managed to capture him?”

Amelia stared at him. “The Jamaican delegation has left their quarters.”

“Lost track of them?”

“It looks like they have already left Britain.” She didn’t snap at him, even though she hated his flippant tone.

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Black said with a grin, “and anyone who knows me could tell you that I like betting. They really want that missing artefact.”

“They’ll need Reid back in Jamaica to present their own spin on this,” Amelia said.

“Unless he is expendable. Either he gets their artefact back, or he dies - and they’ll blame us for ‘silencing the victim’ or whatever they’ll claim.” Black snorted.

“From what we know, the houngan leaders are not the kind to sacrifice themselves like that - nor the kind to let their peers sacrifice them, either.”

“Of course not. Leaders seldom are.” Black smiled at her, and she ground her teeth at his accusation. “But who says he’d stay dead?”

Amelia felt a cold shiver run down her spine. “Are you serious?” Was Reid able to return from death, as the Dark Lord had been?

“Yes, I am,” Black said. “And serious as well. We have to expect the worst from them.” He leaned back. “Speaking of - you need to check with the muggles when ‘Carrie Brown’ went missing. Reid might have kidnapped and sacrificed as many as a dozen people for his spells. If you find out about the woman he just murdered, and perhaps any others, then we will know just how long the houngans have been active in Britain.”

“How did you know her name?” She narrowed her eyes. Even if they had taken pictures from a Pensieve, how could they have found a muggle that quickly?

“Hogwarts has ways to track visitors, if they are expected.”

So, Draco Malfoy hadn’t been lying when he claimed that the Gryffindors could track the Slytherins. But Dumbledore had lied to her. She waited, but Black didn’t elaborate on just how visitors could be tracked, and she wouldn’t ask only to be refused. Taking a deep breath to control her temper, she said: “Pius will have someone look into that.” She didn’t think that it would amount to much - the other kidnapped muggles were already dead, and their bodies had probably been vanished anyway.
“Is there anything else?” She glanced at the clock on her wall; most of the Ministry staff would have left for home long ago. Not even her secretary had still been around when Black had called.

“Yes. You’ll need to increase security at Hogwarts. Reid might try again, as long as he thinks we are hiding the artefact there. Can you handle that, or should I send a few Order members there?”

She wanted to hex the smug smile off his face, but she had no choice other than to accept his offer. She didn’t have to do so gracefully, though. “That is a good idea.” She matched Black’s smile with her own. “I would not want to waste Aurors on guard duty when there are houngans and criminals to hunt. Provided, of course, that your people can manage that much.” Half of the teachers at Hogwarts were part of Dumbledore’s Order anyway, as far as she knew.

Black’s smile slipped for a moment. “Of course they can. Good evening, Amelia.”

“Good evening.”

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**London, Ministry of Magic, March 21st, 1997**

Sirius Black cocked his head to the side. “Pardon?” Not only had he been called into Amelia’s office right after a bothersome meeting with some of Elphias’s less stalwart friends, but she was accusing him of trying to start a war?

“I said: What do you know about this attack on a houngan in Jamaica?” Amelia was glaring at him, worse than McGonagall had yesterday evening.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” he answered honestly.

“Jamaica complained to the ICW that one of their leaders was attacked and murdered in his home with muggle explosives. Apparently, the culprit escaped.” She leaned forward and bared her teeth. “What have the Resistance been doing over there?”

Sirius frowned. “They haven’t left Britain.” Hermione hadn’t mentioned anything, and Sirius doubted that she’d attack Jamaica on her own - and if she did, she’d lead the attack herself; she wouldn’t leave that task to others. And Harry and Ron had met most, if not all, of the veteran Resistance members, according to their tales from training.

“Really? Who else would use muggle bombs to attack manors and murder houngans?” Amelia scoffed.

“There are a few muggleborn-led enclaves in America. They never got along with the houngans...” He shrugged. Deflect, without accusing anyone specific. What worked for pranks worked in politics as well, he had found.

“Do you honestly believe that?”

“It’s possible.” He didn’t doubt that the muggleborns in Europe had been following the news of the war, and given the volatile situation on the East Coast of North America, the muggleborns there would likely have done the same. But would they attack Jamaica? That wasn’t likely. No country in the Americas would risk a war with Jamaica without a very good, and usually well-known, reason. But who else would? Would the French go that far to start a war between Britain and Jamaica?

“Although this could be a cover-up for an internal dispute, and they are using it to attack us.”

“I don’t believe that.” Amelia’s expression told him that she didn’t believe the Resistance’s
innocence either. “I don’t have to tell you that this significantly weakens our position with the ICW.”

“They need to provide proof of such an accusation,” he said. He didn’t have to add that the houngans wouldn’t be able to, not unless they let outsiders into their country. Which wouldn’t happen.

“Britain has enough enemies, or rather, certain factions in Britain do, that the ICW will not easily dismiss this.”

“The houngans have even more enemies; especially in the Americas.” Sirius made a dismissive gesture. He wasn’t as confident as he acted, though - if this wasn’t just a lie to cover up some internal power struggle, then someone was framing the Resistance. “I’ll look into the matter, though.”

“I expect to be informed of anything you find,” Amelia said.

“Of course.” He stood up and nodded at her.

But after the fact, he added to himself. It was always better to ask for forgiveness instead of permission. Pranking had taught him that as well.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 21st, 1997

“We didn’t send anyone to Jamaica!” Hermione Granger stood in Sirius’s living room, hands on her hips. “In the current situation, with the new recruits to get up to speed, the rally to keep safe, and possible attacks by Death Eaters to guard against, attacking the houngans on their home ground would be foolish.” And she prided herself on not acting like a fool.

Sirius held up his hands. “I didn’t say you did. I’m just relaying what the houngans are claiming - that someone using muggle explosives attacked and killed one of their leaders.”

“Why would they claim that, anyway?” Ron cut in.

“They could be lying about it, to make it appear as if we attacked both Reid and this other houngan,” Sirius said. “But I think someone else did attack them in Jamaica. I doubt they would make up such a story - it makes them appear weak and vulnerable.”

“But…” Hermione trailed off. Who could, who would do such a thing? “Do you think they were American?”

“So far, no one’s claimed responsibility,” Sirius said.

“Why would they?” Ron asked. “That would invite the houngans’ vengeance. Which is now aimed at us.”

“They already hated Britain anyway.” Sirius shrugged. “It could be someone from the Americas, taking revenge for what the houngans did to them in the past while framing us. But there’s another possibility. It could be a Death Eater. We haven’t found Rookwood yet. Or Wormtail - but the traitor is too much of a coward for this.”

Hermione blinked. “Rookwood? Do you think he’d risk attacking houngans?” Would anyone be that bold?

“If he could frame the Resistance for it, yes. That puts more pressure on Britain, and makes any
knowledge he acquired from Voldemort more valuable.” Sirius leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs.

“You think he’s trying to make a deal with the Ministry.” Harry shook his head. “They wouldn’t stoop that low.”

“Amelia wouldn’t. But there are a lot of victims of the Withering Curse. Their families expect the Ministry to find a cure,” Sirius said.

“Yes. Dad’s under a lot of pressure, even though the Ministry hasn’t really given him enough help to do anything,” Ron said. “He says it’s a ploy from Bones to make him look bad.”

“He’s right.” Sirius nodded at Ron.

“Even if the Ministry were willing to make a deal with him, would he actually head to Jamaica? That’s far more dangerous than trying to hide in Europe.” Like Pettigrew, Hermione thought, who was probably spending the rest of his life as a rat, if his past actions were any indication.

“He’s desperate,” Sirius replied. “And he’s about the only one among the remaining Death Eaters who has the skill and talent to pull this off. And unlike Wormtail, he probably would rather take such risks than settle for a life as a fugitive.”

Sirius had lived that life for over two years, Hermione reminded herself. And before that, he had spent over ten years in Azkaban. Like Rookwood. The animagus would know what he was talking about. “Did you, ah… talk to him?”

“There wasn’t an opportunity to talk, there,” Sirius said. “Not really. But I heard things.”

His expression made Hermione regret asking. But they needed to know as much as possible to deal with this.

“But travelling to Jamaica, and attacking houngans there… if he has the cure for the Withering Curse, he wouldn’t need to take that many risks. He could simply wait.” Ron voiced some of the same doubts Hermione had.

“If he has the cure,” Sirius said. “I think he would have let the public know, to put pressure on the Ministry, if he actually had a cure.”

“Could he be trying to get the cure in Jamaica?” Hermione bit her lower lip. It was a little far-fetched, but… “Starting a war between Jamaica and Britain wouldn’t do that much. There are no friendly staging areas for the houngans in Europe. And Britain’s not in any shape to launch another invasion.” The past wars had always been attacks by Britain against Jamaica, usually from friendly islands, like the Bermudas.

“It is just a possibility,” Sirius said. “But something we should be looking into.”

“And how would we do that? Ask the houngans to send us their evidence? While we’re hunting Reid?” Harry scoffed.

“If it is Rookwood, then he likely has the skull, and the houngans could find him using their ritual,” Hermione said. “We could tell them, but they’d sacrifice people to find him.” She saw Harry and Ron wince at hearing that.

“They will be sacrificing people anyway, if it comes to a war,” Sirius pointed out. He looked grim, but not quite as appalled as the others. “And it would mean the Resistance would not get the blame
any more.”

Hermione wasn’t quite willing to sacrifice - even indirectly - innocents for that. Certainly not when war, and with it their deaths, was not yet certain. She shook her head. “That goes too far. We’re not at war with Jamaica, and might avoid it altogether, and even if Reid hasn’t already left Britain, he won’t manage to enter Hogwarts again, so further sacrifices would be useless. And on the other hand, if we do spread this news, then others could accuse us of working with the houngans.” The Old Families would love that.

“Amelia would do that. She was very angry about us keeping the visit to Hogwarts a secret.” Sirius suddenly chuckled, though without much humour. “The ironic twist to all of this is that unless we catch Reid and interrogate him, we might actually have to go to Jamaica to get the cure.”

“If he’s even still in Britain.” Ron looked grim.

Harry snorted. “Since he escaped so easily from us, he might think he is safe even if we find him.”

Hermione winced. That hadn’t been their finest hour, to say the least. She had spent a lot of time going over all the mistakes they had made. That she had made. She didn’t like to, but the Major had taught her that a good officer needed to be honest in their appraisal of a failed mission in order to learn from their mistakes. Sighing, she said: “We will do better next time. It was a rather unusual situation.”

“We were six versus one, and failed to get him. That’s as bad as it gets,” Harry retorted.

“We made many mistakes, yes,” Hermione admitted, forcing her annoyance down. “We didn’t expect him to do anything like that, not after he provided us with the information about his spell and since we were certain that the skull wasn’t in Hogwarts. We should have had more people there too, ready to stop him.” They had been set up to defend the school, not to prevent him from fleeing.

“We didn’t want to tell too many people about it,” Sirius said. “And with good reason. Dealing with houngans is not a thing done lightly. Or openly.”

Harry snorted. “And yet, now everyone knows we did.”

“Everyone knows that an official ICW delegate tried to sacrifice a woman in Hogwarts, and we stopped him,” Sirius said.

“We didn’t stop him from murdering her.” Harry apparently wasn’t seeing any silver lining. “We weren’t prepared enough.”

“What could we have done?” Ron asked, his tone already indicating that he didn’t think there had been anything they could have done. “When he turned the woman into a cloud of blood and gore, we couldn’t see a thing and had to quickly scatter so he wouldn’t be able to attack us while we were blind. And since he didn’t stay and fight, but ran, he had a head start. Enough to delay us further, so he was out of effective wand range when we got through the door.”

“We could have used our brooms; he wasn’t that far away,” Harry said.

“We could have,” Sirius said. “But that would have put us in range of his spells as well. He probably would have hit one of us before we took him down.”

“Rifles were the safer option,” Ron added. “But his Shield Charm shrugged off our bullets anyway, so ‘snipers’ wouldn’t have done any good.”
“And if we had had snipers ready then we would have needed to use communication mirrors to inform them so they would have known to fire at him once he ran out of the castle,” she pointed out, “since radios don’t work inside Hogwarts.” That would have cost some more time. They wouldn’t have gotten through his shield even with two snipers, or so she thought, unless they had managed to hit him with every shot, and that was unlikely - hitting a running man was not that easy, even for the experienced shooters of the Resistance. Although maybe a machine gun or two would have done the job...

“In other words, our main mistake was trusting a houngan to act like a civilised wizard,” Sirius said. “But if we had treated him like the scum he is, he’d have used that against us.”

“Well, we don’t have to play nice any more,” Ron said. “Next time, we can do better.”

“We can hardly do worse,” Harry said.

“It’s not that bad.” Sirius frowned at Harry. “While we didn’t look our best, I think you surprised and maybe even scared him when you dispelled his transfiguration.”

“I also used my other wand for that, which he saw.” Harry looked down. He was really taking this hard, Hermione thought.

“I doubt he knows what the Elder Wand looks like. At worst, he knows you’re using Dumbledore’s wand.” At least Sirius didn’t sound that concerned. “So, next time we meet him, we’ll deal with him.”

Hermione nodded with the others, but she knew that even if they found Reid, catching him alive would be difficult. And, as she had told Sirius, they couldn’t afford to send anyone to Jamaica, not with all the problems they had to deal with in Britain.

And yet she couldn’t help thinking that sooner or later, they might have to anyway.

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Hogsmeade, March 21st, 1997

Hermione Granger slowly turned around as she studied her surroundings. She was standing in a wide open field, close to Hogsmeade. Good lanes of fire, little cover for attackers, and enough space to put up a hall large enough for the expected crowd. “It’ll do,” she said.

“Are you certain?” Seamus asked. “An open air area would look more impressive to the purebloods. Pictures from inside won’t be enough.”

“It would also be far more vulnerable to someone dropping vials of Exploding Fluid from a broom,” Justin said, shaking his head.

“Which has happened before,” Hermione added. “And the point of the rally is to reach the muggleborns, to keep them from starting a riot, or worse. We could use transparent walls and roofs with the Unbreakable Charm, but that charm’s not truly unbreakable, and then any attacker could also see exactly where we were inside it.”

“I know, I know.” Seamus sighed, and Hermione knew without having to look that he was rolling his eyes. They had gone over this before.

She refrained from telling him that they were already winning, and didn’t need masses of muggleborns marching through Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. They just needed to keep a lid on the
violence until a few more members of the Wizengamot caved and joined Sirius. “Alright,” she said, “This is a decent place. We can set up here tomorrow, and throw enough wards on the hall so it can withstand an attack long enough to deal with the attackers.”

“And we have good sniping positions in range,” Tania added over the radio. The witch was flying above them, disillusioned.

“We’re also close to Aberforth’s inn.” Justin nodded towards the Hog’s Head Inn. “He’ll provide both another pair of eyes, and a nearby Floo connection.”

“Alright,” Hermione said. “Let’s place a few cameras, and then check another spot or two.” That way, an attacker observing them wouldn’t know where they’d set up and might be spotted if they scouted the field after they left.

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They were studying the second alternate spot, a field too close to the forest, when they heard the explosion. Hermione and the others were on the ground, with their wands out and protected by Shield Charms, before the smoke rose over the roofs of the village.

“Someone blew up a shop in Hogsmeade,” Tania informed them over the radio. “I’m going in.”

“Be careful,” Hermione said, pushing the button of her radio. “Everyone else, move to the edge of the village!”

They made their way over the field, covering each other with their rifles and moving one after the other, until they reached the first houses.

“One house is damaged, forefront caved in, small crater in the street. Looks like a Blasting Curse - or explosives,” Tania said. “The Auror patrol just arrived… there’s a crashed broom nearby. Lots of wounded, too.”

Hermione stood up behind the low wall she had been using as cover. “Seamus, take to the roofs! Justin, with me!” She started to walk towards the still rising smoke. “Which building was hit?” She asked over the radio.

“Looks like… ‘Flint’s Fine Finery’, ” Hermione heard Tania report.

A pureblood tailor? She clenched her teeth. If this had been an attack by muggleborns… “We really need to get Nott as soon as possible,” she muttered under her breath as she spotted the first Auror trying to hold back villagers from rushing to the burning house.

The villagers fell back as soon as they spotted the Resistance, Hermione noted - many of them glaring at them, or disappearing into their houses. It wasn’t that much of a surprise - Hogsmeade, as the only pure wizarding settlement in Britain, was an almost entirely pureblood village. And one which had been attacked by muggleborns during the war.

She ignored their reaction, as she ignored the Aurors’ half-hearted attempt to stop her, and pushed through to the downed broom rider, Justin following in her wake. “What happened?” she asked as soon as she was close to the Aurors there.

They stiffened, and looked around.

“The rest of us are securing the village,” Hermione said. Just in case they wanted to start trouble.
“Someone blew up the tailor’s,” the Aurors’ apparent leader, a wizard barely older than Hermione, said. “A witness saw the broom fall from the sky right after the explosion.”

The wizard on the ground was unconscious, and wearing singed robes. He could have been simply flying above the house just as the explosion happened, of course. But Hermione doubted that.

One of the Aurors treating the man’s wounds pulled something out of the man’s pockets and Hermione gasped - it was several sticks of dynamite bundled together.

Muggle explosives. Just what she had feared.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 21st, 1997

“... the DMLE has declined to comment, citing an ongoing investigation.”

Someone had actually done it, Bess Cox thought after hearing the report on the wireless in Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips. They had blown up Flint’s shop in Hogsmeade. The report hadn’t named any dead, but if the shop was destroyed, then odds were that the bigot had been killed. Someone had completed the mission that had cost Felix, Ricky and Mark their lives.

She clenched her teeth as memories of that night filled her mind. The flight at night, carrying the bombs, almost getting lost near Hogwarts. Trying to find their targets from the air, among the many roofs. Ricky yelling to just drop the bombs, before the Aurors saw them. Mark going lower, then dropping his. Hearing the screams from below, seeing the spells flashing in the air. Dropping her own fire bombs, seeing Felix crash, the winged monsters suddenly appearing in their midst, slashing at them...

“Hey? Hey? Bess?”

Randall’s voice and his hand on her arm broke the spell. She shuddered and shook her head, closing her eyes and taking deep breaths. She wasn’t in Hogsmeade, wasn’t fleeing for her life, didn’t hear her friends dying...

“Sorry,” she said, “I just remembered…” She trailed off, then glanced at him. He knew what she had done in the war.

Randall looked around and lowered his voice. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She didn’t want to. Not now, not ever. Remembering was already too painful. Ricky had been killed quickly while facing the Veela, but she and Mark had evaded the first attack, only to find themselves caught between the harpies and purebloods on brooms. They had turned to flee, but Mark’s broom had been a Keeper’s model, very agile, but not as fast as her own broom. Not nearly fast enough to escape their pursuers. He had yelled at her to flee, then had veered off, to delay the enemies after them.

Bess shook her head. “No, sorry.”

He didn’t push, simply nodded, took a sip from his beer and waited for her to recover her composure.

After a while, she sighed and pushed the uneaten remains of her dinner away. “I don’t know how to feel about this,” she finally said, nodding towards the wireless.
Randall hesitated a moment, then said: “I think it was a mistake.”

“What? Why?” she blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Bombing a shop in broad daylight?” He shook his head. “Too much collateral damage. Exactly what the Resistance has told people not to do.”

“Granger just wants to suck up to her ‘peers’ in the Wizengamot,” Bess spat out.

“She’s right about the purebloods, though. We need to divide them, so they don’t unite against us. That won’t work if they fear we will go after all of them.”

Bess remembered the sneer on Flint’s face when he had told her friends to get out of his shop. The damn bigot deserved this, and his friends as well.

Randall sighed. “I don’t like them either, but we can’t simply lash out at every pureblood. Let’s stick to the list.” He grinned. “I’ve been looking into the telly troubles, and I’ve found a few addresses to check.”

Bess slowly nodded. She still disagreed about Hogsmeade - her friends’ deaths hadn’t been in vain! - but as long as they were hitting back at the pureblood bigots she’d go along with Randall’s plans.

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“What have you found out?” Amelia Bones asked as soon as Pius entered her office. She expected results - they had captured the suspect alive, and could use Veritaserum, after all.


“With muggle explosives?” She frowned. “Was he trying to frame the Resistance?”

“That’s our best guess. He was under the Imperius, and has been obliviated. He remembers being given the explosives a month ago, with the instructions on how and where to use them. He can’t remember who gave them to him, though.” Pius looked apologetic, even though such precautions were to be expected. It wasn’t worth trying to reconstruct the memories, hoping that the culprit had been both sloppy with the Obliviation and not otherwise disguised his identity. The Unspeakables with experience in such difficult magic had more important tasks to perform. Pius went on: “He received the signal to strike yesterday.” Which meant the owl had already left, and couldn’t be traced any more. “International owl post, according to the memories we gathered.”

That didn’t mean that much - France was just a short trip away, after all. But the planning in advance… Amelia frowned. “He wasn’t a Ministry employee, or the Imperius would have been broken when he passed through the Thief’s Downfall.”

“He worked at a shop in Diagon Alley,” Pius confirmed. “And he had been ordered to avoid the Ministry.” He paused for a moment, looking grim. “I doubt that Nye was the only one. His orders included blowing himself up after the attack. It was pure luck that he misjudged the force of the explosion and was blown off his broom before he could obey that order.”

Amelia muttered a curse.

“It looks like whoever set this up wanted to frame the Resistance,” Pius went on.
“They would have picked a muggleborn for that,” Amelia said. Could this be a convoluted attempt by the Resistance to frame purebloods?

“They might not have had the time or opportunity to find a muggleborn. But Nye was known to be rather… critical of muggleborns.”

“He was a bigot, you mean.” Not a Death Eater, though - or Pius would have told her.

“Yes.”

“Our culprit set this up a month ago. They didn’t pick a muggleborn, even though they were no longer hiding back then.” Amelia shook her head. Either they had not wanted to kill a muggleborn, which would point towards the Resistance, or, as Pius had said, they hadn’t had the time or opportunity to find a muggleborn victim. International owl post. Either a foreigner, or someone who had fled Britain. “If we knew whether the explosive used was the same as was used in Jamaica…”

Pius actually snorted. He knew as well as she did that the houngans would rather fight a war than let anyone investigate on their island. “You think that the culprit set up these attacks, then left for Jamaica?” He sounded doubtful.

She raised her shoulders slightly, not quite a shrug. “It’s a possibility.” Her gut told her that she was right, but that was not proof. “Inform Black and Granger of this.”

Pius’s eyebrows rose slightly before he nodded, and she wondered if she might have actually surprised him. Given the current troubles, they needed all the help they could get to keep the peace. Even the help of mass murderers and their friends.

“Is there any news about the search for Reid? The other two delegates have been making repeated inquiries about the incident.”

He shook his head. She frowned at him, even though she hadn’t expected anything else. At least the delegates couldn’t exploit this debacle too much, not unless they wanted to appear far too sympathetic to a houngan caught in the act of sacrificing people.

It was a small consolation, but Amelia was grateful for anything that didn’t make Britain’s situation even worse than it already was.

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London, Diagon Alley, March 21st, 1997

“Stop staring out the front, Ronniekins! We’re supposed to not know what’s coming.”

Ron Weasley turned away from the entrance of the twins’ rebuilt shop and rolled his eyes at George. “We’re also supposed to act natural - and it is natural to be worried about a possible attack, seeing as this shop was at the heart of Voldemort’s final battle, and we’re about the most famous blood traitor family in Britain. And do I have to remind you that there are at least two groups out there that have attacked muggleborns?” Nott was the less dangerous one, in his opinion, compared to the group who had tried to frame the Resistance.

George shrugged. “I trust our wards.”

“I don’t,” Ron spat out. “They used muggle explosives, remember? That means they could duplicate them until they have enough to blow up all of Diagon Alley!”
“No, they couldn’t!” George was grinning. “We’re too close to muggle London. An explosion of that size would endanger the Statute of Secrecy, and the Obliviators’ Seers would foresee it. Dad told us that.”

Ron scoffed. “That only works if there’s no possible muggle-worthy excuse. And muggle London has a number of bombs buried in the ground.” Hermione had told him that.

“Are they crazy? Why would they do that?” George was frowning at him. “You’re taking the mickey!”

“I’m not!” Ron protested. “They had a war a while ago, and so many bombs were dropped on London, a great number of them didn’t explode and were buried. Some of them still explode from time to time - that’s what the muggles think happened to Shacklebolt and his team.” Which only proved that even Death Eaters knew about it.

“Bloody hell!” George was shaking his head as if he had trouble believing it.

“Not so confident any more?” Ron asked, smirking slightly.

His brother glared at him. “Just keep an eye out. I’ll think of some counters to that.”

“Good luck,” Ron said, turning his attention back to the Alley. It was almost time anyway.

A few minutes later, right on time, the street in front of the new Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes blew up, throwing up cobbledstones and dirt in a big cloud of dust. Ron unshrunk his new broom and cast a Human-presence-revealing Charm, followed by a Disillusionment Charm while rushing to the top floor, where he jumped out of the window.

He fell a story before he caught himself, and then he shot up towards the marker his spell showed him. Below him, another explosion shook the street. As planned.

He drew his wand and urged his broom on. “Finite!” A robed figure on a broom became visible - the attacker. The figure waved their wand, and a green spell shot towards him. Ron rolled to the side, letting the spell shoot past, and gave chase. A few tight turns later, he had the fleeing figure lined up and cast himself. His spell shattered their shield, and their hood was torn away, revealing their face when they suddenly veered off sharply.

“Nott!” Ron spat, then sent a Reductor Curse at the fleeing attacker, followed by a Bludgeoning Curse.

His target apparated away, though, before the spells hit, and Ron forced himself to curse - and not sigh with relief.

If he had actually hit Tonks...

*****

Worcestershire, Nott Manor, March 21st, 1997

Ron Weasley appeared inside the ‘listening post’, as the twin’s hidden camp had been dubbed by the Resistance, a few minutes after his ‘fight’. Hermione and the rest of the experienced Resistance members were already present, and he went to hug her.

“Oh, how romantic!”
He released the witch and turned to glare at Tonks, who no longer looked like Nott. The metamorphmagus was faking a swoon. “I should have hit you with a spell or two,” he grumbled.

“You were cutting it a bit close, weren’t you?” She was grinning widely. “You sold the chase, though.”

Ron shrugged. That had been more stressful than he had expected, but it had all gone down as planned.

Fred snorted. “Our products work perfectly fine. We tested them often enough.”

“You first version tore off more than my hood,” Tonks said with a frown.

Ron’s brother shrugged. “That’s what tests are for.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Everyone, get ready! We strike in one minute!” She looked at Justin, who was monitoring the wireless ears they had placed inside the manor.

“No change there - he hasn’t heard about the attack yet,” the former Hufflepuff said.

Hermione nodded. “Seamus?”

“Bomb’s ready!” Seamus sounded far too eager to handle so many explosives for Ron’s taste - but better the Irish wizard risk his life than Ron himself.

“Alright. Currently, Nott and his aunt and uncle are in the manor, as well as two house-elves. You know the plan.” They did, but Hermione repeated it anyway - not for the first time. “Tania and Seamus are providing air cover - they’ll shoot down anyone trying to flee. Justin will keep monitoring the ears and track Nott if possible.”

Ron doubted that that would work - the ears were sending transcripts, after all, and couldn’t cover the entire manor.

“Sally-Anne will stay with him, and this will double as our first aid station,” Hermione continued. “We’ve already filled up the escape tunnel they prepared, and we’ll cover the entire area with jinxes to keep them from fleeing before the bomb goes off. Ron, Harry, John, Louise and I will enter from the back, Sirius and the rest from the front.”

His brothers had tried to argue about that, but Harry and Ron were the ones who had actually trained with the Resistance, and so were the best choice to work with them closely. Ron still smiled, remembering Fred’s face when he had pulled out his assault rifle and loaded it.

“Alright. Get into position!”

They split up and moved out. Seamus would drop the bomb at the front of the house, so Ron’s group could move closer to the wardline in the back than Sirius’s group. Ron was still rather nervous about the whole thing - he had seen what a tiny bit of explosives did in training, and Seamus was carrying far, far more.

Right after finishing his Anti-Apparition Jinxes, he heard Seamus on the radio. “Dropping in five, four, three, two, one…”

Ron gripped his rifle tightly and pressed himself into the ground, behind a fallen tree trunk at the edge of the forest. A second later, he heard the third explosion that day - and by far the loudest. And most powerful. Dirt and rocks rained down on him, hitting his Shield Charm.
“Wards are down,” Bill reported, “and so is the front wall.” He sounded slightly off - though Ron didn’t know if that was because his brother was using a muggle radio, or because he had been closer to the explosion.

It didn’t matter anyway - his group was already moving, racing towards the back of Nott’s manor. He didn’t bother keeping his rifle pointed, much less aimed at the manor - Seamus and Tania would be covering them from above.

Harry was the first to reach the manor, but Ron was right behind him, and the two crouched down at the porch, wand and rifle aimed at the door there. He couldn’t see anyone through the windows, and his Human-presence-revealing spell showed no marker in range either, so Nott wasn’t yet making a break for it.

Louise pointed her wand at the door, and blew it open with a spell. ‘Standard Hit-Wizard Door Knocker’, she had called it when she had shown them at the camp. It certainly worked well - the entire door was ripped off its hinges.

John jumped to the corner and stuck his rifle inside. “Clear!”

Louise passed him, leading with her wand. Then it was Ron and Harry’s turn. Ron stepped inside, crushing parts of the door under his boots, and let his rifle drop at his side, dangling from its sling, while he covered the room with his wand. Movement to his right drew his attention - a small figure was scrambling out from a passage inside the inner wall. A house-elf! He stunned the creature before it could do more than squeak in fright, then cast a full Body-Bind Curse for good measure.

Hermione and Harry dashed past him, towards the door to the hallway leading to Nott’s living room - or salon, as he called it - with John bringing up the rear. Before they reached the door, though, it exploded towards them, and a swarm of flying, buzzing metal rushed at them. Animated blades, Ron realised, his eyes widening.

As Moody had drilled him and Harry to, he acted out of reflex, meeting the cloud of swirling metal with a stone wall, stopping the blades for a few seconds before they started to cut and smash through it.

Harry started to dispel the things, but that didn’t seem to be working well. “It’s not one spell!” he yelled, “We have to deal with each individual blade!”

Ron cursed under his breath and conjured a thicker wall, to buy them more time, followed by Hermione dropping a stone block on the hemmed-in swarm, crushing a large part of the blades - or at least immobilizing them. A flick of her wand turned it to mud, and another turned it back to stone - with most of the flying metal trapped inside it. Ron and Harry finished the ones which had escaped that fate, but that took some time, and Harry only narrowly evaded being cut up when four of the blades descended on him at once and Ron could only get one of them in time.

“Got one trying to flee with a broom from the upper floor, east side. Wasn’t Nott.” Seamus reported.

“Moving there,” Sirius answered.

“We’ll push on to the salon,” Hermione said into the radio. “But the defences could be tricky. I don’t like the sight of the rug there.”

Ron agreed, and pointed his wand at it. “Incendio!”

The rug caught fire - and started to thrash around in the hallway like a giant snake in its death throes. Ron heard Harry mumble something about a chamber, and winced. Theoretically, they could cast the
Flame-Freezing Charm on the fire, but the rug was moving by itself and Ron didn’t think getting too close to it would be smart.

“Let’s go through the wall here!” Louise yelled, “It’ll be faster!” And safer, Ron thought.

Hermione nodded. “Make a hole! I’ll seal up the hallway.”

Another stone wall replaced the door while Louise stepped to the side of the room, twirling her wand. An instant later, a hole two yards across opened in the wall. Harry threw a grenade inside, and Ron pressed himself against the wall just before it went off.

Right afterwards, he rushed through the hole, diving into a forward roll. He spotted a figure stumbling around - a hand before their eyes, and sent a Stunner at it at once. Nott! His spell was stopped by a shield, though. Harry’s Piercing Curse dealt with the shield, but Nott had recovered from the blast and blinding, and his own wand was flashing.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Ron dropped to the floor while the remains of the couch shot up to catch the spell, and the resulting explosion shook the room. He coughed, blinked once, then saw Nott stumbling. Ron’s next Stunner hit, and Nott fell.

“We’ve got Nott. I repeat, we’ve got Nott.” Hermione said into the radio, then turned to John and Louise. “Check him for spells and curses!”

While the two Resistance members waved their wands over Nott’s stunned form, Harry and Ron took cover at the door, securing the entrance. The hallway was still burning fiercely. “Mate, that was a bit much,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“But can’t be too cautious.” Ron sniffed. He privately agreed with Harry, but he wasn’t about to admit that - his idea had closed off the hallway to them as well, holding them up as long or longer than a trap or guard would have managed.

“We’ve got his uncle cornered in the upper bedroom. That makes the runner his aunt,” Ron heard Sirius say over the radio.

“Do you need help?” Harry asked.

“No, no. Deal with Nott, we have this,” Sirius said. “Fred, use one of the special fireworks! Remus, Tonks - cover us! Ready?”

“He forgot to turn the radio off again,” Harry mumbled. Louder, and into the radio, he said: “Sirius! Stop pushing the button!”

A curse and some laughter later, the channel was silent. Just in time.

“He’s safe,” Louise said, straightening up from where she had crouched next to Nott.

Alright.” Hermione nodded at the former Hit-Witch and John. “Go secure our exit route. We’ll handle him.”

Louise stared at Hermione for a moment, then nodded and the two Resistance members left the room through the hole. Hermione turned to Harry and Ron.

“We talked about it,” Harry said before she could say anything.
“We’re all in this together,” Ron added.

Hermione frowned, then sighed and pulled out a small box. A tap of her wand had it grow to the size of a small chest, and a flick opened the lid, revealing a row of open vials. “Wake him up!”

Ron pointed his wand at Nott. “Rennervate.”

Nott stirred, groaning with his eyes closed first, then they shot open and he gasped. “What…”

Hermione didn’t give him a chance to yell. “Imperio. Stop!”

Nott shut up. Ron felt a shiver run down his spine. Using an Unforgivable… They had planned and discussed it, but to actually see it done… He pressed his lips together. It was the easiest way to handle this. And neither he nor Harry would let Hermione carry that burden and face that risk by herself.

“Give us all your memories about the recent attacks. All of the attacks since the Dark Lord died in Diagon Alley,” Hermione ordered, and slid the chest over to Nott.

While Nott started to pull out silvery strands of memories from his temple and sent them into the vials, Harry stared at their prisoner. “Legilimency would have worked as well.”

“But not as quickly. And this way we can copy them and hand them out.” They had gone over this already. In depth. The Ministry might also think that Nott was a victim of the Imperius, but that could be used against his allies, once they knew them.

The three stood there for a few minutes, no one saying anything while Nott filled vial after vial.

Finally, he stopped. Ron saw Hermione take a deep breath, and he glanced at Harry. They had talked about this, privately. His friend nodded.

A moment later, both of them emptied their rifles into Nott.

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Chapter 55: Cross Purposes

‘The attacks in March 1997 were committed by imperiused purebloods - both those against muggleborns in Diagon Alley and the one against a pureblood-owned tailor’s in Hogsmeade. No one contested that fact - not the Ministry nor the Order of the Phoenix or the Muggleborn Resistance. Why, then, was the so-called ‘Imperius defence’ used by pureblood wizards when accused of being Death Eaters so summarily rejected following the Second Blood War? Most of the alleged Death Eaters did not even have trials, but, according to the official reports, were ‘killed in action’ which conveniently made an actual investigation, including Pensieve evidence, impossible. It is therefore not surprising that the fairness of the judicial system during that time has been questioned by every unbiased observer and historian.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Worcestershire, Nott Manor, March 21st, 1997

As soon as she appeared in front of Nott Manor, Amelia Bones had a flashback to the Malfoy Manor bombing. The damage wasn’t as extensive, and there was no fire, but it was another manor of an Old Family, destroyed by muggleborns using muggle means.

Or, she corrected herself when she spotted Black standing in the rubble that was all that had been left of the front of the manor, muggleborns and the Order.

“Amelia! There you are!” He was smiling widely, despite - or, knowing him, because of - the body covered with a blanket laid out near him.

“Sirius,” she managed to say without cursing. “What happened?”

“You weren’t informed?” He acted surprised. “A masked broom rider attacked Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes with vials of Exploding Fluid. The owners protected themselves and drove the attacker off, managing to reveal his face in the process. It was Theo Nott. The nasty little bugger the Wizengamot acquitted not so long ago, remember?”

She didn’t deign to dignify that barb with a response. It wasn’t her place to tell the Wizengamot how to conduct their business. Instead she focused on Black’s story. “You saw someone who looked like Nott, and then attacked his home in response?”

He shrugged with that nonchalance that so irked her. “In a word, yes.”

“Because someone saw someone who might have been Nott.” She clenched her teeth.

“I checked the memory in a Pensieve myself.”

“And then you and your band of vigilantes went off and attacked Nott’s manor instead of informing the DMLE.” As so often when talking to him for any length of time, she wanted to hex the insufferable grin from his face and arrest him.

“We couldn’t take the risk that a spy would warn him. Or that a pair of rookie Aurors would knock on his door, be told he wasn’t home, and then leave again while he bolted.” His grin changed, now
reminding her of a feral beast. “You wouldn’t have launched a raid, would you?”

Amelia couldn’t have. Pius didn’t have enough Aurors and Hit-Wizards available on such short notice. She hated to admit that, and she loathed Black rubbing it in even more. “And now, all of the Manor’s inhabitants are dead, including the main suspect. Without any evidence of his guilt left. Just the word of those who are known to have tried to kill Nott before.”

He chuckled. “That, and the robes we saw, the broom we saw, and more Exploding Fluid just like that used in the attack. Or attacks.”

“You didn’t know that when you attacked,” she spat. “You just wanted an excuse to kill him!”

“To capture him, actually. The little bugger managed to get himself killed, though. We underestimated him.”

She didn’t believe him, not even for an instant, and scoffed. “You were already prepared to assault his manor.” Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to strike that quickly.

“Of course. We have plans to attack a variety of locations. Just in case.” He smiled again.

His story was so thin, a blind wizard would have seen through it. At best, he had gotten lucky and found the right attacker. At worst, he had used the opportunity to kill Nott. But Black controlled enough of the Wizengamot now that arresting him would only lead to her own replacement by a crony of his. Probably Pius. She glared at him. “Hand the ‘evidence’ over, and stop disturbing the crime scene.”

“Of course.”

His smug tone irked her even more than the equally smug smile which she longed to see wiped off his face… She turned away and marched towards the back of the manor. There she found Pius, standing over a body. Nott.

“Firearms?” she asked.

If Pius was annoyed by her lack of courtesy, he didn’t show it. “Yes. ‘Rifles’, I think.” He flicked his wand, turning the body over. “The exit wounds are too large for ‘pistols’.”

She didn’t flinch at the sight - she had seen far worse from dark curses. “You’ve become an expert on muggle weapons?”

“It seemed a good idea to familiarise myself with them, given their use during the war.” Pius turned the body back to its original position.

“So far their use has been limited to the Resistance,” Amelia pointed out.

“I doubt that that will remain the case,” Pius said. “Even if the muggleborns don’t follow the example the Resistance has set, others might try to frame them.”

“Like Nott might have been framed?” Amelia asked, watching him for his reaction.

He tensed up. “We’ve recovered enough Exploding Fluid to be certain that he was at least planning to attack someone. Although I expect the Unspeakables to come up with a match for an attack or two once they analyse the fluid.”

He was carefully not saying anything about the most recent attack, Amelia noted. He suspected
himself, then. Or he might even know. But he wouldn’t do anything. For the Head of the DMLE, that was… she shook her head.

“Amelia?”

She ignored him and walked away. At least this might mean that tomorrow’s muggleborn rally wouldn’t end in a riot that destroyed Hogsmeade.

Unless the muggleborns took today’s events as examples to emulate.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 21st, 1997

“Good evening, Mister… or should that be Monsieur…?”

He held his hand out, smiling, and the other wizard - or was it a witch? He couldn’t tell, not with the blank mask covering their face and the cloak obscuring their body - shook it with a weak, no, a gentle grip.

“Mister will do.” Even their voice was masked, he was certain. There was something missing there. But the French accent was still recognisable. “In the sort of business that we are engaged in one should stay as discreet as possible.”

“Mister,” He nodded, forcing himself to keep smiling. “I’m happy to welcome you to my home.” He didn’t mention that he hadn’t had many visitors, not since his acquittal.

“And I am ’appy to be ’ere. Most of Britain ’as become a dangerous place for true wizards and witches.”

“Something we will remedy!” He knew they would.

“Something you will change,” his guest corrected him. “We can support and ’elp you, but not directly. Politics.”

He knew that. “Isabelle, I mean, Mademoiselle Dubois, has explained your situation to me.” In general terms, of course, she hadn’t actually named any names. The Duc of France was playing both sides, trying to butter up the mudbloods through the Delacours as well as supporting the purebloods. He thought the other wizard tensed up, for a moment, but it was hard to tell with their disguise.

“We all ’ave our difficulties to deal with. Short-sighted wizards, weak rulers, and traitors. And mudbloods.”

He nodded eagerly. That precisely summed up Britain’s, no, Europe’s problems. “Exactly. But there are enough wizards and witches of good breeding left to stop this, before it ruins our country, and others.”

His guest nodded. “It will be dangerous, though. And bloody.”

He and Isabelle had talked about that already. As if he had suddenly become a coward just because he had been captured by the mudbloods. And he knew their tricks now - they wouldn’t catch him again. He scoffed. “I’ve faced danger already.” He had survived the war, after all. “And I’m no stranger to violence.” Not at all.
“Bien.” His guest reached inside his cloak and pulled out a small box. A tap with his wand enlarged it. “You will find gold and other, more difficult to acquire, things you might need inside.”

He refrained from simply grabbing the box. That would have been rude. As would be openly casting detection spells on a gift. Both of them knew, of course, that he’d do so afterwards. He clapped his hands.

“Master?”

“Take this to my study!” he ordered, without looking at the house-elf that had stepped out of the passage in the wall. Servants were to be neither seen nor heard, after all.

*****

Sirius Black pulled his head out of the Pensieve and looked at Vivienne. She shook her head. “I don’t recognise the visitor.”

“The accent is French, but that could have been faked,” he said. “Although the memory looks genuine.” He wasn’t an expert, though.

“The accent may be false, but I do not think so. And that was Isabelle Dubois in the other memory.” Vivienne almost sneered. “No one could duplicate ’er attitude that well.”

Sirius almost checked if Nymphadora was around - the metamorphmagus might take that as a challenge, and the French witch had been insufferable enough in the memory; Sirius didn’t need to see her in the fake flesh, so to speak. “They were cautious, though. Masks and cloaks…” Even Dubois hadn’t said anything directly incriminating to Nott, but her meaning had been clear. “Our only link is Dubois.”

“She’s a friend of Beaumont’s. But so is ’alf the Court.” Vivienne scowled. A touchy subject, Sirius knew.

“Well, maybe we should ask her then.”

Vivienne smiled, proving that Sirius could speak just as subtly as Dubois.

*****

Hogsmeade, March 22nd, 1997

“Seamus, anything to report?” Hermione Granger asked, her left hand on the button of her radio, while she was standing on the roof of the hall they had put up near Hogsmeade.

“Half a dozen Aurors on the streets, and the same number of Hit-Wizards near the hall,” Seamus, flying above her on his broom, with Tania, reported. “And two each in the air.” She heard him chuckle. “They must have scraped together everyone they could, but they’re still outnumbered three to one by us alone!”

Unless the Ministry had placed some of their forces in reserve, hidden from view. Hermione would have done that - provided she could have spared the manpower. According to Tonks, the Ministry couldn’t. They had even asked other departments for volunteers, Percy had told them. Bones must be livid, she thought, to have the Ministry’s weakness revealed like that.

Although, while Seamus was technically correct, the Resistance was also presenting the strongest front they could - they had brought out the recruits from boot camp for this. And while the recruits
looked impressive in their camo fatigues and knew how to handle their guns, they weren’t quite up to speed yet, even if one discounted their lack of experience.

But looking impressive was the point of this rally. The Resistance needed to show both the Ministry and the muggleborns that they were strong and had the situation in hand. And the muggleborns needed to show everyone how many of them had returned and were willing to fight for their rights.

Judging by the numbers of muggleborns she saw on the way to the hall from Hogsmeade, and standing in line before the Thief’s Downfall, that had been achieved already. She just hoped that there wouldn’t be any attacks - such a mass of muggleborns was a tempting target.

Hermione shook her head. Despite the flyers they had distributed, and John’s broadcast yesterday evening, not that many muggleborns had actually arrived early. Instead of small, manageable groups, there was a throng of people at the security check at the entrance.

She frowned. The Resistance had people spread out all over the area, but they couldn’t spot everything. She hoped that Nott’s death would be enough to make the others involved in the attacks on muggleborns fear a similar fate should they show up today. And that whoever was ordering his imperiused victims around using international owl post hadn’t had the time to send instructions to attack the rally. But it would only take one bomb or a single Blasting Curse to wreck the event.

*****

There were more people than at the last rally, Hermione thought when she stepped on to the stage at the back of the hall, next to John. Was Nott’s death the reason for that? And if so, did they feel safer now, or did they want more blood? They didn’t look that agitated, but that could easily change.

John glanced at her, and when she nodded at him, he smiled and stepped right up to the transparent wall shielding the stage from the rest of the hall. “Hello, everyone! I’m happy to see so many of you willing to stand up for yourselves and join our rally here! It’s been a little while since we last met, and, as you may have noticed, the Resistance is stronger than ever.”

Shouts of agreement filled the hall, barely muffled by the transparent wall.

John smiled even wider. “And here’s our leader, the witch who brought us all together, fought for all of us, and led us through the war! Hermione!”

Taking a deep breath, she stepped up while John withdrew from the stage. After the applause died down, she cleared her throat, cast an Amplifying Charm and started to speak. “Many things have happened since our last rally. Cowards who hide behind imperiused victims attacked muggleborns in Diagon Alley. Someone tried to frame the Resistance for an attack on Hogsmeade using another imperiused victim. We’ve even been accused of attacking houngans in Jamaica!”

That caused some whispers, and someone yelled: “And they attacked Hogwarts!”

“They did, and they were driven off,” she said, with a nod in the direction of the speaker. “Just as they were driven off when they attacked Diagon Alley again, yesterday.” More people started to say something, but she kept speaking, her amplified voice drowning out the comments. “But this time, the attacker didn’t get away! We tracked him to his home, and brought him to justice!” She paused when the crowd started to yell about Death Eaters, then waited until the noise abated somewhat.

“The attacker was none other than Theodore Nott - a Death Eater we had captured during the war, but who was set free by the Wizengamot!”

“That caused some whispers, and someone yelled: “And they attacked Hogwarts!”

“He won’t get acquitted any more!” another wizard yelled.
This time she ignored the comment. The crowd was already riled up. “Nott wasn’t just attacking
muggleborns - he was trying to make muggleborns attack purebloods, to restart the war. We stopped
him, but there are others like him, people who want to see us, the muggleborns of Britain, fail. They
want to see us turn on innocents, to see the indiscriminate bombing of wizarding dwellings, to see
young children burned alive, all so they can denounce us as monsters. So they can call us criminals
and deny us our rights!” Once more she kept talking over the outraged yells. “But we won’t let them!
We fought them in the war, and won! We’re fighting them in the Wizengamot, and we’re winning!
They cannot stop us! They cannot silence us!

“All we have to do win is to persevere! To uphold our ideals and stand fast! We cannot allow
ourselves to become what we fought so hard against! We will not lash out at others just because
they’re purebloods! We know better than that! We are better than that! Blood doesn’t matter!”

The crowd started to yell now. “Blood doesn’t matter! Blood doesn’t matter!”

“We’re not just fighting for the rights of the muggleborns, but for the rights of every wizard and
witch in Britain! We’re all in this together, and we’re winning! We will have democracy! We will
have equality! We will have our victory!”

Hogsmeade, March 22nd, 1997

Harry Potter was glad when the last of the audience had left the hall. There was still the possibility of
an ambush in Hogsmeade, but the rally had ended without a riot breaking out. And without him
having to help calm down the crowd.

Two of the new recruits, Anna and Gary, closed the hall’s doors and he walked over to them,
checking on the way that nothing had been left behind on the floor. They tensed up when they saw
him, and he couldn’t refrain from snorting. By now he had been training (and getting yelled at by the
Sergeant) with them for two weeks, and he was currently wearing the same fatigues as the
Resistance, but most of the new recruits treated him like they treated the veterans of the Resistance.
Which, he had to admit, he was, in a way.

“At ease,” he said, smirking, and Anna pouted at him while Gary chuckled.

“Your imitation of the Major needs some work,” Gary said. He was still a bit tense, but not as much
as before.

Harry shrugged. “It’s only been two weeks.” He adjusted the sling of his rifle.

“We just successfully completed our first mission!” Anna said, smiling.

“It’s not complete until you’ve been debriefed by your superior,” Harry reflexively said, then wished
he hadn’t when he saw the witch wince.

“That was a good Sergeant,” Gary said, though he wasn’t sounding quite as amused as before.

“It was something Moody drilled into us,” Harry said. “Veteran Auror,” he added when the two
older muggleborns didn’t seem to recognise the name. “He trained me and Ron during the war.”

“Oh.” Anna nodded. Just like she nodded when the Sergeant told her something. Or Hermione.

So much for being one of the guys, Harry thought. Hermione and Sirius were correct - he wasn’t
‘just Harry’, and wouldn’t ever be ‘just Harry’. At least not with most people, he added when he
spotted Ron and Hermione walking towards them from the back.

He didn’t have to force himself to keep smiling any more when he saw his two best friends together, but he still felt somewhat awkward. Even when they weren’t acting affectionate. He knew that they were sleeping together every night Hermione was at boot camp, after all. And now he was jealous, again.

“Hey,” he said. “Good speech.”

Hermione smiled, then frowned. “It could have been better, I think. But it worked out.” Harry grinned - she sounded like she usually did right after the exams.

“No one’s started a hunting party,” Ron said. “So, that’s a success.”

“No one did so openly,” Hermione corrected him. “We don’t know what people might be planning.”

“You can’t know everything,” Ron said. “Even though you’re coming close,” he added with a grin.

Hermione huffed, then turned to Anna and Gary, who hadn’t said a word since Harry’s friends had arrived. The two straightened up at once. “Report to Justin and help cover Hogsmeade. We’re going to vanish the hall.”

“Yes, m… Hermione,” Gary said. Anna just nodded.

As soon as they left, Harry heard Hermione sigh. “I know I should be glad that they hold me in such high regard, it makes leading the Resistance far easier, but to be called ma’am at my age…”

Harry shrugged. “That’s the price of fame.”

Judging by the way Hermione narrowed her eyes, she remembered her own words, and didn’t like having them quoted back at her.

He couldn’t resist. “Maybe we should find a good nom de guerre for you as well.”

“Purebloods’ Boggart!” Ron said at once, chuckling.

Hermione glared at them both, then shook her head. She was smiling, though. “Let’s step out and start vanishing the hall, before the grass gets too damaged.”

“Nothing the right spells won’t fix,” Ron said. “Sprout could make a detention out of it.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Hermione answered, opening the door. “And the Easter vacation has started, so there aren’t any detentions to be served anyway.”

“Oh, right.” Harry blinked.

His friends turned around, looking at him.

He answered their unspoken question. “Neville wanted to hunt down Death Eaters hiding in muggle London. I put him in touch with the twins, but I haven’t checked what came of it.” He had been too busy with the training and the latest troubles.

“Ginny hasn’t mentioned anything, and she usually nags me about Neville,” Ron said, frowning. “Though I haven’t talked to her lately.”

The last time they had been at Hogwarts hadn’t been a good time to discuss such matters, Harry
thought. Not with all the blood and gore to explain. “We can talk to her at home,” he suggested.

“We should have done that already.” Ron winced. “She’ll be mad at us.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” Hermione said. “We had too much to deal with.”

Hermione was right, but Harry still felt guilty about neglecting his friends. “We’ll have to talk to Neville as well.”

“Before he goes off by himself, and makes a mess,” Hermione agreed, nodding.

Harry wouldn’t have put it like that, but he feared that she was correct.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 22nd, 1997

“Now you’re asking about Neville?”

Standing in Sirius’s kitchen, Ron Weasley winced at Ginny’s tone. His sister was glaring at him and Harry with her arms crossed over her chest. “Well… we were busy.” He knew it wasn’t a good excuse.

“Too busy to talk to him?” She frowned at him, then switched her attention to Harry.

Ron’s friend grimaced. “The attacks, the training, the Wizengamot and the rally…” He shrugged.

Ginny scoffed. “You know how he acted when you were still at Hogwarts. He hasn’t changed. He’s become worse, even. He’s been preparing for this. Even asked the muggleborns from the lower years about how to dress as a muggle so he can fit in.”

She should have mentioned that before today, Ron thought, then scolded himself for being a hypocrite. “Sounds like he’ll go at it alone if he has to,” he said. “Do you know if he talked to anyone about this?”

“The twins, maybe?” Harry cut in.

“He didn’t mention them,” Ginny said.

“They were rather busy this week,“ Ron said. He didn’t say what they had been doing - Ginny didn’t know that they had been observing Nott for a week before striking at his manor.

“As was Sirius,” Harry added. “He hasn’t mentioned Neville.”

“So… Neville was left hanging.” Ginny’s frown grew.

Ron refrained from saying that Neville hadn’t always been so eager to strike at Death Eaters. That would have been unfair. He sighed. “Yes, we forgot about him.”

“I forgot about him,” Harry corrected him. “I told him I would put him in touch with others, meaning the twins and Sirius, but I didn’t really check up on how that worked out.”

As usual, Harry was blaming himself for everything, Ron thought. “I should have thought about it as well,” he said. “But we were busy, mate. Let’s just call him now.”

Neville wouldn’t have already gone out hunting today, would he? And even if he had, he wouldn’t
have found any of the purebloods in hiding yet, Ron told himself as they walked to the entrance hall.

“Where’s Hermione?” Ginny asked while Harry grabbed some Floo powder.

“She’s with the rest of the Resistance, handling the debriefing after the rally. She’ll be joining us here as soon as she’s done,” Ron answered.

“Ah.”

Did she sound relieved? Ron shook his head. She should simply tell Harry how she felt, in his opinion. But he knew better than to tell her that.

“Longbottom Manor!” Harry said, throwing the powder into the fire. When it turned green, he knelt down and stuck his head inside. “Hello?”

Ron couldn’t hear who Harry was talking to, but it wasn’t Neville.

“I’m Harry Potter, a friend of Neville’s. Is he at home?”

“Ah. Could you tell him that I called?”

“Thank you.”

Harry stood up again and stretched. “Neville went out. His house-elf doesn’t know where he went.”

Ron sighed. They’d check with the twins, but he already had a feeling that they hadn’t talked to Neville either… “Great.”

*****

London, Camden, March 22nd, 1997

“How is it?”

Bess Cox swallowed the forkful of spaghetti bolognese before answering Randall. “It’s good,” she replied.

“I couldn’t eat another fish and chips dinner,” Randall said, cutting another piece off his pizza.

“You said that before.” That was why he had picked the restaurant, after all.

He snorted. “And there’s no chance of anyone overhearing us here.”

That was just an excuse, in her opinion. A privacy spell would make eavesdropping impossible even in the midst of Diagon Alley. But she had been getting a bit sick of Freddie’s herself lately. “So… what was your impression of the rally?”

“Granger was pretty persuasive,” he said.

Bess scoffed. “She’s quite the hypocrite, though. We shouldn’t do anything, and she goes and kills Nott?”

Randall chuckled. “You’re right. On the other hand, she’s the one on the Wizengamot, with Black and Potter.”

“And her boyfriend, Weasley.” Another pureblood.
“Him too.” Randall nodded. “They’re bound to have more information.”

“Which they keep to themselves.” She took another forkful.

“That’s to be expected. Loose lips sink ships,” he quoted.

Bess snorted, then swallowed. “She’s still a hypocrite. And probably a sell-out.”

“Probably?” He grinned.

She scowled at him. “It depends on whether they can get rid of the Wizengamot and the Ministry, or not. If she’s telling us to be patient forever…” She shrugged. People in power wanted to stay in power. And Granger had risen very high for a muggleborn witch nominally in her sixth year. Bess was wondering, though, what Randall was thinking. They had plans, after all.

“Well, technically, she just told us not to lash out at random purebloods. I doubt anyone will mind if we bag a known Death Eater,” he said.

She grinned. “You’ve found one, then.”

He smiled. “I found a warded flat that the neighbours don’t remember. I don’t know who’s hiding there, though.”

“Let’s go find out!”

*****

London, Islington, March 22nd, 1997

“How did you find it?” Bess Cox asked. She was sitting in a pub and studying the building across the street.

“It was the first address mentioned in the article in the Daily Mirror.”

She turned her head to look at Randall. “Seriously?”

He was grinning widely. “Yes. Sort of like the Terminator, I started at the top.”

That caused her to snort. “But I don’t think they’d open the door to the flat if we rang the bell.” The purebloods inside would know that they were caught, then - muggles wouldn’t be able to even think of doing that due to the Muggle-Repelling Charms on the flat.

“Unfortunately, we can’t do that. And the flat’s warded, so we can’t easily break in either.”

“How good are you at taking down wards?” Bess had never really studied that; during her time at Hogwarts, it hadn’t been taught in Defence, and the exams hadn’t more than touched on that subject, so she hadn’t studied it on her own either. If she had known how to deal with wards, maybe the attack on Hogsmeade’s Death Eaters would have gone differently...

“I’m not a real Curse-Breaker, but I should be able to take down those wards,” Randall said. “They’re not that strong. Probably because they didn’t want anyone to know about the flat, and so had to do it themselves.” He rubbed his chin. “So, we need to block Apparition and Portkeys. I doubt they have a Floo connection there - that would have revealed their location to the Ministry.”

Bess scoffed. The Ministry only stopped hunting muggleborns and supporting the Death Eaters because they were forced to by the Resistance. They still hated muggleborns, even if they also feared
them now.

Randall glanced at her, but didn’t comment.

“Do you have any idea who they are?” she asked. “And how many there are?”

Randall shook his head. “No, I don’t. And I don’t see how we could find out - observing the flat won’t tell us much since they’ll be apparating in and out.”

Bess nodded. Using the door would mean they might meet some muggles on the way - and purebloods wouldn’t want that. “Can we take whoever’s in there then?” She wasn’t an expert duellist, and Randall was smart, but he had less experience in magical fighting than she did - and hers was limited to that horrible night in Hogsmeade. They’d been training together, though.

Randall took a deep breath. “If it’s only one, yes. Two, maybe.”

“‘Maybe’ is not good enough.” Bess clenched her teeth. She knew what happened if you underestimated your enemy.

“If we could break the wards while they are out, then we could ambush them once they return. Or place a trap.” Randall rubbed his chin. “But then we wouldn’t know who was hiding there.”

“And we wouldn’t know when they were out - or if they’re going to be out long enough anyway,” Bess said. “With a few Extension Charms, they could have half a manor in there.” Which meant that they could have half a manor’s worth of wizards in there.

Randall looked at the flat in question again. “We might be able to spy on them from the right vantage point.”

“Renting a flat in this building, to spy on them?” That sounded like spy novel stuff. “How about we skip this flat, and check the next one?”

“I don’t think the next one will be any different,” Randall pointed out.

“Shite.” Bess finished her ale. She wanted to do something. Hurt the Death Eaters and bigots. They were right there, across the street!

She was trying to get the waiter’s attention to order another ale when Randall suddenly hissed:

“Check out that man!”

He was nodding in the direction of a nearby table. The man sitting there was dressed rather fashionably, as far as she could tell - but for the hat on his head that was hiding his face.

“He’s been staring at the flat as well,” Randal whispered to her without making it obvious that he was watching the man.

The waiter finally stopped flirting with the pair of girls sitting at the bar, and walked over. Bess watched as the man jerked when he was addressed, hastily ordered something, and went straight back to staring outside the window. Which, especially at this time of the evening, didn’t really offer anything interesting - unless you knew about the hideout on the second floor across the street. When the man took a minute to pay the waiter, shuffling the money around and looking at the coins and notes as if he hadn’t seen them before, Bess knew.

“He’s a pureblood,” she whispered.
“Yes,” Randall agreed.

“Can we take him?” They were in public, but if they ambushed him outside the pub, they could be gone before anyone could react.

Randall looked at her. “If he was with the occupants of the flat, he wouldn’t be here, in a passable disguise, would he?”

Bess frowned. He had a point. But she really wanted to do something. Anything. And they didn’t know who the man was. “We need to find out what he knows. And who he is.” They couldn’t attack the flat with an unknown observing it.

“We don’t have Veritaserum.” Randall was glancing at the man again.

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” Bess whispered, drawing her wand under the table.

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“What happened in London, Pius?”

Amelia Bones hated to rely on Pius for information, but she couldn’t trust the Aurors left in the Corps to tell her the truth without informing their superiors. She almost snorted - there weren’t Aurors left she could trust, period. At least not Aurors with experience. Certainly not Dawlish. The Head Auror had made it quite clear that he was already positioning himself for the time after her term. Not that Pius could be trusted either.

“I assume you are talking about the incident in…” He glanced at the parchment in his hands. “…Islington.”

She almost rolled her eyes in response. She knew that he didn’t need to check such details before answering. She refrained from answering with a barb, though. “Yes.”

“We received the report from the Obliviators just an hour ago, and it took a little longer until a team of Aurors arrived at the scene.”

“Don’t give me excuses, give me information.” she glared at him.

He took a deep breath before continuing. “According to the Obliviators, a fight between at least three wizards took place in front of muggles. In a pub, to be exact. Collateral damage was considerable, and the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee is expected to blame muggle extremist groups - ‘hooligans’, I believe they are called - using a fire bomb for this.”

Amelia blinked. “Was there actually a bomb used in the battle?” That would indicate muggleborns. As did the location itself.

“Not to my knowledge.” Pius shook his head. “Although John suspects that the fight is related to the warded flat we discovered across the street from the location of the battle.”

That was a given - wizards didn’t simply meet and fight in a muggle area. “A warded flat in a muggle neighbourhood.” Amelia narrowed her eyes. “A safe house?”

“That is possible. It was empty when my team took down the wards and entered, but there were signs of a hasty flight, and prior long-term occupation. There is no indication that there was a fight in
the flat, though.” Pius glanced at the parchment again. “So far we haven’t been able to find out who had been using the flat.”

“That’s not much for an incident that’s already caused the ICW delegation to contact me asking if war has broken out.” At least the Obliviators had handled both the incident and the delegates easily enough.

“It’s only been two hours, and since the muggle authorities are present we cannot openly use magic.”

Another excuse that wouldn’t have flown when she was the Head of the DMLE. “I don’t care how difficult it is. We can’t have muggleborns and Death Eaters fighting in muggle areas. That will play directly into the ICW’s hands.” She shook her head. “I’ll contact Black and see what he knows about this. You push Dawlish to produce results. We need to solve this case quickly.”

Pius frowned briefly before he nodded. She had expected that - she was certain that he would prefer to talk to Black himself. But this was a matter for the Minister for Magic. And as long as she held that position, she would do her duty.

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**London, Bromley, March 22nd, 1997**

“Let’s go say hello!”

Randall opened his mouth to say something, but she was already standing up and walking towards the unknown wizard, her wand hidden behind her back. She couldn’t cast the Imperius, but she could hold someone at wand point. The others in the pub wouldn’t even notice - just like in the movies. A glance told her that Randall was right behind her. He wouldn’t be happy about this, she knew, but he would have her back anyway.

She was only a few steps away when the wizard noticed her. She saw his head turn towards her, his eyes still hidden by his ugly hat. She moved her arm a bit, to let him see her wand, to show him that they had him outnumbered and at wand point.

She was just about to tell him not to do anything foolish when she noticed that his right hand was hidden under the table. Before she could react, the entire table shot towards her. She managed to twist away, but that only kept her from having her face smashed in when the table hit her and slammed her into the wall behind.

She came to on the floor, disoriented for a moment. She was pushing herself up and grabbing her wand when the wall above her blew up, and fragments rained down on her. She heard screams and saw people rushing to the pub’s bar in the background. Dimly, she saw Randall moving, casting, as she scrambled away on all fours, then stood up.

Their enemy was at the door, one of Randall’s curses splashing against his Shield Charm. A strong Shield Charm - it didn’t shatter. She sent a Reductor Curse of her own at it, but missed, blowing up the door behind him. That caught his attention, and she almost froze when his wand flicked towards her.

Screaming, she rolled to the side, a curse splashing on the ground near her, and then she screamed in earnest when her side started to hurt as if her skin was on fire. Rolling around behind the remains of another table, she saw that there were smoking patches on her clothes and screamed even more. Then something hit her head and...

Bess Cox woke up panting and sweating. She had barely realised that she didn’t know where she
was when she felt the pain in her side.

“Take this,” someone said - Randall, she recognised the voice - and put a vial into her hand.

She downed it without hesitating or checking what it was, then hissed while the pain slowly eased.

“Did it help?”

Bess nodded. “Th… thanks,” she managed to say.

“I couldn’t do much about the acid burns. The ointment will take some time to restore the skin.”

“Acid?” Hadn’t she been on fire?

“You were hit with conjured acid of some sort. Fortunately, it was just some splatter, the spell missed you. Otherwise, I’d have had to take you to St. Mungo’s.”

Which would have meant Aurors taking an interest. And she was still a wanted witch as far as she knew. Bess nodded. “Thank you again.” The pain was gone now. “Where are we?”

“In a hotel,” he explained. “I obliviated the concierge, so we’re safe for the moment.”

“Good. What happened?”

“The wizard escaped. I did hit him with a curse or two, though. I think, at least.” He sighed. “I managed to get you and apparate out before the Obliviators or Aurors arrived.”

She gasped. “Shite! We had a fight in front of the entire pub!”

He nodded. “Breaking the Statute of Secrecy…” He grimaced while trailing off.

“We were just defending ourselves,” she said. “He started it.”

“After you threatened him. ‘Let’s go say hello’? Really?” He was glaring at her.

“I didn’t expect him to attack us.” Not in front of the pub. Or when faced with two wands. “Did you see his face?” The wizard had to have been an experienced fighter, probably a veteran of the war, given how he had fought both of them at once.

Randall shook his head. “Not clearly. Maybe if we had a Pensieve…”

She snorted at that thought, and he shrugged. “The news are calling it a firebomb attack. IRA or some crazy hooligans.” He snorted. “The Ministry’s excuses are quite transparent.”

The Ministry would be hunting them, now. Bess tensed, then told herself they were still safe. The Aurors wouldn’t know them. The Obliviators would have erased the memories of the witnesses.

But the purebloods in the flat would have been warned and escaped by now. And she wasn’t in any shape to continue the hunt. Bess closed her eyes and muttered a few curses under her breath. That could have gone better.

But, she added to herself, it could have gone a lot worse as well.

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“I assure you, Amelia, that we have no idea who was behind the incident in Islington.” That wasn’t entirely accurate - they had a suspicion, at least, but Neville hadn’t called back yet - but Sirius Black didn’t worry about such details. It wasn’t as if Bones looked like she believed him, anyway.

“The Resistance had just finished guarding our rally in Hogsmeade,” Hermione added. “We were not involved in that fight.”

Sirius glanced at the younger witch. Hermione was staring at Bones as if she dared the Minister to contradict her. She probably was, he thought - relations between the two witches were even worse than between himself and the Minister. He looked back at the older witch. “We’re very much interested in finding out who fought there, of course.” And who had been living in that flat across from the site of the fight. “What have your Aurors found out so far?”

“Nothing.”

Sirius couldn’t tell if Bones was lying - she was frustrated, but that was normal for her, in his experience. He shrugged. “Well, if you need help, I know a few skilled wizards and witches who could lend you some assistance.”

Her expression made him want to chuckle. “We suspect that muggleborns were involved,” she spat out. “Given the location.”

Hermione slightly cocked her head and frowned. “That seems rather arbitrary.”

“Who else would be found in that area?”

“Death Eater sympathisers in hiding?” Sirius said. He spread his hands when Bones glared at him. “They go out to eat in the pub across the street, get into an argument, and settle it the pureblood way?”

That earned him a glare from Bones and an eyeroll from Hermione.

“This sort of incident is not helping our dealings with the ICW,” Bones pressed out through clenched teeth.

Sirius shrugged. “It was handled by the Obliviators. As it was supposed to be. Speaking of the ICW, we’ve discussed the accusations by Jamaica.”

Hermione took her cue. “We should ask Jamaica for samples of the muggle explosives allegedly used in that attack on that houngan, to check with our own records. That would let us determine whether there is any link to the attacks in Britain.”

“And,” Sirius took over before Bones could answer, “it’ll put some pressure on the houngans.” Even Fawley wouldn’t be able to mess that up. Britain would appear cooperative and helpful, and the houngans would refuse to hand over such samples anyway - they were far too secretive.

Bones slowly nodded. “And what if they do offer those samples?”

“Then we analyse them,” Hermione said. Her tone left no doubt that she considered the question stupid. Bones’s expression left no doubt that she knew that.

Sirius wanted to chuckle again, but that would probably have pushed Bones too far.

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“Do you think Bones will accept our proposal?” Hermione Granger asked as soon as Sirius had stepped out of the fireplace into the entrance hall of his home.

“I think so. She’s not the type to neglect her duty just because she hates our guts.” He shrugged.

Hermione wasn’t quite certain of that, but nodded. Sirius did know the witch better than she did. And thinking of the houngans... “We’ll need to learn spells to deal with those bone walls,” she said. “Dispelling them takes too long.”

“Do you think Reid’s still in Britain?”

She shrugged. “I think sooner or later, we’ll have to deal with houngans. I want to be prepared.” Much better prepared than they had been for Reid.

Alright. There might be something useful in our library. The Blacks fought the houngans often enough - we had extensive holdings in Jamaica, before the rebellion, and my ancestors wanted to get them back - and those involved in the wars might have left some notes or records.” He smiled. “But between the curses, and the deliberate chaos - supposedly to keep outsiders from learning our secrets - it could take some time to check.”

Hermione barely held back from voicing her opinion of people who treated books like that. The Blacks deserved their reputation for that crime against libraries alone, in her opinion.

He must have noticed, since he chuckled. “Don’t glare like that! Everyone responsible has been dead for years, if not decades.”

“We’ll also need to prepare for the attack on Dubois,” she said.

“Vivienne is working on that. She’s visiting her family.”

Which explained why the Veela wasn’t in Sirius’s arms right now, Hermione thought. Then she told herself not to act like a hypocrite - she was quite affectionate with Ron as well, after all. And would be even more so, if they weren’t trying to be considerate of Harry’s feelings.

“Are you going to join the others at Longbottom Manor?” Sirius’s question interrupted her thoughts.

She shook her head. “Harry, Ron and Ginny can handle that just fine. I can use the time to start researching here.” She wasn’t in the mood to deal with Neville, anyway. Handling Seamus was already enough of an annoyance.

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

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Kent, Longbottom Manor, March 23rd, 1997

“You went to attack a Death Eater hideout by yourself?” Ginny sounded as if the only reason she wasn’t hexing Neville was the fact that he was already hurt, Harry Potter thought.

“I didn’t plan to attack them; I was just watching the place to find out who was living there. Those two attacked me without warning,” Neville defended himself. He was in his bed, propped up by cushions, and his left arm was dangling from his wrecked shoulder. For someone who had taken Skele-Gro, he was holding up well, in Harry’s opinion - he knew just how painful that potion was.
“Mate, going out alone wasn’t the best decision,” Ron said.

“No one else would come with me. Even though they knew about this ‘telly trouble’.”

There was more than a hint of reproach there, Harry thought. And with some reason, he added, feeling guilty. They now knew that the twins had told him about that, but blown him off at the same time. If Neville had been killed in that fight… “We called after the rally, but you had already left.”

“Sorry.” Neville looked away. “I wanted to do something. But I messed it up. I don’t know how they spotted me - I was wearing muggle clothes.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. His friend was probably thinking of some of the more outrageous styles they had seen worn. “Which clothes did you wear?” Ron asked.

“I went and bought the clothes I saw in that muggle newspaper.” Neville pointed at his desk.

Harry went over and picked up the issue of the Daily Mirror there. It was a few weeks old. “Which ones?” he asked, flipping through it. There were a few ads, but not for clothes.

“The fashionable ones,” Neville answered. “In the article on the page next to the one covering the ‘telly trouble’.”

Harry found it. “Ah, I understand now.”

“What?”

He looked at the other three Gryffindors. “They were probably too posh for that kind of pub.”

“Too posh?” Neville sounded confused.

“Too expensive. It’s like someone trying to pass for a Knockturn Alley resident while wearing Acromantula silk robes,” Harry explained.

“Ah.” Neville cringed. “I didn’t know that.”

“I wouldn’t have known that either,” Ginny said, “and I doubt that anyone who didn’t grow up among muggles would have.” She glanced at Harry and Ron.

“Yeah, mate,” Ron was quick to agree. Harry nodded.

“I still blew it. I had to flee before help arrived, and now the Death Eaters hiding there are gone.” Neville sounded despondent.

Harry wasn’t quite certain if they had been Death Eaters, but pointing that out wouldn’t help Neville either. “Well, there are other flats to check. Once you’re healed.” Which shouldn’t take too long - their friend hadn’t lost all the bones in his shoulder, after all.

“We can ask Hermione if we can make it an exercise for the Resistance,” Ron added, nodding. “The Death Eaters won’t stand a chance that way.”

Neville’s smile made Harry feel even more guilty about forgetting about him for a week.

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Kent, Greengrass Manor, March 23rd, 1997
“They killed Theo.”

Upon hearing Astoria, Daphne Greengrass looked up from the Daily Prophet and at her sister. The younger witch was glaring at her across the dining table, her lunch untouched.

“I know,” Daphne said.

“You helped them kill him!” Astoria sounded as if Daphne had been the one to wield the wand that had ended Theo’s life.

“He was a damned fool who would have doomed us all. I saved us.”

“They wouldn’t have caught him without your help!” Her sister’s lips were trembling - she was close to crying, Daphne realised.

“They would have caught him.” Before Astoria could contradict her as she used to when they were still little children, Daphne went on: “But even if they hadn’t caught him, they would have killed us.” She held up the Daily Prophet, showing the pictures from Hogsmeade. “Did you see this? Did you see how many of them were at the rally? What do you think would have happened if we hadn’t told them about Theo?” She shook her head. “I’ll tell you what would have happened: They would have come for us. Killed us in Theo’s place.”

“But…” Astoria looked mulish.

“Don’t be a bloody fool!” Daphne snapped. Her sister gasped at her language, and stared at her with wide eyes. “Have you forgotten what happened in the war? How many of our friends who fought them are still alive? Huh? Do you think they have forgotten what we did? Do you think they will accept the verdict from the Wizengamot? The very same Wizengamot that they want to replace?” She was standing now, both hands gripping the table. “Do you think I wanted to sell Theo out? Of course I didn’t! But he was endangering us. Everyone knows that we fought for the Dark Lord. Who do you think everyone suspected to be behind those attacks?”

“But… we weren’t!”

“Do you think anyone cared about that? They wanted blood! They wanted revenge! If Theo hadn’t been stopped, they would have attacked us! We lost our parents! We lost our friends! But we lost the bloody war! And if we keep fighting them, we’ll lose our lives!”

Her sister was sobbing, her head lowered.

Daphne took a deep breath, then another, wiping some tears from the corners of her eyes as she went round the table, towards Astoria. But before she reached her sister, Astoria jumped up and ran out of the dining room.

“Astoria!”

Her sister didn’t stop, but ran straight towards the stairs.

Daphne sighed and sat down on the next chair. She closed her eyes and rubbed a few more tears away. She hadn’t liked betraying Theo either. But it had been a damn stupid idiot or her family.

And family always came first.

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Anotto Bay, Jamaica, March 23rd, 1997

Augustus Rookwood wished he had a Daily Prophet. He needed to know what was happening in Britain. But he couldn’t be tracked by owls, and the only place on Jamaica where he might be able to buy an issue was Port Royal - provided the houngans allowed the newspaper to be sold on their island. He’d probably have to make do with a local newspaper, or maybe an American one.

And he’d better wait another day to let things settle some more. He was being hunted by the houngans, after all, and, even using Polyjuice to disguise himself, entering the capital of Magical Jamaica was a tad dangerous. Not as dangerous as attacking another manor, of course. Maybe he would try to kidnap a houngan in Port Royal, once he was more familiar with the town.

Until then there were the books he had taken from Williams’s manor to study. And plans to make about how he could send a letter by international owl post without revealing his location.

He had to keep up the pressure on the British Ministry, after all.
Chapter 56: Undercover Operations

‘The death of Theodore Nott was a greater shock to Wizarding Britain than one would have expected given his role in the recently concluded hostilities. For while he had been acquitted by the Wizengamot, it had also been proven that he had fought for the Dark Lord - something for which many, especially muggleborns, felt he deserved the death sentence. Violent acts of revenge - or vigilante justice - were all too common in the period following the Battle of Diagon Alley, although usually limited to returning muggleborns forcing out the purebloods who had taken over their homes and business.

But there were several reasons that Nott’s death had such an effect. He was killed by the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance, with the Ministry only being informed after the fact - a clear demonstration of who had the real power in Britain at the time. Since he had been killed following an attack on Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley, his death also served to further erode the reputation of the Wizengamot. But almost more than anything else, his death served to send a message to the Old Families still clinging to their inherited power: The tide has turned.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 24th, 1997

For a moment, he was back in Azkaban. For a moment, he felt the cold, the pain, the desperation. For a moment, his escape, his exoneration, his new life with Harry, his friends and his new lover, was but a dream, a mirage.

Sirius Black shuddered. He wasn’t in Azkaban. He was in his home, in his bed. Warm. Safe. He had been out of Azkaban for almost four years now, and yet he still had nightmares and woke up afraid that he had gone mad and was still in his cell.

Although the nightmares occurred less frequently these days. He hadn’t felt the need to sleep as Padfoot for a long time now. Turning his head, he looked at one of the reasons for his progress. Vivienne.

His lover was still asleep, curled up next to him, one arm slung over his chest, one leg crossing his under the sheet, her long hair splayed out behind her on the pillow. He reached over to brush a strand that had fallen in her face back behind her ear, and she started to mumble in her sleep in reaction to his touch. A few seconds later, just enough time for a quick Breath-Refreshing Charm, she opened her eyes. “Cherie?”

“Good morning,” he said, smiling at her, before leaning over to press a kiss on her brow.

“Bonjour,” she whispered, pulling herself closer to him with her arm and sighing contentedly when she rested her head on his chest.

He wished he could stay like this forever. He couldn’t - he had too many important tasks to accomplish - but he could stay in bed a little while longer.

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“The location of Isabelle Dubois’s ’ome is a matter of record, so she is easy to find,” Vivienne said an hour later, in the living room. “But it is protected by old wards.” Sirius knew what that euphemism stood for: Wards erected by blood sacrifices centuries ago, when such atrocities were legal, or at least overlooked. Like the wards protecting his own home.

“Anything special about them?” Bill asked.

Vivienne shook her head. “I do not know. I’m not a Curse-Breaker.”

“We can go through any wards, however old,” Hermione cut in, “but everyone will know that it was us.”

“That cannot be allowed!” Fleur said quickly. “The Duc will be forced to declare war in response to such an open attack on one of ’is courtiers.”

Vivienne nodded in agreement.

Harry snorted. “He tolerates his courtiers supporting attacks in Britain.”

“Those are deniable actions,” Fleur said. “Done without ’is official knowledge.”

“He knew about your family’s intervention in the war, though.” Harry didn’t seem willing to let this go too quickly. “It was even in the newspapers.”

“That was an act of retaliation against a criminal, not an attack on a member of the government or the population of a foreign country.” Hermione earned herself a glance from Harry, Sirius noted.

He decided to intervene before they went off on that particular tangent. “The morality of such a stance aside, we cannot risk war with France.” The French were very prickly where their honour was concerned. “Which means that we need to grab our little agent covertly. And given the politics of the Court, we can’t have the Delacours or d’Aigles implicated either.” They were too close to Britain, with Fleur and Vivienne. “Any ideas?”

“If her home was deserted for a few hours, I could take down the wards and we could ambush her inside,” Bill said. “I would need some help for that, though.” Fleur glared at him; the Veela would know the risks incurred by such an action.

“She won’t be living alone, no matter her affairs,” Vivienne said - a bit cattily, Sirius thought.

“If we knew what explosives had been used in Jamaica, we could use the same and frame whoever was behind that attack,” Ron said.

“Most think we’re responsible for the attack on Jamaica, so that would point at us anyway.” Sirius shook his head. “Muggle means are out.”

“Let’s just hope no one at the French Court thinks of getting rid of a rival and framing us that way,” Harry muttered.

Sirius wasn’t the only one who glared at him.

“We’ll need to ambush her when she’s away from her home, then,” Hermione said after a moment. “If she’s, ah, having as many affairs as you indicate, maybe we could use one of her lovers’ homes for that? Or prepare a honey trap?”

“A what?” Vivienne asked.
After Hermione and Sirius had explained the term, the Veela nodded. “That could work. But we would need an attractive and ‘armless looking bait.”

Which excludes myself, Sirius thought. His roguish charm meant he was anything but harmless-looking. Then he noticed that everyone was looking at him.

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Cumbria, Britain, March 24th, 1997

“An ‘exercise’ in the middle of London involving half-trained Resistance recruits hunting purebloods in hiding. Right when the police are searching for supposed bombers. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

Hermione’s tone made her feelings on the matter clear. She wasn’t wrong, Ron Weasley knew. But he didn’t think his idea was bad either. “Neville going off on his own isn’t a good thing either. And unlike him, the recruits can blend in. Since we now have pictures of the attackers thanks to Neville’s memories, they won’t be caught by surprise either.”

“Unless they disguise themselves.” Hermione, sitting at the desk inside her tent, pressed her lips together. “I know I’ve seen them before, but I can’t recall where.”

“It was probably at the rally,” he said. “Most muggleborns were there, at least most of those who’d want to hunt Death Eaters in hiding.” He rubbed his shoulder and winced at the twinge of pain that caused - today’s training had been rough again. Harry suspected that the other recruits were a little resentful of the numerous absences of the two ‘auxiliaries’, and took it out in training. Ron thought that the Resistance simply overestimated them.

“If they were at the rally, then they went through security, which would mean that they were not disguised, nor under the Imperius, and we would be certain that they were actually muggleborns hunting supposed Death Eaters, and not purebloods in hiding,” she pointed out. “Even Neville didn’t stick out that much, and he has no experience with muggles.” She stood up and started to pace. “The last thing we need is another fight in a muggle area involving muggleborns. Those bigots in the ICW are just waiting for that so they can claim that we are a threat to the Statute of Secrecy.”

“We could use firearms, though.”

“That would cause a lot of trouble with the muggle police. We have to hope that they don’t make the connection to the warded flats interfering with television reception, or they’ll start searching, and once they start encountering the Muggle-Repelling Charms, someone’s bound to start noticing that something’s wrong.” Hermione sighed. She sat down on the bed next to him. “But we might have to take that risk anyway - if the ICW gets an excuse to intervene…”

Ron shuddered. He had heard tales about the African intervention. “So…”?

She nodded. “We have to be very careful, though.”

“We’re always careful,” he said. “Unless we’re being Gryffindors.”

That got a chuckle out of her, and she leaned into his side, her head resting on his shoulder. Then she sighed again. “It seems to never end. As soon as we have one problem solved, or at least a plan to deal with it, another appears. Not even killing Voldemort stopped it.”

“Killing him ended the war in Britain, though,” Ron said without hesitating. “We might not be doing as well as we could, but things could be a lot worse. We just have to keep going until there are no more problems. No more serious problems, I mean.”
She pulled back a bit to look at him, and he smiled. “We won’t lose.”

Hermione slowly nodded and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her and took a deep breath. They would get through this.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 25th, 1997

Sirius Black frowned as he put down his cup next to the Daily Prophet the owl had just delivered. Remus was being stupid.

“All I’m saying is that this is a dangerous undertaking. After Nott’s death, Malfoy and Runcorn will be on their guard, and Daphne and Tracey will be under suspicion.” Remus stabbed his rashers almost violently, then stuffed them into his mouth.

The full moon had been yesterday, so Sirius’s friend was at his worst - ragged, tired and easily angered. Sirius would joke that he was like a witch on her period, but he still remembered how Lily had made him regret making that joke in their seventh year. The Dementors hadn’t touched that memory, of course. Still, some things had to be said, even if Sirius might have to be a little more diplomatic than his usual frank self.

“They’re Slytherins. They know how to lie, and how to deal with scum. It comes from spending so much time in a den of backstabbing snakes. And, of course, from being backstabbing snakes themselves.”

“They’re barely adults,” Remus said. “And you’re sending them to deal with wizards who have decades of experience.”

“They’re bloody Death Eaters! They’re only helping us because they want to save themselves. So, let’s make them earn their pardon.” It was better to risk enemies than allies, much less family and friends, Sirius knew.

“Technically, they were acquitted. They do not need a pardon.” Remus was being pedantic again. A good sign, so close to the full moon.

“You know what I mean. If they manage to get information we can use to deal with Malfoy and Runcorn, we’ll tell the muggleborns that they were spying for us. That should keep them from getting killed.” A damned good deal for the two Death Eaters, in Sirius’s opinion.

“And if they get killed trying to spy for us?”

He shrugged. “Then we’ll have a pretext to go after Malfoy and Runcorn.” Sirius grabbed another scone and pulled it apart. Then he noticed that Remus was growling. “What?”

His friend shook his head. “Nothing,” he spat, then stood up and left the kitchen.

Sirius blinked, then turned to Vivienne. The witch had been reading the Tribune Magique and hadn’t said a word during the argument. She had been paying attention, though, since she answered his silent question. “I think ‘e might be fond of them.”

“What?”

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“Moony!” Sirius caught up to his friend in front of the stairs leading up to the first floor.

“What?” Remus turned and looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Are you in love with the snakes?”

His friend gaped at him. “What?”

Sirius was relieved at seeing his surprise. If the two Death Eaters had managed to seduce Moony… He sighed. “Just checking.”

Remus blinked, then clenched his teeth. “Are you trying to say that the only possible reason for my objection to risking the lives of Greengrass and Davis would be a possible infatuation with one of them?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Of course you would.” Remus sighed. “For the record: No, I’m not in love with either of them. Merlin’s beard, they’re still kids!”

“They’re adults,” Sirius pointed out.

“You know what I mean.”

Remus was baring his teeth again, he noticed. He didn’t actually know what his friend meant, but he nodded anyway. “That doesn’t change the fact that they joined the Dark Lord and tried to kill our family and friends.”

“And they came to us when they heard about Nott’s plans to attack muggleborns again.”

“Because they wanted to save their own skins,” Sirius retorted.

“From what I can tell, they’re sick of the war. They wouldn’t be the first kids who made a serious mistake that they later regretted.”

Sirius hissed. “That was different! I didn’t join the Death Eaters! Snape did!”

“Yes, he did. Later.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that. He was hanging out with all the Death Eaters,” Sirius spat.

Remus shook his head. “If you don’t start giving people a chance to change we’ll never have peace.”

Sirius remembered Dumbledore’s final message. But this was different. “I’m giving them a chance to change. But I’d rather risk them than Nymphadora.” Maybe mentioning the witch who had the hots for Remus would make him see reason.

His friend looked at him, baring his teeth for a moment. “Don’t try to get them killed.” Then he turned and walked away.

“I’m not,” Sirius told Remus’s back, loud enough so his friend would hear it.

But he wasn’t about to sacrifice anyone else for them either.

*****
“Dear, there are a few strands escaping your braid. And your makeup needs a tiny bit of touching up.”

Daphne Greengrass looked at her image in the mirror in her room, ignoring its vapid comments. She looked just like a friend of Theo should look so soon after his death: wearing her best robes, but not quite perfectly coiffed and styled. Nervous and afraid she might be the next victim, but trying to hide it and put on a brave face. Just what Malfoy and Runcorn would expect.

Of course, she was nervous and afraid. If those two wizards suspected anything, it wouldn’t end well for her. They wouldn’t disappear her while she was a guest as that would make them the prime suspects, but it would only take one Imperius to send her to her death in an attack on Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. She could almost hear Malfoy comment on how distressed she had been, obviously trying to avenge her friend Nott. They’d even make her a martyr for their cause.

Shaking her head, she left her room. Tracey would arrive soon. In the hallway she glanced at the door to Astoria’s room. Her sister had spent the last few days mostly in there, only emerging for meals. She hoped that that would change, but there wasn’t much she could do about it. Not right now.

Tracey hadn’t yet arrived, but Tonks was in the entrance hall. The metamorphmagus was wearing the face of an unknown witch and twirling her wand in her hand. A subtle reminder that Daphne couldn’t run, or so she thought. At least the werewolf had already left. Daphne shuddered - the full moon would be rising soon, and if the beast were still in her home...

“Nervous?” Tonks asked, mistaking her reaction.

“Yes,” Daphne answered, in a flat tone. She didn’t want to make idle conversation right now.

“You don’t have to be nervous. If they suspect you, then they’ll likely interrogate you before they do anything incriminating. And in that case, they’ll find out that we know where you are, so they can’t make you disappear.” Tonks smiled in a way that probably was meant to be reassuring. But the half-blood wasn’t the one visiting Malfoy and Runcorn. She wasn’t the one risking her life.

But Daphne didn’t point that out. Instead she simply nodded and hoped the other witch would stop talking. She already knew all that.

Her hope was in vain, though - the metamorphmagus continued to prattle on. “Given your supposed friendship with Nott, it won’t be suspicious that you’ll be carrying a Portkey either. Just remember to clear the wardline before you use it, go through the garden for that, if you can, the plants will help break the line of sight.”

“Yes,” Daphne hissed through clenched teeth.

“I’m just trying to help,” Tonks said. “I’ve got some experience with such missions.”

Fortunately, Tracey arrived and the Auror shut up in favour of glaring at Daphne’s friend.

“Are you ready?” Daphne asked.

“Would I have arrived if I wasn’t?” Tracey smirked, but Daphne could see that she was nervous as well. “Did Professor Lupin leave already?” she added, looking around.

“He returned home,” Tonks said.
Tracey acted as if she were disappointed - she wasn’t as dumb as to actually want to see a werewolf right before the full moon, Daphne knew - then shrugged. “We’ll see him in the morning, then.”

“He has something more important to do.” The Auror’s smile was about as honest as their upcoming visit, Daphne thought.

“Well…”

Tracey was about to needle the Auror some more, but Daphne cut her off. “Let’s go!”

She really wasn’t in the mood to listen to the two witches talk about the damned werewolf again. Tracey was taking her teasing too far, in Daphne’s opinion.

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South Downs National Park, Hampshire, Britain, March 25th, 1997

“Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis. I’m glad you came.”

Malfoy sounded as charming as usual, Daphne Greengrass noted when she bowed to their host. If Theo’s death had made an impression on him, then he didn’t show it.

“Thank you for your invitation,” she said.

“Please follow me to the salon.” He gestured towards the door.

There were fewer guests in Malfoy’s home this time, Daphne thought as she and Tracey entered the salon. Philius Runcorn was there, which they had expected, but a number of his and Malfoy’s supporters in the Wizengamot were absent. She grabbed a glass of wine on the way to the gathering, only briefly hesitating. Their host wouldn’t have tampered with the wine, she told herself. Dosing a guest with Veritaserum would be such a hostile act, it would not only turn her and Tracey into enemies, but alienate his other allies. That was not something you did to test a potential ally, but a means to interrogate a prisoner. And if their cover had been blown, then such a ruse wouldn’t have been needed in the first place - they’d have been ambushed on arrival.

“Ah! Good evening, Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis!” Runcorn bowed a bit awkwardly, his age hampering his manners. “I’m very glad to see you both at our gathering here.”

“Good evening, Mister Runcorn,” Daphne said.

“We were just discussing the most recent tragedy. I offer you my heartfelt condolences for the loss of your friend.”

Runcorn sounded genuine, but any politician with his experience would, Daphne knew. She nodded, taking care to appear appropriately sad. She nodded again when the six other Wizengamot members hastened to follow Runcorn’s example. “Thank you. It’s a relief to hear such sentiments. Theo was the last of our group of friends from Hogwarts. Others we’d have counted as friends distanced themselves from us as soon as they heard of his death.”

“The rats are abandoning the ship,” Tracey muttered with a frown.

“Recent events have caused some of our acquaintances to reconsider their support,” Malfoy admitted. “It’s not a great loss overall, given how fickle they have revealed themselves to be.”

Tracey snorted. “Even the gold of cowards would have been useful.”
“Not to mention that should they not just distance themselves from us, but try to curry favour with our enemies, their votes and influence could be decisive,” Daphne added. Black was close to getting the majority he needed to ‘reform’ the Wizengamot.

“I can assure you that there is no shortage of gold. Our coffers are full, and we have friends with more to spend.” Malfoy smiled. “The situation in the Wizengamot is somewhat more precarious, I admit, but by no means hopeless. Even though we may have lost some supporters, they have not switched sides.”

“Not yet, you mean,” Tracey said. “They will just wait long enough so they won’t appear completely spineless before sucking up to Black and his allies.”

Daphne glanced at her friend. Tracey was overdoing it, in her opinion. She had a reputation for being blunt and outspoken, but if she was too obvious… “The opportunists had already changed their allegiance before the ... latest events,” she said. “I think that those who are now distancing themselves from our cause are doing so out of fear for themselves and their families.”

“Exactly!” Runcorn smiled widely. “Since they are motivated by fear, they will return to our side as soon as they realise that the mudbloods will not spare them no matter what they do.”

“Unless they turn blood traitor,” Tracey said.

“The mudbloods will not accept them on their side,” Runcorn said.

“They don’t have to. Black will promise them safety for themselves and their families,” Daphne retorted, “in exchange for their support.” She scoffed, remembering how Black had treated her and Tracey.

“Black!” Runcorn muttered the name as if it was a curse. “If his family could see him, betraying everything they stood for!”

“He and the other blood traitors are allied with the mudbloods, though. And so other purebloods, even from the Old Families, will try to join them as well,” Daphne said. Which was why she and her friend had contacted him in the first place. If they had known what he planned… well, they’d still have done it. It was their only chance to survive this war.

“Short of the mudbloods cursing Black in the back, that won’t change,” Tracey added with a sneer. “They’ll play nice until they have taken over the Ministry and the Wizengamot. And then it’ll be too late for the turncoats. They’ll be helpless.”

“At least Theo died with his wand in hand,” Daphne said. “Unlike others.”

Malfoy frowned. “Do you intend to follow his example?”

Tracey stared at him. “They won’t take us prisoner again. We’ll die as witches before we let them murder us as if we were muggles.”

Daphne saw Runcorn exchange a glance with Malfoy, and for a moment she feared that they had seen through her act. Tracey was just too obvious, she thought, tensing while she glanced around. The salon had a door to the porch of the house, but they wouldn’t reach it with eight wizards attacking them. And even if she and Tracey managed to surprise them, they wouldn’t be able to beat all of them. Not in close quarters. They could only hope that their Portkeys would work.

Runcorn, though, smiled. “A very brave stance, worthy of your lineage. But our situation is not quite as dire as you make it out to be. Our enemies are more vulnerable than you think.”
Daphne hoped that her relief at not having been revealed as a spy would be mistaken for hope of winning against the mudbloods.

Malfoy nodded. “Dumbledore built an alliance between his Order of the Phoenix, the Mudblood Resistance and the Ministry which barely survived his own death, and broke apart after the Dark Lord was killed. Black claims he inherited the Order’s allegiance, but he’s no Dumbledore - he won’t be able to hold it together. He’s too radical, and too short-sighted.”

“He’s rich, though,” Tracey cut in. “And he’s the godfather of the Boy-Who-Lived.”

And, Daphne added in her mind, Black was certainly ruthless enough to lead the Order.

Malfoy frowned, but quickly smoothed his expression. “Not all of those who followed Dumbledore and opposed the Dark Lord will support turning the country over to the mudbloods, which is what Black intends to do. They will not need more than to see the mudbloods’ true nature to abandon him.” He smiled. “And while Black tries to portray Potter as the next Dumbledore, anyone can see that the boy’s just his mouthpiece. He is not even old enough to sit in the Wizengamot yet.”

“He did kill the Dark Lord, though,” Daphne said. “And that means a lot to the public.” Others among the guests nodded.

“The public does not matter as long as we hold the Wizengamot.” Runcorn nodded as if he truly believed that. Fawley and Avery didn’t seem to share his views, though.


“That is a risk, but Black knows that if he condones such an atrocity, he will lose any support among purebloods,” Malfoy said. “And no matter his actions, he is a pureblood of an Old Family; the mudbloods will not follow him.” He shook his head. “No. Black knows that in order to take over Britain, he needs to keep the mudbloods in check until he is firmly installed as the Chief Warlock, with a crony as his pet minister.”

“Black’s very close to Granger,” Daphne said. “Who does all she can to keep the mudbloods in check.”

“He might appear to be close to the girl,” Malfoy said with a sly smile, “but that is only thanks to Potter. And I have it on good authority that Granger broke up with Potter in favour of Weasley’s youngest son. That sort of thing tends to put a strain on any friendship, doubly so among teenagers.”

“You’re not basing your hopes on Potter’s troubled love life, I hope,” Tracey said with a barely-hidden sneer.

“Of course not!” Runcorn said.

He seemed to be on the verge of expanding on that, but Malfoy smoothly cut him off. “Black’s family life, or lack thereof, is important, though. He’s taken a Veela as his lover, and lives with a werewolf. People were willing to overlook that during the war, but now?” He scoffed. “Some are already wondering if the Boy-Who-Lived should be raised in such an environment.”

Daphne didn’t have to fake her shudder and revulsion at the thought of living with a werewolf as others chimed in, and the discussion turned to ways of spreading such sentiment among the British wizards and witches.

She just hoped the others would not realise that Tracey was sneering at them, and not at the
scandalous relationship between Black and the werewolf.

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“Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis. Might you stay a few minutes? There is a small matter to discuss.”

Daphne immediately tensed and turned away from where she was waiting behind Fawley at the fireplace. “Of course.” Surreptitiously, she glanced around. Malfoy and Runcorn were standing there, seeing the guests off. Tracey was next to her, but she couldn’t see anyone else. She hadn’t cast a Human-presence-revealing Spell, though, and even a former summer house would have hidden passages for house-elves and other servants. Just because she couldn’t spot an ambush didn’t mean she was safe.

She didn’t let that thought show on her face, of course. “Shall we return to the salon, then?” They’d have an easier time escaping from there, instead of from the entrance hall. Unless they were planning to ambush her and Tracey there.

“By all means.” Runcorn stepped aside to let them enter first. Daphne couldn’t tell if he had been surprised, or not. She glanced at Tracey. If this was a trap, they’d be ready. For whatever good it would do them.

No one attacked her when stepped into the salon, but she didn’t relax.

“What did you want to talk about?” Tracey demanded as soon as the two wizards had joined them.

Malfoy cleared his throat. “Mister Nott mentioned a few weeks ago that he had a falling-out with you two. He didn’t go into details, but he said you had lost your nerve. Tonight, you seemed rather… more determined.”

Daphne nodded. “Of course Theo would have said that.” She shook her head in apparent regret. “He came to us, some time ago, with a barely thought-out plan to attack muggleborns.”

Tracey scoffed. “He basically wanted to continue doing what hadn’t worked before. We didn’t feel that suicidal.”

“So you expected him to be killed?” Malfoy’s smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“It did not come as a surprise,” Daphne said. “But we hoped that… we would be proven wrong.”

“And yet you have now chosen to pick up the fight? Your comments certainly gave that impression.”

Tracey shook her head. “We haven’t chosen to fight; we have realised that we do not have a choice. They didn’t inform the Ministry, but went after Theo themselves. They didn’t capture him either - they simply murdered him and everyone else in his home.”

“And everybody knows that Theo was a friend of ours,” Daphne added.

She caught Malfoy glancing at Runcorn and nodding. “I see. I wish I could disagree with your conclusion, but I fear you are correct: The mudbloods will not let us live, should they win this struggle.” He paused for a moment, then continued: “And I even suspect that no matter what you do or don’t do, the mudbloods will attempt to frame you.”

“We’re more cautious than Theo was,” Daphne said.

“That is wise,” Runcorn said. He glanced at Malfoy, and for a moment, Daphne thought this would
be it - that the two wizards would take them into their confidence. She was wrong, though.

“I’m glad we cleared this up,” Malfoy said, instead. “These are very troubled times. We have more support than might be apparent, but with the current balance of power favouring the mudbloods, we need to move very cautiously.”

“We’re not about to fly off and cast curses at mudbloods in Diagon Alley,” Daphne said. “That would only court disaster. The Ministry can’t stop the the mudbloods should they start a rampage - or launch a coup.”

“The Ministry can’t, but they are not alone,” Runcorn said.

Tracey snorted. “The Old Families haven’t enough power to stop the mudbloods either.”

“Not yet, maybe,” Runcorn said.

“Theo was a fool to attack the Weasleys’ shop.” Daphne sighed. “If the mudbloods had gone out of control in response…” she trailed off, pressing her lips together.

“We can but hope that others will not follow his example,” Malfoy said, looking at them.

“We’ll defend ourselves if attacked, naturally, but we won’t attack anyone. Not until we’re certain that it will not do us more harm than good.”

Daphne nodded at Malfoy, who nodded back. She still had no proof of his involvement in the attacks, but she hoped that she had at least gained his trust.

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London, Ministry of Magic, March 26th, 1997

“What do you have for me, Pius?” Amelia Bones asked as soon as the Head of the DMLE entered her office.

Pius waited until he had closed the door to answer. “The investigation into the incident in Islington has not uncovered anything new. Unfortunately, any witnesses were obliviated before we could question them.”

Amelia made a dismissive gesture with her hand. Witnesses were unreliable to begin with, and muggle witnesses doubly so. They couldn’t donate memories for Pensieves. “I meant something new, not something we already knew.”

“Two batches of Exploding Fluid were found in Nott’s home. One was matched to the attack on Diagon Alley on March 4th, and the other to the attack on Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes on March 21st.”

So the Unspeakables had finally done their job, Amelia thought. “Two different batches of Exploding Fluid?”

“Yes.”

“Was there enough of either batch for another attack?” She narrowed her eyes. He had to have considered that as well.

“Yes.” Pius’s expression didn’t change.
“So, either he had multiple sources of the fluid, or the second batch was planted in his home,” Amelia spelled it out. If it was Black then he would have covered his tracks. If she still had an Auror Corps worthy of that name, if she could spare a few experienced Aurors to look into the sources for the fluid... if, if, if. She shook her head. Even if she managed to find evidence that linked anyone to the planted fluid, she didn’t think the Wizengamot would find them guilty. Not if they worked for Black.

“There also was evidence that an Imperius Curse had been recently cast on Nott.” Pius met her eyes. Amelia narrowed her eyes. That would support the theory that Nott had been set up - but by whom? With the Thief’s Downfall in the Ministry, the curse would have had to be cast more recently. That would point at Black and his allies. But if they had controlled Nott, would they have set up the attack on Diagon Alley as it had happened? They could have done a lot more with him as their tool. Did someone else set him up, to conceal their own involvement? “So, Nott was behind the attack on Diagon Alley, but he was likely forced to do so.”

“That is the conclusion of my investigators.”

“Did they find any evidence of memory charms?”

“No.”

“What about his backers?” She didn’t think that Nott had acted alone.

“We found no evidence of anyone working with him,” Pius said.

“Black and his accomplices had ample time to go through the manor before your Aurors arrived at the scene.” Her tone turned the statement into an accusation of sloppy reaction times.

Pius pressed his lips together before answering. “We arrived as soon as we heard about the attack.” So, he didn’t like being told off for Black’s actions. Amelia carefully didn’t smile. “You didn’t have his manor under surveillance.”

He inclined his head. “There were not enough Aurors available for that.”

She knew he was right - she had been in his place before. But taking the blame for things out of your control was what you did as the Head of the DMLE. Especially if you were plotting against your superior. “And what results did your surveillance of the Greengrass and Davis Manors produce?”

That made him frown. “We haven’t been able to penetrate their wards, yet.”

She hadn’t expected that, of course - Amelia knew that the Ministry didn’t have many Curse-Breakers who could slip through the kind of wards Old Families had on their homes. And the few they had were among the Unspeakables, who were currently researching the Withering Curse. Not that they had made any progress so far. “Did your people at least manage to track them when they left their homes?”

“They met with Augustus Malfoy and Philius Runcorn yesterday evening.” Pius must have noticed her surprise, since he was smiling faintly.

She stared at him. “That was provided by your source among Malfoy’s friends.”

He nodded, his smile fading. “They have lost more of their allies following Nott’s death,” he said, “but their remaining supporters seem to be undeterred. If anything, they might have become even
more determined to oppose Black.”

“Including Greengrass and Davis?”

“They are among his supporters in the Wizengamot.” Pius continued before she could berate him for evading the question she wanted answered. “But neither the host nor his guests let anything slip that would tie them to any attacks. Greengrass and Davis stayed behind when the other guests left, though.”

That wasn’t enough to take them in for questioning, she knew. And if she did it anyway, Malfoy and Runcorn would be warned. But she was certain that the two witches were involved in the whole affair. “Find out what those two are doing for Malfoy and Runcorn! Before Black frames them as well, and leaves them dead in the ruins of their manors.”

Pius nodded.

“Have you found out anything concerning Reid’s whereabouts?”

“Nothing,” Pius answered without any sign of shame at that failure. “Did the houngans respond to our request for samples of the explosive used in Jamaica?”

She shook her head. “Fawley has passed it on, but so far they haven’t even acknowledged it. He expects them to take a few more days before agreeing on a response. Although, according to him, it did counter their accusations in the ICW.” Not that that had taken much - the houngans were too infamous to have a lot of support. “Have Beaumont and Steiner been pestering the Aurors again?”

“They keep asking the same questions. We keep giving them the same answers.”

She snorted. Business as usual, then. If only those two would finally stop trying to spy on Britain and go home. But the ICW was still putting pressure on Britain. “Anything else?”

He shook his head and left her office.

Once the door had closed behind him, Amelia clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, hissing in frustration. Things were falling apart. Nott’s death had revealed how weak the Ministry was compared to Black’s alliance. The public might not have realised just how much contempt Black had displayed, but those who mattered had certainly taken notice. She didn’t even know if Pius was still following her orders, or if he’d inform Black as soon as he was out of her office. And the muggleborns were up to something as well, possibly on Black’s orders.

Not for the first time, she contemplated resigning from her post. But that would mean that either Black himself or one of his cronies would succeed her.

And the Ministry would lose any integrity it still had left.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 26th, 1997

“The rest of the recruits won’t be happy that we’re gone for the night again,” Harry Potter said when he and Ron entered Grimmauld Place.

His friend shrugged. “We’re not recruits, we’re allies training with them. There’s a difference, and they should know that.”
“That sounds like Hermione.”

Ron cleared his throat. “Well, she told me that when I brought it up. It’s logical.”

“It is. But I doubt that the recruits think like her.” Harry was almost certain that they didn’t. Since Ron and he were missing quite a lot of the training, there would be some resentment brewing. Even with all the amenities of wizarding tents and magic, camp life wasn’t as comfortable as living in a wizarding home. The food certainly wasn’t quite as good, though the difference wasn’t as spectacular any more since the Weasleys had left.

Ron shrugged again. “They’ll get over it. We’re doing a lot more than training. And we fought Voldemort directly.”

Harry frowned. “That’ll follow us forever.”

“I sure hope so!” Ron said. “So we can avoid another war.”

He was right, even though Harry still didn’t like it. “I’m not going to wear robes that make you wish you were colour-blind, or grow a beard,” he muttered.

Ron chuckled and slapped him on the shoulder. “Stop being gloomy, and let’s see what Sirius called us here for.”

Harry thought, but didn’t mention, that Ron was as much interested in meeting Hermione, who was already here, as in learning what Sirius wanted to talk about. Mentioning it would have been petty. His two best friends were happy together, and he could be happy for them. Even if it still stung a little. Or a little more.

*****

“There you are, soldier boys!” Sirius said with a wide grin, seated in his favorite armchair in their living room.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was just getting up from the table to greet them. “Soldier boys?”

Where had Sirius picked that up?

Sirius huffed. “It’s a famous muggle song!”

“Really?” He hadn’t heard that one.

“Youth today!” His godfather frowned at him.

“He found an old LP today,” Hermione explained, hugging him, then Ron. Who she kept hugging a bit longer, Harry noticed.

“Ah.” Harry sat down himself. “So, what did you call us for?” He saw Ron sitting down as well, and Hermione returning to the table with her notes.

“Greengrass and Davis met with Malfoy and Runcorn again. While they didn’t manage to find any proof that those two are behind the recent attacks, they did hear about Malfoy’s plan to ‘split us up’,” Sirius said. “Apparently, they think me living with Vivienne and Remus will make people worry about you getting ‘corrupted’.” He scoffed.

“And I’m a slut who seduced you, then dumped you, which will cause the Order and the Resistance to turn on each other,” Hermione added with a scowl.
Harry snorted. “That sounds as if they’re grasping at straws.” He forced himself to chuckle - Hermione hadn’t seduced him, of course, but she had, technically, dumped him. Not that he’d be a fool over that. She had made her decision, after all, and had been both honest and fair about it.

“A lot of people do hate werewolves, though,” Ron said. “Remember the scandal after Remus was outed? And Veela have a certain reputation as well.”

“The muggleborns don’t really care,” Sirius said. “The purebloods…” He shrugged. “Harry might have to point out that Remus, Fleur and Vivienne fought Voldemort, should the idiots manage to get an article published voicing their ‘concerns’.”

Harry nodded. He could do that. “Stupid bigots,” he muttered.

“And Malfoy, at least, is too smart to put his faith in that kind of prejudice,” Sirius said. “Runcorn’s living in the last century, so he might actually believe that drivel. But I don’t think they’re limiting themselves to a smear campaign.”

“More attacks on muggleborns and purebloods? Do they actually want to start a war? They have to know they’ll lose,” Harry said.

“They are aware of that, our two Death Eater spies did mention that.”

Sirius’s opinion of Greengrass and Davis hadn’t changed, Harry thought. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about the two Slytherins - they were helping them now, and taking a considerable risk, but they had tried to kill the Weasleys during the war...

His godfather went on: “So they’re planning something else, I think.”

“We know that Nott tried to copy our own tactics,” Hermione said. “Even if he wasn’t too successful. His backers could be expanding on that, though.”

“Malfoy Manor?” Ron asked.

Harry felt a shiver run down his spine. If they attacked Grimmauld Place with a bomb...

“Malfoy Manor was isolated; we’re in the middle of London - an attack on us would be a threat to the Statute of Secrecy,” Sirius said.

“They could try to cover it up as a German bomb from the Blitz going off,” Hermione added, “but the Germans didn’t have bombs powerful enough to go through the wards on this place.”

Of course she’d know that, Harry thought. She had probably calculated the amount of explosives needed to destroy Grimmauld Place.

“They probably don’t know that, though,” Sirius said. “And on the other hand, our home not only has some of the strongest wards in Britain, but we also have quite the collection of cursed items and other dubious magical paraphernalia stored here. An attack that destroyed part of the house would probably set off a number of them - and that’s a clear threat to the Statue of Secrecy.”

Ron whistled. “Worse than what Bill used on the old Burrow?”

“More obvious, I think. One of my great-grand uncles was fond of using the Gemino Curse as a prank. My mother once set off an avalanche of dancing oil lamps. She survived the experience, alas,” Sirius said.
Harry was somewhat reassured. But... “That won’t keep them from trying to kill us elsewhere.”

“We’ll have to be even more on our guard than usual,” Sirius said.

“Really feels like we swapped places with the purebloods, now we’re hiding in our mansions and worrying about attacks,” Ron muttered.

Harry agreed with the sentiment. They had even left Hogwarts, as had the Slytherins last year.

“We’re taking steps to deal with them, though,” Hermione said, looking at Sirius.

Harry’s godfather grumbled: “I’m still not convinced it’s a good plan.”

“You’re the best choice,” Hermione said. “Remus certainly wouldn’t be able to seduce Dubois.”

“I wouldn’t be that certain,” Sirius objected. “He seems to have made an impression on both Nymphadora and one of our Death Eater spies.”

“Just because Tonks was complaining about Davis doesn’t mean Remus has turned into a heartbreaking Casanova,” Hermione said. “And Bill refused.”

“You mean that Fleur refused,” Sirius said with a snort. “She’s got quite the temper.”

“And Vivienne didn’t?” Harry asked.

The other wizard sighed. “She feels that taking down Dubois is worth ‘me sullying myself by getting close to her’.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “She isn’t as insecure as Fleur.”

Harry was tempted to ask if Hermione would want Ron to seduce a witch for their cause, but he knew better than to actually do so. She had a temper too, after all.

*****

Sirius’s family had definitely never included a librarian, Hermione Granger thought, not for the first time. ‘Deliberate chaos’ indeed! She was sitting in the Black Library, skimming through another diary of one of Sirius’s ancestors. A rather self-aggrandising tale, and of doubtful veracity - the claims of dealing with bone constructs did not fit with her own experiences, although it was possible that this Black had fought weaker houngans. Or ones using less advanced spells. In any case, his curses would not help her. And neither would the descriptions of his ‘conquests’.

Sighing, she closed the journal and put it on the ‘read’ stack. She still had to reorganise those books as well - the library couldn’t be left in such a state, without even an index! And yet, she lacked the time to do that, with all the other things she had to do and deal with.

“No luck there either?” Ron asked, peering at her over the journal he was reading.

She shook her head. “Just another collection of embellished war stories. Barely better than Lockhart’s work.”

Ron winced. “That bad?”

“The prose is worse, actually.” Lockhart at least had been an accomplished writer who had, although probably by accident, successfully cast a Bone-Vanishing Charm to great effect. Unfortunately, that spell didn’t scale up enough to be of much use against a skeleton, much less a bone wall. “What
“No spells, but the witch who made these notes describes the tactics they used.”

“That could be useful.”

“They didn’t work out,” he said.

“Still more useful than a detailed description of a whorehouse in Magical Miami,” she countered.

“What?” Harry looked up from the thick tome he was currently reading.

“Sirius’s ancestor had some peculiar priorities,” she explained.

“Ah.” Harry looked like he was about to say something more, but then went back to reading.

“Did you find anything useful?” she asked.

“Some spells that could be useful, though not against bone constructs and conjured skeletons.”

She sighed. “I really wish I could tell Sirius’s ancestors off.”

“You can, actually. There are portraits of them,” Ron said.

She shook her head. “Those are just a sort of imprint. Worse than ghosts.” And summoning their souls just to scold them for their crimes against libraries would be excessive. And impossible.

She grabbed the next journal in her pile and opened it. She didn’t start reading right away, though. Instead she looked at Ron and Harry. She remembered how they had killed Nott together. She was certain they had done that to spare her from having to do it herself. A sweet gesture, even though she had killed before. Many times.

And she knew she’d kill again - probably a houngan, she thought while starting to read the journal in her hands.

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**Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Near Toulon, France, March 28th, 1997**

The French were far too aggressive in battle, but they knew how to live, Sirius Black thought, looking at the dishes and wine the waiters and waitresses were offering. The Comte de Hornes had spared no expense for his party. It wasn’t a masquerade, which was fortunate - people were always on their guard on such occasions; both Britain and France had had their share of assassinations at such events - but the robes worn by the guests resembled costumes more than the dress robes with which Sirius was familiar. Elaborately styled and with a plethora of spells cast on them, each was a minor work of art showcasing the skill of its wearer - and, in many cases, their body. A French tradition dating back to the time before the Statue of Secrecy, he had been told by Vivienne. His own robes were rather understated, although he had cast a few charms that animated the designs on them, displaying short scenes of famous events as they moved around on the fabric.

He resisted the urge to rub his face while he signalled a waitress with his empty flute. The muggle disguise Hermione and her friends had used on him made his skin itch, and he could only imagine what the paint they had smeared into his hair would do to his locks. The worst thing, though, was the loss of his beard. He didn’t look like a dashing rogue any more, but rather some ponce like Lockhart!

An attractive ponce, though, he had to admit - he did draw a great deal of attention from the other
guests, and certainly not because of his robes. If he didn’t have Vivienne and wasn’t on a secret mission of the utmost importance… He sighed, and nodded at the servant who refilled his flute with more champagne before venturing towards the garden.

He still wasn’t fond of the plan. While it flattered him that others thought so highly of his charm, he felt exposed and vulnerable. His invitation was the result of some manipulation - blackmail, as he understood it - of a minor noble. He wasn’t likely to talk, but Sirius couldn’t help but worry a little. If he had been able to attend as a friend of the Delacours or the d’Aigles… but Dubois despised both families, and the feeling was mutual. And while the witch probably would have liked to steal the lover of a rival, she wouldn’t trust him enough for their plan to work.

Which meant he would have to take the first step, without being obvious about it. Which wouldn’t be too easy, not even for him. He walked on the terrace, acting as if he was looking at the garden while searching for Dubois. She wasn’t inside, and it was too early for her to have left without snubbing their host, so that meant… there!

He spotted the witch near the stairs leading to the fountain, talking with an older wizard. Probably one of her acquaintances, he thought - they didn’t look like lovers or even friends. She was wearing a robe with animated waterfalls in various places instead of fabric, a rather tantalising display, if he was honest. He glanced back at the room he had left, and met the eyes of Lydia, one of Vivienne’s cousins, then strode on towards the fountain.

As planned, Lydia followed him, catching up to him just as he was passing Dubois. “Monsieur Anderson!” she called out.

Sirius took care to frown briefly where Dubois could see it, but Lydia couldn’t, before turning around with a polite smile. “Mademoiselle?” Not quite impolite, but certainly not inviting anything.

The Veela, whose robes seemed to be made of clouds, looked taken aback, as planned. “I was curious about your homeland,” she said in French, then proceeded to ask him a few questions about Magical Portsmouth, the homeland of his cover identity. He took care to answer in a manner just this side of being rude, and the witch left in a huff. She was a good actress, Sirius thought as he watched her leave.

Sighing, he shook his head, sneering briefly, before he continued on his way towards the fountain. When he passed Dubois he nodded at her. “Bonsoir. Michael Anderson.” He let his eyes roam over her figure for an instant, before smiling at her with just a hint of interest.

“Isabelle Dubois.” She met his eyes, and he thought her polite smile changed into a more sultry one before he nodded at the wizard, who apparently was ‘Antoine Deschamps’, and left for the fountain.

A few minutes later, he saw her heading towards him, and smiled.

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Magical Port Royal, Jamaica, March 28th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood hated wearing the form of a muggle boy barely old enough to carry a wand, but he didn’t have access to a local wizard’s hair to use with Polyjuice. At least he wasn’t risking being recognised as a muggle - since Jamaica had no school like Hogwarts to which all children were sent, no one should be suspicious that they didn’t recognise him. And his apparent youth also provided a good explanation for his lack of familiarity with the town, no matter how much it grated to act like a stupid child.
Of course, after several days spent roaming the town, he now knew the island’s capital quite well. And some of its residents no one would miss. Like the particularly unsavory houngan trying to sneak up on him, unaware that his spell had warned him of the man’s presence minutes ago.

Drawing his wand while he waited behind the next corner, Augustus grinned at the thought that Ricky, as the criminal called himself, probably thought that he had caught a lucky break when the apparent child had wandered into a deserted side alley.

He had his wand ready, and when the houngan turned around the corner, Augustus stunned him before he could react. A few spells later and Augustus tossed a bright red ball from one hand to the other as he left Port Royal.

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Chapter 57: Hunting

‘It has been said that the Second Blood War was decided by intelligence and logistics. While I do not completely agree with that assessment - the war was ultimately decided by the defeat of the Dark Lord at the wand of Harry Potter in the Battle of Diagon Alley, not by a clandestine operation - I admit that both played crucial roles in the war. And in a not so surprising parallel to this, spying became even more important in the immediate aftermath of the war. Politics, never a honourable business to start with, was both bloody and dirty during that period, and every faction, both foreign and domestic, used spies to further their agenda. In hindsight, the Ministry’s rather lacklustre performance during the war can be at least partially explained by its apparent lack of intelligence assets as displayed in the political struggles following the war.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 28th, 1997

Hermione Granger frowned when, for the fifth time in less than half an hour, Harry sighed loudly. “He’ll be fine,” she told him. For the fourth time. Harry’s godfather could take care of himself.

“He hasn’t done this before,” her friend said. “Not since Azkaban.”

That Sirius was still affected by his time in that hellhole - which Hermione was determined to close once they had taken control of the Wizengamot - didn’t need saying. All of them were aware of that. But they each also had their own demons to deal with. And more than the French to deal with. They’d never resolve the houngan crisis if Hermione couldn’t focus on her books due to all the distractions - it wasn’t as if they could do anything for Sirius right now. “He’s not alone. The Delacours and the d’Aigles are ready to help him, if they’re needed.”

Harry grumbled something she didn’t catch, but he’d at least now be silent for the next few minutes. And Ron hadn’t even looked up - for a boy who had grown up with six siblings, most of them prone to loud outbursts, without the help of a Silencing Charm until Hogwarts, this was probably nothing special.

She suppressed a snort - it wouldn’t do to set a bad example herself - and focused again on her reading. Although she didn’t expect anything to come from this book either - another tale long on combat descriptions, and short on specific spells. Or vague, in the more interesting scenes, like this account of a witch laying waste to a horde of undead by disrupting their very bones… She blinked. Winnifred Braddock? She had seen that name before, she was certain.

Yes - the books Dumbledore had left her. One of them was written by Braddock. She hadn’t done more than skim its contents as it had covered some of the magical creatures of Africa, but if she had been an accomplished witch on the battlefield as well, then that may have been a mistake.

“I’ll be right back!” she announced, standing up and closing the journal. She had to fetch that tome from the Resistance’s headquarters!

*****

Ron Weasley blinked when he saw Hermione rush out of the Black Library without any explanation.
And once again when she stuck her head back in to announce that she was fetching a book.

“It must be very important, if she almost forgot to tell us that she’s leaving the house,” Harry said.

Ron nodded. Hermione had drilled those rules into them like Moody would have. “Last time she rushed off like that was… second year? The Basilisk?”

“Probably,” his friend agreed.

And she had been petrified before she could get back to them, Ron remembered. Damn. She wasn’t in danger - she could apparate straight to the Resistance’s base and back - but now he was worrying anyway.

Fortunately, it didn’t take her more than five minutes to return, a floating trunk in her wake which she set down on her table with a flick of her wand.

“That looks like rather more than one book,” he said.

She nodded without looking at him, already opening the trunk. “Yes. One of the witches mentioned in the last journal had a familiar name… there!” With a wide smile, she held up a thick tome. “Winnifred Braddock’s ‘A Guide to Magical Africa’s Magical Animals’.”

“Africa?” Neither France nor Jamaica was in Africa. He glanced at Harry, who looked as lost as Ron felt.

“Yes, Africa.” Hermione was flipping through the book. “Apparating Aardvark… Blasting Aerophant… Bone Devil!”

Ron sighed. They wouldn’t get an answer until Hermione was done with whatever she was researching.

“‘Bone Devils, distant relatives of the dreaded Greater Tasmanian Devil…’ - I seriously question that... appear as masses of swirling bones. They seem to grow in size as they age, but are actually simply adding the bones of their prey to their shell. Older specimens may take a long time to be defeated as the accumulated bones form an almost impregnable armour which is able to absorb many spells in battle. To deal with them, the native wizards developed a Rapid-Bone-Dissolving Potion which is made from…” She looked up at Ron and Harry and smiled.

“Time to brew!”

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 29th, 1997

Once, Ron Weasley had liked Potions. His mum used to brew a number of them for the family and he had liked watching her work when he was little. That had changed once he had started at Hogwarts, of course - Snape could have made anyone loathe the subject. Not even Slughorn, who was a decent teacher, replacing Snape a year ago had changed that.

Nevertheless, Ron was a little apprehensive as he watched Hermione drop a batch of sliced serpentine slug spleens into the cauldron in Sirius’s - and Harry’s - basement. He knew she excelled at Potions, as she excelled at everything else, but she hadn’t brewed this potion before, and all they had were the notes of this Braddock witch. If anything went wrong… he shuddered.

It had taken Ron and Harry some time to persuade her that the middle of the night wasn’t the best
time to start brewing an exotic potion for the first time - she had taken her ‘failure to properly study’ the books Dumbledore had left her rather hard.

Hermione noticed his reaction and frowned at him as she started to stir the potion. “What’s wrong?”

He almost told her to watch her stirring, but questioning her ability to brew a potion and talk at the same time would distract her more than simply answering. “I’m trying not to think about what would happen if this Rapid-Bone-Dissolving Potion was spilled.” Horrible images of flopping on the floor as some sort of boneless human puddle came to mind.

She snorted. “It’s actually quite safe. It only affects bones, not skin or flesh. Not even hair or teeth. You could bathe in this and it wouldn’t do anything. Well, there’s the heat, but other than that…” She shrugged and stopped stirring, then added the handful of diced garlic she had prepared earlier. “Of course, if you drank it, there would probably be some unpleasant effects.”

“So, we still need a way to deal with zombies? The undead variant, I mean,” he clarified before she could correct him.

She stirred again - counter-clockwise this time - and pursed her lips. “The type of zombies made from animated corpses are usually decaying. Unless they are very fresh, bones should be exposed in various spots where the flesh and skin have rotted off, and therefore they would be vulnerable to the potion - at least to some extent.”

“Might be good to soften them up with Blasting Curses, then,” Ron said. “To expose more bones.”

“Yes.” She bit her lower lip as she grabbed a pinch of powdered fluorite, sprinkling it carefully into the liquid. “We’ll also need a way to use the potion in the field. Throwing vials at skeletons, even with Banishing Charms, is not an effective method.”

“The ‘Everlasting Evaporator’ Dumbledore had left to me would have been good for that, if combined with some wind,” Ron said. “But it was destroyed.” Together with his brothers’ shop.

“If we can discover the spell that the item used then we can turn the potion into a sort of aerosol,” Hermione said. “It couldn’t be used effectively with most potions, but on this, and maybe a few others which are actually more like ointments…”

“Exploding Fluid?” Ron had paid attention when she had told him about the different types of muggle bombs.

She winced. “That would… probably act like a fuel-air explosive. We’d need to test it. Once we know the spell. Finding it might take some time, unless it’s in the Hogwarts Library.”

“I could ask Ginny to check.” It would keep his sister busy, contributing, and out of trouble.

“She can’t involve others, though - we don’t want that knowledge to spread to our enemies. They could greatly enhance the effect of their attacks that way.” Hermione took a step back from the cauldron and used her wand to dim the flames beneath it. “Now it just needs to simmer for three and three quarter hours,” she stated while winding up a muggle alarm clock.

Ron let out a sigh that was just a bit too loud, then grinned when she frowned at him. “Time to study the books Dumbledore left you?” They could spend more time together.

It was her turn to sigh. “I wish I could. But I have to check up on the training camp. We’re running exercises for the planned operations in London.”
“Ah, right.”

“Are you going to take part as well?” she asked, her head tilted slightly to the side. Her hair had grown out some, he noticed, but it was still far from the wild mane she had sported before the war.

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “You’re not the only one who has sort of neglected what Dumbledore left us.” And Harry could handle Neville in the training camp just fine. “Even though I don’t yet know just how useful are the trinkets I’ve got left.”

The Evaporator had been obvious in hindsight, the bound Marid had been obviously useful, and he had thought of a few uses for the Animated Rope. The rest, though, were not quite as easy to make sense of. He still hadn’t found a way to use the self-shaving flying razor for anything but shaving since it couldn’t be used to cut anything but hair; he had tested that. And the other two...

Well, he could spare the time for more experimentation. Dumbledore must have had a reason to leave those items to him.

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Cumbria, Britain, March 29th, 1997

“You want to be trained as a soldier? You look like a tourist! Do you plan to crawl through the mud wearing those fancy pants? Do you expect a butler to follow you around with a tray of champagne?”

Harry Potter saw Neville cringe when the Sergeant addressed him - they should have changed before apparating, he realised - but his friend quickly stood up straight again. “Yes.”

“Yes, you’re a tourist?” The tall mercenary stepped closer to loom over Neville.

“No, I’m here to train with them!” Neville responded. He pushed his chin out and stared at him.

The Sergeant snorted. He nodded towards Harry. “Him and his mate are skipping training half the time, and now you arrive three weeks late. This isn’t a summer camp, boy!”

That remark cut a bit too close to the truth, Harry thought. Ron and he were absent a bit too often in his opinion. The recruits probably thought the same. Two of them who were watching the scene, Emily and Anna, were snickering. He shook his head. “He isn’t here for the whole training, just a day.”

Neville shot Harry a look that clearly told him that his friend felt betrayed. Harry didn’t react and instead focused on Boones.

The mercenary narrowed his eyes. “He won’t learn enough in a day to go into combat. Not that you’ll learn enough in a month either.”

Fortunately, Neville held his tongue, though it was obvious that he disagreed. Harry shrugged. “It’s just a day. We’ll get changed.”

The Sergeant scoffed and shook his head, but turned away. As soon as he spotted Emily and Anna, he bellowed: “You there! You think this is funny? You think you’re real soldiers? You’re not any better than the tourist here! Stop wasting time here and run to the range so you can at least hit the area of your target with a gun!”

“Yes, Sarge!” The two witches jerked and ran off. Boones glared at Harry and Neville, then walked towards the range himself.
“Range?” Neville asked.

“Shooting range. For firearms training,” Harry explained.

“Ah. Like a duelling hall?”

“Not quite.” Harry led him over to the Resistance’s tents.

“I guess I’m not going to learn how to use firearms then,” Neville said. “If it takes that long.”

“You’re right. You’ll get to watch the others so you know what they can do, though.” Harry noticed Neville looking at the fatigues he had been given with a puzzled expression. “Something wrong?”

“Just wondering… will we be wearing these green clothes in London? I think I only saw one guy wearing pants with that colour and pattern when I was there. In muggle London, I mean.”

“No. We’ll be wearing normal clothes,” Harry said. “Normal muggle clothes. Nothing too posh. So we can blend in.” And so no one would call the police and report that London was under attack by unknown soldiers.

“Ah.” Neville grimaced. “I didn’t know that my clothes were wrong. They were in that magazine.”

“They weren’t wrong, just a bit too expensive for the area.”

“Ah.” Neville held up the flap of Harry’s tent for them. Inside, he sighed. “At least your tents are normal. Everything else…” He closed his eyes, sitting down in an armchair in the tent’s living room. “That man doesn’t like me.”

“Boones?” Harry snorted. “He doesn’t like anyone, I think. You should hear the others talk about him.”

“Like Moody?”

“Pretty much.” Except that Moody was dead, Harry thought, killed by Voldemort. If Harry had been a bit faster arriving that day… he sighed, sat down on his bed and pulled his fatigues out of his pocket.

“So…” Neville said after a moment. “You left Hogwarts for this?”

“More or less.” Harry shrugged, then started to change.

“Are you and Ron part of the Resistance then?”

“Not exactly.” And they probably never would be.

“Is that because you’re not muggleborns?” Neville held up his new pants.

He wasn’t exactly wrong, Harry knew. He shook his head anyway. “We’re members of the Order, not the Resistance.” He pulled his shirt on, then grabbed his boots. “But enough of that. Hermione will run an exercise this afternoon. I’ll give you a tour of the camp until then, with a stop at the range.”

Neville nodded, then licked his lips. “Do the others, the muggleborns, like you?”

“Are you asking because you saw them laughing at us?”
Neville hesitated, then slowly nodded.

“They were laughing because they went through the same thing when we started here. Boones called them the sorriest lot of recruits he’d ever seen. And he said the same to Hermione and the other Resistance members in the first camp.”

“Ah.” Neville looked relieved as he transfigured his shoes into boots.

“Of course, they don’t particularly like the Ministry or the Old Families, but they know that you went out by yourself to hunt Death Eaters. You’ll be alright.”

Seeing Neville smile weakly, Harry hoped that he wouldn’t be proven a liar.

*****

Marseille, Quartier Magique, France, March 29th, 1997

The French knew how to live well, Sirius Black had to admit - the room in the hôtel he had rented didn’t lack any amenity for which he might wish. Extension Charms had turned the room into a suite, or maybe even a small palace, the furniture was covered with all sorts of spells to provide maximal comfort, as the bed he was lying on proved, and the lunch had been magnifique.

It was expensive, of course - but Michael Anderson, recent émigré from Magical Portsmouth who had managed to save most of his fortune when he had to take flight after a coup had toppled the old regime, could afford it. As could Sirius, of course. But all this luxury didn’t change the fact that he was missing his family. Not even Vivienne could stay with him, lest his cover as a bigoted pureblood from the Americas be blown.

A soft knock at the door - magically created; he could have any sound he wanted instead - informed him that someone from the hôtel’s staff was waiting outside. Sighing, he scooted a little to the side so he could easily let himself drop behind the bed to use it as cover and, just in case, drew his wand and flicked it at the door.

It was one of the maids. “Monsieur Anderson? There was a letter delivered for you.” The young woman held out an envelope.

Sirius didn’t bother getting up. Anderson wasn’t interested in maids, no matter how pretty they were, nor how well their robes fit them. He was a snob of the worst sort.

“Thank you. Accio letter.”

The envelope flew towards him, landing softly on his bed - Sirius trusted the hôtel’s security measures, but he’d still cast his own spells to check for curses before touching the thing. Another flick of his wand sent a Sickle to the maid.

“Merci, Monsieur.” She smiled politely and bowed.

He waved his hand as she left the room, then cast a few detection spells on the envelope. It looked safe, but you never knew. And since the North American Magical enclaves were notorious for their spotty records due to their constant wars and revolutions, claiming to be from the Americas was not entirely unheard of as a cover, to say the least. But then again, the constant turmoil also regularly sent many genuine emigrants to Europe.

The envelope carried the seal of the Damases, one of the oldest pureblood families in France. He cast a Severing Charm on the envelope, slicing it open without breaking the seal, then summoned the
It was an invitation to a dinner with Marie de Damas for the following day. She wasn’t from the main branch of the family, of course - those Damases would never give a colonial émigré the time of the day - but she was a close friend of the Comte de Hornes. Rumoured to be his natural daughter, actually, as Vivienne had told him in private. One of those rumours everyone was aware of, apparently, at least in Magical France.

Chuckling at the differences between France and Britain - such a rumour would have caused a duel or two among the Old Families - he used a Dictaquill to pen his acceptance of the invitation. He didn’t know if Dubois would be attending as well - Vivienne hadn’t mentioned de Damas as an ally of the witch - but it wasn’t as if he had anything else planned for tomorrow.

But he hoped Dubois would be in attendance - he wasn’t looking forward to fending off another gaggle of witches looking for a rich husband, or acting like a bigot towards anyone with muggle or non-human heritage, without the audience for whom his act was meant. Even though Vivienne had assured him that Dubois would hear about everything the day after at the latest.

Sirius leaned back and closed his eyes. He missed her. Her smile, the cute way she tried to hide her distaste whenever Kreacher served black pudding for breakfast, how she sounded as she woke up…

He wished this undercover mission was already over so that he could return to his family.

*****

London, Bromley, March 29th, 1997

Bess Cox studied her arm. She couldn’t spot any scars, not even a discolouration where the acid had burned her - her skin had been completely healed. And yet she felt the urge to scratch at it.

“Admiring yourself?”

She looked up and saw that Randall had left the bathroom of their room. He was already dressed.

Unlike herself - she was still clad in the shirt and shorts she had worn to bed. She snorted at him. “Just checking your handiwork. Wouldn’t want to have the arm fall off in the middle of the street.”

He chuckled at that. “That could actually happen if you splinched yourself. Imagine the reaction of the muggles!”

“I’d rather not break the Statue of Secrecy like that,” she said, getting up, picking up her clothes and heading towards the bathroom herself.

“That wouldn’t break it - the Obliviators can handle that kind of incident easily.”

She didn’t take long to get ready for the day - or afternoon - herself. A quick shower, and some cleaning and cosmetic charms and she was done.

Randall was sitting in the single chair of their room and reading the newspapers when she stepped out of the bathroom. “Did you find anything interesting?”

“No.”

“Are they still hunting us?” Bess asked while sitting down on her bed. It was a pointless question; the police wouldn’t drop the case.
“It’s been a week. Too long for the tabloids to still be focusing on the fight, not long enough for them to be calling for the head of the superintendent in charge of the investigation.”

“Do you think it’s safe to go and hunt the next Death Eater?” She needed to do something after spending a week basically holed up in the hotel, doing nothing but talking and watching the telly. Randall didn’t seem to be interested in shagging either, or maybe he had seen too much of her burned skin while treating her wounds. She wasn’t certain if she was interested anyway.

“Safe? No.” He shook his head, and her hopes fell. Then he grinned. “Hunting Death Eaters is never safe. But I doubt that the police have made the connection between the wards and the fight, so we shouldn’t have trouble with the muggle authorities while investigating the next flat.”

She huffed at him for pulling her leg like that, but she was grinning.

It was time to hunt again!

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London, Ministry of Magic, March 29th, 1997

“An impressive reception, Madam Minister. Especially considering your circumstances.” Beaumont raised her glass while she made a show of letting her gaze wander over the Atrium of the Ministry.

“Thank you, Madam.” Amelia Bones smiled politely at the witch. “But what circumstances do you mean? The fact that your colleague has still not been seen after his attempted attack on Hogwarts?”

The delegate’s fake smile didn’t even waver. “I’m talking about the resumption of hostilities in your civil war. That throws some doubt upon Britain’s ability to uphold the Statute of Secrecy.”

Amelia scoffed. “Do you consider any arrest made by your Gendarmes Magiques an act of war as well, then? Five dark wizards last year in Marseille alone, I think, according to your own words to my Head of the DMLE last week. Not counting the two repelled raids by Barbary Coast wizards on the Côte d’Azur.”

This time Beaumont frowned. “There were no Aurors involved in the attack on Mister Nott and there were no arrests made. It was at best a vigilante action by remnant elements of a faction from your civil war.”

“I wasn’t aware that French wizards were the kind to meekly call for the Gendarmes when attacked,” Amelia retorted, “instead of pursuing fleeing attackers. But perhaps I was mistaken about the famous French élan.”

“There’s a difference between pursuing a fleeing thief or assailant and an attack on a manor by an organised group.” Beaumont sniffed. “Are you honestly trying to tell me that you support this kind of vigilante action?”

“The Ministry’s position is and has been for years that if no Aurors are present, any British wizard or witch has the right to apprehend criminals caught in the act,” Amelia quoted. She was entirely correct - though not many would have included taking and destroying an entire manor in that clause. She bared her teeth in a poor facsimile of a smile. As much as she loathed defending Black’s actions, she hated the meddling French witch even more. This reception should have been the celebration of the ICW inspection concluding. But both Beaumont and Steiner were using the recent events as a pretext to prolong their stay.

“Oh, but isn’t that the core of Britain’s troubles? That the war was so costly that there are not enough
Aurors available any more to enforce the law?” The French witch tilted her head slightly to the side and smiled with fake sympathy.

“Recruitment and training are going well. As you have seen, volunteers are supporting the Aurors in the meantime. They even managed to foil an attempted sacrificial ritual by a colleague of yours. To think that someone would abuse the mandate of the ICW in such a despicable fashion to strike at a school full of children…” Amelia shook her head in equally fake concern. “It makes you wonder what else might have been happening during this inspection.”

Beaumont wasn’t smiling any more. “Are you insinuating that either I or my Prussian colleague are preparing blood sacrifices?”

“Of course not,” Amelia said. “I was talking about the sacrificial rituals Reid conducted before he was stopped. We have found multiple disappearances of muggles that we think are connected to his actions. Not exactly the kind of conduct expected of an ICW delegate. One might wonder why you were not aware of this. And why you insist on prolonging your inspection with the weakest of pretexts.” She wasn’t even pretending to be polite any more. She was simply too sick of all the plotting and lying and the backstabbing. She wanted these foreign meddlers gone from Britain so she could concentrate on rebuilding the country before Black started to tear down even more of it.

“Are you accusing me of abusing my mandate?” Beaumont scoffed. “That’s a quite transparent attempt to shift the blame and hide your deficiencies. It will not work, Madam Minister. We, that is the ICW, will get to the bottom of this affair.” Without giving Amelia a chance to respond she turned away.

“She seems more easily rattled than at the beginning of the inspection.”

Amelia didn’t have to turn her head to know Pius had stepped up to her side and had observed the whole exchange. She shrugged. “She could be faking it, to make us think she’s nervous.”

“To what purpose? It would only make her look guilty.”

“But why would she be nervous? We don’t really have anything on her, or her country.” Amelia turned to look at Pius. “Unless you’ve been withholding information from me.” She narrowed her eyes - he would do that, if he thought that it would serve his goals and that he could get away with it. She had done the same, some of the time, when dealing with Cornelius.

He shook his head, then cast a privacy spell. “I just received this news: A muggle yacht that went missing the day after the Hogwarts incident has been found wrecked on the coast of France. According to the report from my French colleague, there were traces of magic found on the ship - and blood from several people.”

“Reid.”

“The timing would indicate that, but there are, of course, other possible suspects as well.”

Rookwood, for one. But Amelia had been an Auror for most of her life. She’d bet Galleons to Sickles that Reid had gone to France.

But whether he had gone to co-conspirators there, or simply used the country as the most expedient way to return to the Caribbean, she couldn’t tell. “Have you told Black this?”

“I did. He left the reception shortly afterwards, citing a stomach ache.”

“He did?” Amelia frowned. “That’s unlike him.”
“He might be suffering from a curse or a wound received during the attack on Nott Manor.”

Amelia didn’t think that was likely. Not unless Nott had been far more into the Dark Arts than preliminary reports indicated. Which was not impossible, of course. “Look into it.” She spotted Greengrass and Davis in a corner, talking with a crony of Malfoy’s, and added: “And increase your efforts against those two.”

She might not have much time left until the Wizengamot would fall to Black and remove her, but she would spend all she had doing her duty.

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Cumbria, Britain, March 29th, 1997

“... and the brutal murder of Theodore Nott is but one example of what we have to expect should the muggleborns not be brought to heel. Violent criminals are already running rampant in Diagon Alley, evicting law-abiding wizards and witches - both purebloods and half-bloods - from their homes and looting their shops. Businesses are hurting since their customers cannot walk through Diagon Alley any more without getting harassed, or worse!

“The Ministry has lost too many Aurors and Hit-Wizards in the war, often at the hand of muggleborns, to uphold law and order any more! It falls on all of us witches and wizards to support the Ministry to prevent our country from falling into anarchy!

“Remember our history! Remember our traditions! Do not let the mob rule Britain! Band together and take back our country from the criminals before they rule us!

“This is the first broadcast of the Pureblood Voice!”

Harry Potter flicked his wand to reduce the volume of the wireless receiver in his and Ron’s tent when the propaganda broadcast was replaced by the normal program - the Witching Hour, playing one of Celestina Warbeck’s songs.

“Blimey! They started their own pirate wireless?” Ron shook his head, then winced, rubbing his shoulder, which had been bruised during the exercise that afternoon.

Harry nodded. “Looks like it. They interrupted the normal program in the middle of a song, and I don’t think the Wizarding Wireless Network would dare broadcast this.”

Neville, sitting on the couch in the tent’s living room, cleared his throat. “Do you think the muggleborns heard it?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think so. They tend to listen to the muggle wireless.”

Ron sighed and pointed his wand at his temple, drawing out a silvery strand of memory. Harry stared at him and Ron answered his unspoken question: “Hermione will want to listen to it herself.”

His friend was right, Harry knew. “Let’s return to Grimmauld Place then.” It would mean another night away from the Resistance’s recruits, and right before their mission in London, but it couldn’t be helped.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 29th, 1997
“So that’s ‘The Pureblood Voice’...” Harry Potter heard Hermione say when she pulled her head out of the Pensieve. She chuckled. “If it wasn’t so serious, it would be ironic - they claim to be fighting for their traditions, and yet they copy muggleborn tactics where they can.”

He snorted. “Sirius would say that’s typical of the Old Families.”

“They did it with the Hogwarts Express, and the Wireless too,” Ron added. “And the cars.”

“We have more important things to do than to discuss pureblood hypocrisy,” Hermione said, taking a deep breath. “If purebloods are forming groups to attack muggleborns…” She pressed her lips together until they formed a thin line.

“... then we’ll be back at war,” Ron finished for her.

“Will the purebloods believe them, though? Everyone knew that Nott was a Death Eater, even though the Wizengamot let him go,” Harry said. “And he did attack us after he was acquitted.”

“That’s true, but they also know that we killed him, instead of letting the Aurors arrest him.” Hermione sighed. “Not that we had much choice - if we had left it to the Ministry, they would have bungled the arrest, and we would have had muggleborn vigilantes, maybe even death squads, as a result.” She looked quite grim as she levitated the memory strand back into a vial. “But if the purebloods - especially those who didn’t mind the persecution of muggleborns - do believe that we want to hunt them down indiscriminately, they might be driven to support Malfoy and Runcorn, or simply form their own death squads.”

“Cursed if we do, cursed if we don’t?” Ron shrugged. “Not too many purebloods will fall for it. Dad’s been talking to people in the Ministry since Voldemort’s death, and pretty much everyone is glad that the war is over. It’s mostly the Old Families who still believe these kinds of lies.”

“But the muggleborns taking back their homes and shops in Diagon Alley wasn’t well received by everyone,” Harry said. “Many normal purebloods were evicted, after having bought or rented them from others, and Sirius said that the Ministry hasn’t made any headway in sorting out that situation.” Which meant that the evicted tenants or buyers might blame the muggleborns as readily as the pureblood war profiteers who had seized the buildings after the muggleborns’ exodus.

“We’ll need to counter these lies with our own broadcast. And an article in the Prophet and possibly The Quibbler.” Hermione sighed. “It’ll draw attention to the broadcast, but that can’t be helped.”

“Tomorrow’s mission won’t help either,” Harry pointed out. It was like juggling grenades. They had to appease the radical muggleborns, but mustn’t drive the bigots into thinking that they had no choice other than to fight.

He heard Neville, who hadn’t said anything so far, hiss at that. “We can’t let the Death Eaters get away!”

“We won’t let them get away,” Hermione said. “But we might need to hand over any prisoners - and there will need to be prisoners - to the Ministry.”

“They’ll acquit them!” Neville protested. “Like they did with Nott, Greengrass and Davis!”

“We can delay any trials until we’ve taken over,” she answered.

“That works - if this whole affair doesn’t slow us down,” Ron pointed out.

Sirius’s absence would slow down their takeover as well, Harry knew. But if they could prove that
the French were behind the latest attacks, then that should help their cause significantly - many British wizards held more loyalty towards their country than to their blood status.

Of course, Sirius needed to succeed with his undercover mission for that to happen.

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London, Sutton, March 29th, 1997

“No wonder the Death Eaters are hiding here,” Bess Cox muttered. “All these bloody gardens must make them feel as if they’re still living in their manors!”

Randall laughed. “It’s one of the nicer boroughs. But they can’t go into the gardens - muggles everywhere!” he added in a fake accent.

Bess privately wondered just what kind of family Randall was from - he didn’t seem to feel out of place in this area. Unlike her. She clenched her teeth for a moment, then let out a breath. “So… where’s the telly trouble here?”

“We’re almost there,” he said, nodding towards an old three-story house.

Bess squinted at it. “Looks to be in good condition.” Posh too.

“Who would want to hide in derelict houses?” Randall snorted.

Bess didn’t mention that after the Hogsmeade attack, she had hidden in such houses for a week, afraid to even look for another flat in London. They approached the building, looking like just another couple out on an afternoon stroll.

“The second floor is warded,” Randall whispered as they passed the entrance.

Bess nodded. “How strong are the wards?”

“Haven’t checked yet… let’s sit down on that bench.”

Bess studied the building while Randall, his wand hidden behind a newspaper, cast a few spells. There was a bookshop on the ground floor, antique books - she could spot several books in the windows that wouldn’t have looked out of place at Hogwarts. Separate entrance for the flats on the upper floors, of course. Sturdy looking door, too. Not that it would stand up to an Unlocking Charm. There was a small alley on one side.

“The wards aren’t as strong as the ones on the last flat,” Randall whispered after a few minutes.

“How long would you need to take them down?”

“About an hour,” Randall replied. “But I’m not planning on taking the wards down.”

“What?” Was he planning to use a bomb? But that would destroy the building. And probably the one adjacent to it.

“One Death Eater was enough to almost kill both of us. We can’t attack the flat by ourselves.”

He was right, of course, though Bess hated to admit it. She wanted to hurt the damn pureblood bastards! “Why did we come here, then? Just to watch the damn building?”

“Not exactly,” Randall said. “I have a plan.”
Yorkshire, Bones Manor, March 30th, 1997

“Are you working again today, Auntie?”

Amelia Bones didn’t wince when she heard her niece’s question at breakfast, and the guilt she felt at leaving Susan alone was easily suppressed. “I’m sorry, but I need to deal with another crisis.”

“The Pureblood Voice?” Susan asked, setting down her glass of pumpkin juice. “We were listening to the Witching Hour at Hannah’s,” she added.

“Yes.”

Susan pouted. “Can’t that wait until tomorrow? It’s just some broadcast.”

“A broadcast that could start another war,” Amelia said.

“You’re the Minister.” Susan was frowning now. “You don’t need to go to work to tell Thicknesse to do something about it. I’ve been home for a week now and you’ve always been at work!”

She pressed her lips together and lifted her cup to gain a moment to control herself. It wouldn’t do to complain about Pius in front of Susan. “I cannot expect my people to work on a Sunday if I don’t.” That wasn’t how she had led the DMLE, and it wasn’t how she led the Ministry.

Susan’s frown deepened, then her niece looked away and scowled at her plate. Amelia sighed. She didn’t like leaving the last remaining member of her family alone, but she was not a witch to put her personal life before her duty to her country.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Nothing else was said by either of them until they finished their meal and Amelia left for work.

There were new letters waiting on her desk when she arrived in her office. She had expected that, of course. Sifting through them, she read the one from the Wizarding Wireless Network first. They wanted the broadcasts stopped and they wanted Aurors to protect them in the event that the muggleborns blamed them for the Pureblood Voice.

Shaking her head, she pushed it to the side. The Ministry couldn’t spare the wands for such a task. And stopping the broadcast? They hadn’t managed to stop the Resistance Radio despite months of effort. Trying to stop the Death Eaters wouldn’t be any more successful. Unless they were quite a bit less competent than the muggleborns… which, Amelia had to admit, was possible. Not likely, but possible. She wrote a quick memo for Pius. He wouldn’t like it - Amelia had hated it when Fudge had tried to micromanage her department - but he’d follow her instructions anyway. She grinned at the thought - it was petty, but Pius deserved it.

She skimmed the other letters. Various members of the Wizengamot voicing their concerns. Allies of Black. None from the man himself, though she had no doubt that the infuriating wizard would use the opportunity to make the Ministry look incompetent again. Maybe he’d offer the Resistance’s help on the grounds that they knew how to pirate broadcasts.

She shook her head as she penned a few quick answers. Nothing substantial, just empty words.

Which, she thought as she banished the stack of letters to the out box, pretty much summed up most
of her work as Minister these days.

London, Ealing, March 30th, 1997

“Follow the plan,” Ron Weasley heard Hermione say into her radio, next to him in the scuffed backyard. “Eric, Emily - start casting.” Both of them, as well as the others in their group, were disillusioned, spell markers showing their positions. Ron focused on the building in front of him. The target was on the second floor.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Eric answered, and Ron knew that Hermione was rolling her eyes at the slightly joking tone.

A minute passed while the two Resistance members layered Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey Jinxes, as well as spells to block Floo travel, over the entire building.

“Done!” Emily announced over the radio.

Hermione pulled away from Ron. “Breach team, move in!” she ordered, and Ron and the others started towards the building, passing two shiny bicycles parked near the fence cutting the yard in two.

“No movement up top,” Connor reported from his broom in the air above the building.

“Nothing in front either,” Celia said. The witch was with Eric and Emily, and keeping an eye on the front as well as on the two recruits.

Harry was the first to reach the back door and Ron heard it unlock a second later. As planned. He cast a Shield Charm, then grabbed the handle with his left hand. “Ready!”

Harry’s marker moved a bit, then Ron heard his friend’s voice: “Go!”

He pushed the door open and Harry’s marker slipped inside. Ron followed. “Stairs are empty,” he whispered into his radio mic. His friend was already going up the stairs.

They reached the second floor in thirty seconds and took cover on the flight of stairs, Hermione and Neville behind them. Ron heard her mutter a spell, then announce “Muggle-Repelling Charms set. Breakers, start on the wards!”

None of the muggle tenants would bother them now while Anna, Gary and Sinclair worked on the wards. Which would take a while. Ron took a deep breath and forced himself not to fidget, even though no one could see him.

“Nothing in the air,” Connor reported a few minutes later.

“Nothing in the front,” Celia added.

“Back of the building still clear,” Mary-Jane chimed in.

Ron was tempted to add ‘and the wards are still up’, but he controlled himself. It wouldn’t take that long to break through the wards, he told himself.

It took almost half an hour for the three recruits to take down the wards. Ron was certain that
Hermione could have done it in half the time. Or less, with the right support. But this was supposed to be the new members’ first mission.

“Wards down!” Gary announced, and his tone betrayed his exhaustion.

Ron slipped his hand into his enchanted pocket and grabbed a grenade. “Ready,” he announced.

“Windows charmed!” Connor reported.

“Go in!” Hermione ordered. A second later, Harry blasted the door open. Ron threw the flashbang inside. Compared to passing the Quaffle to a speeding Chaser, this was easy.

The grenade went off and he heard a scream from inside. Harry’s marker dashed inside, moving to the left. Ron jumped after him, taking the right. A yellow curse flew past him. A wizard was standing in the doorway to the living room, wand extended. Ron’s Piercing Curse shattered his shield, and a Stunner from Harry took him down.

Ron heard more screams. High-pitched ones. Harry’s marker moved forward, and Ron cursed under his breath. His friend was acting like the French again. Or not - he jumped past the doorway, further down the hallway, and suddenly, the wall in front of them vanished, replaced by a hole.

In the living room, a witch was turning around, eyes wide with fear. She didn’t get past the first syllable of whatever spell she was casting before Ron banished her into the wall, then stunned her before she could recover.

Then he noticed the crying children hidden behind the couch.

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Ten minutes and two doses of Veritaserum later, they knew the wizard was Aloysius Fleaweather, a former employee of Abbot Greenhouses, who had supported Voldemort financially before he went into hiding with his family a few months ago. Like his wife, the wizard had been willing to spend gold for the cause, but balked at actually murdering people. Though judging by how pitifully he had fought, he wouldn’t have been much good at it anyway. And unfortunately, the Death Eaters he had been in contact with had already all been killed, and he didn’t know where any others might be hiding.

Hermione sneered at the still dazed couple. “Hypocrites.”

Ron sighed. He was glad that they had caught a Death Eater, or at least a supporter, but the knowledge didn’t help much with making him feel less guilty about attacking a family.

“Their gold paid for Voldemort’s murderers.” Hermione knew him well.

He shrugged. “I know that, but I still feel bad about the kids.”

“They’re only stunned,” Hermione said. “Less risk of accidental magic that way.”

“Quieter too,” Harry added, though his joke felt a bit forced to Ron.

“Anyway, we’ll pass them on to the Ministry. They can find a place for the children while they interrogate the parents.” Hermione turned to the Resistance members in the room. “Good work, everyone! We’ll do the debriefing at the camp.”

Most of the recruits smiled, a few even cheered, but not all of them. “The Ministry’ll just set them
free again,” Gary said with a scowl.

“If they do, it will expose their own corruption,” Hermione retorted, “which will only help us take over more quickly. Now move - we’ve spent enough time here!”

Ron couldn’t tell whether or not she wanted that to happen. He didn’t care either way. He just hoped that next time there wouldn’t be any kids around.

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**London, Sutton, March 30th, 1997**

Bess Cox rang the doorbell, hoping no one would answer. That would make things much easier, in her opinion. A simple Unlocking Charm to get in, a Muggle-Repelling Charm to keep the first floor tenants from returning, and they’d have all the time they needed and no witnesses to worry about - her disguise wasn’t the best.

Unfortunately, the tenants were home. Or at least one of them was. The door opened and a middle-aged woman peered at them through the gap. “May I help you?”

Bess shook her head. “No, you can’t.”

The woman blinked, confused. “Pardon...” Randall’s Stunner cut off whatever she was about to say, and Bess caught the woman’s limp body before she fell to the floor and stepped inside. Her friend followed at once, locking the door behind them.

“Mum? Who is...” A little girl walked out of the kitchen. When she saw them holding her mother, her eye went wide.

“Stupefy!” Randall’s spell hit the girl before she could scream.

She quickly searched the flat, but found no one else. “Do you think this is everyone?” She nodded at the two muggles on the floor.

Randall nodded. “I think so. Her bed is big enough for two, but the pictures on the desk don’t show anyone other than the two of them. At least the recent ones.”

“Thank you, Sherlock,” Bess said, snickering.

He chuckled, then pointed his wand at the two unconscious people. “Obliviate. Let’s move them to their beds, so they think they just took a nap when they wake up.”

“Alright,” Bess agreed. “Wingardium Leviosa!” She carefully guided the girl to her bed while Randall did the same with the mother, then returned to the living room and cast a Muggle-Repelling Charm on the flat.

Randall looked at the ceiling, then at the room and frowned. “I guess hoping that they forgot to ward their floor was too optimistic.” He sighed. “Plan B it is.”

Which meant that they would have to drill through the pipes. Bess pulled out the power tool they had brought with them while Randall started searching for the pipes leading into the flat above with the help of a bit of transfiguration. That actually took longer than drilling through the pipe with the silenced tool, but after half an hour there was a small hole leading into the flat above them. It was still warded, but, as Randall had found out yesterday, the wards were weak and didn’t cover gases.
Or poison, Bess thought as Randall pulled out a reddish vial from his pocket.

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La Bresse, Chateau de Damas, France, March 30th, 1997

“Welcome to my home, Monsieur Anderson,” Marie de Damas said. “I’m very glad you accepted my invitation.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Mademoiselle de Damas,” Sirius Black said, bowing with a flourish - but not too much of a flourish; he was acting the part of an American, after all. “I’m honoured that you were kind enough to invite a poor émigré to your home.” And it was an impressive home, indeed. The de Damas were not just old, but rich, if even a cadet branch lived in such a manor.

De Damas laughed, well aware that ‘Anderson’ was anything but poor. But forms had to be observed. “The other guests are already in the salon. If you’ll follow me?”

“With pleasure,” Sirius replied.

He walked next to the witch, making the appropriate appreciative remarks when they passed a particularly noteworthy portrait or piece of furniture, though he took care to overlook a few pieces to reinforce the notion that Anderson wasn’t that refined.

The other guests, ten by his count, were mostly French witches, half of them sporting wide smiles he doubted were sincere. There were also three wizards - husbands, if his impression was correct.

And Dubois.

Sirius’s own smile widened - only slightly, of course. It wouldn’t do to appear too eager. But he glanced at her a few times while de Damas presented him to the other guests, until it was her turn.

“Monsieur Anderson, this is my friend Isabelle Dubois. Isabelle, this is Monsieur Anderson.”

“Enchanté, Mademoiselle,” Sirius murmured, kissing her hand. “I think we have met before, at the Comte de Hornes’s ball.”

“We did indeed.”

“I must apologise for my manners on that occasion. I was hounded by that… Veela, as you may have noticed, and I’m afraid to say that I almost lost my temper.” He didn’t quite sneer when he mentioned Lydia, but his tone conveyed the same sentiment.

“Understandable, Monsieur. I am, to my regret, familiar with the likes of her.” Dubois’s smile showed her teeth.

“Oh?” He tilted his head slightly to the side.

“Indeed. Veela have a certain reputation in France.”

“Please, Isabelle, let those histories rest for the evening.” Sirius noticed that de Damas’s smile had grown a bit toothy as well.

“Of course, Marie.”

Sirius glanced at Dubois while Marie summoned a waiter with a snap of her fingers and raised his eyebrows.
He caught her whispered “later”, and smiled.

*****

“We meet again on a terrace,” Sirius said with a grin when he spotted Dubois leaning against the railing overlooking the garden.

“And once more you seem to be evading pursuit,” the witch responded.

He sighed loudly. “She wasn’t quite as annoying as that Veela, but still…” He shrugged. “I’m not looking for a wife.”

“Certainly not as hard as she is looking for a husband. I wonder why Marie invited her in the first place.” Dubois shook her head.

Sirius shrugged again. “I wouldn’t know - I haven’t been in your lovely country for long.” He leaned back against the railing. “But I’m grateful to be here.”

She nodded. “Are you planning to stay, or to return to your home?”

He let out a breath and raised his head to look at the stars above them. “I haven’t made any plans since my arrival, other than to enjoy my life for now.” He looked at her again, flashing a smile. “You only really learn to appreciate something after almost losing it.”

“Oh? What prompted this?”

“Ah, let me tell you a story…”

Sirius went through his prepared, entertaining and utterly fictional backstory while Isabelle commented at the right places with innuendos. It should have been easy to flirt with her - she was a beautiful witch, witty too, and dangerous as well. A true femme fatale.

But he felt more guilt than excitement. And concern.

Vivienne had said that she approved of this mission, and knew what it would entail, but Sirius knew that him flirting with, seducing Dubois was hurting her. He didn’t like it either, but there was no one else who could do it. Harry certainly lacked the experience and Remus lacked the attitude and spirit.

But too much was at stake, he thought while he stepped closer to Dubois, who put her hand on his chest, caressing it until he grasped it and lifted it to his lips.

Too much.

*****

Anotto Bay, Jamaica, March 30th, 1997

He saw a grandiose - no, gaudy - entrance hall with gilded windows. A corridor lined with half a dozen attractive men and women, dressed in servant’s garb. No, they were muggles, animals posing as humans. Zombies, under the control of the mambo - the female houngan - who owned the manor. Whose family had stolen the manor during the Maroon Rebellion.

Augustus Rookwood cursed whatever had made ‘Ricky’ so resistant to the usual interrogation methods. He was a skilled Legilimens, but sifting through the memories of the thug he had captured was proving to be far more tiresome than anticipated. Knowing the interior layout of the manor wouldn’t do him any good if he didn’t know where in Jamaica the damn building was to be found!
Breathing heavily, he focused on his captive’s mind once more, bending it to his will. No mere thug would stand in his way! Windows… he caught a glimpse of a terrace. A gazebo in the background. Hadn’t the damn thug ever set foot outside the manor? Was the mambo that cautious?

Another memory of the thug’s rutting rose, one of a dozen; the man was a deviant, and he was about brush it away when he caught sight of the grass in the memory. Steeling himself, he dived into the memory instead.

He found himself on a cart filled with hay, with yet another female servant. A disgusting sight for any pureblood wizard, but he didn’t focus on it. Instead, he looked at the manor in the background, on a small hill, and committed the sight to his memory.

Sighing with relief, he closed his eyes, breaking the spell. He took a few deep breaths while he recovered. He had done it. He knew where his target lived.

Smiling, he pointed his wand at the drooling thug in front of him.

“Avada Kedavra.”

*****
Chapter 58: Entrapment

‘While the guerilla tactics and attempts at psychological warfare had their roots in the Dark Lord’s tactics during the First Blood War, merely adapted to the changed circumstances following the Battle of Diagon Alley, the so-called ‘Pureblood Voice’ was nothing but a blatant attempt to copy the Resistance Radio. Some of my colleagues see this attempt at using muggleborn tactics in order to achieve the goals of the blood purity ideology as a sign of hypocrisy. I wouldn’t go that far - in any war, those who make tactical and strategic decisions based solely upon their ideology, without regard for the necessities of the situation, are generally at a fairly major disadvantage compared to those who do not so handicap themselves. Ultimately, even those among the Dark Lord’s followers who were so fanatical that they decided to fight on after his death adapted muggleborn ideas rather than conceding defeat - something that can be seen as a defeat in itself, given their stated goal of ridding Britain of muggleborns and their influence.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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London, Sutton, March 30th, 1997

“Alright… here goes…”

Bess Cox bit her lower lip as she watched Randall pour the vial’s content into a small beaker-shaped cauldron. If he spilled it… She held her breath until he pulled a rubber tube over the beaker’s top. “Whew.”

He glanced at her. “Even if it had turned into a gas without being heated, it wouldn’t have killed us. Just laid us out for a few hours.”

“It lasts half a day, you said,” she retorted.

“At the proper dose. A drop or two wouldn’t have the same effect.”

“If you were knocked unconscious, you’d have spilled the rest as well.”

Frowning, he huffed. “As I said, without being heated, it will not turn into a gas.”

“Why didn’t anyone else use this kind of poison?” Bess could think of a few possible uses.

“A Bubble-Head Charm will protect you against it, and a bezoar will counter its effects,” Randall explained, slowly setting the cauldron down on the burner he had prepared. “Also, it’s rather expensive.”

“How much did you pay for it?” Bess had grown up in a poor family, and the thought of paying so much for such a thing wasn’t a comforting one. She was still a wanted witch, after all, and would have trouble finding a job.

“I didn’t pay for it; I stole it.” Randall lit the fire under the small cauldron and looked at her with a grin. “Or rather, I liberated it from a pureblood’s shop when the owner was distracted by some acquaintances of mine who wanted to know what he did during the war.” His grin widened. “No need to spend our own gold on this if we can have purebloods pay for it.”
“Oh.” She chuckled. “Clever.” Bending over to look more closely at the cauldron, she asked: “How long will this take to put them to sleep?”

“We should wait half an hour to be certain that the gas has spread through the entire flat before I start on the wards. It would be safer if we had another vial so we could cover the flat better, but the shop had only one on display.”

“Ah.” Bess wasn’t fond of waiting, but there was no way round it.

“At least by the time I’m done with the wards, the gas will have become inert. Harmless.”

Bess frowned - she knew what inert meant; that bloody bigot Snape had drilled it into her with scathing words she would never forget. But Randall was just being nice, she told herself. She nodded and checked her watch, then tried to relax while they waited.

*****

Hours later - a small part of her was quite happy that Randall’s estimate of how long he’d need to take down the wards had been wrong - they finally entered the purebloods’ flat. An Unlocking Charm opened the door, and the two of them went in, leading with their wands. Randall had cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself, but Bess had said she trusted his work; she wasn’t sure if he had seen through her excuse or not.

The flat had been rented - or stolen; a few spells and the owner wouldn’t remember anything - furnished. There was a telly and a radio in the living room and modern appliances in the kitchen. None of them looked as if they had been used in months. The fridge was stocked, though, as Bess found out.

“Found them!” Randall announced.

Bess headed towards him. He was standing in the larger bedroom, over the bodies of a witch and a boy. The witch looked young, probably barely out of Hogwarts, Bess thought, and the boy looked like he was ten or so.

“They look like siblings,” Randall said, poking the witch with his foot.

“Do you know who they are?” Bess asked.

“Hm…” Randall walked to the table in the living room. Bess followed him.

There were a few Daily Prophets, a few cutouts of issues - covering the Battle of the Ministry - and letters. Randall grabbed one of them. “Fredrick Rovier. He and his wife were on the list, weren’t they?”

Bess checked. “They’re not on it any more. Killed in the Ministry.” Or so she assumed - she had noted down the date of their removal, not the cause.

“So…” Randall looked at her.

“So…” Bess looked back at him. “What do we do with ’em?”

Randall didn’t look like he had an answer.

*****

“How much longer are they going to be unconscious?” Bess asked after about a minute.
“It depends on the amount of gas they were exposed to,” Randall answered.

He didn’t know then, Bess thought. Not that she knew any better. She had come to hunt Death Eaters, not... children. One child, a child of Death Eaters, she amended. “Let’s check her arm!”

Randall cut off the witch’s sleeve with a charm. “No Dark Mark.”

That didn’t mean anything, of course. Plenty of the Dark Lord’s followers weren’t marked. “We should interrogate her.”

Her friend shook his head. “We don’t have Veritaserum.” She looked at him, and he shrugged. “It’s not available in shops.”

“Could you brew it?” Bess certainly couldn’t. She had barely passed her Potions O.W.L.

He winced. “Not with the resources we have. There are a lot of restricted ingredients, and I’d need a better cauldron.”

Bess clenched her teeth. “How can we find out if she’s a Death Eater then?”

“Let’s search the flat. We might find evidence.”

Bess nodded and cast two full Body-Bind Curses. She caught Randall raising his eyebrows at the second, and she shrugged. “I don’t want the kid to wake up and run off while we’re busy.”

He nodded. “Good thinking.” She couldn’t tell if he was honest or thought she was making up an excuse.

It took them an hour to search the flat, and most of that time was spent casting Finite on suspicious objects. They found a stash of money, mostly Galleons but some pounds as well, and several books and potions - and clothes and a travelling brewer’s set.

“Nothing conclusive,” Randall summed up. No Death Eater masks, no robes, no dark items.

“What do we do?” Bess glanced at the two captives. They hadn’t woken up.

Randall sighed. “We could hand them over to the Resistance.”

“How?” Bess didn’t know where the Resistance was based. “Drop them in front of a muggle shop in the Alley?”

“Someone would probably hex them,” Randall said.

Or worse, Bess thought. She knew what she’d think if she found a bound wizard with a note that they were to be handed over to the Resistance.

“We could hand them to the Ministry,” he added after a few seconds of silence.

“What?” Bess turned away from the two purebloods and glared at him. “They’d let them go!”

He grimaced and shrugged. “Well... maybe. Things have changed since Nott’s death. But... what else can we do? Leave them here?”

“We can interrogate them.” They could beat the truth out of her, Bess was pretty certain of that. “Once they wake up.”
He nodded.

*****

**Marseille, Quartier Magique, France, March 30th, 1997**

Vivienne was waiting for him when Sirius Black returned to his room in Marseille. She had cast a privacy spell beforehand; he could tell from the faint buzzing noise he heard when he entered.

“’Ow did it go?” she asked as soon as he had closed the door.

She hadn’t stood up to embrace him, he noted, but instead remained sitting on the bed. Wearing her robes, too. He sighed. “Your plan is working. She’s quite clearly displaying her interest.”

She nodded. “Good.” After a moment, she added: “Did you kiss?”

“Yes.” He sat down next to her, but was hesitant about wrapping his arm around her. He could tell that she was tense, and trying to hide it. “She’s invited me to another dinner.”

“In her home?” Vivienne quickly asked.

“No. ‘Le Moineau’, a restaurant in Paris she apparently loves very much.” Dubois’s manner and tone had implied that they might head to her home afterwards, though.

“I know it. It employs a very good cook. Rumored to be a squib, but nothing was ever proven.”

“Ah.” Sirius didn’t care about that, but others would. His family used to kill squibs until the last century.

They sat there for a minute, close enough to touch, but apart. She sighed. “I’m a hypocrite. I ’elped plan this, and I ’ate it.”

He knew she didn’t mean the ambush for Dubois, or the probable fate of the French witch, but his role in it. “I’m not too fond of it either,” he said. He was being honest, too - for all that in his teens, and before Azkaban, he would have jumped at such a mission, he now felt guilty and dirty seducing an enemy. With a sigh, he added: “But it’s the best way to get her and end this whole affair.”

“I know. I still don’t like it.” She sighed as well, and he felt her leaning into him, felt her warmth through his robe.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer to him until she rested her head on his shoulder.

They remained like that for some time, just being close to each other. He didn’t offer to abandon the mission, nor promise that he wouldn’t go further to gain Dubois’s trust, and she didn’t ask him to.

*****

**London, Sutton, March 31st, 1997**

Bess Cox watched the clock on the wall. It was past midnight already. She sighed - the damn purebloods still hadn’t woken up.

“If you really want we could use bezoars on them,” Randall said.

She had proposed that before, and he had refused. That had been hours ago, though. “No. As you
said, we might need them ourselves, and it’s not worth using them any more. They should wake up any minute now.” At least Randall had said so - half an hour ago.

He knew that as well, and she caught him grimace. “Yes.” Then he returned to reading one of the books they had found in the flat. Or at least acting as if he was reading it.

She stood up and pointed her wand at the two captives, casting another Incarcerous Spell on them. The full Body-Bind Curse was more effective, but they couldn’t talk while under its effect.

He didn’t comment, but she caught him frowning, and glared back - she couldn’t wait without doing something. Not for hours and hours, at least. She glanced at the table, where they had put the Daily Prophet issues they had found. Maybe she should set fire to another picture of Fudge, and watch him try to escape the flames. Or maybe Bones...

A groan interrupted her thought, and she whirled around as Randall shot up, his book dropping to the floor. The witch had woken up!

“What… John! What did…. John!” The witch was struggling against the enchanted ropes holding her, but froze when she caught sight of them. “Who’re you?” She asked, gasping.

“That doesn’t matter,” Randall said, stepping closer to her. “Who are you?”

“John?” She turned her head until she saw the boy. “What did you do to him?”

“Same as we did to you,” Randall said. “Who are you?”

“Release us!”

Bess crouched down next to the witch and glared at her. She wanted to curse the witch. Or at least hex her. She pushed her wand forward, digging its tip into the witch’s cheek. “Answer the damn question!”

“O-Oriel Rovier.”

It figured, Bess thought, that she’d have a fancy name.

“Are you the daughter of Fredrick Rovier?” Randall asked.

“He’s dead. Killed in the Ministry. With Mum.” Rovier wasn’t quite stammering, but she came close. And there were tears in her eyes.

“Are you his daughter?” Randall repeated, glaring at their captive.

“Y-Yes. Are you the Mu… the Resistance?”

“No,” Bess spat out.

“We’re asking the questions,” Randall said. Bess clenched her teeth at the rebuke. “And we’ll be interrogating your brother as well, later. So, if you lie to us, you will regret it.”

“He hasn’t done anything!”

Rovier was shaking her head until Bess pushed the tip of her wand into her face again. “We’ll see,” she said, baring her teeth at the pureblood.

“Your parents were Death Eaters. What about you? Were you a Death Eater too?”
“No! Check my arm! I don’t have the Mark!”

“We already did.” Randall sighed. “You don’t need the Mark to be a follower of the Dark Lord. Did you attack muggleborns? Or ‘blood traitors’?” he added.

“N-no! I was just taking care of John. My parents didn’t want me to fight!”

Bess couldn’t tell if the witch was lying or not. She looked at Randall, but he was staring at their captive. “Did you want to fight for him?”

“N-No.”

“Not even when your parents were killed?”

She swallowed, but shook her head. “No. No.”

“Not even to take revenge?” Randall crouched down as well, opposite Bess. “Will your brother tell us that as well? Or that you promised to avenge Mum and Dad?”

Rovier was crying now. “He hasn’t done anything! Please…”

Randall stood up. “I guess that’s a ‘yes’. Did you do anything?”

“N-no. No. It was just talk.” She sobbed.

“Really?” He tilted his head.

“Yes. I couldn’t leave John alone. He has no one else. Please don’t hurt him! Please!”

The pureblood was begging. Bess wondered if her friends had begged as well, before they were killed. She glanced at Randall.

Her friend sighed, and pointed the wand at Rovier.

“No! Please! Ple…”

“Stupefy!” His spell cut her off and her body went limp.

He sighed.

“What do we do with her?” Bess asked. “She wants to fight us. Muggleborns.”

Randall glanced at the boy, still unconscious. “We still have to check with ‘John’ if she told us the truth.”

“And if she did? The Ministry won’t do anything to her since she hasn’t done anything. Yet.” Not that they would do anything anyway, Bess thought. Not to a pureblood. “It would be foolish to let her go so she can later attack others. And she saw our faces,” Bess added as an afterthought.

“Do you want to kill her?” Randall was staring at her.

Bess clenched her teeth. She wanted to kill the witch. Just as her friends had been killed. Just as so many had been killed by those monsters. She pointed her wand at Rovier. It would be easy. Reductor Curse, Cutting Curse, Piercing Curse - any curse would do it. She glanced at the kid, who had still not woken up. “Fuck it!” She lowered her wand. “They’re not supposed to cry,” she muttered, walking towards the kitchen, where she had seen a bottle of Ogden’s Finest.
She needed a drink.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, March 31st, 1997

The Resistance recruits’ celebration of their first mission - and first victory - reminded Harry Potter of a lot of the parties in Gryffindor after they had won a Quidditch match. Lots of alcohol, lots of loud music, and lots of people staying up too long. Past midnight, in this case. They’d regret it in the morning, he thought - unlike McGonagall, the Sergeant wouldn’t have mercy. Especially since he was told that the recruits had spent the day in London and didn’t know that they had had their first battle. If you could call it a battle - the Fleaweathers hadn’t shown much skill or talent for fighting.

He glanced at Neville, who was sitting next to him, staring at the campfire’s embers with a beer in his hand. The Gryffindor hadn’t said much since they had returned from London, and even less since Ron and Hermione had retreated to her tent an hour ago. “We should head to bed,” Harry said, “or we’ll have a hard time in the morning.” Emmet and Clifton were keeping an eye on the remaining recruits, but the rest of the experienced Resistance members had already gone to bed as well.

Neville didn’t respond. Harry was about to repeat himself when he suddenly spoke up, still staring at the remains of the fire: “Why are they celebrating?”

Harry drew a deep breath and wondered if Neville had drank more beer than he thought. “They’re celebrating their first mission. Their first victory.”

Neville scoffed. “Some victory! Those enemies were worse than first years taught by Lockhart. They’re acting as if they had fought the Dark Lord’s inner circle!”

Harry shrugged. “They didn’t know that when they went in. And the wards were decent.”

“The Death Eaters we captured will be set free anyway.” Neville took a another sip from his bottle.

“If that happens the Ministry will be weakened further.” Harry wasn’t certain that they would simply be let go - Bones would certainly attempt to prosecute them, and some of the Wizengamot members who had acquitted Nott might use this opportunity to switch sides. At least according to Doge.

Neville snorted. “Politics!”

Harry sighed. “Politics is at the root of this conflict. We won the First Blood War, but since nothing changed in the Wizengamot, the next war was inevitable.” It was a bit more complicated than that, but it was also already past midnight.

Neville muttered something Harry didn’t catch.

“Are you really unhappy that it wasn’t a harder battle?” Harry let some of his annoyance seep into his tone.

It was Neville’s turn to sigh. “No… not really. But… it feels so pointless. My parents fought in the last war, Gran was murdered in this war, and all I have done is stare at a map in Hogwarts and tell my proxy to vote for Dumbledore. I didn’t even curse anyone in the attack today. I feel like…” The bottle slipped from his hand and dropped, the beer spilling on the ground. He cursed.

“Don’t feel like that. Dumbledore himself said that we must not just win the war, but the peace as well. That we cannot give in to hatred and revenge, but must strive for justice.” Harry remembered the Headmaster’s last message well.
Neville snorted. “Some justice!”

“That’s why we need to reform the Wizengamot,” Harry said.

Neville didn’t look convinced. He turned his head to look at Harry. “You actually fought and killed the Dark Lord. You’ve done your part.”

Harry shook his head. “No. I’m not done. Because it’s not about winning a war. It’s about ensuring that our children won’t have to fight another war.”

Neville stared at him for a moment, then looked at the dying fire again. “Let’s go to bed.”

*****


Amelia Bones refrained from rubbing the bridge of her nose. “The Resistance ‘arrested’ the Fleaweathers and delivered them to the DMLE.”

Pius nodded. “Correct. The Fleaweathers have been in hiding for months.”

“Suspected Death Eaters.” Amelia had been the Head of the DMLE back when that suspicion had been raised.

“They’re not marked, but, according to the Resistance, they have admitted to supporting the Dark Lord financially.”

A confession helped along by force, or by Veritaserum, no doubt, Amelia thought. It didn’t matter - their own interrogation would ferret out the truth. She took issue with something else, though. She narrowed her eyes. “You make it sound as if the DMLE approves of the Resistance’s action.”

Pius spread his hands. “As we would approve of any capture of a wanted suspect by civilians.”

She refrained from cursing out loud. Pius wouldn’t say that if some criminal from Knockturn Alley had done this. She scoffed, but didn’t pursue the topic further. There was no point. “And the Roviers?”

“An anonymous message delivered by owl informed us of their location. We found both of them, under full Body-Bind Curses, in a muggle flat in London. The owl was taken from Diagon Alley’s post owl office - without the clerk’s knowledge.”

“Anonymous?” Amelia didn’t like that.

“Neither the Resistance nor the Order of the Phoenix have claimed responsibility for it.”

Amelia chuckled. “Not many would want to admit that they attacked children.”

“I do not think that they are lying. There was no sign that Veritaserum had been used on the Roviers,” Pius pointed out, “and we know that the Resistance has access to it.”

He was correct, Amelia knew. Sighing, she said. “Which means there’s another muggleborn group out there hunting suspected Death Eaters.”

“They might not be muggleborns,” Pius said. “Although they used muggle knowledge to break into the flat.”
“Do you honestly think a pureblood or half-blood did this?” Amelia raised her eyebrows at him.

“I feel it wouldn’t be prudent to assume too much.”

“Whatever. Set a team to finding those responsible. We can’t have vigilantes hunting people.” Especially not with the damned ICW delegation still in Britain.

Pius nodded. He didn’t ask her if she expected him to stop the Resistance and the Order as well. They both knew the Ministry wasn’t in any shape to take on either of those groups.

“Inform me as soon as you have interrogated the Roviers and the Fleaweathers.”

Pius frowned slightly but nodded. Amelia knew that she was behaving hypocritically - she had hated it when Cornelius had meddled in her investigations - but this was also a political matter. Black was counting on the Wizengamot acquitting yet another Death Eater so he’d receive even more support.

Amelia would do what she could to prevent that, of course.

*****

**South Downs National Park, Hampshire, Britain, March 31st, 1997**

“Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis. Thank you for coming, despite the latest developments.” Malfoy greeted the two witches with a bow.

Daphne Greengrass returned the bow as soon as she had cleaned the soot from her robes. “We came because of, not despite, the recent events,” she said. “To see purebloods hunted down like animals… Purebloods whose only ‘crime’ was the desire to live in safety…” She shook her head. “This cannot stand.”

“They were so desperate that they went and hid among muggles,” Tracey added. “But it didn’t save them. Hiding and bowing our heads will not save any one of us.”

Daphne hoped they hadn’t overdone it. To her relief, Malfoy smiled. “Exactly. Please follow me to the salon. We have important matters to discuss.”

There were no other guests in waiting in the salon. There was no sign of Runcorn either. Daphne made a point of looking around.

“Philius won’t be joining us,” Malfoy answered her unspoken question.

“Oh?” She wasn’t certain how to take that.

“What’s he doing?” Tracey asked with narrowed eyes.

“Politics.” Malfoy shrugged, then sat down in his customary seat.

Daphne took a seat on the couch, with Tracey following her. She didn’t pry further but simply waited.

“As you so pointedly said, things have taken a turn for the worse. The mudbloods are now openly hunting purebloods.” Malfoy leaned forward, folding his hands between his knees. “The Old Families are in dire peril, even though some do not realise it. Or do not want to realise it.”

“The mudbloods only understand violence,” Daphne said. “As they do not care about traditions and culture, they do not respect the law.”
“Exactly.” Malfoy smiled thinly. “Too many of our peers in the Wizengamot do not understand this. They assume that mudbloods are like us - civilised wizards and witches.” Tracey snorted and Malfoy glanced at her, nodding in apparent approval. “They are fools. But fools whose mistakes will doom us all.”

“But what can we do if they won’t listen?” Daphne shook her head. “If they refuse to see the truth?” Silently, she urged Malfoy to take the bait. To tell them about his backers and of his plans. Then Tracey and she could inform Black, and quit risking their lives.

“I’m afraid to say that there’s not much we can do. Too many in the Wizengamot support the mudbloods. Too many let fear rule their decisions. The only way those cowards will change their stance will be when the mudbloods reveal their true goals. But they are too smart to do that until they have taken control of the Wizengamot.” Malfoy sighed. “We can but hope for a miracle. If some mudbloods were to kill a prominent blood traitor…”

Tracey scoffed. “Fat chance of that happening. Black, Potter and Weasley are far too close to the Resistance for that.” She chuckled. “Or far too close to Granger.”

Daphne nodded. “Everyone knows that the only reason a mudblood would attack one of them would be the Imperius Curse.” She couldn’t believe Malfoy would actually expect them to do such a thing.

Malfoy slowly nodded. “I concur. Since we would be blamed, it is fortunate that it is very unlikely for a mudblood to attack them.” Daphne’s relief at hearing this didn’t last since he continued: “However, given the violent nature of mudbloods, and their deep-seated hatred, I think there’s a not insignificant chance that some of the mudbloods will not forgive those Wizengamot members who supported the Muggleborn Laws and the Ministry’s actions against the Resistance - no matter whether or not they have recently changed their allegiance.” He smiled at them. “It is a small chance, but our only hope.”

It was clear what he meant. Daphne forced herself to keep smiling. To appear confident even though she was anything but. “That would likely be dismissed as mudbloods acting under the Imperius,” she said.

“That depends on the manner of the attack. A wizard running at a bunch of ruffians can be dismissed as a victim of the Imperius, but a co-ordinated assault?” He shook his head.

Daphne nodded. The purebloods would be more suspicious of the mudbloods to begin with, too. “It wouldn’t be the first time in history that a just cause prevailed no matter the odds.” She glanced at Tracey. If her friend lost her composure… Fortunately, she controlled herself and nodded slowly.

Their host smiled.

*****

Twenty minutes of meaningless talk later, Daphne and Tracey arrived back at Greengrass Manor. Lupin was waiting for them, together with Tonks. “We need to talk to Black,” Daphne said, cutting off the werewolf’s greeting.

“What happened?” Tonks asked. “Did Malfoy and Runcorn incriminate themselves?”

Tracey scoffed. “As if! Our esteemed host is far too smart for that and merely mentioned what he hoped might happen.”

Lupin frowned. “What did he say?”
“What he meant,” Daphne corrected the creature, “was that he wants us to kill one of the Wizengamot members who have recently defected to Black and frame muggleborn extremists for the deed. That’s why we need to talk to Black.”

Lupin understood at once, and nodded. The metamorphmagus took a bit longer. And Tracey just had to spell it out. “Yes. This is a test. We need to fake a murder. And quite convincingly.” Which would be difficult, especially after their trials had revealed how Dumbledore had manipulated their attack on Nigel Nye.

There was an alternative, of course. Daphne didn’t mention it. But she knew that if she had to kill a coward to save her family, she’d do it.

*****

Cumbria, Britain, March 31st, 1997

Hermione Granger woke up on her side, her head on Ron’s chest and one leg over his. Her boyfriend - lover - was still asleep, breathing steadily. One of his arms was wrapped around her, his hand resting on her hip. She sighed contentedly, snuggled up to him a bit more and closed her eyes. Her alarm clock hadn’t rung yet, which meant she could remain like this for a little while, at least.

And yet she couldn’t. The recruits had started the last week of the training camp, and she needed to go over their choices for their specialisations. A quite pretentious term, of course - it wasn’t as if a few days focusing on long range marksmanship would turn anyone into a sniper. Not as modern militaries used the term. Not even those among her friends who had experience in sniping would qualify.

But they could share their experiences, and the new recruits would have both a mentor and a head start. And the Resistance would have a replacement lined up, in case they lost another member.

She drew a hissing breath remembering all those who had been killed in the war. Dean, Mary, Colin, Martin and Jeremy. And Dennis was still in a coma, waiting for a cure for the Withering Curse. She clenched her teeth - she should be working on finding that cure, but she had no time. Not with the French plotting against Britain - some of the French, she corrected herself - and the Wizengamot still holding out. Reid would be back in Jamaica, she thought. Unless he counted on them assuming that, and had slipped back over the border. So much to do… She sighed again.

When she felt Ron stir under her, she realised that she had been a bit too loud and woken him up.

He groaned. “Hermione?”

He turned his head to look at her, and she smiled at him. “Good morning, Ron.”

“I didn’t hear the alarm.”

“It’s not yet time to get up.”

“Oh.” He blinked, then cleared his throat. She felt his chest move. “So…” He trailed off, licking his lips.

She bit her lower lip, then smiled, and started to caress his chest. He took a deep breath, and his hand started to wander…

And both of them froze when the alarm clock went off.
“Err…” He smiled.

She frowned and grabbed her wand, silencing the clock. “We’ll use cleaning charms instead of taking a shower, and eat breakfast quickly,” she stated.

He nodded, smiling.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, March 31st, 1997

“Malfoy told the two snakes to kill a defecting Wizengamot member?” Ron Weasley shook his head. “Wasn’t that what we wanted?”

“Not exactly. He didn’t tell them to do it - he only remarked that muggleborns killing a member of the Wizengamot who had recently joined Sirius’s faction would make others reconsider their allegiance.” Remus sitting in Sirius’s living room, snorted. “That’s not enough to convict anyone.”

“We could simply capture Malfoy and Runcorn,” Harry said. Ron’s friend was scowling and hadn’t sat down for more than a minute since they had been told about last night’s meeting at Malfoy’s.

“We could. It would cause a ruckus, but if we obtain proof that they are behind the attacks and working for the French, that wouldn’t matter,” Remus said. He sighed. “Although we don’t know for certain if that’s the case.”

“Greengrass and Davis are certain,” Hermione added.

“They could be wrong,” Remus said, leaning back. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Ron snorted. The two Slytherins should know the other Death Eaters best, shouldn’t they?

Hermione sighed. “If they’re not behind the attacks we can’t frame them. There are already rumours circulating which claim that we framed Nott. We need at least one of them alive and standing trial to ruin their faction in the Wizengamot. Otherwise, such rumors will linger and fester even more, and we’ll suffer for it later.”

“I’ll bet Galleons to Sickles that they are guilty,” Ron said. The memory of the meeting they had watched had certainly seemed very convincing.

“Would you bet the future of Wizarding Britain on being right?” Remus asked. “Are you dead certain that Malfoy couldn’t truthfully claim - under Veritaserum - that he had merely expressed his hope of such an attack happening?”

Ron frowned at the former teacher, but he didn’t have a comeback for that. There was too much at stake.

“Sirius wouldn’t have to risk his life,” Harry said, pushing his chin forward.

“Do you think he’d agree with such a course of action?” Remus tilted his head slightly to the side.

“I think he would,” Ron said, before he could help himself. When Remus glared at him, he shrugged. “If we’re wrong, we’re back at war. A war we’d win.”

The older wizard sighed. “He would risk a war on such odds - but he wouldn’t risk your lives. And you’d be in the thick of it, if there’s another war.”
Ron glanced at Harry. Remus was correct - Sirius would rather risk his own life than Harry’s. Ron’s friend knew that as well, and his frown showed it.

“We have to consider, though, that even faked, the apparent death of a Wizengamot member at the hands of muggleborns will do exactly what Malfoy and Runcorn hope - cause more purebloods to join or rejoin them,” Hermione pointed out. “That could be mitigated by claiming that the muggleborns were framed, but only to some degree. So while our undercover operations would progress, our political campaign would suffer. And if Sirius manages to gain the trust of Dubois, and we can capture her, we wouldn’t need to gain Malfoy’s trust.”

“Provided that Malfoy and Runcorn are working for Dubois,” Remus said. “The French are the most likely suspects, but not the only ones.”

Ron sighed. “Great. Cursed if we do, cursed if we don’t.”

“Not quite,” Remus retorted. “It’s a matter of calculating the risks.”

“With unknown variables,” Hermione cut in.

Ron assumed that that contradicted Remus, judging by the man’s expression.

“We will need to discuss this with Sirius,” Remus said after a moment.

“If he returns to Britain he might endanger his cover,” Hermione said.

“We can visit him in France,” Harry quickly said.

“Great,” Ron muttered. He hoped this visit would not end like the last one.

“Not all of us need to go,” Remus looked at him.

Ron narrowed his eyes at the wizard. “I will not let my friends go there alone.” Especially if this trip turned out like the last one.

Besides, he was a member of the Wizengamot as well. Leaving important decisions to others didn’t feel right to him. He didn’t want to be a mere mouthpiece.

*****

Marseille, Quartier Magique, France, April 1st, 1997

Hermione Granger had been in France before, several times, although she had not visited Magical France. After reading up on the country, her family had decided to stick to muggle France for their vacations. She remembered how she had thought it ironic that one of the most republican countries in Europe had a magical counterpart that was an almost absolutist monarchy.

And now she and her friends were walking down the main street of the Quartier Magique in Marseilles - although disguised with wigs, makeup and tanning spray. Polyjuice would have been more thorough, but could be countered with magic.

She still felt exposed and too vulnerable. It was just Remus, Harry, Ron and herself. Tonks had stayed in Britain, to keep an eye on Greengrass and Davis as well as to pose as Sirius for short appearances, and they didn’t trust anyone else with this information. She understood the need for secrecy, but she would have preferred some of her other friends with her. Two on brooms in the sky, disillusioned, and two nearby, disguised.
She sighed.

Ron, walking arm in arm with her with a tan and his hair dyed black, bent his head towards her. “What’s wrong?”

“We shouldn’t be here,” she said in a low voice despite their privacy spells. “We should have simply travelled to the muggle Côte d’Azur and discussed things with Sirius using his communication mirror.”

“Harry wants to see Sirius.”

She understood that - she was missing her parents, whom she hadn’t visited in a few weeks - but she remained convinced that it was an unnecessary risk. But she had been outvoted. That wouldn’t have happened in the Resistance, she knew.

They reached the small café Fleur had told them about. It was narrow and rather dark, but stretched between two streets. Discreet too, the Veela had told them - no one would bat an eye at privacy spells. Hermione hoped that that was true. Britain couldn’t afford another diplomatic crisis, and they couldn’t afford to get arrested should anything happen.

Sirius, in disguise himself, different from his undercover one, of course, was waving at them. Drawing attention to himself - but then, that might look more natural for a harmless meeting of friends. Harry made a beeline for him and hugged the wizard. The rest of them were more restrained and quickly sat down.

“So… what’s so important you had to meet me in person?” Sirius asked once their order had been served. “Not that I mind spending time with you, of course.” He was grinning, though he seemed more than a bit wary.

“We’re reasonably certain that Malfoy has decided to test Greengrass and Davis’s loyalty and expects them to kill one of the deserters from his faction in the Wizengamot, and frame the muggleborns for it,” Hermione informed him, cutting Remus off before the older wizard could start to explain. She ignored his frown - she wasn’t about to stay here any longer than necessary.

“Ah. And I guess letting them kill one of the opportunist bigots would be out of the question?” Sirius chuckled and held up his hand when Remus glared at him. “Just joking. I know we need every vote.” His expression added an unspoken ‘for now’. “But arranging a fake assassination will be difficult without the cooperation of the Ministry.” Which they wouldn’t get.

“If the Ministry doesn’t have DNA testing,” Hermione said, “then we just need a sufficiently burned corpse to be found inside the burned out ruins of a building, and some witnesses that place the victim at the location. Polyjuice would suffice for the latter.”

“The Unspeakables might be able to reconstruct a dead man’s face,” Sirius said, “or check his blood. We don’t know what the Department of Mysteries is capable of. Identifying the dead after Malfoy Manor was quite the task, as I recall. Especially those who had been burned. But they still managed - or so they claimed.”

That was troublesome. “We could claim we vanished the corpse, but that would not fit our usual modus operandi.” The Resistance had wanted the Ministry to find the corpses of their enemies. “We could make up a new muggleborn group, and have them kidnap the victim. Disappearing enemies is a common tactic used by several muggle regimes faced with insurrections. Malfoy might be suspicious in that situation, though. He would want our own attacks to be copied so we get the blame.” She took a sip from her soft drink. “We could blow up a building and burn it so thoroughly,
they might assume that any corpse was burned to ashes. But if they have a way to track down bone fragments, that would not work. If it was a muggle target we could fake a plane crash in the sea. That would explain the lack of a body.”

“None of the bigots we’re talking about would set foot in a muggle aeroplane,” Sirius declared. “I don’t see how anyone sane would do that unless they had lost a bet.”

Remus snorted at that, and the two older wizards chuckled. She caught Harry and Ron exchanging glances.

“Old mischief aside,” Sirius continued, “and apart from those ‘technical difficulties’, there’s another problem to consider: We would need to trust our victim not to change sides again.”

“We could keep them under guard,” Remus said, “for their own protection.”

“Only after the deed is done.” Sirius shook his head. “In order for this work, they can’t be seen with us beforehand. A meeting with me is not suspicious, but a sudden new bodyguard or friend, who then vanishes after the attack? Malfoy would smell a set-up. He’s not dumb.”

“We could use my cloak to stay hidden,” Harry proposed.

“One of us could,” Ron corrected him. “We’re not first years any more.”

“Would they really dare cross us?” Hermione asked.

“They changed sides out of fear. A man driven by fear is unpredictable.”

“You want Greengrass and Davis to kill one of our ‘allies’.” Remus’s face seemed set in stone when he looked at Sirius. Hermione heard Harry hiss through his teeth and Ron mutter a curse under his breath.

Sirius nodded. “It would be the safest option for all of us.”

“It would also give Greengrass and Davis leverage on you.”

Remus sounded angrier than Hermione would have expected. Why would he… Her eyes widened when she understood what he was implying. What Remus thought Sirius would do to solve that. She could understand it - they had tried to kill the Weasleys - but to use them as spies, only to stab them in the back…

“Well, if we’re already talking about killing a former supporter of the Dark Lord, can’t we kidnap them without asking beforehand, and then fake their death as planned?”

She wasn’t the only one to glance at Ron in response to that proposal.

“I guess we could,” Sirius said after a moment. “It would mean I don’t have to travel to Britain to set things up.” That meant his own mission wouldn’t be put at risk by his absence.

“We might need more people for that, though,” she pointed out. “People we can trust.” The veterans of the Resistance, of course.

“It would look more authentic as well,” Remus said.

“That might make Malfoy suspect a trap, though,” Harry added.

“Not necessarily. The kind of bomb we would need to use would very likely ruin all evidence of a
kidnapping, and that can be done by Greengrass and Davis.” Hermione took a deep breath. “But Malfoy and Runcorn might expect to be told how it was done. And that would mean they would be able to do it as well.”

“They might already be aware of how to do it. Voldemort used a bomb himself to kill Shacklebolt and his team,” Harry said. “And there was the attack in Jamaica.”

“Alleged attack,” Hermione corrected him. He was right, though. Another reason to avoid a new war. “I think it’s still our best option, though. Even with no bodies and the possible suspicion that raises - there’d be an absence of evidence, but not a fake or wrong corpse to be discovered. Greengrass and Davis will just have to be somewhat vague. That might even improve their cover since it might be seen as a power play.”

“So… all we need is a suitable target, then.” Sirius grinned.

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Shropshire Hills Area of Natural Beauty, Shropshire, Britain, April 3rd, 1997

“What’s with the purebloods living in national parks?” Harry Potter wondered aloud when watching the Cadwallader Cottage - which despite the name was a small manor, not a mere cottage - through his Omniculars.

“It makes a lot of sense, actually.” Hermione was talking in her lecturing voice, he noticed. “Thanks to magic, they don’t need roads or other muggle infrastructure, so they can pick locations where no muggles are living nearby. National parks and similar areas are perfect choices.”

“I don’t think that they had national parks when those houses were built,” Harry said. “This looks old enough to have been built before the Statute of Secrecy.”

“That doesn’t have to be true,” Ron cut in. “Many families like to pretend that they are older than they actually are. Or at least have been richer for longer.”

“So, we might not be about to destroy a building English Heritage would kill to preserve?” Hermione asked.

“Who?” Ron asked. Harry didn’t know the organisation either, but he had an idea what they did. Hadn’t Uncle Vernon complained about them once?

“A muggle institution tasked with preserving our heritage, mostly historic buildings and monuments,” Hermione answered without looking away from the building.

“Technically, we’re not the ones who’ll destroy it,” Harry pointed out. “We’re just the ones breaking in and kidnapping the owner.”

She snorted and shook her head. “I don’t see any magical traps or guards before the wardline. Let’s move closer.” She moved her wand and faded from view. Only the marker floating above her head told him where she was. Ron and Harry followed her example.

They quickly crossed the green field until they reached the small wall indicating the wardline. Muggles would just see some rocks, rocks so uninteresting they didn’t deserve a closer look.

“I’m placing the bomb,” Hermione whispered. A moment later, a large hole appeared in the ground. As Harry watched, the earthen walls of the hole turned to metal. Then a large cylinder appeared on the ground next to it and floated down into the hole, coming to rest at an angle. “Bomb’s set,”
Hermione announced.

They moved a hundred yards to the side. Hermione created three fox holes while Ron and Harry covered the house with jinxes to block magical travel.

“Ready,” he announced.

“Take cover!” Hermione ordered, jumping into a hole. Harry followed her example and pressed himself against the soft earth, then quickly cast a Silencing Charm on himself.

Ten seconds later, the earth trembled. He cancelled the charm and climbed out of the foxhole.

“Wards are down!” Hermione announced after a flick of her wand. A second later, Harry was on his Firebolt, speeding towards the now defenceless house. Without the wards to block his Human-presence-revealing Charm, markers appeared as soon as he was in range. Two of them - those had to be Glyn Cadwallader and his wife. They were not moving, probably still shocked.

“Targets on the first floor, south side!” Harry announced through his radio, then pointed his wand ahead and blew a hole in the wall.

That made the Cadwalladers move - he saw the markers move towards the front of the building. He saw Ron’s marker veer off, flying towards the northern side right before he entered the building.

He bled off speed in a tight turn, almost scraping along the wall inside, then shot forward. A door barring his way was turned into splinters with a Reductor Curse. Through the dust thrown up by the explosion he saw someone running away. He gave chase and leveled his wand. Before he could send a Stunner after them, figures moved to block his path. Animated suits of armour waving around axes and swords he realised as he pulled up and came to a stop.

They were enchanted with protective spells he also noticed when his Blasting Curse sent them reeling, but didn’t destroy the four of them moving towards him. He was tempted to draw the Elder Wand and simply crush the suits, but instead vanished the floor underneath them. He was shooting along the hallway, after the fleeing Cadwalladers, before the suits hit the ground below.

Up ahead was a corner. The markers tracking the Cadwalladers were still moving away, so he simply rose to the ceiling and took the corner as quickly as possible. He passed above another suit of armour, a halberd glancing off his Shield Charm - had it detected him somehow, or was it simply flailing blindly? - and finally had a clear line of fire to the two fleeing purebloods.

His Stunner hit the witch in the back, and she dropped at once. Cadwallader himself whirled around, screaming, then toppled himself.

Ron’s marker appeared behind the fallen wizard, right next to a window the bomb had blown open. “Both targets down!” he announced. “We’re getting them out now. Watch out for animated suits of armour!”

Harry turned around. He and Ron reduced the suit coming towards him to metal fragments with a few Blasting Curses before levitating the two stunned purebloods and leaving the house.

“I’ve taken their house-elf,” he heard Hermione say as they cleared the building, “Mission accomplished.”

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Cadwallader Cottage, Shropshire, Britain, April 3rd, 1997
Floating on her broom above the damaged house, Daphne Greengrass tried not to shudder as she saw the werewolf levitate a huge box into the building. If that were Exploding Fluid, then a shock would be enough to set it off. A small mistake, a lapse in concentration on the part of the beast, and they would vanish in a fireball.

Swallowing dryly, she moved her broom a little away from the house. Not too far, though - she was certain she was under observation by whoever had broken into the house. Probably Granger, she thought, and the rest of the Resistance. They would be waiting for a reason to kill her.

Below her, Lupin set the box down, then flew up towards them. “The bomb’s placed. Now fill the area with petrol. We don’t have much time.”

“Did they get a warning to the Ministry?” Tracey asked, gasping.

“No, but muggles might have noticed the explosion already.”

“Ah.” Muggles they could handle, Daphne knew.

“Get going,” the werewolf snarled at her.

Flinching, Daphne did as ordered. A few Doubling Charms later, the house was filled with petrol bottles.

“Follow me!” the beast ordered before she could inform him.

She flew after him, Tracey trailing behind her. Lupin flew over a small hill, then landed. His wand flicked, and Daphne couldn’t hear anything any more. She opened her mouth to protest, drawing her wand, but stopped when Lupin pulled a muggle contraption out of his robes and pushed a button.

She didn’t hear anything when the bomb went off. She was still turning when the light flared up, but she saw the fireball rise behind them, felt the earth tremble, felt the air hit her. “Merlin’s beard!” she whispered, or thought she did - she couldn’t hear herself either.

She was panting when smoke replaced the flames and the light grew dimmer, flames no longer reaching above the crest of the hill behind them. It looked far too much like Malfoy Manor. Where her parents had been killed.

She didn’t notice that Lupin had cancelled the Silencing Charm until he shook her shoulder. “We need to leave. Apparate!”

Panting, she stared at him, shaking her head.

He cursed, then grabbed her arm, then Tracey’s. “Sorry about this, but we have to leave.”

A second later, Daphne experienced the familiar feeling of being forced through a small tube as he took her and Tracey by Side-Along-Apparition.

*****
'It is telling that in the midst of an international crisis, with Britain under close scrutiny by the International Confederation of Wizards and Jamaica all but threatening war, the radical muggleborns still refused to present a united front to the foreign forces. Instead of closing ranks with the Ministry, they hunted down pureblood families who had gone into hiding months previously. Not only did they put the entire country at risk, but they also had nothing to show for their efforts. For as it turned out, those they caught had not hidden in preparation to strike at the muggleborns, but to save their lives during the height of the Second Blood War. And while some of my colleagues might consider the fact that the captured purebloods were handed over to the Ministry as a desire for reconciliation, I refute that opinion. The victims of this ‘witch hunt’ were handed over to the Ministry for the sole purpose of further dividing the Ministry’s meagre forces and weakening those who still opposed Black and his allies in the Wizengamot.'

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

Kent, Greengrass Manor, April 3rd, 1997

Daphne Greengrass felt like vomiting when she regained her balance inside her home. Not because she had just been transported by Side-Along-Apparition - that was unpleasant, but she had been taught to endure it as a child. No, but to re-enact the murder of her parents, on the order of those responsible… She wanted to scream, to cry, to curse the monster who had forced her through that ordeal.

But she couldn’t. If she did, she’d doom her remaining family. Herself and her sister. Instead, she forced herself to remain calm and smoothed out her robe with a flick of her wand.

Tracey wasn’t quite as composed, however, and was muttering curses under her breath while she took deep breaths, trembling - with rage or horror, or both. Daphne couldn’t tell.

“Are you alright?” The werewolf asked, with fake concern. “The force of the explosion shouldn’t have reached us behind the hill, although I confess to a lack of personal experience in that area.”

Daphne reached out and wrapped an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “We are alright, considering the circumstances,” she said through clenched teeth. She wanted the monster gone from her home, from her life. She wanted to stop hurting, to stop fearing, to stop feeling. She wanted to be free of all this.

Tracey wiped her eyes - with her hand, not her wand, and slowly nodded. She wasn’t raising her head, though, and stared at the ground.

Daphne heard the beast gasp and mutter: “Merlin’s staff! I didn’t realise… no one did… I’m sorry.”

She didn’t look at it. If the creature pitied her, instead of hating her, then that would be even worse. She could deal with hatred, but to have sunk so low that her enemies took pity on her? That would be a disgrace. So she shook her head, and fell back on the manners her parents had taught her. “It is late. I think we should retire for the night,” she said, not quite managing to sound as polite as she wanted.
It seemed to be enough, though - the werewolf straightened up and nodded. “Of course. Good night, Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis.”

“Good night,” Tracey mumbled and Daphne could feel her friend’s breathing slowing down as the creature left them.

Once the door closed behind it, she clenched her eyes shut and tried to ignore the tears running down her cheeks.

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**Cadwallader Cottage, Shropshire, Britain, April 3rd, 1997**

Amelia Bones drew a hissing breath through clenched teeth when she saw the devastation wrought upon the Cadwalladers’ estate. Where their house had stood, only burned out ruins remained. The destruction was as complete as that of Malfoy Manor.

She noticed differences as well, though, as she walked towards the northern part of the ruins, where she spotted Pius and Dawlish. There were no bodies lined up, and there was no smell of burned flesh permeating the air. And on closer inspection the ruins were different as well, though she couldn’t say exactly how they differed.

“Report!” she barked as soon as she was close enough to talk to her underlings.

Pius straightened up. “Good morning, Amelia,” he said.

She ignored the reprimand implicit in his polite greeting. She wanted answers, not empty courtesies. “What have you found out so far?”

Pius glanced at Dawlish, and the Head Auror took a deep breath. “We were alerted by the Obliviators at four in the morning that there was an explosion in this area, and that they had handled the muggle authorities who had been about to investigate. An Auror patrol quickly spotted the, at the time, still burning ruins, and alerted the Department. We deployed the reserve force and secured the area, in case it was an ambush, then put the fire out.”

Amelia made a mental note that it hadn’t been Fiendfyre. She nodded at Dawlish. “Go on.”

“We searched the ruins, but the destruction and the fire had not left much in a recognisable state. As far as we can tell, the wards were destroyed with a muggle bomb, as was the house, and the ruins were then set on fire using large amounts of petrol.”

She frowned. “Petrol? Refined?” She did recall that the Resistance had not used regular petrol, but she couldn’t recall the correct name for their mixture.

Pius shook his head. “No. Not like the kind used against Malfoy Manor.”

“And there were two bombs, not one,” Dawlish added.

“One to take care of the wards, and one to destroy the house. Peculiar,” Pius said.

“Indeed.” Amelia narrowed her eyes. It could be the Resistance’s work. Or the work of someone trying to frame them. Or the result of the Resistance trying to make her think they were being framed. “Did you find the Cadwalladers?”

Dawlish shook his head. “No. We haven’t found any bodies so far. They might not have been at
home when the attack took place, but they haven’t contacted us so far.”

“I doubt they would,” Pius said, “After such an attack, most would stay hidden.”

“They might have been kidnapped,” Dawlish speculated. “One bomb to breach the wards, another to hide the kidnapping.”

Amelia nodded. “Possible. But that doesn’t narrow down the range of suspects.” The remnants of Malfoy and Runcorn’s faction saw the Cadwalladers as traitors, and Amelia was certain that many muggleborns hadn’t forgiven them for supporting Malfoy, even though they had switched sides. She sighed. “Go through the entire area. If there’s a single finger bone left, I want it found. And contact the Department of Mysteries, and have them investigate the explosives and spells used. We need to know who did this, before things escalate.”

“Of course,” Pius said, inclining his head. Dawlish nodded.

But Amelia knew that neither of the two believed that they would achieve that goal.

She didn’t believe it either, but they had to try.

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London, Diagon Alley, April 3rd, 1997

Bess Cox kept looking around while she walked next to Randall towards ‘Winston’s’. The bar had been reopened for the second time, in defiance of the attack a month ago, and Bess was certain that the purebloods would attempt to attack it again, since it had become a symbol for the muggleborns. That wasn’t the only reason for Bess’s nervousness, though.

As if he had read her thoughts, Randall whispered: “Relax, we’re safe. As safe as you can be as a muggleborn in Diagon Alley.”

She snorted, and answered in a low voice: “I’m still a wanted witch.”

“No Ministry thug would dare try anything here,” her friend retorted. “It’d start a riot.”

“Unless they are working with the Resistance.” Bess knew that that wasn’t impossible - the Ministry had co-operated with the Resistance before, during the war. And Granger was stuck on working within the system.

“Well, that’s not…” Randall trailed off and stared at a wizard who was reading a newspaper. “An evening issue of the Prophet?”

Bess tensed. That only happened if...

The other wizard looked up. “You haven’t heard? Someone blew up the Cadwallader manor!”

The name didn’t mean anything to Bess, and a glance told her that Randall was at a loss too. “Who’s that?” she snapped.

“A Wizengamot member.”

A pureblood then, and from an Old Family. “Who did it?”

“They don’t know yet. But according to the Prophet the Resistance deny that they had anything to do with the attack.”
“A mysterious new group did this?” Randall sounded sceptical.

Bess glanced at him. “It’s possible. The Resistance weren’t the only group fighting during the war.” Her friends had fought as well!

“Whoever they are, they’re more radical,” the unknown muggleborn pointed at a paragraph on the front page. “Cadwallader just joined Black’s faction in the Wizengamot - after he had voted for the bigots for months.”

“No loss then,” Randall said, craning his neck to peer at the article. “That looks like Malfoy Manor. But… they didn’t find the bodies?”

“So the Prophet claims.” The man snorted. “But you know how incompetent the Aurors are.”

After everyone had had a laugh about that, Randall asked if he could copy the issue.

A Doubling Charm later, Randall and Bess continued towards ‘Winston’s’.

“Do you think they kidnapped them?” Bess asked. “And keep your eyes on the street! We can read the newspaper in detail once we’re safe.”

Randall glared at her, then nodded and folded the newspaper. “It’s possible. And it would explain why no one has claimed responsibility. If the corpses turn up in Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley we’ll know.”

Bess knew that her friends also hadn’t planned to claim responsibility for their fatal attack on Hogsmeade, but they had been fools. Unlike this new group - they had levelled the entire house. “Maybe it’s the Resistance. They’re putting up a nice front, but are taking the scum out one by one.”

Randall shook his head. “I doubt that. If Granger wanted to do that, she’d have continued the war against the Ministry right after the Battle of Diagon Alley. It could be a splinter group of the Resistance, though.”

“Huh?”

He shrugged. “Not everyone in the Resistance might be content to follow Granger’s orders while she reaps all the benefits. She’s famous, has an Order of Merlin, a seat in the Wizengamot, and Black probably pays her a fortune for her support.”

That made a lot of sense to Bess. That was how it usually worked out, didn’t it? A few people getting rich and powerful while the rest were left behind. “Sell-out,” she mumbled.

“Exactly.”

They reached the bar and Bess was glad to notice that half a dozen people were spread out, wand in hand. Guards. She was even more glad, though, when she entered the bar and the protection of its wards.

Inside, it was loud and crowded. “Pretty brave of them, to gather here,” she said to Randall while they pressed through to the bar.

“Pretty brave of us,” he shot back with a grin.

Bess shook her head. Compared to actually going out and fighting purebloods and Death Eaters, showing up at a well-protected bar didn’t take much courage, at least in her opinion. On the other
hand… Her eyes widened and she patted Randall on the back until he turned to look at her. “Get me a beer! I’ll get us a table!” she yelled into his ear. He nodded, and she pushed towards the back.

She was lucky - a couple got up just when she passed their table, and they didn’t leave their coats. She slid on to the bench and smirked at another witch who had been just a bit too slow.

It took her friend five more minutes to reach her. “Finally!” she exclaimed when he set down a glass in front of her.

“You must be really thirsty.” He shook his head with that grin of his.

“Not really. I just had a thought.” She grinned at him. “We should start our own group and recruit people!”

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“... once more the muggleborns show their true colours! Not content with driving pureblood families out of Wizarding Britain, they now are hunting down those poor people who are hiding among muggles! The message is clear: No pureblood is safe, not even if they abandon magic! The muggleborns want to kill us all!

“And not even those who abandon their blood and heritage and join the blood traitors are safe! Glyn Cadwallader recently joined Sirius Black’s alliance - and yesterday, his manor suffered the same fate as Malfoy Manor at the hands of muggleborn criminals!

“And once again, the Ministry has been revealed as powerless. What Aurors are left aren’t being sent to protect the persecuted purebloods, but rather to prosecute innocent purebloods!

“This has to stop! We all have to band together before it’s too late. In the Wizengamot, in the Ministry, on the streets of Hogsmeade and in Diagon Alley, we need to make a stand! We need to fight for our traditions, for our families, for our very lives, or we will perish at the hands of the muggleborns!

“Remember our history! Remember our traditions! Do not let the muggleborns win! It's better to die fighting than live as slaves!

“This is the Pureblood Voice!”

The nerve of those people! Amelia Bones refrained from blasting the wireless receiver in her office. Instead, she calmly flicked it off and turned to Pius. “After hearing that, I don’t think I need to ask whether or not your attempts to stop these broadcasts have made any progress.”

“We’re still working on ways to track them,” he replied.

She snorted. “And meanwhile, they are doing their best to incite another war in Britain.”

“That was to be expected,” he told her. “An obvious reaction by the radical elements.”

“Obvious in more than one sense,” she said. “I would be lying if I claimed that they were entirely wrong about the current state of Wizarding Britain.”

He frowned for a moment. “The muggleborns are not indiscriminately hunting purebloods, apart from suspected Death Eaters and sympathisers. Black and many of his friends are purebloods, and
allied with the Muggleborn Resistance.”

“The Resistance themselves might refrain” - personally, Amelia doubted that - “but they don’t control all of the muggleborns. The recently captured ‘suspects’ were not exactly members of the Dark Lord’s Inner Circle.”

“We’re preparing to prosecute the Fleaweathers. They did support the Dark Lord, if not as combatants. But their gold contributed.” Pius sounded slightly defensive.

“And the Roviers?” Amelia was already aware of the results of that investigation, but she liked seeing Pius squirm. As much as the usually unflappable wizard actually did, of course.

“The girl didn’t do anything illegal, although she has a quite poor opinion of muggleborns.”

“In other words, she might turn terrorist herself in a few years.” Amelia snorted.

“Interrogation under Veritaserum has not revealed any such plans.” Pius briefly pressed his lips together.

“She and her brother haven’t been released yet, though.” Amelia rested her chin on her steepled fingers.

“They are currently being held in the Ministry for their own protection.”

“We wouldn’t want to have them suffer Nott’s fate, would we? Or the Cadwalladers’,” she said. “But the longer we hold them, the more guilty they will appear.”

“We’re looking into measures to protect them after their release.”

“Can we spare the wands for that?” She knew they couldn’t, as did he.

“Not until the latest Hit-Wizard recruits finish their training.” Pius shrugged in an almost French way as if this wasn’t their biggest problem.

“Start using them for actual tasks instead of training missions.” As the war had shown, even half-trained wizards and witches could be used effectively.

“That could put them, and others, at risk. They’re not ready for deployment, especially not in the current, slightly tense situation. They are currently at the stage where they are overly confident.” Pius pursed his lips. “The odds that a confrontation with the muggleborns would occur are quite high, in my opinion. And if such an incident were to escalate…”

Amelia scoffed. “Use them for safe tasks where they don’t have to deal with muggleborns. It’ll free up our more experienced people.” Who, unfortunately, were not really that experienced either. But experienced enough not to start trouble with the Resistance, at least.

“I don’t think that there are many missions where they wouldn’t have to deal with muggleborns sooner or later,” Pius pointed out.

“As long as it’s later rather than sooner.” Every little thing would help with increasing the Ministry’s effective manpower. “What did you find out about the attack on the Cadwalladers?”

As usual, Pius showed no reaction to the change of topic. “Preliminary analyses by the Department of Mysteries claim that the explosive used in the attack was different from the one used by the Resistance. Less effective as well. The same applies to the fluid used to start the fire.”
Both could have been planned to obscure the identity of the attackers, of course. She nodded anyway, prompting him to go on.

“They used one explosion to breach the wards, and another to destroy the building. Again, different from the attack on Malfoy Manor last year.”

“Not too different, though - the Resistance dropped a petrol mixture on the Manor after the explosion,” Amelia corrected him.

He acknowledged the point with a small nod. “We haven’t found any remains. The Unspeakables claim that they have more precise methods to find even traces of a body, but haven’t had any success so far either.”

“That would point towards a kidnapping.”

“It is possible,” he admitted. “If that is true then we can expect a statement from the culprits soon enough, which should give us more insight into their identity and aims.”

“Or the corpses of the Cadwalladers dropped in the middle of Hogsmeade.” Which would likely offer more insight as well.

Amelia shook her head. “Bombs and kidnappings… this is looking more and more as if we are back in the war.”

Pius didn’t say anything in response.

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London, Hampstead, April 3rd, 1997

“How are they doing?” Hermione Granger asked, stepping into the guarded room in the safe house that served as an infirmary - and holding cell. Glyn and Patricia Cadwallader were lying on two conjured cots.

“We haven’t woken them up,” Sally-Anne answered. “They’re not hurt, though at their age, they shouldn’t be kept unconscious for too long.”

Hermione nodded. “We’ll be interrogating them soon.”

“Aren’t they our allies, technically at least?” the other witch asked.

She scoffed. They had gone over this before. “Cadwallader only abandoned Malfoy when he realised that we would win. Until then he supported any and all anti-muggleborn proposals in the Wizengamot. This is a good opportunity to find out if they have done more than just vote for Voldemort.”

Sally-Anne slowly nodded.

Hermione shrugged. “Though if our interrogation reveals that they can be trusted, we won’t use the Draught of Living Death.” She would be shocked if that was the case, though.

“And if they have done more? If they murdered people?”

Hermione pressed her lips together. If they killed the Cadwalladers - executed them - then Greengrass and Davis would have a more solid cover. But if they later revealed the deception… Meting out vigilante justice would send a clear message to both purebloods and muggleborns: that
the Resistance was acting as judge, jury and executioner, just as they had during the war. That would encourage more muggleborns to take the law into their own hands, weaken the Ministry further and scare more purebloods into thinking that even if they switched sides they wouldn’t be safe. In short, it would make rebuilding Wizarding Britain into a functioning country far more difficult. She sighed. “We’ll deliver them to the Ministry to be tried - but if all goes well we’ll be in control by then.”

Sally-Anne frowned. “Or at war.” She sighed. “Sorry… it’s just… we beat the Dark Lord, we beat the Ministry, but we just have more problems. The French, the houngans, the remaining bigots…”

Hermione was tempted to respond with a platitude like ‘that’s life for you’. Instead, she said: “We’ll solve those problems, and any others that crop up.”

Her friend nodded, though she didn’t seem to be convinced. “I just wish we could spend more time together, without worrying about all of this.” She sighed again.

“Yes.” Hermione knew who Sally-Anne wanted to spend more time together with. Just like Hermione did. “And we will.”

As soon as they were done with the current crisis.

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“Huh… what… you!”

Hermione saw Cadwallader’s eyes widen when he recognised her. “Yes, me.” She nodded.

“Why did you attack us? Patricia! What did you do with her?”

“Stunned her, like you.” She stood up and walked closer to the wizard while he struggled against the bonds that kept him tied to his chair.

“We’re allies! Black said so!”

He was starting to breathe heavily. Not hyperventilating, though. And since Sally-Anne wasn’t stepping in he shouldn’t be in any danger of suffering a heart attack.

Hermione nodded slowly. “Yes. You switched sides.” She waited a moment before continuing. “Malfoy didn’t like that, and arranged to have you killed.”

“You’re working for Malfoy?”

She stared at him. He must have been more affected by the Stunner than she had thought, to blurt out that kind of inane nonsense. “No. We attacked you to fake your death, and make him think his plot succeeded so we can gather proof of his crimes.”

“Ah.” He was starting to smile, then stopped. “But…” He pulled on the bonds again, then stared at her.

She nodded, and pulled out a vial of Veritaserum from her pocket. “Yes. We decided that this was also a good opportunity to find out if you can be trusted.”

Judging by the way the man paled and started to tremble, Hermione was already certain of the answer to that question.

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“...she agreed.”

Hermione glanced at the parchment where the Dictaquill was writing down the transcript of Cadwallader’s interrogation, then looked at the drugged wizard. “Why did you decide to join Black?”

“To be safe.”

“Was that the only reason?”

“No.”

“What other reasons did you have?” Not for the first time, Hermione wished Veritaserum worked a bit differently - having to pull out answers like this was tedious.

“I hoped to be rewarded.”

Typical. “By Black?”

“Yes.”

“Would you betray Black if you had the opportunity to do so safely and be rewarded?”

“Yes.”

That didn’t come as a surprise. She shook her head. “Would you prefer that the muggleborns were gone from Wizards Britain?”

“Yes,” the man droned.

“Would you have killed muggleborns if you had had the opportunity?”

“No.”

That surprised her. “Why not?”

“I don’t like killing.”

“But you supported the Dark Lord!” Sally-Anne exclaimed, then bit her lip. “Sorry.”

Hermione glanced at her friend, then turned back to their prisoner. “Do you mind if others kill muggleborns?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want the muggleborns gone, but not dead?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish for the muggleborns to serve the purebloods?”

“No.”

The man wasn’t really making sense, she thought. “Why not?”

“They’re too dangerous.”
Ah. Hermione smiled grimly. It was time to wrap this up. “Would you support a war against the Ministry and Wizengamot, if they were controlled by muggleborns and Black?”

“No.”

“Would you do it if you were certain you wouldn’t suffer for it?”

“Yes.”

She had his measure now. “Sally-Anne? Do you have any questions?”

Her friend shook her head. “No. I’ll fetch the Draught of Living Death.”

“Please.” They couldn’t trust Cadwallader, as expected. Hermione pointed her wand at the man’s head.

“Obliviate.”

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 3rd, 1997

“... they’re currently under the influence of Draught of Living Death since they’d switch sides again if they were given the opportunity.”

Ron Weasley snorted after hearing Hermione’s summary. “They won’t be happy to have been used as bait.”

“They’ll be even less happy once they’re being prosecuted for supporting Voldemort,” Harry added.

“Will they actually be prosecuted?” Ron asked. “You just said that they didn’t do anything other than voting for the Dark Lord’s proposals.”

“Those laws and bills started the whole war,” Harry replied with a scoff.

“If we were to prosecute them for voting for the Muggleborn Laws we should also prosecute over half the Wizengamot,” Hermione said. “Such a course of action would not only provide fuel for pureblood propaganda, but it would also set a precedent of the Ministry’s authority over the Wizengamot, since the DMLE would then be able to influence the political process by prosecuting members of the Wizengamot for their politics. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

“I thought you wanted more checks and balances,” Ron said. “So the Wizengamot couldn’t pass laws that violated human rights.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “But only in the form of a special court composed of judges under oath that could repeal such laws. Prosecuting the Wizengamot members for their votes goes too far. It’s one step from prosecuting people for their opinions.”

“Certain opinions should be illegal,” Ron said. Like bigots’ and Death Eaters’. If they were allowed to spread their views, Britain would never be free of their ideology. Neither Hermione nor Harry seemed to share his opinion, though.

“That’s not a good idea,” Harry said. “Freedom of speech is a basic human right.”

“We don’t have to go as far as the United States go, though,” Hermione added. Ron snorted - the Magical Americas were anything but united. “Britain and many European nations are more
restrictive, especially when it comes to hatemongering.”

He shrugged. “I’d prefer it if they couldn’t spread their poison any more, no matter how they word it.”

“We all would,” Hermione said. “But human rights are universal, not tied to the colour of your skin or your opinions on blood. We have to grant them to our enemies too, or we’ve already taken the first step towards losing them ourselves.” She sighed. “But that aside, if we do prosecute everyone who voted against muggleborns, we’d only drive more purebloods into the arms of Malfoy and his ilk, and even our allies would assume that if they opposed us they’d risk being prosecuted themselves. Even if we didn’t have another war on our hands as a result, the Wizengamot would soon turn into a mass of sycophants who wouldn’t dare to point out any mistakes in the government’s proposals and policies. Which would mean such mistakes would not be corrected, but implemented.”

“Ah.” Ron was starting to see the problem.

“Not to mention that the Wizengamot is supposed to control the Ministry. If the Head of the DMLE can put a Wizengamot member in prison for their political beliefs, that’s no longer the case. A strong Minister could dominate the Wizengamot - to the point of removing any opposition. The bureaucracy is powerful enough without also giving them the power to arrest Parliament.”

“Which means,” Harry said with a sneer, “that the Cadwalladers will escape punishment.” He shook his head. “I don’t think many muggleborns will be happy about that.”

“I know they won’t be happy. But we need to draw the line there, or we’ll lose any chance of rebuilding Wizarding Britain into a better country,” Hermione said. “We can’t give in to the desire for vengeance; it’ll start another cycle of violence.”

“Dumbledore’s message warned us about that too,” Ron added.

“We have more urgent problems to worry about, though,” Harry said. “Like Sirius’s mission.”

“And Greengrass and Davis’s,” Hermione added. “And I really need to research that evaporator spell. But I don’t have the time to focus on that.”

“Did you ask the twins to help?” Ron asked. “They should be done with rebuilding their shop.”

Hermione blinked at him, then closed her eyes and grimaced.

“I’m so stupid!”

*****

London, Diagon Alley, April 3rd, 1997

Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes had been rebuilt better than before, as the sign over the window claimed, Harry Potter had to admit after entering the shop. The main room was brighter, and it didn’t feel cramped any more either, with fewer shelves and displays taking up floor space. And there was no rubber-chicken hiding near the entrance trying to peck his face off as soon as he cleared the Thief’s Downfall.

He kept an eye on the half a dozen customers browsing the wares, just in case, as he made his way to the counter in the back.
“How may I… Harry!” Probably-George greeted him. “Haven’t seen you in a while! Do you need a few items to prank our little brother? Or something to get back at your godfather?”

Harry shook his head reflexively, then reconsidered, then decided against it. “Not at the moment.” Once this bloody crisis was over, maybe. “I need to talk to you in private.”

“Ah.” Probably-George nodded at the door behind him, then tapped a bell on the counter with his wand. “Let me call Clarice.”

A minute later, a pretty young witch entered through a side door, adjusting the colourful robes that the twins used as the staff’s uniform. Dumbledore would have approved of the style, Harry thought. He also caught a glimpse of jeans underneath, so she was probably a muggleborn.

“Clarice, take over for a bit, Fred and I need to discuss business with our partner,” George said, already opening the door. Harry smiled at the girl and followed the wizard.

The workroom hadn’t really changed, he noticed. It was still a mess of weird items, cauldrons, jars and boxes, and a heap of what looked like the remains of experiments. ‘Destructive testing’, Hermione had called it once.

“Fred! We’ve got a visitor!” George announced when his brother looked up from the cauldron he was observing. “Important business,” he added.

Fred nodded, then sighed and vanished the contents of the cauldron. “Hi, Harry!” he said, wiping his hands on his apron.

Harry winced. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Fred dismissed his concern with a wave of his hand. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t anything important or expensive. Just a new flavour for our Skiving Snackbox line.”

“Ah.” That made him feel better.

“So,” George said, brushing away some clucking animated chickens miniatures from the closest counter so he could sit on it, “What do you need?”

“If it’s about the money we owe you, don’t worry - Sirius’s compensated us in full for the damages incurred in fighting the Dark Lord, and the added publicity brought us more business as well,” Fred cut in before Harry could say anything.

“All the muggleborns shop here and not at Zonko’s anyway,” George added, “but we got more pureblood customers too.”

“Ah.” Harry nodded. “No, I’m here because of the current crisis.”

The twins grew serious at once. “What do you need?”

“Hermione discovered a recipe for a Rapid-Bone-Dissolving Potion,” Harry said, looking around for a safe spot to sit down. The twins winced in unison, so he quickly added: “It works by touch, and only on exposed bone. It’s meant to deal with houngan conjurations.”

“Ah. And she needs a lot of that brewed?” Fred asked.

“Yes. But even more importantly, she needs a way to aerosolise it, so it can be used effectively in the field.”
“Like Ron’s Evaporator,” Fred said, nodding.

“Exactly.”

“I think we can adapt our Sneezing Sparklers for that.” George was already making notes on a piece of parchment he had grabbed from a veritable mound of it. “We just need to tweak the spells so they produce a much finer spray.”

“A mist.” Fred had walked over and was now peering at George’s notes. “We need to adjust the duration and spread too.”

George nodded, then looked up at Harry. “We can do it. You’ll have your ‘Bone Busters’ in a week.”

“We’ll have a better name then too.” Fred grinned. “He’s still hopeless at naming things.”

Harry thought it was a pretty good name, and that if anyone shouldn’t be allowed to name anything, it was Hermione, but he simply nodded. “Good. I hope we won’t need them, but…” he trailed off, shrugging.

“With Dumbledore gone, the houngans will stir up trouble again,” George said.

“They already did,” Fred corrected his brother.

Harry clenched his teeth - remembering that particular failure still stung. If only he had been a bit quicker, a bit less stupid, he could have saved the woman. Probably. He slowly let out his breath. “Here’s the recipe for the potion,” he said, pulling out a roll of parchment from his enchanted pocket. “Hermione said it’s harmless unless you pour it over bone, but she hasn’t tested it extensively.”

The twins perked up. “We should do that, then. Do you have some captured Death Eaters available to serve as test subjects?” Fred asked.

He glared at them. He hoped they were just making tasteless jokes, and weren’t fishing for information about the Cadwalladers. Or serious.

George chuckled. “Just kidding. We use conjured animals for testing.”

“For the first stages, at least,” Fred added. “Since this won’t be a product for the shop, we don’t need more than that.”

“Good.” Harry nodded.

“Speaking of Death Eaters… how are our two spying snakes doing?” George asked.

Fred scowled, Harry noticed. “They’ve been useful,” he said.

“I knew that already. I was wondering how they are handling the whole thing.”

“As far as I’m aware, they’re handling it well. The bigots do not seem to suspect them.” Remus would have told them otherwise.

“Why should they? The two fit right in among the Death Eaters,” Fred muttered.

This time George scowled at his brother. “I just want to know if we can trust them.”

“We are trusting them,” Harry said. “Within reason, of course.”
Fred scoffed in response. George nodded. “Well, if that’s all, we should start working on your order.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Anything for our partner, and war hero,” Fred said, though his cheer sounded a bit forced to Harry, and George certainly didn’t look cheerful.

Harry wasn’t about to pry into their affairs, though. He had already too many things to worry about.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 3rd, 1997

“I’m so stupid!” Hermione Granger said, shaking her head.

“No, you’re not.” Ron, sitting next to her on Sirius’s couch, sighed.

“I should have thought of the twins right away!” Potions were their speciality, after all. They had reverse-engineered the Thief’s Downfall for Dumbledore! She had been too arrogant, too short-sighted, too focused on keeping their secrets, to see the obvious!

“We all should have. We didn’t.”

She jumped up, out of his embrace, and started to pace. “So much time lost!”

“A few days, at most.”

She whirled around to stare at him. “They could be crucial! We’re stretched thin as it is.”

“They won’t be. We’ll manage. Nobody’s perfect.” He stood up and walked over to her, wrapping her in his arms. “Relax. Blaming yourself for it won’t help anyone. What’s done is done.”

She hissed. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

He didn’t answer, simply started to rub her back.

Closing her eyes, she finally sighed. “There’s just so much we need to do. Politics, reforms, recruiting, training, planning, plotting...” It had been easier during the war. She had been focused on fighting the Death Eaters, then.

“We don’t have to do everything.”

There was enough they had to, though. If only to keep it secret. If their enemies were aware of their plans...

“You know, there are a lot of people we can trust. Family, for one. And friends,” Ron whispered into her ear.

She took a deep breath. He was still rubbing her back. Holding her. She forced herself to relax. It wasn’t as difficult as she had thought. “One traitor, one prisoner, could ruin us.”

“That could happen to us as well. You, me, Harry, Sirius, Remus...”

She didn’t want to consider that. But she couldn’t help it. “We all know Occlumency. And there’s the contract for the Resistance.”
“Neither is foolproof.”

“But even so… the more people who know a secret, the greater the danger of it being revealed.”

“Better to risk exposure than failure.”

That was often one and the same, especially in politics. But she knew what he meant. They hadn’t done as well as they could have, should have, lately.

And they needed to change that.

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Marseille, Quartier Magique, France, April 4th, 1997

Sirius Black stood up and bowed right before Dubois reached his table. “Isabelle,” he said with a wide smile, then grasped her hand to kiss it. She was wearing red robes, daringly cut - slit up to the hip on both sides, and with a neckline that plunged halfway to her navel. A ruby dangling from a gold necklace accentuated her cleavage.

“Bonsoir, Michael.” The French witch let her fingers trail over his hand for just a second as she withdrew her own.

He held her chair as she sat down, then resumed his own seat.

“How gallant of you,” she commented.

“I aim to please,” he responded. “And I wish to fit into your country.” Sirius hoped he hadn’t overdone it - Anderson wouldn’t have had courtesy and manners beaten into him as Sirius had, but he would have started to adapt by now.

“Even if it means losing your American charm?”

He gave her his best roguish grin. “That won’t happen. It’ll just be refined - seasoned, you might say.”

Dubois laughed. It wasn’t her polite laugh, the kind with which she responded to the usual clever word games, but a more honest-sounding one. “I can believe that,” she said, reaching over the table to pat his hand. Once more she let her fingers slide over his skin when she withdrew. “You’re refreshingly different.”

“Compared to the French wizards?” he asked, then signalled the waiter with his wand.

She nodded. “More open. More honest.”

He smiled - the unintentional irony helped with that. “You make it sound as if French wizards routinely lie.”

“They do.” She laughed again, less honest, this time. “But so do we French witches.”

The waiter arrived and took their order. Sirius used the short break in conversation to glance around. They were in the ‘Elysée’, the best restaurant in the Quartier Magique. The safest, too. He spotted her bodyguard as well, sitting alone at a table. She was good, and her disguise - Polyjuice, unless he was mistaken - was almost perfect, but she was paying too much attention to Sirius and Isabelle. Dubois. And after several such evenings, he was familiar with her mannerisms, too - the way she fidgeted with her wand. It was an old trick for keeping it ready to cast at a moment’s notice without
appearing to do so.

“Have you considered moving to France for good?” Dubois asked once the waiter left their table.

Sirius nodded. “Yes. Although finding a good home will take some time. A wizard’s home has to meet the strictest standards, or his love life will suffer,” he added with another grin.

“I can help you there.” Once more she held his hand.

“I know.” He patted hers with his free hand. “And I will certainly ask you for advice - once I have found a suitable location.”

“Are you looking for a spot that reminds you of your old home, or something radically different?”

The waiter returned, and filled their glasses.

“Something new, but not too different. Those who cut off their roots wither and die, but those who shy away from anything new do not fare any better in the long run.”

“A wise view. Moderation is not as valued as it should be.”

Was that a wistful tone in Isabelle’s voice? He wasn’t entirely certain. “My home’s fate taught me to value it. Radicals destroyed it.”

“France has been spared that,” she said, smiling faintly.

“To France!” He raised his glass.

“To France.” Dubois followed his example.

It was an excellent vintage, as he had expected - he knew Isabelle well enough by now. And judging by the way she kept touching him, he might end up knowing her a bit too well later this evening.

*****

“Welcome to my home,” Isabelle said two hours later as they stepped out of the fireplace.

Sirius kept smiling, making the appropriate sounds while he looked around. Behind him, the bodyguard arrived and quickly moved to the wall. He didn’t see anyone else, but that didn’t mean anything. Not that he planned to attack Dubois by himself in her own home.

Dubois nodded at the witch. “We’ll be retiring for the evening.” The bodyguard nodded in acknowledgement while she took Sirius’s arm. “My bedroom opens to the south,” she whispered.

He tensed in response, although not - only - for the reasons she would expect. He had hoped - while knowing it was unlikely - that it wouldn’t come to this. Vivienne had told him she didn’t mind, but she had been lying.

But too much was at stake. He had to earn Dubois’s trust. So he smiled, and walked with her, past the portraits of her ancestors. He had his arm wrapped around her waist when they arrived at her bedroom, with her leaning against him.

Once they were inside, she stepped away from him. A flick of her wand closed the door. Another made her robes drop to the floor.

Sirius drew a hissing breath. She was beautiful. She wasn’t Vivienne. And he was playing a role.
He told himself that he was doing this for his family, and his love, while he slipped out of his own robes.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, April 4th, 1997

“... Stand up and fight! Fight for your family, for your country, for your very lives!

“This is the Pureblood Voice!”

Bess Cox wasn’t the only one in Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips who was glaring at the wireless receiver. In fact, the only one who wasn’t glaring or cursing was the cook, as far as she could tell. And Randall, who was at most staring.

“Fuckin’ Death Eaters!” she said, loud enough to carry through the room.

Others nodded in agreement. “They should track down those bastards and kill ’em!” a burly wizard said.

Randall spoke up at once. “The Resistance seems too busy playing at politics to get anything done.”

“They caught some Death Eaters,” the other wizard protested.

“And handed them over to the Ministry!” A witch with dyed hair yelled. “So they can be released again!”

“No, they disappeared,” the first wizard said.

“They were blown up, not disappeared.”

“That’s pureblood propaganda!”

Randall raised his voice again. “The Resistance Radio tells us to do nothing, but the purebloods spread their lies unhindered. Doesn’t anyone else think that that’s wrong?”

“They won the war!” the burly one all but yelled.

“And they’re losing the peace,” Bess said. “They should have kept fighting until the Ministry was crushed.”

The witch glared at her. “My boyfriend’s in the Ministry! He fought the Death Eaters too! His father was cursed by the Dark Lord!”

“You’ve got a pureblood boyfriend?” Bess asked before she could reconsider.

“Half-blood,” the witch spat. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Bess had a problem with that, and she was about to tell the witch so, when Randall took her arm.

“No, of course not,” he said. “We’re just sick of waiting and doing nothing while the Resistance plays games with the Old Families in the Wizengamot and the purebloods gather their forces again.”

A number of the other guests started to nod in agreement, but the dumb witch just had to speak up again. “They’re not playing games. My boyfriend told me that the Wizengamot’s about to come over to our side. Black just needs a few more members to join him.”
“Your boyfriend says a lot, doesn’t he?” Bess shot back, ignoring Randall’s grip on her arm.

“He also fought the Death Eaters at the Battle of the Ministry!” The stupid witch glared at her. “As did the Resistance! What did you do during the war?”

Bess grit her teeth. She couldn’t tell the truth about her actions during the war. She would have to be vague, but… the others were already nodding in agreement with the witch.

“Besides, what could you do about the damn Pureblood Voice anyway? I don’t know a thing about the wireless.” The burly wizard shrugged. “Let them handle it, I say.”

Bess glanced at Randall, who was subtly shaking his head. This was not going according to plan. Not at all. And Randall seemed to blame her.

*****

West of Savanna-la-Mar, Jamaica, April 4th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood felt the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow. He wasn’t actually sweating - his charms handled the humid heat of this wretched island just fine, so he didn’t suffer from it - but after hours of hard work, he felt as if he were.

And he wasn’t done. Not by a long way, yet. The wards of the mansion down in the valley were old and twisted, and he had to work from a far greater distance than was optimal. If he could have used a tunnel to get closer… but the houngans would expect that, after the battle at Williams Manor, or whatever the savages called it.

Taking a deep breath, and a sip from his Ever-Filling Flask, he closed his eyes for a moment. He could continue for another couple hours before he would need to rest. A few more days until he could pass through the wards without alerting anyone. Provided he found out just what the latest spell woven into the mansion’s defenses actually did, of course.

He snorted. Some of his former colleagues would love this. Analysing, manipulating unknown spells was a popular task in the Department. Not as dangerous as dealing with cursed artefacts, but as rewarding. Usually. Not as rewarding as tomb raiding, of course.

He chuckled. He hadn’t been allowed into that field. Croaker, the old bastard, had denied all his requests. Had kept him stuck in Analysis. Merely out of jealousy and spite, in Augustus’s opinion - if Croaker had suspected anything, Augustus would have found himself dosed to the gills with Veritaserum in a heartbeat. Not many knew just how efficient the Department was in policing its members. Or hunting them down, if needed.

He was very fortunate that the Department would never co-operate with the houngans, or he wouldn’t be able to stay for days at the same place without being found by their spells.

Chuckling, he resumed his work. He had wards to bend.

*****

Département du Var, north of Toulon, France, April 6th, 1997

“You have found a location to build a house?” Isabelle - Dubois - sounded happy. She looked happy as well, Sirius Black noticed, when she moved to hug him. And kiss him.

“I have found a potential location,” he corrected her, after breaking the kiss. “I’m not quite certain yet
that it’s suitable, but it’s far from any muggle settlements, and close to a beautiful little lake in the Massif Central.”

“Oh?”

He smiled. “For a new house, I think the Côte d’Azur is a bit too exposed to raiders from the Barbary Coast.”

“Ah.” She nodded.

“I know that they prefer to raid Veela enclaves, but I do not think that they’d pass on the opportunity to rob a manor with weaker wards.” Any new wards would take a long time to grow powerful enough to deter such attacks. “But as I said, I’m not yet set on the location.”

“You’re being cautious?” Her smile turned the question into gentle teasing.

“I’m quite forward when it comes to love, but I have found, to my regret, that when it comes to building a home, one cannot be too cautious.” Sirius had no trouble letting his smile slip a bit. Over the last two days, most of their time together had been spent in bed. Vivienne…

“I see. Hidden depths? Or layers?”

“Not as many as you, my love.” He bent down to kiss her again. He wasn’t lying - the witch had proven to be both charming and witty. If not for her actions and views on blood purity she would be a nice woman, even. But then, bigots could and often were nice to those they liked.

“So, when do I get to see it?”

He managed not to tense up. This could be the opportunity he had been waiting for. He shrugged. “I’m planning to look for a few more locations. There’s no need to bother checking it out if I’m likely to find another I like more.” He couldn’t appear too eager to take her out of her wards.

“If I saw it, I might be able to point out more similar locations.”

He tilted his head to the side. “That’s a good argument, actually.”

She snorted and patted his cheek. “It won’t take us long either.”

“Hm.” He grinned. “We might take longer than expected. The weather is nice, and the fields there looked… comfortable.”

Her smile grew more mischievous. “I see.”

“Not yet.”

She laughed, and went to change into robes suitable for the trip.

“C’est magnifique!” Isabelle - Dubois, he reminded himself - exclaimed, upon seeing the small mountain lake below them.

He nodded. “Clean air, no muggles nearby, and the view is… almost as beautiful as you,” he added, slipping his arms around her waist from behind her. “A modest manor, here… a boathouse below. Maybe a vineyard… though I think that would need a lot of care at this altitude.”
“It would. But it’s possible. I know a specialist for the spells you’d need.”

“Perfect!” he exclaimed, then nipped at her earlobe.

She giggled, and twisted in his arms until she was facing him. “You mentioned the fields being comfortable…”

He kissed her before answering. “Oh, yes. Let me demonstrate!” He drew his wand and cast a Cushioning Charm on the ground behind him, then let himself fall, dragging her down on top of him.

Her bodyguard was about twenty yards away. If the grass were taller they’d be hidden from view. As it was, Isabelle - Dubois - was blocking the witch’s view of his wand arm. Sirius reached up to her face with his left hand, caressing her cheek, then gently pulled her head towards him.

And cast a silent Stunner point-blank at her, right before he activated his Portkey.

*****

South Downs National Park, Hampshire, Britain, April 6th, 1997

Daphne Greengrass forced herself to appear calm and collected as she entered Malfoy’s home. It wouldn’t do for the whole plot to fail just as she and Tracey were about to succeed in their mission. “Mister Malfoy.” She nodded towards him.

“Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis.” He bowed as usual, Daphne noted. “Thank you for coming. Tea will be served in the salon.”

There were no other guests present, Daphne noted as a house-elf placed three cups on the low table. Tracey was already seated, and looking over the selection of snacks. Probably a way to deal with her own nervousness, Daphne assumed. If all went well, then they would be done with the whole thing after this. Done with the Resistance, too. Done with the damn war.

“I assume you have heard about the attack on Cadwallader,” Malfoy said once their cups had been filled.

“Yeah.” Tracey took a sip, then nodded in appreciation. “Terrible. The mudbloods are showing their true colours.”

“Exactly.” Malfoy smiled. “Though they haven’t found the bodies, yet.”

Daphne shrugged. “The whole building went up in fires so hot, everything was turned to ash. Or so I heard,” she added, with a smirk. ‘Be vague’, the werewolf had told them. As if she’d admit to anything to Malfoy!

“Rumours are running wild,” Tracey cut in. “But only the mudbloods know exactly what happened. Maybe they used Fiendfyre, or some muggle concoction that has a similar effect.”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, but Daphne and her friend simply kept smiling. “It’s a terrible tragedy, but maybe now the purebloods will realise just what the mudbloods are planning,” she said.

“Indeed, they do. I have been talking to several of our ‘undecided’ colleagues, and they are coming around.” He was smiling now. “I almost feel as if I should thank those mudbloods.”

Daphne forced herself to chuckle. “So, things are turning around, then?”

Malfoy’s smile vanished. “Not quite. Black’s coup has been delayed, but between his gold, Potter’s
fame and the threat Granger represents, they are still going to win the struggle for control of the Wizengamot.”

Did he expect them to attack another Wizengamot member? Daphne frowned slightly and said: “Maybe the mudbloods will launch another attack.”

The wizard nodded. “It would be ironic if they attacked the Wizengamot, and managed to kill Black and his cohort by mistake.”

*****
Chapter 60: Coup de Grace

‘In hindsight, many may wonder why, given how prevalent the use of the Imperius Curse was during the two Blood Wars, news of attacks by muggleborns or purebloods still had such an impact on Wizarding Britain when everyone had to be aware that false-flag operations were common on both sides. In my opinion, this only proves how set in their ways all factions were; the average wizard or witch didn’t much care about the truth, or reasonable doubt, but instead filtered any news through their own prejudices and preconceptions - an attitude which had been significantly helped along for decades by the Ministry using the Daily Prophet and the Wizarding Wireless to influence the masses. It should come as no surprise that this, too, contributed to the enormous problems faced by Wizarding Britain at the end of the Second Blood War.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 6th, 1997

“Sirius!” Harry hugged Sirius Black, clearly happy to see him back.

“I’ve got the Veritaserum.” Hermione was more focused on the task at hand, but she smiled at him as well.

“I’ll get her ready for interrogation,” Ron said, relieving him of the bound and stunned Dubois.

And Vivienne was at his side, her arms around him. He was home.

He had every reason to be proud and happy. And yet… he was neither. What had he done, really? Seduced a witch, gained her trust, then lured her into a trap. He snorted. “How did things go with the Cadwalladers?” he asked Harry, more to find something else to think about than because he wanted to know.

“It went smoothly. No one was hurt and the DMLE seems to be clueless so far,” his godson said. “The pureblood propaganda is running wild with it, but we were prepared for that. We don’t think it’ll sway many from our side.”

“Good to hear.”

“We also interrogated them. They weren’t Death Eaters, but they wanted the muggleborns gone from Britain, and they didn’t much care how that would be achieved,” Harry added.

Sirius didn’t have to force himself to smile after hearing that. “Good.”

“I’ll help Ron set up the interrogation,” Harry said. “We’ll start as soon as you’re ready, alright?”

Sirius nodded and his godson left for the basement. Or the dungeon, as his family used to call it before his time. He sighed.

“Don’t feel bad, chéri,” Vivienne whispered. “You did what you ’ad to, for your family.”

She had noticed his mood, of course. “I know, just… I feel dirty for seducing her.” And for
ambushing her, but he didn’t say that.

“I can understand that,” she said, hugging him more tightly. “But she did seduce a lot of men to gain power and influence. Even the Duc ’imself. It’s fitting that she should be brought low by ’er own methods.”

He nodded. “Do you think I should get myself checked at St Mungo’s?” he asked, mostly as a joke.

She seemed to take the question seriously, though, and wrinkled her nose for a moment before nodding. “I think you should add a question about that to ’er interrogation.”

He chuckled, and she smiled. He was still feeling guilty, though, as they made their way to the cellar.

*****

“Rennervate.”

Dubois woke up with a groan and blinked. “Quoi…” She gasped, tugging on the bonds that tied her to the chair, and glanced down before looking up. When she saw him sitting across from her, straddling a chair with his arms on the backrest, she hissed. “You!”

He hadn’t heard more venom in a single word since his mother had learned about his Sorting. “Yes, me.” He inclined his head. “Sirius Black.”

She gasped again. Did she pale a little as well? He couldn’t tell.

“How? My guards check everyone for disguises!”

He shrugged. “It’s a muggle disguise.”

An expression of disgust appeared on her face, but was gone in an instant. “I see.” After a moment, she raised her chin slightly. “The Duc will not let this go.”

“He doesn’t even know that we have you.”

“He will soon find out.”

“By that time, it’ll be too late.” The Gendarmes would be investigating his cover by now, but, even with their best efforts, it would hold for at least a few days. Plenty of time to handle this affair.

Her eyes widened briefly. She had remarkable self-control. “So you plan to kill me.”

“Depending on the results of your interrogation, we plan to have you testify against your ’allies’ in Britain.” He shouldn’t be telling her this, but he didn’t care. She deserved at least this much honesty after their… affair.

“Kidnapping a member of the Court of France and parading her around in front of your rabble… The Duc will go to war over this,” she hissed with a sneer.

“I doubt that.”

Dubois whipped her head around when Vivienne stepped forward from behind the captured witch. “You!”

The Veela snorted. “Did you forget that ’e’s my lover?” She stepped past the witch and to his side, putting a hand on his shoulder. He reached up and covered it with his.
“That explains it… another man led around by a half-breed siren.” Dubois glared at her.

Vivienne scoffed. “Keep telling yourself that. You brought this upon yourself when you decided to meddle in Britain’s politics.”

“You and your family started this!”

“My family was attacked by the Dark Lord. We took our revenge, with the Duc’s permission.”

“Do you think I acted without his approval?” Dubois sneered. “He is well aware of the risk the mudbloods pose for France. Haven’t you heard their broadcasts? Read their leaflets? They will not stop at taking over Britain!”

She wasn’t wrong about that, Sirius thought. He was betting Galleons to Knuts that Hermione had plans to do something about the muggleborns in other countries - eventually.

“I think the Duc will deny having had any knowledge of your actions, once you are exposed,” Vivienne said.

Judging by her expression, Dubois thought the same.

Sirius spoke up. “Was that why you wanted to start another war in Britain? To crush the muggleborns here?”

“Crush, weaken, keep them busy - the exact results don’t matter, as long as the rot is kept from spreading.”

“The rot’, huh?” He shook his head. “I guess you’re not really different from the Death Eaters, then.”

“I’m simply doing what is best for my country.”

“What about the French muggleborns?” he asked.

She pressed her lips together and didn’t answer.

It was time for the Veritaserum.

*****

“Did you plan to restart the civil war in Wizarding Britain?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you work with British wizards and witches towards that goal?”

“Yes.”

“Did you contact them or did they contact you?”

“I contacted them, after I heard they were looking for help.”

Under the effect of Veritaserum, Dubois’s voice sounded much less attractive. She was answering in a dull tone, devoid of any emotion - so unlike the witch Sirius had, if briefly, known. It made listening to the interrogation easier.
“Who did you contact?” Hermione’s voice lacked emotion as well, he noticed.

“Augustus Malfoy and Theodore Nott.”

Sirius hissed through teeth clenched in a feral grin. They had the bastard now!

“Were they working together?”

“No.”

“Did you work with both?”

“Yes.”

“Did Malfoy know that?”

“Yes.”

“Did Nott know that?”

“No.”

Nott had been a useful idiot, then, Sirius thought.

The rest of the interrogation went as expected, with Hermione asking question after question while her Dictaquill wrote down the answers on an Endless Scroll.

Dubois had been acting on her own, technically, but it was clear that the Duc had been aware of her plans. She had supported Nott with potions, gold and directions, including when and how to attack - apparently, she didn’t know who had attacked the first muggleborn rally in February, but they had already known that from Nott’s memories. Dubois hadn’t been working with Beaumont either, though she suspected the Duc had been directing the other witch in response to her efforts.

But most importantly, they knew Malfoy was planning to restart the war, and had been promised support from France. Enough for a long war that would exhaust all factions, until Magical Europe could step in and take control of the remnants of Britain. Malfoy, of course, hadn’t been informed of that.

And all because Dubois and her allies feared a French muggleborn revolution. Or a second Grindelwald. He shook his head. Fools. Bigoted fools. They were reaping what they had sown. Or would be.

“Did your plans involve other countries as well? Prussia?”

“No.”

Hermione was still interrogating the witch, even though she hadn’t heard anything more than speculation and negative answers for the last five minutes. Well, they had confirmation that Dubois hadn’t had any contact with muggleborns. Sirius cleared his throat. “I think we’re done now.”

“One more question,” Hermione said. She didn’t wait for his answer, and turned her attention back to the French witch. “What are you planning to do about the French muggleborns?”

Dubois told them.

Sirius didn’t feel guilty for deceiving her any more. He felt dirty, though.
“The French are planning to preemptively kill ‘the most dangerous’ of their muggleborns.” Hermione was pacing in Sirius’s living room, angrier than he had ever seen her. Or that he remembered.

“Not the French. Dubois and ’er allies.” Vivienne, sitting on the armrest of Sirius’s seat, barely flinched when Hermione turned to glare at her. Sirius had known his lover was brave, but this proved it. He could feel her tense, though.

“With the approval of the Duc,” the muggleborn witch snarled. Sirius saw Ron purse his lips, then stand up and join her.

“She only thinks that she ’as ’is approval. The Duc wouldn’t condone this,” Vivienne retorted.

“He condones her actions in Britain,” Harry cut in while Ron put his hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“That’s not the same as murdering ’is own subjects,” Vivienne shook her head. “’E knows what that would lead to - the revolution Dubois and others fear.”

“Dubois should know that as well,” Harry said.

“She wants to preserve her country, her world from changing,” Sirius cut in, patting Vivienne’s hand. “But she doesn’t see, or rather, she doesn’t want to see, that France needs to change to prevent a revolution in the not-so-distant future.” He didn’t mention that, in his opinion, the threat of revealing such plans to the public would convince the Duc to condemn them even if the French ruler had no problem with such murders. Which Sirius didn’t doubt.

“Causing what you fear by the very actions you are taking to prevent it.” Hermione snorted. “That’s straight out of a classical tragedy.”

“Or comedy,” added Sirius, “depending on whose side you are.” That earned him glares from everyone. He would have added another tasteless quip, to uphold his facade, if not for Vivienne’s look. He sighed instead and said: “If this information is revealed, there will be a revolution in France.”

“Another,” Hermione said. He frowned - no one called Grindelwald’s War a revolution, but he guessed it could be seen as one. The witch was already continuing: “But it will not be successful, not if launched without any preparation, or any support from the establishment. It will be a bloody massacre, and the French muggleborn will drag us into it while we’re still dealing with the aftermath of our own war.”

“Which means we can’t make this public,” Harry cut to the conclusion.

Vivienne spoke up. “The Duc must know about this! And ’e must know that we know.” Sirius smiled proudly. Brave and cunning.

“I think a public trial for Malfoy and his accomplices will be enough to discredit their faction and we can do that without revealing Dubois,” Sirius suggested. “We’ll have to deal with her ourselves, though - handing her over to the Ministry would pretty much cause all the problems we want to avoid.” The obvious solution was clear to him, of course. And he could see Hermione understood it as well.

“Give ’er to my family! If she disappears, ’er friends will use that to ’urt my family. Once we ’ave Malfoy arrested they’ll know that it was us. And she needs to be alive to… influence the Duc so ’e’ll put a stop to this madness. Afterwards… She is a proud witch. Realising that she will not be able to
take revenge might very well push ’er to take ’er own life to escape the shame and ’umiliation. That will solve all those problems,” Vivienne said with a feral smile.

Brave, cunning, and cruel, Sirius thought. She could have been born a Black.

*****

South Downs National Park, Hampshire, Britain, April 6th, 1997

“The Ministry’s security measures are not perfect - I’m telling you this in the strictest confidence, of course; it would be a catastrophe if any violent mudblood were to learn of this!” Malfoy was leaning forward and had lowered his voice.

Daphne Greengrass hated the man’s theatrics, but she couldn’t help following his example and leaning forward as well. “I thought the wards and other protective measures were redone after the Battle of the Ministry.”

“They were, but - as with so much else after that tragic day - the wizards tasked with restoring the defences rushed their work ... to its detriment.”

“One would expect that they would at least have taken care to guard against bombs, though.” Tracey narrowed her eyes at the wizard. “Those are the most common mudblood weapon.”

“They did - to a point. The danger of Imperiused attackers is greatly reduced by the Thief’s Downfall installed in the Atrium and at the entrance to the Wizengamot’s floor, and any blast of sufficient power to break through the defences would do so much damage that the Ministry would be exposed to muggles, which the Obliviators would prevent since it endangered them as well. But if a mudblood managed to sneak a bomb into the Wizengamot Chamber…”

Daphne snorted. “The only mudblood allowed access to the chamber is Granger, and I doubt that she’d do that.”

“And said hypothetical mudblood would have to sacrifice their own life to ensure that the bomb goes off,” Tracey added.

Daphne nodded - Malfoy couldn’t expect them to commit suicide to achieve his goals, could he? There were few people allowed to enter the chamber, other than the members themselves.

The wizard frowned. “But the muggles are able to use their bombs from a distance - or have them explode after a certain time has passed.”

Daphne nodded.

“They can’t detonate a bomb from a distance through wards,” Tracey said. “So I’ve heard.”

“But a timer would be possible. If the hypothetical mudblood could gain access to the chamber, set the bomb, timed for the start of the session, and then leave…” Malfoy spread his hands.

“There is still the issue of the sheer volume of the hypothetical bomb needed for such a task,” Daphne said. Though given what she had seen at the Cadwalladers’, if combined with a Gemino Curse, even a small amount of muggle explosive could be rapidly expanded, and the force of the explosion… It was possible, she realised.

“Such a bomb would kill everyone inside the Wizengamot. And anyone lucky enough to be late would be under suspicion of being behind the attack, no matter who did it,” Tracey said. “And if all
his opponents are missing, Black might suspect a trap and leave.”

“Indeed. Although the mudbloods might attack the more prominent opponents of Black in their homes at the same time as well, to ensure their deaths. That would, of course, explain the survivors being late.”

Daphne’s eyes widened. Did Malfoy actually plan to sacrifice most of his allies? That would cover his tracks - if the mudbloods were blamed for it. And the heirs of the dead members would certainly be ill-disposed towards the mudbloods. That had been the case after Malfoy Manor as well. She felt the pain of losing her parents again, then forced herself to consider the issue. Yes, she decided, Malfoy would sacrifice them all. It would leave him with a Wizengamot full of inexperienced members, easily manipulated while they were grieving. She slowly nodded, hoping that her face didn’t betray her shock at the realisation. “Indeed, that would throw a wrench in the mudbloods’ plans.”

Tracey nodded. She didn’t say anything, though, for which Daphne was glad. Her friend’s temper could betray them both.

“Provided, of course,” Malfoy said, “that the mudbloods could find a way to sneak such a bomb into the Wizengamot Chamber.”

“That… might be possible,” Daphne said. She saw Tracey stifle a gasp and glance at her, but she focused on Malfoy. “But whoever did this would need some time to prepare.”

“Of course. But in the meantime, the mudbloods and their blood traitor allies encroach even more on the very heart of Britain. The window of opportunity for such a blunder by them is shrinking.” Malfoy sighed, almost theatrically.

“We can but hope that we will be as fortunate as we were with the Cadwalladers,” Daphne replied.

On the way to the fireplace of Malfoy Manor, Daphne made idle conversation while her thoughts raced. They could do this, she knew. They could avenge her and Tracey’s parents. They could kill all the blood traitors in the Wizengamot. If they could blame the mudbloods for the attack it would even work out - between the blood traitor’s heirs blaming the mudbloods, and the mudbloods blaming each other, Malfoy could take control of the Wizengamot and the Ministry. With the Resistance and the Order leaderless, the Ministry had a decent chance of winning the war, too. And even if that didn’t work out… the country would be so weakened by all the chaos, she and Astoria, and Tracey, would be able to disappear from Britain without risking being sent back by another country to placate the Ministry.

She clenched her teeth as she stepped up to the fireplace. She could avenge her family and - possibly - prevent the mudbloods’ takeover of Britain. She could be free of Black, too. Safe.

And all she had to do was to kill dozens of people, and plunge Britain into another war.

She glanced at Tracey, but she couldn’t tell what her friend was thinking.

She could do it. Show them all. Kill Black, Granger, Potter and Weasley. People who had ruined her life. Murdered her parents and friends.

As long as she was willing to risk it all as well. And see countless more people die in another war.

They reached the fireplace. If she wanted to do this, she needed to talk to Tracey before they reached
her home, where the werewolf was waiting. If they were to do this, they needed to work together and plan ahead. They couldn’t head straight back to her home.

If she wanted to do this.

She grabbed a handful of Floo powder.

Did she want to do this?

She hesitated, just for a second, long enough for Tracey to glance at her, then threw the powder into the fire.

“Greengrass Manor.”

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, April 7th, 1997

Amelia Bones didn’t want to see Sirius Black. The wizard flouted any law that might hinder him and openly scorned the Ministry. But he was also the most influential member of the Wizengamot - Doge was but a figurehead - and he wouldn’t falsely claim that he had important information just to rile her up. Amelia herself would certainly never neglect her duty and play power games for petty reasons. Even though she hated that, once again, the Ministry was being sidelined or blindsided.

But that he was bringing Granger with him… She clenched her teeth and forced herself to calm down so she wouldn’t lose her temper when facing the mass-murdering muggleborn.

“Good morning, Sirius,” she said with the barest hint of a nod when he entered his office. “Miss Granger.”

Black simply nodded back at her. Granger didn’t show any reaction to Amelia not addressing her as ‘Madam Granger’, as befitted a member of the Wizengamot. Even if the girl had failed her Wizarding Customs O.W.L. exam, she would be aware of that.

“Sirius.” Pius, of course, was all too courteous. “Madam Granger.” He even bowed to the girl - could he be more obvious in his attempts to curry favour?

“Mister Thicknesse.”

“What brings you to my office this early in the morning?” Amelia said as soon as the two visitors had sat down.

Black leaned forward, grinning widely but without any humour that she could detect. “Proof that Augustus Malfoy is conspiring with foreign purebloods and plans to murder the entire Wizengamot.”

Amelia froze, hissing through suddenly clenched teeth. Even Pius seemed shocked. “What did you do?”

Black chuckled. “We’ve been investigating Malfoy for some time. Last night we finally found proof that he wants to blow up the Wizengamot - with him absent, of course - and frame the muggleborns for it.”

“What kind of proof do you have?” Amelia asked. They hadn’t heard anything about this from the Ministry’s spy. Had Black gone so far as to kidnap Malfoy? A glance told her that Pius didn’t know anything more either.
“Testimonies. Observations. Enough to arrest him, and his co-conspirators and interrogate them with Veritaserum.” Black leaned back, looking far too smug for Amelia’s taste. If this was true, then this affair was far too serious for his attitude.

She set her jaw. “I’m not about to arrest a member of the Wizengamot on the say so of his chief political rival.”

“I would never expect you to, of course.” Black was still grinning.

Granger reached inside her robes and pulled out three vials. “Here are the memories of Malfoy planning his attack, as well as the memory of him ordering the attack on the Cadwalladers. They are alive and well,” she added with a grin that showed too many teeth.

“So you were the ones who attacked them,” Amelia said. And they had lied about it.

Black shrugged. “It was needed to gain Malfoy’s trust. No one died.”

He hadn’t said that the Cadwalladers had been working with them, Amelia noted. Which told her enough. “You kidnapped them.”

Black’s grin widened. “A necessary ruse. Without it, we wouldn’t have been able to find out about Malfoy’s plans for the Wizengamot.”

“I’m certain that even your political enemies will understand the necessity of this course of action,” Pius said.

Amelia briefly glared at him. She knew as well as Pius that the Wizengamot would never condemn Black, not after he just saved all of their lives. If his claims were true. Which, she knew, they almost certainly were. But who… she narrowed her eyes. Of course. “Greengrass or Davis, or both, are working for you.”

Black chuckled. “Right on the mark, Amelia.”

“Some might suspect entrapment.” Not that too many Wizengamot members would care about the legal details in a case like this.

“The testimonies and his interrogation will show that he was the one to instigate everything. All that the two snakes did was accept his invitations and proposals.” Black spread his hands.

“We need to plan his arrest carefully,” Pius said.

“Their arrest,” Granger cut in. “Everyone who attended those clandestine meetings has to be arrested at the same time, or they will escape. They might not all be privy to his plans, certainly not those who would have died with the rest of us should he have succeeded, but they certainly were willing to resort to criminal acts to take control of Wizarding Britain.”

Amelia clenched her teeth. To hear the girl condemn others for the same crimes she and Black had committed…

“Of course,” Pius agreed, as if he weren’t aware of the hypocrisy of Granger’s statement. She glared at him, but he ignored her.

“He might have traitors among the Aurors as well,” Granger continued. “And among the Ministry’s staff. The Resistance will be ready to intervene, should they attempt a coup. As we did before.”
“We have enough trusted Aurors and Hit-Wizards to manage,” Amelia spat.

“You better be dead certain of their loyalty.” Black was staring at her.

She bristled at the implication. The Ministry hadn’t fallen so low as to need help from Black and Granger to arrest a bunch of traitors.

Once more, Pius stepped in. “I believe I know who we can trust in this matter.” His smile turned what should have been a rebuke into a conciliatory remark.

She controlled herself with some effort. “We’ll watch the memories. Depending on the results, we’ll arrest him before today’s session.”

She wouldn’t let anyone, not even herself, keep her from doing her duty.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, April 7th, 1997

“You know, I think this is the first time we’re not going to be early for a session,” Harry Potter said as he and his friends stepped out of the fireplace in the Ministry’s Atrium and through the Thief’s Downfall set up there.

Ron chuckled. “And the first time Hermione’s not nagging us about being late.”

The witch in question huffed, but didn’t comment. She huffed again when Ron reached over and ruffled her hair, but didn’t pull away, Harry noticed. He was glad for the distraction - after Remus had told them about Malfoy’s plan, Hermione had confirmed that it would be possible, in her opinion. Harry had worried about the possibility of Malfoy going ahead without Greengrass and Davis’s help ever since. He couldn’t, and shouldn’t, personally check every nook and cranny in the Ministry, not without tipping Malfoy off about the fact that they knew about his plans, but he couldn’t help glancing around, worrying about possible ambushes.

The Ministry was still full of purebloods, and while there couldn’t be many of Voldemort’s supporters left after the Battle of the Ministry and the following purge, there were bound to be a few. And Malfoy’s propaganda might have turned a few more Ministry employees, especially among those who had been active in the hunt for the Muggleborn Resistance during the war.

Thicknesse had said that they could trust the Auror and Hit-Wizard guards on shift today, and they were not planning to let Malfoy get close to the Wizengamot Chamber, but… He shook his head. “Smile, Harry,” Sirius whispered, “we don’t want people to suspect anything, do we?”

His godfather had cast a privacy spell beforehand, but Harry still glared at him. If Thicknesse was a traitor, then this would be the perfect opportunity to get rid of not just the leaders of the Order and the Resistance, but also of the Aurors most supportive of them. Tonks had messaged them that Thicknesse had passed through the Thief’s Downfall, which ruled out Polyjuice, but what if Bones wanted to betray them? Or if Dawlish was a traitor? Or someone else, someone also able to prepare an ambush without any guards noticing? Or if anyone had managed to sabotage the Thief’s Downfall? Harry really didn’t trust anyone in the Ministry, other than Tonks, Arthur and Percy. And all three would also be present for the occasion.

When the fireplace flared up behind them, he glanced over his shoulder, his wand in hand, but it was just a clerk.
At least there were a few members of the Resistance present - Harry saw Tania and Seamus acting as if they were studying the fountain and flirting with each other - and the rest of them were ready to storm the Ministry, but if there was an ambush they’d take some time to arrive through the lift shaft. Although the threat of swift vengeance might serve to keep Bones and Thicknesse honest. But even that was no guarantee.

Or, Harry thought, Moody’s lessons might have been a bit too good.

“Looks clear,” Hermione whispered, looking as if she was talking about the bills to be discussed this session while she twirled her wand in her hand.

“Haven’t noticed anything either,” Ron said, glancing at the lift on the other side of the Atrium. Tonks was walking towards them, smiling, though she looked quite tense.

“Hey there!” She waved, as if she was meeting them by chance.

“Nymphadora!” Sirius exclaimed. “How is my favourite cousin doing?” He ignored her scowl and muttered “Tonks!” while he recast his privacy spell to include her.

“Everything’s ready,” she said, her tone not matching the glare she aimed at Sirius. “Runcorn’s already inside the chamber. He’ll be arrested there.”

Sirius was, as usual, utterly unimpressed by any expression of disapproval not accompanied by at least hexes. “Ah! Please ask your mother for a memory of that so I can watch and enjoy it later.”

The fireplace flared up again, but it wasn’t Malfoy, just a few more members of the Wizengamot Harry didn’t know by name. Backbenchers, Hermione called them.

Harry glanced at Thicknesse, who was chatting with half a dozen Aurors near the lift. He was envious of the man’s composure - there was no sign on his face that he was about to make one of the most important arrests of his career.

The Minister stepping out of the lift drew some attention from the Ministry employees in the Atrium, though no one approached her - Bones’s stern expression must have scared them off, Harry thought with some amusement.

Just then, Malfoy stepped out of the fireplace. The wizard was through the Thief’s Downfall before he suddenly stopped walking, staring first at Bones, then at Thicknesse, who was walking straight towards him.

Malfoy turned, as if to leave, but the fireplaces had gone out already, as planned. Harry saw a sneer appear on the man’s face, before a thin smile replaced it as Malfoy turned to face Thicknesse.

Everyone in the Atrium was now staring at Malfoy and Thicknesse. If any traitors were among the crowd, they wouldn’t be easy to spot.

Harry had his wand out, as did his friends, and kept glancing around for any threat. Any danger.

Thicknesse stopped a few yards in front of Malfoy. “Augustus Malfoy, you are under arrest for treason.” His voice carried far through the Atrium, even though it didn’t sound as if he had cast an Amplifying Charm.

“Treason?” Malfoy scoffed. “Has the Ministry fallen so low that it has become a tool to be wielded against political opponents?” He stood stiff and straight, but hadn’t drawn his wand. That was a good sign, in Harry’s opinion - it probably meant that Malfoy didn’t have enough traitors around to fight it
“Hardly,” Thicknesse responded. “We know about your plan to bomb the Wizengamot.” Two Aurors stepped forward to flank Malfoy as the crowd observing the scene gasped upon hearing this.

The man flinched. “Preposterous! This is an obvious attempt to discredit and frame me!” He took a step back, though. “You cannot arrest a member of the Wizengamot! This is treason!”

“You are a traitor!” Thicknesse retorted. “Take him!”

Malfoy tried to draw his wand, but the Aurors stunned him right away, and the wand clattered as it fell to the ground.

Harry kept an eye on the crowd, his wand pointed at the ground, but ready to cast. Some looked as if they were ready to start a fight, either to help or kill Malfoy, but no one actually made any threatening moves while he was taken down to the DMLE’s cells.

Harry didn’t relax his guard, though, not even when he and his friends were on their way up to the Wizengamot. He knew it would be some time until he would feel safe again inside the Ministry.

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**London, Diagon Alley, April 7th, 1997**

“... Malfoy was arrested on the way to the Wizengamot. Philius Runcorn, the most senior member of the Wizengamot and close friend of Augustus Malfoy, was arrested in the Wizengamot Chamber, together with several of their acquaintances.”

Bess Cox wasn’t the only one listening to the Resistance Radio in Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips who whistled in response to the news. Rumours had spread since the early afternoon of a shake-up at the Ministry and had grown wilder with each passing hour. The Resistance storming the building, capturing the Wizengamot, Malfoy launching a coup, Bones forming a dictatorship, the ICW intervening… the rumours had been piling up, and her and Randall’s attempts to find more people willing to take the fight to the purebloods in hiding had not fared well when everyone had been discussing the latest ‘news’.

“The arrests happened after the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance discovered that Mister Malfoy was planning to blow up the Wizengamot in the middle of a session, murdering everyone but those absent - namely, himself and a few of his cronies - and framing muggleborn extremists for the attack.”

The whistles turned to yells and shouts of anger. Bess ground her teeth. If she got her hands on Malfoy…

Someone turned up the volume on the wireless receiver, and the voice of the Resistance Radio’s announcer rose above the angry cries of the audience.

“... presented with such evidence, the Ministry arrested the culprits. While Mister Malfoy’s exact plans are not yet known, it’s clear, both from sources close to the case as well as his public statements, that Mister Malfoy wanted to stop Wizarding Britain from becoming a democracy where everyone has equal rights no matter their blood status, and that he didn’t care how much death and destruction would be caused by his futile efforts.”

Once more the yells drowned out the wireless broadcast, but this time, the repeated shouts to settle down and listen from various guests, including Bess herself, didn’t have any effect. Cursing, she sat out.
down and huffed.

Randall, who had stayed sitting, pointed at the door. “Let’s go outside!”

She dropped a few coins on the table to pay for her meal - she didn’t want him to pay for both of them - and followed him out on to the street. “Those bastards!”

He nodded. “Although if this is true, then Malfoy just ruined the Old Families. Trying to murder all of them just so he can kill Granger, Black and Potter as well? No one will want to support anything he supported for a while.”

“If this is true’?” Bess narrowed her eyes at him.

A flick of his wand cast a privacy spell around the two of them. “It seems almost too convenient for Malfoy to try something like this - and for Black and the Resistance to find out about it in time to stop it.”

Bess blinked. “Do you mean they set him up?”

Randall shrugged. “Maybe. It has certainly removed the biggest obstacle to reforming the Wizengamot and the Ministry, and pulled the rug out from under any other pureblood supremacists still holding out.”

It made a lot of sense to Bess. She slowly nodded, then shrugged. “I don’t care either way, as long as this means that we can finally replace the purebloods in the Wizengamot.”

He chuckled as they walked towards the main street of the Alley. “Yes. Whether this was a set-up, or a lucky break, the Resistance better not miss this opportunity.”

Bess nodded. They had lost enough time playing nice with the purebloods. Then she grinned. “At least the Wizengamot won’t let him go. Not when he had planned to kill ’em all.”

“You’re right,” he said. “The only question will be: Veil or Kiss?”

She grinned. It didn’t matter, not really - Malfoy deserved both.

*****

Kent, Greengrass Manor, April 7th, 1997

“...the latest example of stubborn bigotry. Malfoy was willing to murder dozens, including his so-called friends, just so he could keep the Old Families in power! But he failed, just as everyone else trying to follow his example will fail!

“We’re fighting for the rights of every wizard and witch in Britain, no matter their blood! We will win for all of us! We will have democracy! We will have equality! Blood doesn’t matter!”

Daphne Greengrass, sitting on her bed in her room, sighed and flicked her wand to turn the wireless receiver off, then slumped slightly. It was done. Malfoy and Runcorn and their cronies had been arrested. Thanks to herself and her friend. Who was currently shaking her head at Daphne.

“They didn’t mention us.” Tracey, seated sideways on Daphne’s favourite chair, arms draped over the backrest, mock-pouted.

“They didn’t have to. Our involvement will be obvious soon enough,” Daphne said. “Once it becomes known that we’ve not been arrested.” They hadn’t been at the session, after all.
Her friend snorted. “That information will already have spread. It’s a miracle that the DMLE managed to keep the whole thing a secret until the arrest.”

Daphne shrugged. “Our fates have been tied to Black’s ever since we decided to turn on Theo.”

Tracey narrowed her eyes at her. “You sound bitter about that. Having second thoughts?”

“It was the best course of action for us and our families.” That didn’t mean that she liked it.

“You thought about Malfoy’s plan, though.”

Her best friend knew her, of course. “As did you.”

“Of course,” Tracey said. “It would have been stupid not to carefully consider all available options in our situation.”

Daphne hesitated a moment, then leaned forward. “So… why did you decide to stick with Black?”

“Only a fool would trust a leader who sacrifices his allies like Malfoy was planning to.” Tracey’s sneer seemed forced to Daphne. “He’d have sacrificed us as well, either to cut a deal, or as a diversion for another of his plans.” She huffed. “And he treated us like little girls.”

“The werewolf does the same,” Daphne pointed out.


Daphne shivered. To flirt with a werewolf, even if it wasn’t serious…

“So, why didn’t you join Malfoy?”

“Same reason as you,” Daphne said.

After a moment, her friend tilted her head to the side. “Sick of the war, then?”

Daphne looked out of the window, at the top of the trees of the garden outside. “Like you.”

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Then Tracey broke the silence. “Did you talk to Astoria yet?”

Daphne winced. She wasn’t looking forward to that talk.

“Ah.” Tracey sighed. “Aren’t you afraid that she’ll run off to curse some muggleborns?”

“I convinced her that Granger can keep track of her, as the Gryffindors did in Hogwarts, and would hunt her down and kill her if she left the house.” She didn’t like lying to her sister, but if it kept her from getting herself - and their family - killed...

Tracey chuckled. “That’s a good one! And she fell for it?”

Daphne frowned. Tracey was her best friend, but Astoria was her sister. She shrugged. “Lupin has been living here for weeks now. Are you certain that they can’t track us?”

Tracey’s smirk vanished and she muttered a few rather colourful words under her breath.

Daphne nodded. Even if tracking them at Hogwarts had been Dumbledore’s doing, the Headmaster
might very well have shared that with Potter and his friends before his death. “We can’t know for
certain, but…” She shrugged.

“…it would be foolish to think we’re safe,” Tracey finished for her, clenching her teeth.

“As long as we’re not acting against them, we should be safe, actually,” Daphne said, “We’re now
firmly established as their allies.” At least as far as the public was concerned. And Malfoy’s cronies.

“Unless they plan to use our deaths to frame another of their enemies,” Tracey added with a cynical
smile.

Daphne glared at her friend. That wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

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Cumbria, Britain, April 7th, 1997

“Thank you, sir.” Hermione Granger smiled at the mercenary as she pushed a small bag over the
folding table. “Here’s the rest of your payment, as agreed. And a bonus, for your excellent work.”

The Major nodded at her, then opened the bag and checked the money and gold inside. The sun was
about to set, but they didn’t need lamps yet.

The Sergeant scoffed. “We’d have done better if some of the recruits hadn’t been missing half the
time.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Or all of them for your ‘field trip’.”

She smiled wryly. “They needed to relax.”

He slowly shook his head. “There was nothing in the news, yet once they were back they acted as if
they had been in combat.”

“Just a field trip.” She shrugged.

“Most of them are older than you, but they follow you. And they don’t resent Potter and Weasley,
even though those two get special treatment all the time.”

“Quit fishing for information, Mick,” the Major said. “Our clients paid for their privacy.”

“Right.” The Sergeant looked at her for a moment, then glanced at the Major. “Payment checks
out?”

“Yes.”

The Sergeant grunted and stood up. “I’ll get the Land Rover then.”

Once the burly mercenary had left the folding table, the Major said in a low voice: “He doesn’t like
mysteries.”

“I understand the feeling.” She really did - in their place, she’d have gone crazy trying to figure out
what was really going on.

“I bet you do. But do you understand not being able to figure something out?”

She just smiled. She couldn’t answer that.

“Thought so.” He inclined his head, then stood up and held out his hand. “Pleasure doing business
with you.” She rose as well and shook it. “Will there be another contract in the future?”

Hermione hesitated a moment, then nodded. “That is likely.” The war had proven that the Ministry’s organisation wasn’t up to the task of fighting a war. Aurors were meant for police work, even those hunting dark wizards, and the Hit-Wizards’ numbers could not expand quickly enough during war time. And the majority of them were glorified guards, not trained soldiers.

“Maybe I’ll find out what, exactly, you need soldiers for.” He nodded at her.

“Maybe.” Some muggles were told about magic, after all, even without being related to a wizard or witch.

“Until then, ma’am.” He saluted her.

“Sir.” She returned the salute.

*****

Hermione Granger looked at the camp. Tents were packing themselves up, firepits and latrines - not that those had really been used, with wizarding tents available - were being filled with earth, and litter was being vanished left and right. With the Major and the Sergeant gone, there was no longer any need to hide magic, and the latest members of the Resistance were using their wands to clean up Justin’s family’s woods.

She turned around and stepped inside her own tent. Justin, Sally-Anne, John, Tania, Louise and Seamus were arrayed around a conjured table in the centre of the living room.

She nodded at them. “Alright. You all know what happened today.”

“We let the Ministry arrest Malfoy and Runcorn.” Seamus’s tone clearly indicated that he didn’t like that. She refrained from rolling her eyes.

“We just saw the death of the Death Eater faction in the Wizengamot. The bigots just lost whatever support they still had among the other members.” She stood straight, hands crossed behind her back. “We’ll be able to push the Wizengamot Reform Act through as soon as the dust from the arrests has settled.” With a toothy smile, she added: “We did it. We’ve won the war.”

Sally-Anne was the first to cheer and she hugged a smiling Justin. Tania grinned widely and elbowed Seamus, who glanced at her in response. Louise yelled “Yes!” and John nodded. Soon everyone was yelling.

Hermione watched her friends - even stubborn, bloodthirsty Seamus - cheer with a wide smile of her own. After over a year of struggling, they had beaten the bigots. In the field, and in the Wizengamot. They had won. She sighed. They had paid a heavy price, though.

“What do we do now?” Sally-Anne’s question broke her out of her reminiscing. The witch was shifting her weight from one leg to the other and back. “We won the war, and now it’s all politics. That’s...” She shrugged. “I’m not a politician. And we’re an army, not a political party.” Her eyes traveled to the tent’s exit. “They just finished training, too.”

Hermione nodded. “The Resistance is still needed. We’ve seen that the Ministry wasn’t ready for a war. They didn’t have an army, just some Aurors and guards. More importantly, they had no plan to create an army. They had no reserves. No plan for a mobilisation or conscription.” Which had been a very good thing for the Resistance during the war. “And we know that even with the bigots utterly discredited, we have enemies - the Jamaican houngans. Possibly the French.” If Sirius’s next mission
failed.

“Are we going to merge with the Hit-Wizards?” Louise asked.

Hermione shook her head. “I think we should take them over. Train them as we have trained. Keep a small cadre for guard duties, and the rest of us as reserves who can be called up in a very short time if needed.”

“Like a militia?” Justin had his arm around Sally-Anne’s shoulders.

“Sort of,” she said. “It’s more like the militaries on the continent that use conscription. Like the Swiss.”

“So, we’ll be in control of Wizarding Britain’s military.” Seamus grinned.

“We’ll be in control of the entire Ministry,” Hermione said. “Once we have a majority in the Wizengamot.” But having control of the military would ensure that there wouldn’t be another set of muggleborn laws. Never again.

She took a deep breath. “And as much as I hate to say it just as we won the struggle in Britain, we have another battle in front of us.” Most of them looked puzzled, but Justin and Louise nodded. “We need to find a cure for the Withering Curse.”

And Hermione didn’t think that the houngans would give it to them without a fight.

West of Savanna-la-Mar, Jamaica, April 7th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood took a deep breath, inhaling the cool air of the Jamaican night. He had done it - he had bent the wards of the mansion below him. They wouldn’t stop or hinder him any more.

But wards were not all the manor’s defences. He already knew that the mambo had zombies as servants. Even if they were muggles they would present an obstacle. Or a distraction. He had seen kennels in a side building of the manor as well - there would be dogs, at the least. Maybe magical animals. Nothing that could fly, though - the kennels had no roof.

He scoffed. He could deal with mere animals. Nor was he much bothered by the prospect of dealing with spelled furniture and cursed objects. A skilled wizard’s home was a death trap for an unwary intruder. Or should be, at least - but Augustus was neither unwary nor inexperienced.

No, the real trouble was the mambo inside the manor. He had to take her alive to get her knowledge. And that would be difficult. Even for a wizard as skilled as himself.

Fortunately, he was prepared. He reached into his enchanted pocket and pulled out a small case containing several vials. He took a sip from one of them, ignoring its vile taste. That would remove his scent, rendering the dogs useless.

Another vial he drank in its entirety - he could take no chances with this one, even if he could feel his stomach already growing unsettled. Not with at least two apprentices inside the manor as well, according to the memories he had taken from ‘Ricky’.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then pointed his wand at his face. A complicated transfiguration later, the night’s darkness faded from his view, and he saw the manor on the small hill below as an owl would see it at night.
He cast a Disillusionment Charm and started to carefully make his way downslope from the ridge on which he had been staying. It took him twenty minutes to reach the wardline, mostly because he didn’t follow any of the paths in the woods and fields - those would be covered with detection spells or even traps.

Despite his confidence in his work, he held his breath when he reached out with his arm - his left arm, of course, never his wand arm. While unlikely, he might have missed a defence. But while his skin tingled when he pushed his hand through the wards, he encountered no resistance nor was he pushed back or struck down. Releasing his breath, he stepped inside the wards.

A path ahead of him led towards the manor’s side entrance, but he didn’t take it. Nor did he walk over the lawn. Instead, he pulled out his broom and unshrunk it, then looked at the balcony on the south side. Zombies generally couldn’t fly, so the defences on the ground were likely to be more powerful.

He fought down a sudden bout of nausea, flew up to the first floor and eyed the balcony, then shook his head. Too obvious. Too vulnerable. He flew on, towards a small window near the balcony. He could see a corridor behind it. Perfect.

He aimed his wand at it and cast a privacy charm on it to mask any sound his entrance might cause, followed by an Unlocking Charm. He slipped inside, not touching either pane or frame. Now he just had to find the mambo.

Although the three markers moving toward his position that his Human-presence-revealing Spell showed him might indicate that he had found her already. Or she him.

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Chapter 61: Foreign Solutions

‘Augustus Malfoy’s failed plot to blow up the Wizengamot spelled the end of what has come to be known as the ‘traditionalist pureblood movement’ in Wizarding Britain. By planning to murder not just his enemies, but his allies, even his own kin, Malfoy betrayed the very ideals - blood, honour, tradition - for which he claimed to be fighting. His actions did not just discredit his entire faction, but also allowed Sirius Black to portray his own movement as the only reasonable alternative to a complete takeover by the muggleborns. Such a portrayal would have otherwise been very difficult for any member of the Black family, even more so for a wizard with Black’s radical history. It is quite ironic that the very attempt to prevent Black’s takeover of the Wizengamot instead greatly facilitated it. This is one of the reasons some of my colleagues consider the Malfoy bomb plot as the end of the Second Blood War - especially if they consider the bombing of Malfoy Manor to be its start - despite the fact that this requires one to ignore several significant events which are undoubtedly part of that conflict.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

West of Savanna-la-Mar, Jamaica, April 7th, 1997

For a moment, Augustus Rookwood considered retreating. It was obvious that he had lost the element of surprise. But if he did, he would lose more than a week’s work - some of the ingredients for the potions he had used were nigh-impossible to come by as a civilian unless one had lavish funds. And while money could be acquired, contacts who were unscrupulous enough to deal with Britain’s most wanted wizard without betraying him to the authorities were another thing. Further, he wouldn’t be able to repeat the same tactic again. So he pressed his lips together and dismounted, sticking the broom to the wall outside. He could do this - he was prepared and had a plan.

One of the markers was coming at him from behind, two from ahead. A flick of his wand transfigured the planter in the alcove in front of him into a vaguely humanoid figure while he stepped into another alcove on the other side of the corridor. With a twist of his wand he conjured a giant snake behind him. A Disillusionment Charm hid it from view as it slithered to cover his back.

Just before the two markers in front reached the corner ahead, he opened a vial in his pocket. The slight hissing noise was drowned out by an explosion that blew a large hole in the transfigured planter. An amateur’s mistake. And he hadn’t seen a spell - that had been a vial of Exploding Fluid.

The first marker would be the apprentice then, Augustus concluded - the mambo wouldn’t make such a mistake, nor would she use a vial instead of a spell. Which meant he didn’t need to take that one alive. The apprentice - a boy, Augustus noticed - turned the corner, his wand covering the row of alcoves, but he hesitated, not wanting to repeat his mistake, just long enough for Augustus to strike.

A Reductor Curse blew a hole in the floor just behind the boy, causing him to stumble - straight into Augustus’s Fire Whip. The boy - or maybe girl; the spell illuminated their face long enough to show they were younger than Augustus had expected, barely of an age to attend Hogwarts - couldn’t even scream before their head was torn off.

Augustus took a step back, taking cover in the alcove as he cast a Shield Charm. The second marker
was about to turn the corner behind him - and the third in front of him. That one would be the mambo, which meant his disillusioned snake should be able to take care of the second apprentice.

He heard a yell, cut short, behind him, and glanced back. A figure seemed to be struggling with an invisible snake, then it went limp. Grinning, he turned his attention to the front. A bout of nausea hit him, but he fought it down. Not now, not so close to victory.

The third marker was right at the corner, hiding out of sight - but not out of range of his detection spell. A Blasting Curse would wreck the corner and shower her with splinters…

He hesitated. This was too easy. No experienced witch would fight like this. Not in her own home. His stomach tried to rebel again, and he bent over, panting. He shook his head. No matter; she was a threat.

He blew the corner to smithereens and heard her cry out in pain, then saw her body collapse in a shower of blood, shredded by the stone shards. Not even a Shield Charm? And he hadn’t encountered any of the defenses and curses he had expected. Gasping, he once again retreated into the alcove and pointed his wand at the limp body behind him.

“Accio wand!” he whispered.

Nothing.

He pointed his wand at the headless apprentice in front of him.

“Accio wand!” Louder this time.

Nothing flew or leapt towards him. But he had seen the wand in the boy’s hand… the vial! The mistakes!

Those had been zombies! Decoys! He had to escape!

“Accio broom!” he shouted, his spell overpowering the weak charm with which he had stuck the broom to the wall outside. He saw the broom flew towards him. His Human-presence-revealing Spell showed no enemies nearby. He reached out to grab the shaft…

… and skeletal arms tore through the walls, floor and ceiling, smashing into his shield, battering it down and forcing him back into the alcove, where more bone limbs grasped at him.

A Blasting Curse blew a hole in the phalanx of bone limbs, opening an escape route - but the blast had been too close, and the force of the explosion also shattered his Shield Charm. Before he could recast it or take more than one step towards his broom - held by other skeletal hands, he now saw - dozens of the limbs descended on him, smashing him to the ground.

His wand arm erupted in pain, broken - or even shattered. He screamed, desperately struggling, trying to escape despite the pain, despite his wand being lost, but his efforts were futile. The convenient cover the alcoves had provided, the hasty reaction - it had all been a trap, he realised.

Immobilised by dozens of skeletal hands, he felt his stomach rise again.

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He was panting, trying not to smell the stench of his own bile and snot as it formed a puddle right next to his head, when he heard laughter. Looking up, hissing at the pain the movement caused his hurt body, he saw a dark-skinned woman wearing thin, white and scandalously short robes,
She flicked her wand, and he saw his own wand fly towards her. She caught it with her left hand. She stepped closer, forcing him to crane his neck further so he could keep her face in view.

“Are you the one who murdered Markus?” She had a heavy accent. A native mambo, then. Not a mudblood raised as one.

“Who?” He played dumb.

She snorted and waved her wand. At once, the skeletal hands gripping his broken wand arm tightened, and he screamed. It felt as if shards of his own bones were being driven into his flesh and through his skin.

“Are you?”

“Markus Williams? I killed him, yes,” he spat. He gulped down air, the smell of blood mingling with the stench of bile despite his nose running. He felt his stomach rise again, and dry-retched several times.

“Disgusting.”

He glanced up and saw a faint shimmer around the mambo’s head. A Bubble-Head Charm. Behind her, he saw a young man turn the broken figure back into a planter. That would be her apprentice. He didn’t say anything, just continued to breathe heavily. If she noticed the slight hissing sound…

“Who are you?”

“You don’t know me?” His forced laugh turned into a cough that wracked his body with pain each time his chest moved. He just had to endure this a little longer. But if she hurt him any worse…

“Rookwood. Augustus Rookwood,” he quickly said. “I’d bow, but…” His grimace might be called a smile if one were blind and squinted.

The mambo’s own smile reminded him of Lestrange’s. “You’re the last British Death Eater.”

“Not quite,” he said. How much longer did he have to endure this?

She frowned. He saw her apprentice step up behind her. “Mistress?” he asked in the same accent. “The three decoys are dead. Too damaged to serve further.”

Augustus saw a frown appear on the mambo’s face. “Dispose of them!” She spoke without turning her head to look at the man, her attention focused on himself.

“As you co…” the man bowed, then staggered, trailing off. Augustus saw him blink, his lips moving, without saying a word.

This time, the mambo turned around, just in time to see her apprentice collapse. She whirled back, not bothering to check on the man, and time seemed to slow down for Augustus while he watched her wand swing to point at him. If she…

But she didn’t cast. Instead, she shivered, then pulled something out of a pocket of her robes, swallowing it. A bezoar, as expected. But that would only treat the symptoms.

Once more her wand moved towards him, and once more her expression reminded him of Lestrange. And then her face went slack and she collapsed.
He let out a relieved breath, before another coughing fit shook his body. He didn’t have much time left. And he was badly hurt, and still held in the vice-like grip of these skeletal hands. He moved his left hand.

“Accio wand!”

Wandless magic had never been his forte, but failure was not an option - his spare wand had been crushed along with his right forearm.

He saw the wand, his wand, twitch and roll an inch across the stone floor.

“Accio wand!”

Another inch.

“Accio wand!” he yelled as loudly as he could, putting everything he had into the spell.

The wand rolled towards him, bumping against a bone shard, then rolling over it, closer and closer, until the fingers of his left hand closed around it. Even exhausted and in agony from his wounds, he smiled.


It took a dozen Vanishing Charms to free him from his bony bonds. His arm sent waves of excruciating pain through his body when released, flopping down on the stone floor before he could numb it.

Sweat ran down his brow, and his vision started to dim. Grinding his teeth, he closed the vial in his pocket. He couldn’t afford even more poison spreading, even though there couldn’t be much left anyway. A repurposed household charm blew the poisoned air around him away with a steady breeze. Retching, he pulled out his potion case, opening it with a flick of his wand, then fumbled for the blue vial. When the cork seemed stuck he cursed with frustration, then ripped it out with his teeth before gulping down the liquid inside. He had to purge his body of the antidote to the airborne poison before it damaged him further.

For a minute, he simply rested on the floor, shivering, until he could see clearly again and didn’t feel like puking his guts out any more. He vanished the blood-soaked right sleeve of his robes and winced at the sight of mangled flesh pierced with bone. The Bone-Mending Charm wouldn’t be enough to fix it.

He could deal with it later. He hadn’t much time left; reinforcements could arrive at any minute - the missing second apprentice might be off seeking help. He muttered a few curses. If he had the time to loot the manor… but he wouldn’t even be able to restock the potions he had used, and would use to recover from this.

Ah, well… he told himself that he wouldn’t have been able to use the same trick twice anyway, even if he had another pair of vials of the poison and antidote left. A flick of his wand stripped the mambo of her robes and sandals, and anything else - he wouldn’t make her mistake, and leave her with the tools to escape. A few spells later she was bound, wrapped in ropes, blindfolded and silenced.

A Killing Curse followed by a Vanishing Charm took care of the apprentice, before he levitated his captive and mounted his broom. The skeletal hands had scratched the shaft, but it seemed otherwise undamaged. Which was a good thing, seeing as he had to fly it one handed.

He landed at the wardline and shrunk the broom, stashing it inside his robes, then turned around to
stare at the manor. For a moment, he hesitated. He knew that there were rare books inside, exotic knowledge to be had, unique spells to be found.

Augustus shook his head. He pointed his wand, and cursed green fire sprang up behind the broken windows of the first floor.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 7th, 1997

Sirius Black looked up from the amber liquid in his glass when the door to his living room opened. When he saw Vivienne entering, he smiled. “How did it go?”

“We can meet my family tomorrow, as planned,” she said, walking towards him. “With our ‘guest’.”

He nodded and put the glass down. It was too late to drink liquor anyway. “Do they expect any trouble?” His cover should have held, but the French Gendarmes might have caught a lucky break.

“No.” She shook her head then sat down on the armrest of his chair. “The Gendarmes might suspect us, of course - we’re known to be Dubois’s main rivals at the Court, together with the Delacours - but they lack any proof.”

“And the Delacours?” They had facilitated his cover story with carefully forged documentation.

“I trust that they will ’ave covered their tracks. They certainly ’ave the influence and experience to stall an investigation for a few more days.” She shrugged, and Sirius couldn’t help thinking that the d’Aigles and Delacours might not be as close as he had thought.

“And the audience?” he asked, wrapping his arm around her waist. He had to meet the Duc in person in order to take the man’s measure. And to impress upon him the folly of further meddling in British politics.

“Arranged for the evening. Although the Duc insisted on receiving you in the Chateau.” She winced. “‘E refused to meet you on my family’s estate.”

Sirius took a deep breath through clenched teeth. “A private audience - a secret one. He could easily make me disappear.”

“‘E wouldn’t do that.” Vivienne shook her head almost violently. “It would be dishonourable.”

“As dishonourable as me seducing Dubois to kidnap her?”

He saw her flinch in response, before she raised her chin. “It was justified. She wanted to plunge Britain into another war. And ’er plans for the French muggleborns…”

“The Duc might think a small betrayal justified as well, in response to my actions against Dubois. Or to exchange me for her.” If Dubois had been the Duc’s lover, as some rumours claimed, then the leader of Magical France might very well decide to hold Sirius hostage to ensure Dubois’s survival, no matter the diplomatic consequences.

“If she survives she’ll do all she can to take revenge,” Vivienne said. “And if the Duc would go to such lengths to save ’er…”

“…then she has his ear. And probably his heart too,” Sirius finished for her.

“No. The Duc is not that sentimental. If she was ’is mistress, maybe. But a former lover? Who was
kidnapped by ’er current lover? No.” Vivienne shook her head. “’E would appear not just weak, but foolish to risk a war for such a witch.”

“Are you certain?” Sirius was a Gryffindor, so his bravery was not in question, but if the Duc took him hostage, Harry and his friends might react in a rash and violent manner.

“Yes. While we do not elect our leader, a Duc who loses the respect of the Court and the aristocracy cannot ’old on to ’is position for long.”

It seemed French politics were even worse than British ones, Sirius thought. They hadn’t had two civil wars since Grindelwald’s war, though. He nodded. “Alright. So, will he sacrifice Dubois then?”

“Yes.” After a moment, she added: “That is the opinion of my family as well.”

He’d have to trust their opinion, Sirius knew - he wasn’t an expert on French politics. He sighed. He eyed the glass again, then vanished its contents with a flick of his wand. “You know, I didn’t want to, didn’t like seducing her. I still don’t like it.”

“She’s a ’orrible witch.” Vivienne nodded.

“It’s not that.” He noticed a flicker of doubt, and maybe hurt, on her face, and took a deep breath. “It felt as if I was cheating on you.” Well, according to pretty much everyone he could think of, sleeping with another witch was cheating on your lover.

She didn’t answer right away. And when she did, she wasn’t looking at him. “I knew what you were doing. What you ’ad to do. It was my idea.”

He didn’t say anything, just held her closer. He could feel how tense she was.

In a whisper, she went on: “I ’ated it, though. To know you would be in ’er arms, making love to ’er…” She was clenching her teeth, her whispers gaining a screeching undertone. “I ’ate her even more because of this!”

He put his right hand on her thigh, squeezing gently. She was close to transforming, or so he thought. There were no feathers sprouting yet, though. He was tempted to change into Padfoot - that usually broke any tension. Or at least redirected it. But she deserved better than him making light of this. “I won’t do it again.”

She didn’t answer, but she slid into his lap and held him, and he could feel how she slowly grew less tense as he rubbed her back.

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London, Diagon Alley, April 8th, 1997

Ron Weasley ducked when he entered the twins’ shop, but no rubber chicken tried to attack him, nor did anything else dreamed up by his brothers hit him while he stepped through the fast-drying Thief’s Downfall installed at the entrance.

“Ah, we trained him well!”

Ron shot the chuckling Fred a glare. “Better safe than sorry.” Growing up with the twins certainly had taught him that. He glanced around reflexively. To one side, a customer, a young wizard, was talking with the clerk the twins had hired. Or trying to flirt with her, Ron couldn’t tell. He kept an eye on them anyway.
“Bah! Where’s the fun in that?” Fred shook his head. “Safe!” He scoffed. “Are you a Gryffindor or not?”

“He’s been with Hermione for too long; he’s starting to think like her!” George, standing in the doorway to the back room, added. “Soon he’ll read real books instead of Quidditch magazines!”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Very funny.”

Fred grinned. “We do our best. Or worst.”

“Definitely your worst,” Ron said. When his brother opened his mouth again, he held up his hand. “Let’s go into your workroom.”

Fred closed his mouth and nodded, then turned his head and yelled “Clarice! Take over the counter!”

The witch looked over at them and nodded. “Alright, boss.”

“Is she calling you boss because she can’t tell you apart?” Ron asked as he followed his brothers to their workroom. “Or are you actually becoming respectable business owners?”

“That was definitely your worst attempt at a joke,” Fred shot back.

“Respectable? Us?” George shook his head.

Then the door closed, and the twins grew more serious. Fred leaned against a work bench filled with all sorts of knick-knacks and cast a privacy spell.

“I guess you want to know how far along the ‘Bone Busters’ are,” George said.

Ron nodded. He also hadn’t seen the twins for some time, but that wasn’t something that he’d admit to anyone.

“We’re about to finish testing, add a few tweaks, then start production.” George picked up what looked like a Bludger. “And we’ve improved on the concept.” He grinned. “This will seek out your enemies, trying to ram them like a normal Bludger. Just without the Cushioning Charms.” His grin widened. “It would kill someone if it hit their head.”

“And while the target is dodging the Bone Buster - or shielding - it will release the potion into the air as an almost invisible mist,” Fred added, looking smug.

Ron nodded. “So… you adapted one of your inventions, and put it into a Bludger with the safety charms removed.” It was devious. Skeletons and bone walls wouldn’t try to dodge, and houngans would have to worry about getting smashed by the things. And should their limbs break, and their bones become exposed...

Fred pouted. “It wasn’t quite that simple. We had to adapt the spells a lot so it would only attack enemies.”

“And how does that work?” Ron wanted to know. He didn’t want to get hit by one of them.

“A charmed pin will keep it away,” Fred said. “The charm can be cast as well, but a General Counter-Spell would put an end to it.”

And the Bludger would probably put an end to them soon afterwards, Ron thought. “We’ll still want to learn the spell too. We might lose a pin, or there might be other people in the area of effect whom we don’t want to get hurt.”
“You can also command it to stop,” George said. “We tweaked those spells too, though. If someone tries the usual Quidditch spells on them…” He bared his teeth. “Let’s just say they’ll receive a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?” Ron stared at them. He’d rather not discover what the thing did in the middle of a battle.

Fred frowned. “Now you sound like Hermione too. If that’s the result of your special Resistance training, then I’m glad we didn’t get to go.”

“What does it do?”

“It makes the Bone Buster focus on the caster of the spell,” George answered. “After slowing down for a moment, to make them think they succeeded.”

“Ah.” Ron nodded. He didn’t think that would be very useful, but it was a nice addition. “Good work. We can definitely use that.”

Fred narrowed his eyes. “So… does that mean you’re planning to fight houngans?”

“We want to be ready for the next time we encounter Reid or his friends,” Ron said. “I hope he doesn’t return to Britain, though - we’re still dealing with Malfoy and Runcorn’s arrests.”

“That shook up the Wizengamot,” Fred remarked with a chuckle. “Their honourable and generous friend planning to kill them all!”

“Greengrass and Davis revealed that, right?” George asked.

Ron nodded. “Yes. They managed to completely fool Malfoy until after he told them his plan.” He saw that Fred was glaring at George, who in turn was frowning at his brother. Ron didn’t know what was going on there, and he didn’t think he wanted to know.

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Outside Paris, Château d’Orléans, France, April 8th, 1997

Sirius Black didn’t let any lingering nervousness - he was a Gryffindor; he wasn’t afraid - show as he stepped out of the fireplace in the entrance hall of the seat of the Duc d’Orléans. He was an emissary of Wizarding Britain, on a diplomatic mission officially sanctioned by the Chief Warlock. It would be a breach of protocol unheard of in recent times should he be detained, or worse.

Unheard of, but not entirely impossible, he told himself as he cleaned the soot from his robes. He glanced briefly at the guards in the hall, then turned and held out his hand when the fireplace flashed behind him. Vivienne stepped out and took his hand in hers with practised ease while she smiled at him. Her mother, Marie, was next, followed by Fleur’s father. Antoine Delacour didn’t show any sign of his close brush with death four months ago in the catacombs of the Bastille.

As was customary, the chamberlain waited to greet them until all had removed the soot from their clothes. “Welcome to the Château d’Orléans,” the elderly wizard said in French, bowing deeply. “The Duc awaits you in the western salon.”

They nodded in response and followed the man through a corridor decked out in marble. Sirius had to restrain himself from glancing at every decorative pillar or curtain-covered alcove they passed - half an army could be hidden there. He had yet to release Vivienne’s hand.
The western salon was a rather large room for a private audience - the largest room in Sirius’s home could have fit twice into it. The windows were covered with thick curtains. The furniture, though, had been chosen with care for the meeting, he thought - there were two couches facing a single seat, separated by a low table. Almost intimate, even, Sirius thought, for a meeting with the Duc. He couldn’t spot the guards he knew had to be around - probably hidden behind fake walls and curtains.

The Duc himself was standing when they entered, dressed in dark robes with purple trim. He was about ten years older than Sirius, tall and slim, and with an immaculate mustache and goatee - much like Sirius’s own style. And, judging by the Duc’s faint smirk, he had not missed the resemblance.

“Welcome, Marie, Antoine, Mademoiselle d’Aigle, Monsieur Black.” The Duc inclined his head in greeting. Apparently, Sirius didn’t need an introduction.

In response, everyone in his group bowed deeply.

“Please sit down.” The Duc gestured at the two couches.

A house-elf brought some refreshments as they took their seats. The little creature had stepped out from behind one of the curtains, and Sirius made a mental note of the location - there would be a passage for the elves behind there. In a pinch, Padfoot could fit through one as well.

Marie and Antoine made some idle chat while the elf served wine - a good vintage, Sirius noted. He refrained from testing for poison; if the Duc wanted to harm him he’d have too many other opportunities, and without breaking protocol.

“You asked for a private meeting,” the Duc finally said. “With a foreign envoy.” He glanced at Sirius as he spoke, but addressed Marie and Antoine.

“Yes, we did. Sirius has informed us of a grave matter which could have a severe impact on relations between France and Britain.” Marie nodded at Sirius.

The Duc raised an eyebrow, though Sirius couldn’t tell if the man was surprised at the quick deflection or not. He cleared his throat. “Indeed, Monsieur le duc. You might be aware that there have recently been several attacks against civilians in Wizarding Britain.” The Duc nodded, and Sirius went on. “We have discovered that those attacks were instigated by a member of your court, in an attempt to destabilise my country.”

The Duc took a short, hissing breath, but didn’t show any other reaction. “I assume you speak of Isabelle Dubois.”

“Yes.”

“And you have taken her into your custody.”

“Not officially,” Sirius clarified.

“Ah.” The Duc slowly nodded. “Not yet, you mean.” He looked at Marie and Antoine.

Vivienne’s mother nodded. “We thought it best that this delicate situation be resolved with some discretion.”

Otherwise Isabelle’s actions could have grave consequences, given the volatile situation in Britain,” Antoine added.

“Isabelle was kidnapped by her current lover - an American in exile, or rather, a man posing as an
American in exile.” The Duc was staring at Sirius, and his tone left no doubt that he knew who had been posing as Isabelle’s lover. “Such an act might have grave consequences. The French do not suffer foreigners kidnapping members of the Court.”

He hadn’t denied the accusations against Dubois, Sirius noticed. He shrugged. “She brought it on herself. If she hadn’t been trying to plunge Britain into another civil war, she wouldn’t have been taken into custody.” He leaned forward. “And should her plans for the French muggleborns be revealed, I gather that a great deal of violent unrest might result here in France.”

He saw the Duc’s eyes widen in apparent surprise at that. Either he hadn’t known about that or he was an excellent actor. “What plans?”

“She planned to murder the best and brightest of the French muggleborns, to curb a hypothetical rebellion before it could start,” Sirius explained. With a feral grin, he added: “Should this become known I fear that it would cause the very rebellion she feared.”

The Duc had been clenching his teeth while Sirius had been speaking. “Others might take that threat as proof that Isabelle’s apparent fears were not groundless.”

Sirius leaned forward. “Which fears? That the French muggleborns might demand equal rights? And an end to discrimination? And that they might look to Britain for support?”

“Yes.”

He scoffed. “We just fought a bloody war - the second war in less than twenty years. We have no desire for another one.”

“Some might think that currently you’re simply too weak to fight another war.” The Duc was focused on Sirius.

“They would be wrong. Dead wrong.” Sirius met the man’s eyes and bared his teeth. “The Ministry’s losses were terrible. The Death Eaters and their supporters were all but wiped out. But the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance? We’re actually stronger than before.” It wasn’t quite true - while the Muggleborn Resistance had recruited more than they had lost, the new members were not yet trained to the level of the veterans and the Order hadn’t replaced its losses. But Sirius had no doubt that should it come to war with France, recruiting more Order members would be far easier than recruiting more Aurors. “Any country so foolish as to attack us would find out very quickly that we’re ready for war.”

“A muggleborn-ruled Britain would be facing the entirety of Europe united against them.”

He snorted. “And do you think the European muggleborns will sit out such a conflict? They flocked to Grindelwald in the past and he was the aggressor. Should Europe go to war for pureblood supremacy, the muggleborns will rise and you’ll find yourself besieged by your own people. People who will have learned from the Resistance’s example.”

“So you have plans, then.” The Duc’s face was no longer expressionless; he was baring his own teeth now, his anger plain to see.

“Of course we have plans - we’d be fools not to be prepared for that - but we have no intention of starting a war.” Sirius shook his head. “We know how terrible it is, and we do not wish it on anyone.” Not on anyone sensible, at least. “We went to war because the Death Eaters wanted to oppress and murder all muggleborns.” And if anyone else tried the same, they’d go to war again - covertly, or overtly. He lowered his voice. “Stop trying to meddle in Britain, don’t murder your own
muggleborns and there’ll be no war, and no scandal.”

“I cannot ignore Isabelle’s kidnapping. She has too many friends at Court.”

Marie put down her own glass, a slight sneer appearing on her face. “No one would be surprised if her plots and affairs caught up with her. A scorned lover hiring an assassin to take revenge on her would be plausible enough to deflect suspicion away from us.”

The Duc turned towards the Veela. “And you would arrange that?”

“Not directly,” she answered, tilting her head slightly.

“A few words to the correct people, a few hints at what danger Isabelle has been courting with her foolish course of action…” Antoine spread his hands, the large ring on his hand catching the light from the chandelier. “She has overstepped her bounds, assumed she was acting with support you never gave her. A lesson others would do well to learn as well.”

The Duc looked from the Veela to the wizard and back, then glanced at Sirius. “Are you trying to push me into following his example?”

His tone had changed, and he had grown rigid, Sirius thought. He saw the two French nobles stiffen as well.

“We’re not the ones who tried to create a fait accompli and drag France into a war no one wanted but them,” Antoine said. “We’re not the ones who tried to hide their actions from you, assuming you would condone them after the fact - when you’d have no other choice.” He shook his head. “You know me, us, better than that, Louis.”

“I thought I knew Isabelle better than that as well,” the Duc retorted, and Sirius couldn’t help but think that the Duc wasn’t entirely convinced of Dubois’s guilt.

He felt Vivienne, who hadn’t said anything yet, tense up. “We have a memory of her confession, Monsieur le duc.”

The leader of Magical France glanced at her and Sirius, then shook his head. “She was, according to your own words, acting out of fear of a muggleborn rebellion. And you are using the same threat in an attempt to dictate policy to me - while working with a foreigner allied to muggleborns.”

“Dubois was working with foreigners as well - with purebloods willing to murder the entire Wizengamot, the heads of all the Old Families, to further their own goals.” Sirius smiled thinly. “Purebloods who still follow the orders of the Dark Lord - the foreigner who dared to lay a trap in the Bastille and corrupt your people. Neither I nor my allies have done anything against France.”

“You kidnapped a member of my court.”

“In response to her orchestrating attacks on my country.” Sirius glared at the Duc.

“What is more important, the fate of a witch, or the fate of our country?” Antoine cut in. “We are on the brink of war - a situation Dubois brought upon us. Supporting her means condoning her actions against Britain.”

The Duc pressed his lips together for a moment, before he answered. “I do not condone her actions, and I do not wish to go to war.” Sirius clenched his teeth and squeezed Vivienne’s hand. “But neither do I wish to let foreigners dictate to me how I rule my country. Or members of my court. France’s internal affairs are no one else’s concern.”
“The muggleborns disagree,” Sirius said. He ignored the glances from Marie and Antoine. “There are lines that, if crossed, will cause them to react. During the time of Grindelwald’s War, the muggles fought a great war as well.”

“I’m aware of that. Muggle France fell to the Prussians. Some took it as an omen of things to come when facing Grindelwald’s army.” The Duc sneered. “They were proven wrong.”

“The British and French muggles fought a regime of criminals who murdered millions of people for no other reason than their blood,” Sirius went on. “Ever since then, muggles have considered similar actions to be a crime so severe it merits an intervention by the international community.”

“What do you wish to say?”

“I’m saying that should you start murdering your muggleborns, the British muggleborns will consider you a criminal of the worst sort. And they wouldn’t be the only ones in Europe,” Sirius explained.

“You threaten me with war, then, should I not bow to muggleborns?”

Sirius wanted to tell the Duc that that was exactly what he was doing, but Antoine spoke up before he lost his temper. “He’s warning us that mass murder is not the solution. It didn’t work for the British, and it will not work for us. Quite the contrary.”

“Appeasement didn’t work for the British either,” the Duc retorted.

“No amount of appeasement other than unconditional surrender would have satisfied the Dark Lord,” Sirius said. “The muggleborns, by and large, simply want the same rights as purebloods.” Which implied democracy, but he didn’t want to open that can of Flobberworms. “Why do you think that Dumbledore pushed for muggleborn rights in Britain after he had defeated Grindelwald? He knew that that was the only way to avoid another war.”

“And yet Britain suffered two Blood Wars, whereas France has remained at peace.”

“Those wars were the result of the Dark Lord’s desire to take over Britain. The muggleborns were just a convenient scapegoat. If circumstances had been different he would have followed Grindelwald’s example and recruited muggleborns.” Sirius had his doubts - Voldemort must have known that such a course of action could have brought most of Europe down on his head.

“You demand that France stays out of your internal affairs, yet do not offer the same courtesy.” The Duc glared at him.

“Our courtesy ends where mass murder begins.” Sirius met the Duc’s eyes without flinching.

“No one is planning such a crime,” Marie cut in. “No one but Dubois, at least.”

“The purpose of this meeting was to defuse the crisis Dubois created. I think we are all in agreement that war has to be avoided, and that Dubois’s actions are not supported by France.” Antoine smiled. “We are also now aware of the views of the future government of Britain as far as muggleborns are concerned, which will have to be considered by the Duc.”

“Indeed,” Marie added, “we can deal with the other issues at a later date.”

Sirius nodded. The main goal was to avoid a war right now. “If you stop your people from stirring up trouble in Britain in the future we’ll consider Dubois’s actions unsanctioned by France and let you handle the matter discreetly.”
The Duc scowled, but nodded slowly. “I can agree to that.”

Sirius smiled as they shook hands, but he had a feeling that the Duc wasn’t entirely convinced that he couldn’t mess with Britain in the future. Or that he couldn’t oppress the French muggleborns.

He wasn’t too worried, though - they could do something about that once they had handled the current crisis and taken over Britain.

*****

Near Spanish Town, Jamaica, April 8th, 1997

Augustus Rookwood, sitting in the living room of his tent, watched his captive stir on the carpet. The poison he had used had finally been metabolised enough for her to regain consciousness. If only he had had more of the antidote left, to speed up the process… He shook his head. Such thoughts did nothing but distract him. He had to focus on the task at hand.

The mambo opened her eyes and blinked rapidly. She would still have trouble focusing her gaze, he knew. She tugged against the bonds that held her, but not for long - she knew that she wouldn’t be able to break them.

“Good evening, Madam.” He smirked at her expression. If not for the gag, she’d be swearing at him. “I have a few questions for you.” He pulled out his vial of Veritaserum. Her eyes widened, then hardened - that wasn’t the reaction he had expected.

Frowning, he cast a full Body-Bind Curse, then vanished the gag in her mouth. But then he hesitated as he was about to let three drops fall into her open mouth, still thinking of her curious reaction. What if she had taken precautions to prevent the use of Veritaserum? Something that reacted with the potion to kill her? He had heard of such projects when he had been working at the Department.

Sighing, he stashed the vial again - and watched her eyes track it. Was that relief, or regret? With her face frozen, it was hard to tell. No matter, there were alternatives. He pointed his wand at her.

“Imperio!”

Paralysed, she showed no sign of struggling, other than a glint in her eyes that might have been his imagination. But when he ended the Body-Bind Curse, she didn’t do anything except stare at the ground - as victims of his curse were wont to do without orders.

“Tell me your name.”

“Ezola Grant.”

“Tell me the truth. Are you a member of the island’s ruling council?”

“Yes.”

So he had the right kind of witch. He allowed himself to smile, before continuing the interrogation. “Did you expect me to attack you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Ricky had disappeared.”
The thug’s death had not gone unnoticed. Augustus had been sloppy. “Who else knew about this?”

“My apprentices.”

“How many did you have?”

“Two.”

Which meant one was left. “Can the surviving apprentice track you?”

“No.”

That was good news. “Can anyone else track you?”

“No.”

Even better, though he had expected that - what kind of wizard or witch would allow others to gain the power to track them? That clause in his contract had been the worst drawback to becoming an Unspeakable. That left another weakness, though. “Can you track the skulls of the Library of Souls?”

“Yes.”

He hissed with sudden fear. “How?”

She started to explain the spell - the ritual. Sacrifices, duration, range… why hadn’t they found him? A few dead muggles would cover the entire island. “Did you search the island already?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When we discovered that a skull was missing, and after the attack on Williams.”

He blinked. He hadn’t left the island after that attack, so… Of course! The Dark Lord would have taken steps to prevent the houngans from finding the skull he had taken from them. He sighed with relief. “Are you cooperating with the British?”

“No.”

“Will you let them on the island?”

“No.”

He relaxed. The Department could track him - but not from Britain. He was safe. Relatively, at least.

“Tell me all you know about the Library of Souls.”

Augustus leaned back in his seat and took a deep breath. The thug ‘Ricky’ had been surprisingly resistant to interrogation, but his current captive was worse. Trying to break into her mind left him feeling as if he had headbutted a stone wall.

But he had no choice - the information she had been forced to reveal while under his spell had been spotty and purely verbal. If he had access to a Pensieve, he could have forced her to donate her
memories, but as things were… if he wanted to study the layout and defences of the Library of Souls before actually venturing there, he needed to see it in her memories. He couldn’t even potion her to reduce her wits, since that would render her memory unreliable. And ordering her to open her mind hadn’t worked.

So he was forced to match his mind against hers as he tried to overpower her defences. A thoroughly exhausting and painful process - he hadn’t suffered such a headache since his own Occlumency training.

He shifted in his seat, reaching for the cup of tea he had prepared in advance. Taking a sip from it, he glanced at the skull resting on a low table nearby. If only he had the time to study the skull properly - one of the enchantments on it had to have been added by the Dark Lord to prevent the houngans from tracking it. If he could analyse it, he might be able to counter the hold the Department had over him.

He might not even need to find a cure for the Withering Curse to be safe… He shook his head. He had already come too far to give up now. And he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life in hiding; he wanted a pardon.

And he wanted the knowledge from the Library of Souls.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, April 9th, 1997

“Jamaica has accused us of attacking another of their houngans?” Amelia Bones frowned as she dropped the most recent missive from the ICW on her desk and looked at Fawley. “Do they offer any proof for their accusations?”

Britain’s delegate at the ICW shook his head. “No, Madam, they haven’t. All they are claiming is that since another houngan has been attacked in her manor, it has to be the work of the same culprit as the earlier attack. They have not offered any detailed description of the attack either."

“Which means it wasn’t done with muggle explosives.” Amelia shook her head. “It doesn’t mean the culprit wasn’t the same, of course. But I wouldn’t put it past the houngans to settle some rivalries and blame us.”

Fawley nodded, then cleared his throat. “Ah… do we know who was behind the attacks?”

She was certain it was Rookwood, but she had no proof a court would accept. And she didn’t trust Fawley not to leak the information to others. So she shook her head. “There’s only conjuncture, nothing solid.”

He remained silent for a moment, before speaking up again: “What about the muggleborns? Could they be behind the attacks?”

Amelia wouldn’t put such an operation beyond the Resistance’s capabilities, but she doubted that they’d be able to launch such attacks without their leader, and Granger hadn’t left Britain long enough to lead such a mission. And if Fawley spread such rumours, Britain’s trouble with a number of foreign countries would grow much, much worse. So she shook his head. “No. All the muggleborn suspects able to do such a thing are accounted for.”

“Oh.” The wizard sounded disappointed. “I’ve been told - in private, of course - that a number of countries approved of our efforts to continue Dumbledore’s policy towards Jamaica.”
Of course they would. For decades, Dumbledore had been the reason Jamaica had been playing nice with its neighbours. “We haven’t, so far, changed that policy. You can tell them that. But don’t claim that we are behind these attacks.”

Once the wizard had left, she closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. Rookwood was still working on getting a cure for the Withering Curse, she was certain. A cure that would cost a pardon for one of the worst murderers she knew. The same sort of pardon another mass murderer had received thanks to Dumbledore’s influence.

She shook her head. She would be damned if she let a Death Eater escape.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, April 11th, 1997

“The chair recognises Mister Avery.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! While the accusations leveled against Augustus Malfoy and Philius Runcorn are shocking - although we have yet to see and judge for ourselves the evidence for said accusations - it would be a grave mistake to condemn all of the goals the two stood for in reaction. If the worst of dark wizards thinks children shouldn’t be hurt, does that mean such a sentiment is wrong just because he shares it? No! I say our traditions are not tainted by a desperate man’s folly...”

Hermione Granger rolled her eyes as she listened to Avery’s doomed attempts to stop the Wizengamot from burying the bigots’ agenda. Since the majority of the Wizengamot members cared about themselves first, their families second, and the rest of Wizarding Britain a distant third, they had taken Malfoy’s plans personally. Very personally. Who would have thought that the very reason the Wizengamot was so corrupt and easily misled would turn out to provide the impetus for the last push needed to reform it?

“What an idiot,” she heard Ron whisper next to her. “I’ve got a mind to hex him.” She glanced at him, and he grinned. “Just joking.”

She scowled. This was serious. They were about to make history! She was about to point that out to him when he touched her thigh.

“Relax. You heard Sirius and Doge - it’s a done deal. This is just posturing.”

She sighed and nodded, putting her hand on his. They were so close, though, and she longed to shut the idiot up. She wasn’t the only one - other members were jeering and shouting, and even waving their wands. No one hexed him, though - that wasn’t done.

Finally, Avery sat down again, head held high, but teeth grinding, and Sirius raised his wand.

“The chair recognises Mister Black.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! You have heard what Mister Avery said. Even faced with proof of how corrupt his ideology is, he cannot bear the truth. And why is that? Because he’s afraid. Afraid of muggleborns. Afraid of losing his position. Afraid of any change at all.

“But Britain needs to change. The current system is not working. A country where the majority of the people have no voice in government is a doomed country. Why should people listen to a government that doesn’t listen to them? To a Wizengamot that excludes them?
“It’s not as if the Wizengamot has proven to be particularly wise. The Muggleborn Laws were passed despite Dumbledore arguing against them - a mistake caused by fear. And we all know the results of those laws. War and death.

“We cannot allow this to happen again! No longer can we let a few families have the power to decide our country’s fate! If Britain is to prosper, we need everyone working together - and that requires everyone to have a stake in the country.

“The proposed changes to the Wizengamot in the Reform Act will achieve this. Instead of representing themselves and their families, members will represent far more people - people whose support is shown by their votes.

“Some claim this is ‘muggle nonsense’. Something against all our traditions. To those I say: That is a lie. For what I propose - elections - are how we have chosen the Minister for Magic for centuries. Like the Wizengamot elects a minister, the people will elect the Wizengamot.”

Hermione rolled her eyes again when she saw how that rather absurd argument was actually swaying some of the more conservative members. But as long as the needed majority was gained, she wouldn’t complain. She raised her wand as well.

“The chair recognises Madam Granger.”

“Honoured members of the Wizengamot! I fully support my esteemed colleague’s proposal!” She had written most of it, after all. Judging by some grins, people knew it as well. “And I dare say that every muggleborn supports, no, expects and demands, it as well. Muggleborns, half-bloods, purebloods - we all fought for our country during the war. And yet people would claim that we have fewer rights than the Old Families? We bled and died the same as them, as everyone who fought in the war will know.” That should make the others realise that there was more at stake than old privileges. “Hogwarts, the oldest and finest School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has been open to any student no matter their blood ever since it was founded. All of us were students there. By what right should we then be treated as lesser once we graduate? It is past time to right this wrong, before we are dragged into another war. I ask every one of you to vote for the Reform Act.”

She sat down again. A few of the Wizengamot members were staring at her with blatant fear. Others - fewer - scowled. She didn’t care, as long as they won the vote.

“The chair recognises Madam Myerscough.”

Another witch rose, middle-aged. Hermione tuned her out as soon as it was clear that she supported the Reform Act. She hoped that there wouldn’t be too many other speakers until the vote.

“Stop! The ayes have it. Mister Black’s proposal, the Reform Act, has been passed.”

Hermione wasn’t the only one who cheered at the results. She shot up from her seat, her fists balled in triumph, and turned to hug Ron. They had done it. The first general election in the history of Wizarding Britain would be held on August 1st, 1997.

Plenty of time to plan a visit to Jamaica and handle the houngan problem.
Chapter 62: Gearing Up

‘The main reason why the houngans were so feared by European and American wizards was their particular brand of magic - their ability to strike victims with a curse from afar, without the need to see their targets. Shields and cover did not protect against the houngans’ sympathetic magic, and tales of wizards found dead in their bedrooms, their wards untouched and the doors still locked, were widespread. The fact that Jamaica successfully rebelled against Wizarding Britain and repelled several invasions in the following decades is often attributed to the sheer terror wrought by such warfare, helped along by a carefully cultivated image of houngans as masters of the darkest arts - not unlike the Dark Lord himself. As a result, the island dominated its neighbours for centuries, going as far as kidnapping magical children from other shores to raise as their own. It took Dumbledore visiting the island in 1957 and personally killing some of the most infamous houngans without suffering a curse in return to curb such excesses. Many wizards and witches therefore feared the worst when Dumbledore died - particularly given Jamaican claims that he had succumbed to a houngan curse.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 11th, 1997

“You want us to invade Jamaica?”

Harry Potter wouldn’t have put it like that, but his first thought upon hearing Hermione’s plan was quite similar to Ron’s outburst.

The witch in question pursed her lips. “It won’t be an invasion. At worst, it could be called a raid. We’ll enter the country, find Rookwood, capture or kill him and secure the skull the houngans want. Then we either trade it for a cure for the Withering Curse, or use it to find that cure ourselves.”

“I’m not certain that the houngans will appreciate the difference,” Harry said. “Or if they can even see it.”

“And who exactly would take part in this ‘raid’?” Ron asked.

“All of us here,” Hermione’s gesture encompassed the three of them, Sirius, Remus and Vivienne, “most of the Resistance veterans, a few volunteers from the Order…” She shrugged. “We’ll need to be able to deal with any houngans that try to interfere.”

“That’s an invasion!” Ron exclaimed again.

Sirius chuckled. “We’re not going to stay there, so it’s a punitive expedition. Teach the houngans that they cannot mess with Britain.”

Harry shot a glance at his godfather. Was he serious?

Remus spoke up. “You intend to use this as a demonstration of Britain’s power.”

Hermione shook her head. “The main objective is to secure a cure for the victims of the Withering Curse. Ideally, we’ll be out of the country before they even notice us. But should we encounter
houngans, then we won’t let them stop us. And in that case, we’ll use the opportunity to teach them and, through that, others that we won’t tolerate anyone interfering with our affairs.”

“The ICW will have a fit,” Remus pointed out, though he sounded resigned.

“The ICW didn’t do anything to Dumbledore when he visited the island in 1957 and slaughtered half a dozen houngans,” Sirius retorted. “And Dumbledore had even less of a pretext than we have given Reid’s crimes. If we cull some houngans, the ICW will side with us.”

“If we cull some houngans’,” Ron said. “What are our chances?”

“Quite good in my opinion,” Hermione answered. “If Rookwood can attack and kill two houngans in their manors, then it stands to reason that the houngans are not quite as dangerous as they have been made out to be.”

“We don’t know if the mysterious attacker is Rookwood,” Remus said.

“Who else could it be?” Sirius asked. “He offered a cure to Bones; the muggle explosives used in Jamaica and in Britain by imperiused attackers were the same... there aren’t that many wizards who can do that.”

“It could be a muggleborn,” Remus said.

“Theoretically,” Hermione cut in. “But such a person would have done more in the Blood War. And only a Death Eater would have the skull stolen by the Dark Lord.”

Harry had to agree with her reasoning there. “But if the houngans can’t find him in their own country, how can we find him?”

“With the help of the Unspeakables!” Sirius said with a broad grin. “They have ways to find deserters.”

“They didn’t manage to find him during the war,” Harry retorted.

“He was aware of their efforts,” Sirius explained. “And there was the danger of the Dark Lord setting up an ambush for anyone coming after Rookwood. They might also have been too concerned with the threat of other traitors within their ranks.” With a cynical smile, he added: “And there was the possibility that Voldemort would prevail, so the department might not have been too motivated to capture one of the Dark Lord’s inner circle.”

“And we’re supposed to trust them?” Ron scoffed.

“We won,” Sirius said.

“Besides, we will search for both the skull and him. We can use the houngans’ ritual, and whatever means the Unspeakables use to find Rookwood. Probably a similar ritual, maybe even one which also has a sacrificial component,” Hermione explained.

“Not maybe, almost certainly,” Sirius corrected her. “The Department of Mysteries goes back centuries, and they’ve been dealing with the Dark Arts for as long. They claim to keep magic too dangerous to be used, or even known about, sealed in their vaults, but there are too many rumours about their own experiments for them not to have delved into the Dark Arts themselves.”

“Are we taking one of them with us?” Harry asked. That sounded like asking Reid to come with them. He forced away the memory of the poor woman being murdered in front of him.
“Only if we can’t get them to teach us their ritual,” Sirius replied.

“Which means ‘yes’,” Ron added. “Dad told me about their secrecy. And they’ll spy on us as well.”

“That can’t be helped,” Hermione said, sighing. “We need the cure, and we need to stop Rookwood.”

“And stopping the houngans from returning to their evil ways is a good thing to aim for as well.” Sirius showed his teeth in a feral grin.

“It’ll be dangerous, though.” Remus slightly shook his head.

“Less dangerous than having every pureblood government thinking that we’re too weak to retaliate against another attack.” Sirius waved his friend’s concerns away.

“Yes. Dubois would never ’ave dared to meddle in Britain if Dumbledore were still alive,” Vivienne spoke up.

Harry patted his enchanted pocket, where Dumbledore’s wand was holstered. They had talked about this before. He was no Dumbledore, far from it, but he’d do his best to fake it if it meant his family and friends would be safe. And, he added silently to himself, so would everyone else present.

“Well, at least we won’t have to go back to school for a little while longer,” Ron said. “We’ll need to train together with everyone who’s coming with us. And beating houngans should at least give us an ‘O’ in Defence,” he added with a grin.

Harry saw Hermione shake her head, but she was smiling at his friend. As was Harry himself.

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London, East End, April 12th, 1997

“Make sure that the Silencing Charms have been cast,” Hermione Granger told Tania as she levitated a keg of beer into the kitchen. “I’d rather not have the police show up because someone reported an illegal party.” She opened the fridge and sighed. As she had suspected, someone had stuffed it full of beer and soda bottles. Sighing, she put the keg down and levitated the bottles out. “The drinks go into the expanded ice box, not the fridge!” she yelled into the living room, where the furniture was being rearranged and transfigured to turn it into a party room.

At least the food was coming along on schedule - Sally-Anne had all the samples they had planned for ready to be heated and multiplied, as Hermione’s inspection revealed.

The other witch chuckled. “It’s just a party, not a battle.”

Hermione pursed her lips. Everything went better if it was planned and prepared for carefully. “This marks the end of our war in Britain. It should be properly and memorably celebrated.”

“Oh, I think Seamus will ensure that it’ll be a memorable party,” Sally-Anne said.

“What?” She whipped her head round. “What’s he planning?” If he brought down the police or the Obliviators on them...

“Huh? Nothing. But he usually is quite funny when drunk, right?”

Hermione frowned. Seamus did tend to go overboard when partying. But she couldn’t begrudge him that, not during the war, and not on this occasion.
“Speaking of war, did you decide on how to acquire a cure for the Withering Curse?” Justin asked, leaning against the kitchen’s door frame.

She glanced around, then cast a privacy spell. “Yes.”

“Does that mean you’re planning another war?” he asked.

She heard Sally-Anne gasp behind her, and felt a stab of guilt. If this ruined the party for her friends… but they deserved her honesty. “Not a war. But we need to stop Rookwood, who’s running rampant in Jamaica, before he starts a war. And I’m certain that the skull he has is the key to finding said cure.” They might need more than that - Rookwood was in Jamaica for a reason - but then again, between the Order, the Resistance and the Ministry, they had far more resources than a single Death Eater on the run.

Sally-Anne gasped again, but Justin simply nodded. “And the cure for the Withering Curse will help a lot with the election.”

“Yes. It’ll help us get the votes from half-bloods and purebloods.” The only muggleborns struck by the Withering Curse had been the Creeveys, after all - and only Dennis was still alive.

“We’ll be working with the Order then.” Justin was sharp.

“Part of it,” she corrected. “Harry, Ron, Sirius, Aberforth if he agrees, a few others maybe.” But the Resistance would provide the main strength for the raid.

“Is it really necessary?” Sally-Anne said. When Hermione and Justin turned to look at her, she flinched but held their gazes. “I don’t want to leave Dennis in a coma, but… we lost so many in the war, and now we’re going to fight houngans?”

“We’re not planning to fight houngans,” Hermione said. Technically, it was true. “But we’ll be ready for them, should they get in our way.” She knew it would be dangerous, and she didn’t like risking her friends’ lives again, but they needed to do this so they’d be able to rebuild and reform Britain in peace.

Justin nodded. “What’s the timetable?”

“A week or two, I think - this needs careful planning.” And they still needed to negotiate with the Unspeakables. “We need to familiarise ourselves with a piece of gear to deal with skeletons and bone walls.”

“And get used to fighting together,” Justin added. “How will we get to Jamaica?”

Hermione grinned. “Muggle means.”

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“So, this is your secret base,” Ron Weasley said, looking around the hallway.

“Safe house. Or headquarters,” Hermione corrected him. “‘Secret base’ has too many associations with Bond villains.”

He didn’t know exactly what a ‘Bond villain’ was, but nodded anyway. Harry, standing next to him, chuckled. “You’d have to charm Crookshanks’s fur white for that.”

Hermione huffed. “We’re not going to mutilate my cat for a joke.” Shaking her head, she pointed at
The stairs. “Let’s go up to the living room. The others have already started. We’ve expanded it, of course, so everyone could fit inside without stepping on each other’s toes. Everyone except for those on guard duty,” she added.

They followed her up the stairs and encountered Seamus in the hallway. “Hey! You made it!” he said with a wide grin - he looked slightly tipsy to Ron. “We’ve gone through another keg, so I’ll fetch the next.”

Hermione blinked. “You already finished the entire keg?”

“Of course!” the Irish wizard said, laughing, then passed them, slapping their backs as he did so. “I’ll be back!”

Hermione sighed, then opened the door to the living room. “The disco lighting wasn’t my idea,” she said, before ushering them in.

Ron found himself in a dimly lit room filled with music loud enough to make his ears hurt. Half a dozen people were dancing in the middle of the room while others were lounging on what looked like beanbags and couches. Justin, sitting on a couch with Sally-Anne on his lap, waved at them as Hermione steered them to a free couch. As soon as they got close, the music seemed to get quieter and the witch sighed. “I bet the music does more damage to their ears than all the marksmanship training in boot camp.”

Ron shrugged - a few spells would take care of that; he had experience of that himself, given the twins’ tendency to make things blow up - and sat down on the couch. Harry flung himself into a beanbag chair and Hermione joined him on the couch. A flick of her wand had a few soft drinks floating towards them. “If you want beer we can get some once Seamus gets back,” she explained.

“I’m good,” Ron said. He’d rather not get drunk, or at least not too drunk - Harry and he had trained with the Resistance, and fought at their side, but he still felt like an outsider. He didn’t get all of the jokes and didn’t recognise most of the songs and singers. But, he added to himself as he wrapped an arm around Hermione’s waist, that hadn’t stopped Hermione from enjoying Hogwarts, and it wouldn’t stop him from enjoying the party with her.

He opened his bottle - Coca-Cola - and raised it to the others. “Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Sometime later, he found himself with Hermione in her room. He would have remarked on the lack of bookshelves - relative lack, for her - but his mind was on other things. As was hers.

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London, East End, April 12th, 1997

“... and then I told her that I could do magic!”

Harry Potter tuned out Seamus’s drunk rambling about a probably fictitious one-night stand while he watched his two best friends slip out of the living room, masking his frown with another sip from his beer. He shouldn’t feel jealous, he told himself. And he wasn’t. Not really, at least. Not any more. But seeing Ron and Hermione together, sneaking away to have… Well, it reminded him of the fact that he was alone. Alone in a room full of people. That sounded like the lyrics of a song.
Seamus was too drunk to notice that Harry wasn’t even listening. He sighed and took another sip. He should be enjoying himself. This was a party, after all. And a pretty good one, all things considered - certainly on a par with the parties in the Gryffindor dorms after a Quidditch victory. Which was, he realised, not exactly a gold standard. But the music was loud, and the drinks were fine, and there was no danger of McGonagall arriving to tell them to go to bed.

And, after the month spent training in Cumbria, he knew most of the Resistance members drinking and dancing here as well as or better than his fellow Gryffindors. Even, or especially, if they were former Gryffindors themselves. Which, seeing as Seamus was currently trying to talk his ear off, had some drawbacks as well.

He looked around. Justin had taken over one of the beanbag chairs with Sally-Anne. They’d probably sneak off soon too. He couldn’t see John, and Tania was… probably checking the guard. He glanced at his watch. Midnight - they’d be changing shifts now.

He wasn’t entirely certain that a guard was necessary. Wards would provide enough protection for them to react to an attack. But Hermione had insisted that there should be at least one sober guard keeping an eye out. Probably to keep an eye on the rest of them as well. He smirked - Hermione would have been a rather strict prefect for Gryffindor. Not as strict as Percy, though.

He saw a witch moving towards him and turned to face her before he recognised her. Emily. Emily Brown. She had taken a nasty fall in boot camp, and the rest of the Resistance hadn’t let her forget it for two weeks. She wasn’t wearing a muddy uniform now, though, but some jeans and a T-shirt.

“Hey!” She smiled at him and waved with the hand holding a beer bottle, spilling some on the floor.

“Hey!” Harry nodded at her, raising his own almost empty bottle in response.

“Hey!” Seamus said. He tried to drink from his bottle, taking a moment to realise that it was empty. After glaring at it, he went to the bar. Presumably to get another one.

“How do you like the party?” Emily asked. She was wearing high-heels, he noticed - usually, she was a bit too short to look him in the eye.

Harry shrugged, then forced himself to smile - he shouldn’t ruin her mood because he felt a bit gloomy. “It’s good.”

“Oh, yes! It’s great!” Emily nodded several times with a wide smile and he realised that she was also rather drunk. “We’ve won the war!”

“Yes, we did.” This wasn’t the time to tell her that they weren’t yet done with fighting.

“And you killed the Dark Lord!”

“I had a lot of help,” he answered. He noticed that Seamus had stayed at the bar, talking to Tania.

“Modest. And cute.” Emily leaned forward, still smiling widely and cocked her head to the side, making a humming noise.

He froze for a moment. She was drunker than he had thought. And she was flirting with him - or trying to. “Thanks,” he answered. “You look nice, too.”

“Want to dance?” she asked, nodding towards the middle of the room. Someone had transfigured the
floor there into a shiny dance floor.

He had barely nodded when she took his arm and started to pull him along. “Let’s go!”

A few others were dancing too, but there was enough room for them - even counting Emily’s drunken need for a bit more space. She bumped into him a few times, too, but by accident, as far as he could tell.

And then the music changed to a slow song, and Harry found himself with Emily in his arms, swaying mostly in time with the music. He could smell a faint whiff of perfume when she rested her chin on his shoulder, and felt her chest pressing into his while her hands wandered over his back seemingly at random.

When she nibbled on his ear, giggling, he realised that if he ‘played his cards right’, as Sirius called it, he could spend the night with her. He knew from training that she was nice, she was cute too, and, apparently, she liked him. At least when she was drunk.

Which was a problem. If he even wanted to sleep with her in the first place. Which, if he was honest with himself, was a tempting fantasy. But he didn’t know if she really wanted him, or was simply too drunk to realise what she was doing. She was twenty-one years old, after all. She had been in her sixth year when he had arrived at Hogwarts! And she hadn’t shown any such interest in him before. He didn’t want to wake up to find her regretting the whole thing or cursing him. Or, worse, belittling him for his lack of experience. He still remembered Sirius’s story about how he and Harry’s father had tried to ask out a witch four years their senior. He wanted something more, too. Something like his friends had.

And he didn’t want to take advantage of a drunk girl… He shook his head, foiling Emily’s next attempt to nip at his earlobe. Well, he could enjoy the dancing, at least.

But he’d better not drink any more alcohol.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 13th, 1997

Harry Potter was eating breakfast in the kitchen when Ron returned from the Resistance’s base.

“Hi, mate!” His friend nodded and took a seat across him, reaching for the Daily Prophet.

Harry didn’t pull out his watch to check the time, that would have made him look like Percy, but it was past nine in the morning since that was when he had got up. He didn’t comment on Ron having had a long night, either. “Already ate?” he asked instead.

Ron nodded. “Yes… though I wouldn’t mind another cup of tea, actually.”

Kreacher quickly served him, and both Harry and Ron ignored the house-elf’s mutters about purebloods soiling themselves with mudbloods. For a while, neither said anything. Ron was reading the Prophet and Harry was buttering some toast before spreading honey all over it.

“Nothing new,” Ron said, putting the Prophet down. “Just regurgitated stuff they already published last week.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t ask if Ron had picked up that word from Hermione. Or what they had done during the night. “What’s Hermione doing?”
“She’s doing some reading on Jamaica. Muggle Jamaica,” Ron said. He shrugged. “Planning how to enter the country covertly. Nothing I could help with,” he added.

Harry nodded. He wasn’t too experienced with muggle travel either. He finished his toast, then cleared his throat. Ron looked up from where he was studying the tea cup for leaves to read.

“Emily was drunk at the party,” Harry started.

“Most of the Resistance were drunk,” Ron cut in, chuckling. “Seamus didn’t make it to his room - we found him snoring in the middle of the living room, hugging an empty keg.”

Harry frowned. “She was rather… affectionate.”

“Oh?” Ron’s eyes widened. “Did you and her…?”

He shook his head. “No. She was drunk.”

“Ah.” His friend nodded. He didn’t have to sound so understanding, Harry thought. As if the only reason a girl would be flirting with him was because she was drunk.

“So, we didn’t. I didn’t.” he continued.

“Are you going to talk to her when she’s sober?”

Harry sighed. “I doubt she wants to be reminded of what she said while drunk.” And did.

Ron shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“She’s also twenty-one. She was a sixth year when we were firsties.” Harry winced.

“Ah…” Ron grimaced.

“Yeah. I don’t think she would have been interested in nibbling my earlobe if she hadn’t been drunk and I wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, mate.” Ron didn’t sound like he meant it, though. And Harry didn’t want to mention his fear of disappointing an older witch, if they ended up in bed. Not to Ron, who had just spent the night with Hermione, and not for the first time either.

“I’m just being realistic.” Moody would have agreed.

“But every witch is after the Boy-Who-Lived. I mean, not every witch who is interested in you is. Ah… you know what I mean.” Ron had Kreacher refill his cup.

“I can’t exactly read the mind of every witch who flirts with me,” he retorted.

“Well… you could. Theoretically, I mean.”

Yes, he could. Dumbledore’s training had ensured that. But he wouldn’t. He shook his head. “That would be…” Pathetic. “… wrong.”

“Well, you know girls who aren’t like that,” Ron said after a moment.

Harry did. And the one he knew best was with his best friend. He didn’t say that, but judging by the way Ron flinched, his expression might have betrayed Harry. “That’s because they’re not interested in me.”
Ron was frowning now, for some reason. “Are you certain?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was missing something. “What do you mean?” His friend hesitated. Harry leaned forward. “Spit it out!”

“Look…” Ron drew a hissing breath through clenched teeth. “All I’m saying is that you might be wrong.”

“‘Might be wrong’?” Harry was certain now that Ron knew more than he was saying. But how would he know, and why wouldn’t he… “Ginny.”

Ron muttered a curse under his breath.

Harry frowned. Ginny hadn’t said anything to him. And she wasn’t the little girl who blushed and put her elbow in the butter dish any more. She was rather forward, instead. A firebrand, even. “Is that new?”

“What?” Ron glared at him. “Harry, I’m not going to spill my sister’s secrets to you! Not that I know many of her secrets anyway.”

“Well, you spilled one,” Harry shot back.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“How can I talk to her, now that I know? ‘Hey, Ginny, Ron said you liked me’?” He scoffed.

“Don’t! She’ll hex me!”

Harry thought Ron deserved to be hexed. At least a little. He sighed. He was glad they weren’t returning to Hogwarts yet. Maybe he could figure out how to deal with this with a little more time.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, April 14th, 1997

Amelia Bones was in a good mood. Today, the ICW delegation - more precisely, the two members who were left after Reid’s flight - would finally leave Britain, their inspection officially over. One less problem to plague the country.

She dropped the memo she had been working on - an approval of Pius’s schedule for Malfoy and Runcorn’s trial, the ‘Traitors’ Trial’, as the Prophet had dubbed it - on her secretary’s desk and took the lift down to the Atrium.

Sabine Beaumont, Herbert Steiner and their entourages were already waiting near the fireplaces. Aurors and Hit-Wizards were present too, of course, as were a few members of the Wizengamot. “Madam Beaumont, Mister Steiner.” She nodded at them.

“Madam Bones.” The French witch was more than a little curt, and Amelia doubted that the lack of an official reception to celebrate the end of the ICW’s inspection was the only reason for that.

“Good morning, Madam Bones.” Steiner bowed. “A fine day for travelling, isn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed,” Amelia agreed. Any day she got rid of the two delegates was a fine day.

“Amelia! Good morning! Mister Steiner, Mademoiselle Beaumont - good morning!”
“Good morning, Sirius.” And her good mood was already fading. She forced herself to smile. Black was far too cheerful for the occasion, but then, he had been instrumental in forcing the French to back down - or so he claimed. By the glare Beaumont shot him, he might even have told her the truth. Not that he said anything about how he had managed it. She forced herself not to glare as well. Foreign policy fell within the purview of the Minister for Magic, not the Wizengamot. No matter what the Chief Warlock said, it took a bill to change that. But she couldn’t do anything about it. Black now controlled the Wizengamot, and Pius wouldn’t back her if she wanted the matter brought up anyway. That wizard cared far too much about results instead of the law.

She would fire him, if he wouldn’t be reinstated as soon as Black got rid of her. But for now, she was still the Minister, and she’d do her duty.

She cleared her throat. “Madam Beaumont, Mister Steiner, the British Ministry of Magic is proud to note that your inspection was concluded successfully and that you found that there is no danger of Britain not fulfilling her duties towards the International Confederation of Wizards.”

“Thank you, Madam Minister,” Steiner said, bowing again. “We’ve only done our duty.”

That was the official line, but everyone with experience in politics knew better, of course. The delegation had stayed for over a month, far longer than announced beforehand, and one of the delegates had been revealed as a murderer and dark wizard trying to attack Hogwarts. The only inspection that had come close to that in recent memory had been the one sent to California to deal with goblin involvement in the so-called ‘gold rush’. An entire delegation on the take… At least both France and Prussia had lost face for their involvement in this farce.

“Indeed. We’re happy to note that things in Britain are not as bad as we had feared in the beginning.” Beaumont, of course, couldn’t leave without a parting hex.

Amelia refrained from answering. Black, however, did not. “You’re too kind. And please, be assured that we all hope that Isabelle Dubois will soon be found. Her kidnapping is a tragedy.”

Beaumont stiffened, and turned away without another word. She didn’t even glance at the honour formation presenting their wands as she outpaced Steiner. Amelia waited until the last of the Feldjäger had left, then turned to Black. “What did you mean by that?” Had he been behind that kidnapping? Was that how they had forced France to back down?

Black blinked as if he didn’t know what she meant. “What? I just expressed my sympathy for the loss France has suffered.”

She glared at him, but his insufferable grin didn’t change. Nodding curtly, she left him to return to her work.

If things continued like this, or grew even worse, then Amelia was looking forward to her retirement.

*****

London, Diagon Alley, April 15th, 1997

Bess Cox sighed, soaking the last chip of her meal in vinegar at her and Randall’s usual table in Freddie’s Fish’n’Chips. “You know, it’s sort of a let down,” she said.

“What is a let down?” Randall asked, putting the Daily Prophet he had been skimming down.

“We’ve won, but we’ve not done much,” Bess said. When he looked puzzled, she explained: “The Wizengamot will be elected in a few months. The Old Families are done for. And all we did was
capture some purebloods in hiding.” And were almost killed twice, she thought. At least she had been.

“We’ve done more than most.” Randall frowned. “We put our lives on the line, unlike so many others.” He glanced at the other regulars in the shop.

“That’s not a high bar.” Bess sighed again. She should be happy that the Old Families had lost their stranglehold on the Wizengamot. That the bigots had been thoroughly discredited. And she was happy. After the Wizengamot had passed the Reform Act, she had celebrated all night. But now…

“What do we do now?” She wasn’t the smartest witch, her grades at Hogwarts proved that. She had been lucky to survive the war, too. And she was still a wanted witch. Probably. She hadn’t many prospects. Unlike Randall. He was smart. And not wanted for attacking Hogsmeade.

“The war’s over, but the election is far from being a done deal. The Old Families still have more gold than the rest of Wizarding Britain combined,” her friend said.

“What? Are you certain?”

“Well, I don’t have exact numbers, but I don’t think I’m too far off the mark with my estimate. We had a hereditary ruling class with almost complete control over the legislative and executive branches, which means they could control the economy as well, and prevent others from amassing enough wealth to threaten them…” He spread his hands. “The Ministry presented the best option to improve your station, so most talented and ambitious wizards chose that career, instead of, say, business.”

Bess nodded. His explanation sounded logical. “What does that mean, then?”

“It means that if we get complacent, they can buy the election. Plaster the purebloods and half-bloods with propaganda and get themselves elected.” He looked rather grim. “The Ministry arrested the ones responsible for the Pureblood Voice, but the Old Families can simply buy more air time - or entire shows.”

She clenched her teeth. “I’m not going to let them win.”

“We’re not going to let them win,” Randall said. “We’re going to ensure that we’ll win the election. We’re going to form a party!”

Cumbria, Britain, April 15th, 1997

Ron Weasley threw himself to the muddy ground when he spotted the floating marker clearing the trees ahead of him. A Stunner passed over his head, and another narrowly missed him as he rolled into cover behind a tree trunk. He waited a moment, then jumped back out, sprinting towards a large rock while sending a volley of Stinging Hexes at the disillusioned enemy. Another Stunner hit the ground near his leg, then he was behind the rock.

He checked that he was still disillusioned, then rose to peek over the top - only to drop down again when another Stunner flew towards him. Cursing, he waved his wand.

“Avis!”

A flock of birds appeared and shot towards the trees ahead. That should create a distraction. A flick of his wrist created a shallow trench crossing the clearing next to him. If he managed to reach the other side…
“I got him!” he heard Harry say over the radio.

Ron took a deep breath and pushed the button of his own radio. “About time!” Still, he remained cautious when he left his cover until he saw Harry standing over the stunned form of Eric.

“I had to circle around outside the range of his Human-presence-revealing Spell before I could flank him, or he’d have seen my marker,” Harry defended himself. “He was the last one, too.”

Ron nodded and pointed his wand at Eric. “Rennervate.”

The muggleborn wizard blinked as he woke up with a groan. “There were two of you?”

“Of course,” Harry said. “You need to keep an eye out for flankers.”

“And you need to cast more than just Stunners,” Ron added.

“We’re not allowed to cast lethal curses,” Eric said.

“I meant, you need to cast more than just curses. Use Conjuration and Transfiguration,” Ron explained. “If your enemy takes cover, do something about it.”

“But if I had had a rifle, you’d have been shot before you saw me.”

Ron shook his head. “Only if someone had spotted me ahead of you and dispelled my Disillusionment Charm.”

“You can’t count on having a line of sight at that range,” Harry cut in. “Not in a jungle.”

Eric frowned. “Can’t count on not having it either. Why did we spend a month training with guns if we’re not allowed to use them?”

Ron refrained from sighing. The other wizard wasn’t the best loser. “You still need more training with your wand. You can’t rely on guns all the time.” Guns had their place, but a wand was still crucial. He swished his and cleared his fatigues of mud and dirt as they started to walk back towards their camp.

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“Just a week ago, I thought we’d be shot of this place,” Ron Weasley said an hour later, sitting down at the campfire next to Harry with his mess kit.

“Suck it up,” Harry said. “Where else would we train for the next mission?”

“Somewhere warmer?” Ron asked, before taking a bite.

“Justin’s family doesn’t own a Caribbean resort. And we should give France a wide berth for now,” Harry retorted. “Besides, trees are trees.”

Ron nodded, then focused on eating. It had been a tiring day. And they had more training to look forward to.

“Do you think Eric listened to what we said?” Harry asked after a minute.

“If he keeps whining we can always use some of Moody’s methods.”

“That might upset them.”
Ron shrugged. Hermione had told them to train the new members in magical combat, and she knew who had trained Harry and Ron. “As long as it works.”

As Moody had been fond of saying: ‘Better to get hurt in training than in a fight.’

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London, Ministry of Magic, April 18th, 1997

“You have heard the accused’s testimony. You know what he planned - the murder of everyone in this room, including those who thought him a friend. You know why he did it - because he wanted to take over Britain and mould it as the Dark Lord would have. Such a terrible crime deserves only one punishment: the Veil!”

Daphne Greengrass suppressed a snort as Thicknesse bowed curtly and left the floor after his address to the Wizengamot. Showing amusement at the trial of Augustus Malfoy wouldn’t be a good idea. Not even when she had been crucial to uncovering Malfoy’s crimes. Instead, she shook her head in what she hoped was a suitably grave manner. It didn’t matter much, anyway - the trial’s outcome had been set in stone from the start.

A member yelled: “The kiss! The kiss!” A few others joined in. Daphne rolled her eyes - didn’t they know that the Dementors hadn’t returned to the Ministry’s service? That they might end up as residents in Azkaban’s cells, instead of their guards, once the Unspeakables had finished cornering and corralling them? Maybe the Reform Act wasn’t that bad, if it meant the Wizengamot would lose such idiots.

She sighed while Malfoy rose for his own address to his former peers. She certainly wouldn’t be a member in the new, elected Wizengamot. Not with her past. And she wouldn’t miss it, either, she added to herself while stealing a glance at Granger, who was sitting next to Black. To see the murderer of her parents every session, to hear her speak every day, to nod and smile at her whenever they met… she shook her head again, clenching her teeth.

“... what I did and planned had only one goal, a noble goal: to save Britain from its ruin at the hands of the mudbloods. A goal worth any sacrifice! Who among us would not sacrifice their life for their children?”

Most of the members wouldn’t, Daphne thought cynically as her esteemed peers booed and yelled, their outrage drowning out the accused’s last words. They showed no decorum. Her father would have been shocked and ashamed at this display. But her father had been a member of the Wizengamot before it had been gutted by the attack on Malfoy Manor. Before dozens of members had been replaced by their inexperienced heirs, all at the same time. Before the Battle of the Ministry had caused even more deaths.

The Wizengamot her father had been part of, she realised, as she raised her wand to judge the accused guilty, had not survived the war. The muggleborns would only replace a twitching corpse.

Doge passed the sentence. “Augustus Malfoy, the Wizengamot finds you guilty of treason, conspiracy to treason, murder, attempted murder, conspiracy to murder and rebellion. As punishment, you will be sent through the Veil. The sentence will be carried out immediately.”

Malfroy’s protests were cut off by a Silencing Charm, Daphne noted.

“For a man ready to die for his cause, he certainly is struggling a lot,” Tracey commented as the Hit-Wizards dragged the condemned wizard away.
Daphne nodded. Another sign of how far the Old Families had fallen. She hoped the man would recover his composure when he was facing the Veil later. It would make attending his execution easier.

After all, her parents had taught her that she had better watch a mortal enemy die so she could be certain of their demise.

*****

Astoria was waiting for her when Daphne and Tracey returned to Greengrass Manor hours later. “Daphne!” her sister spat, glaring at her.

Daphne heard Tracey mumble a curse before grabbing a pinch of Floo powder. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” her friend excused herself and left for her own home, leaving the two sisters to face each other.

“Astoria.” She nodded at her little sister.

Her sister scowled. “They murdered them! They tried to kill the mudbloods and blood traitors, and the Wizengamot murdered them! I just heard it on the wireless!”

“Since Malfoy planned to murder all of them, that was to be expected.”

“They also said that you betrayed him. That you were a spy for Black and the mudbloods!” Astoria crossed her arms and pressed her lips together. It would have looked adorable if not for her expression.

“I told you that already.” Daphne had. Astoria had avoided her afterwards. Until now.

“Why did you turn traitor?”

Daphne saw tears glittering in her sister’s eyes. She felt guilty, but forced herself to ignore them. This was for Astoria’s own good. “Malfoy and Runcorn betrayed our country. They betrayed their own allies. They were willing to murder the entire Wizengamot for their plans.”

“They tried to avenge our parents! They would have killed Granger, if you hadn’t betrayed them!” Astoria shook with each word she yelled.

“And at what cost? Would you murder so many to kill Granger?”

“They’re just blood traitors! They murdered our parents! They want to murder us!”

Daphne wanted to hex her, but controlled herself. “Would you have murdered me to kill Granger?”

“What?” Astoria looked confused.

“Don’t you realise what would have happened if we had followed Malfoy’s plan? We would have restarted the war. And we would have died in it. Both of us.” Daphne pressed out through clenched teeth.

“What?” Her sister took a step back, her arms falling to her side.

“Didn’t you pay attention at all? How many people died in the war? Most of the Wizengamot! Most of the Ministry! What do you think would happen if we killed Granger, huh?”

“But… but…”
“I’ll tell you what would have happened if we had blown up Granger and the ‘blood traitors’: The mudbloods would have massacred us. You, me, and any purebloods they could find.” She stepped up to her sister. “Merlin’s beard, Astoria! We have lost! Our parents are dead. Tracey’s parents are dead. Draco’s family is dead. Theo’s family is dead. Pansy’s family is dead. All killed by mudbloods! The Ministry is a shell, what Aurors and Hit-Wizards they have left are barely older than us! We have lost the war!”

Astoria was crying now, shaking her head. Daphne felt tears run down her cheeks as well, but ignored them. “So many of us, the Old Families, have been killed already, and yet, Malfoy wanted to murder even more! Even if we managed to somehow win the next war, which of us would be left? What would be left of Britain?”

She took a deep breath. “Do you think I like seeing Granger in the Wizengamot? Hearing her talk? I don’t! She murdered our parents! But there’s nothing I can do about it. Nothing that wouldn’t cause even more death and destruction. Nothing that wouldn’t kill you as well!

“We lost, Astoria. We pushed the mudbloods too far, and they crushed us. And if we don’t accept it, if we try to fight them, then they’ll kill us all.” She wiped the tears from her face. “That’s why I went to Black. That’s why I betrayed Malfoy. Because I want to live. Because I want you to live!”

“But… but our parents!”

Daphne shook her head. “Our parents wouldn’t want us to die. Not for them, not for Malfoy, not for anyone. They would want us to live, and we will live.”

She gathered her sister in her arms, and held her until she stopped sobbing.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, April 18th, 1997

Hermione Granger found Sirius in his living room. To her surprise, he was alone.

“Vivienne’s visiting her family,” he said - he must have caught her glancing around. “Can I offer you a drink?” He pointed at the bottle on the low table.

She shook her head, then brushed a stray lock out of her face. She might have to cut her hair again, she idly noted - unless she wanted to let it grow out once more.

“We should be celebrating Malfoy and Runcorn’s deaths!”

“We already celebrated their defeat.” She had no wish to celebrate their executions.

He huffed, and refilled his own glass. “Where’s Harry?”

“He’s running another exercise with Ron and the new Resistance recruits.” New Resistance members, she silently corrected herself as she sat down in a seat herself. “He’ll be here for dinner.”

“Working them hard, huh?” His grin implied another meaning.

She ignored it. His whole attitude seemed a bit forced. Exaggerated. “Our recruits have finished training with muggle weapons, but they lack experience with magical combat. Harry and Ron were taught by Moody, and can teach others what they know.” Part of it, at least - nothing could really replace combat experience.
“Ah! Preparing for our invasion of Jamaica?”

She rolled her eyes, but didn’t correct him. “Of course. The better we prepare, the less trouble we’ll have.” And the fewer casualties they would suffer. “Speaking of preparation… did you talk to the Department of Mysteries?”

She saw him wince. “I did. But the Unspeakables are living up to their name. Or they would be, if they were called the ‘Unmovables’. They categorically refused to teach anyone outside the Department how to track their members.”

Hermione nodded. She had expected that - in their place, she wouldn’t allow it either. And Sirius knew that, too. “So…?”

He frowned at her. “They offered to send one of them along, but I had to tell the Head Unspeakable about our plans.”

She nodded. She would have preferred not to tell anyone outside their group, but that couldn’t be avoided. At least Dumbledore had trusted Saul Croaker. To some degree, at least.

“So, we’ll have a spy coming along who will report on our tactics and talents to his superiors,” Sirius said.

There was an obvious solution to that problem, but it would create more problems with the Unspeakables. She sighed. “We don’t have any choice. And I’m certain that they already know a lot about us.”

“Some things they don’t know, though. Like Harry’s wand. If they find out just what he is wielding…”

She nodded. The Department of Mysteries was known to collect all sorts of artefacts and dark items. If they realised Harry had the Elder Wand - and they would, should Harry have to wield it where the spy could see it - they’d try anything to get it. And she knew Sirius would kill to protect Harry.

“There are alternatives to killing.”

“We’re not going to hand it over. Harry needs it to protect himself. Especially if everyone sees him as Dumbledore’s successor. And Obliviation might not work. The Unspeakables have warped minds.” He chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

He shrugged. “They’ll expect such things - since they would use the same tactics - so we can assume they’ve taken measures against Obliviation. Maybe they’ll set up some memory delivery service or whatever.”

“That might make killing him useless as well,” she pointed out.

“Only if they have somehow managed to make it all work without actually drawing out the memory and storing it in a vial. Which isn’t impossible, of course.” Sirius shrugged.

“We might make him sign a contract.” Though that could be broken by a skilled Curse-Breaker.

“But the best plan would be to ‘keep him safe’. And, of course, be ready to deal with him at the first sign of betrayal.”

Sirius chuckled. “Good idea. Keep him away from any fighting, for his own safety, of course.” He grew serious again. “Speaking of staying safe…”
She met his eyes. “Yes?”

“You know you shouldn’t go, right? You’re too important to risk your life like that. You’re the leader for the muggleborns.”

“As the leader of the majority of the Wizengamot, you would know all about that,” she retorted. He was right, of course - she shouldn’t go. But she wouldn’t let Harry and Ron risk their lives without her.

“Touché.” Sirius smiled rather sadly. He wouldn’t let Harry risk his life alone either. “But we need the boost to our reputation finding a cure for the Withering Curse will give us. Or fighting houngans and winning.”

A good excuse, she thought as she nodded. Neither of them said anything for a while. Finally, she broke the silence. “Did you talk to Aberforth yet?”

He winced. “Yes. It was harder than I thought, since, apparently, as I’ve sort of inherited Dumbledore’s Order and gained control over the Wizengamot, I don’t need his help any more.” He sighed. “You should have talked to him.”

She shrugged. She had been very busy. As long as Aberforth was on board, it didn’t matter; the old wizard wouldn’t have agreed to help them if he didn’t want to. “He might like to persuade the Unspeakable that they’d be safest far from the fighting.”

Sirius laughed. “I’m rather certain he’d like that.”

She was rather certain too. And looking forward to it.

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Near Spanish Town, Jamaica, April 18th, 1997

A wizard of lesser intellect would have identity issues after ten days of breaking into the mambo’s mind and experiencing countless memories as if they were his own, of this Augustus Rookwood was certain. He glanced at the drooling witch on the floor of his tent. It had taken him five days to break her resistance - but unfortunately, doing so had broken her mind as well, and he had spent the next five days trying to find the memories he wanted among the chaotic torrent of other, useless memories which filled her mind.

He had made progress, of course - a wizard of his skill would not be stymied by such a task. He knew where the Library of Souls was located. He knew what knowledge was contained by a number of the skulls inside it, although not yet the knowledge he sought. But the defences of the Library still eluded him for the most part.

He was aware that after the break-in a few months ago, the houngans had increased the Library’s security. They had taken measures to ensure that the method used then - using a houngan under the Imperius to lead the thief inside, past the traps and defences - wouldn’t work any more. To think Dumbledore had used an Unforgivable… if only he had any proof of that.

But he had to focus on the older defences… He hadn’t found much about them, yet. And he needed to know about them in order to find a way to bypass them. Frowning, he shook his head. The mambo had the knowledge he needed; all he had to do was find it.

He stood up and walked over to his captive. A flick of his wand summoned a carafe of water, which he made the witch drink, and a few chocolate frogs which he fed her. He had tried to weaken her by
withholding food and water, but, while it had helped to break her resistance, it had made it harder to find the memories he needed afterwards because her broken mind focused on food and water if she was hungry. While she was still licking her lips after devouring the chocolate, he pointed his wand at her.

“Leglimens!”

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Chapter 63: Incursion

‘Whether or not the incursion into Jamaica in April 1997 by the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance was an invasion or a raid is as contested among my colleagues as another, related, question - whether or not it was part of the Second Blood War or a continuation of the centuries-old conflict between Wizarding Britain and Jamaica. In my opinion, these questions cannot be answered without first determining the objectives of the incursion. And while, according to the British records, the stated objective was to secure a cure for the Withering Curse, as well as to apprehend the fugitive Death Eater Augustus Rookwood, it is obvious that the endeavour was also, perhaps even primarily, planned to punish Jamaica for the actions taken by their delegate, John Reid, during the ICW’s inspection of Wizarding Britain. And since that was the direct result of the devastation wrought by the Second Blood War, the attack on Jamaica should be considered part of that war. This is further supported by the fact that, at the time, Wizarding Britain no longer had any territorial ambitions with regards to Jamaica. Even Dumbledore’s visit in 1957 had been motivated by the abhorrent practices of the houngans rather than by any desire to retake the island.’

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century’ by Albert Runcorn

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London, Newham, April 25th, 1997

Hermione Granger caught herself copying the Major’s usual ‘inspection pose’ and forced herself to slowly relax a little as she observed the Resistance members present in the expanded living room of the hitherto unused safe house in Newham. They were getting ready for the trip to Jamaica, or rather, they were making last-minute adjustments to their kit in order to keep busy until their departure. Most of them, at least. Some, like Seamus, were actually cramming more gear into their pockets.

“If muggle scans can detect explosives in magically sealed pockets we’ll be in big trouble,” Harry mumbled next to her.

“They can’t,” she whispered back. “And we’re bypassing the checks anyway.”

“Why is he stuffing so many explosives into his pockets anyway?” Ron asked from her other side. “He can take a small sample, and use the Doubling Charm to get whatever quantity he needs.”

Hermione sighed. “He wants to be ready at a moment’s notice, or so he claims.” Privately, she thought Seamus simply liked explosives (and explosions) a bit too much. “And to be fair, it is safer to pull explosives out of your pockets as you need them, instead of creating a heap of them in front of you.”

“I’m not convinced that Seamus carrying so many explosives with him is in any way safe to begin with,” Harry grumbled. “Least of all in a plane.”

“He knows his way around explosives,” she retorted.

“That’s not reassuring,” Ron added. “Quite the contrary.”

She was about to tell the two boys to cut it out when she felt the communication mirror in her pocket vibrate. Pulling it out and tapping it revealed the smiling face of Sirius.
“We’re about to arrive, tell your people not to shoot us!”

“They won’t.” She raised her voice. “Sinclair, Emily - the Order’s about to arrive!”

The two Resistance members on guard duty called out an acknowledgement and Hermione walked towards the door, followed by Harry and Ron.

Despite the call ahead by Sirius, Hermione checked through a spyglass and with a Human-presence-revealing spell before opening the door. Sirius was the first in, with a wide grin on his face.

“Hello, everyone!”

“Sirius, what are you wearing?” Harry voiced what Hermione was thinking.

“A muggle outfit suitable for the jungle, as requested!” the older wizard cheerfully announced, tapping his pith helmet. “Stylish too!”

While Harry berated his godfather, Hermione greeted the rest of the Order group. At least most of them were wearing more sensible and, especially, more up to date muggle clothes instead of an outfit Dr Livingstone would have worn. More sensible didn’t mean that much, of course - while Remus and Bill were wearing sturdy travelling clothes, probably drawing on the latter’s experience in Egypt - Vivienne, Fleur and Tonks were dressed as if they were headed to a tropical beach and were probably using warming charms.

Aberforth was wearing his usual robes. “I’ll transfigure my robes when I need to, not a minute before,” the old wizard grumbled as he entered. “I’m too old to dress like a fool.”

“I shall follow his example,” the figure wearing a hooded cloak next to him said. “I’m Brown. John Brown,” the Unspeakable added, nodding to her.

“Welcome to the Resistance,” Hermione said. “I assume you know how to behave among muggles.”

“Yes.” The man’s voice didn’t seem to have been magically altered, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

“Good. We’ll be taking a muggle aeroplane to travel to the Caribbean, and passing through muggle airports.”

“I’m looking forward to the experience.”

*****

“Listen up!” Hermione snapped “We’re leaving for the airport in five minutes. Is everyone ready? Justin?”

“Yes.” She hadn’t expected anything else - he had organised the trip with her, after all.

“Sally-Anne?”

“Yes.” The witch was already wearing her backpack.

“Seamus?”

“I was born ready!” He patted his pockets for emphasis.

She didn’t bother to glare at him. “Tania?”
“Yes.” Tania gave her a short nod.

“Mary-Jane?”

“Yes.” The survivor of the Avengers’ attempt to capture the Resistance even sounded eager.

Eric, Emily, Anna, Gary, Celia, Sinclair and Timothy were ready as well, though they didn’t manage to hide their nervousness as well as the more experienced members.

“Alright. Let’s go!” The plane wouldn’t leave without them, but Hermione hated to be late. It wouldn’t be a good start to the mission if they couldn’t keep to their schedule from the start.

Heathrow Airport, London, April 25th, 1997

Standing inside the muggle hall - the hangar, they called it - Ron Weasley eyed the muggle aeroplane with both interest and a bit of apprehension while the Resistance were climbing inside it. It was just too damn big in his opinion - how could something that size fly without magic? He clenched his teeth and drew a hissing breath. Muggles flew in aeroplanes all the time. There was no reason to worry.

“Don’t worry, Ron,” Hermione said in a low voice next to him, “Aeroplanes are among the safest ways to travel. Far more people die in traffic accidents than in aeroplanes.”

He forced himself to smile at her, even though her comment was not exactly reassuring. Quite the opposite, actually. “It’s just the first time I’m flying on a plane.”

“Mine too,” Harry said. “My relatives weren’t much for foreign vacations.”

Ron nodded. That was normal for him - the only time he and his family had left Britain on vacation had been the trip to Egypt in 1993, and that had only been possible since Dad had won the Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw that year. Which reminded him… “How much does this trip cost anyway?”

“It’s actually not that much more expensive than buying tickets for a regular flight at short notice for everyone, and much more convenient for our mission,” Hermione explained.

“Ah.” He still had no idea how much gold Sirius and maybe Justin were spending on the plane, but if it was what muggles paid for a vacation, then that was probably not too expensive. To change the topic, he glanced at the Unspeakable, who was standing apart from everyone else. “Do you think he’s a muggleborn? He doesn’t look nervous.”

“He might be. He certainly managed to transfigure his robes into decent muggle clothes for passing through security,” Hermione said.

“That might just be what he wants us to think,” Harry retorted. “Claiming to be muggleborn out of the blue would be too blatant, but letting us come to that conclusion would be more subtle.”

Ron nodded in agreement. “He could simply have copied the clothes from a muggle, so we lower our guard around him.”

Hermione mumbled something - probably ‘Moody’ - but didn’t contradict them. “Alright, I’ll see you inside,” she said, and walked over to where the last of the Resistance were entering the plane.
“The other Order members are rather nervous,” Harry said after a moment.

Ron frowned and turned his head to look at them. They were nervous, he realised, even Bill, who was normally unflappable. Fleur and Vivienne were eyeing the plane with open apprehension, even. Only Aberforth was scowling as usual.

Oddly, seeing others show their fear made him feel less nervous. “Let’s show them how it’s done!” He slung his bag over his shoulder and started walking towards the stairs leading up to the door of the plane.

*****

Half an hour after ‘take-off’, Ron had come to the conclusion that flying the muggle way was boring. Even less interesting than taking the Hogwarts Express since Hermione had stressed very firmly that they weren’t allowed to do any magic inside the plane. And as they were not sitting in compartments, but all in the same room, you couldn’t even have some privacy for whatever.

At least everyone seemed to have taken the order to abstain from using magic to heart. It might be going a bit too far - most spells wouldn’t do anything to the plane - but it would only take one mishap, or unintended effect, to cause a catastrophe. And the Order members were nervous enough already. If the twins had been allowed to come along… but they didn’t have enough combat experience and training with the Resistance compared to the others, or at least that had been the official reason.

He leaned back, fiddling with his seat while waiting for his friends to return to theirs. Hermione was walking down the aisles and checking with the rest of the Resistance and Harry was a few rows over, talking to Sirius (and Vivienne, who seemed to have permanently attached herself to the wizard’s arm for the flight’s duration).

He wished the in-flight movie Hermione had been talking about would start soon.

*****

Lynden Pindling International Airport, Nassau, Bahamas, April 25th, 1997

“Yes! At last, we have escaped this contraption!”

Harry Potter, passing the flight attendant seeing them off at the door, shook his head at Sirius’s antics, even though he shared the sentiment - he wouldn’t miss being stuck inside a plane either. After flying on a broom for years, being a passenger on a plane just wasn’t anything special. Though he wasn’t about to rush out of the plane and kiss the ground.

He heard a giggle behind him, and a glance over his shoulder revealed the flight attendant trying to hide her smile. “He doesn’t fly very often,” Harry said.

“I noticed,” she answered. “There were quite a few first-timers today, right?”

“Yes.” Harry confirmed, before joining his godfather and Vivienne on the tarmac while the rest of their group started to follow him down. The air wasn’t as hot as he had expected, a bit over twenty degrees. Jamaica would be hotter but less humid, he thought.

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“Ah, Harry! We’re finally free again!” Sirius spread his arms wide and beamed at him. He sounded honestly relieved, Harry noticed, and didn’t seem to putting on an act. But why… Azkaban, he suddenly realised. His godfather had spent over ten years in a cell there. Of course he would have issues with being confined to his seat for hours!
And in a few hours, they’d have to board the next charter plane - a cargo plane this time. Harry winced when Sirius turned around to embrace Vivienne. He knew that his godfather was only here because of Harry. He sighed and slung his backpack over his shoulder as the others filed down the gangway.

******

North of Jamaica, April 25th, 1997

“We’re approaching Jamaica and will enter the island’s air space in fifteen minutes.”

Harry Potter checked the time when he heard the pilot’s announcement. A quarter to midnight - they were right on schedule. He stashed his watch inside his pocket again. When Hermione stood up and stepped into the middle of the compartment, between the cargo pallets fixed there, he shifted his weight around on the fold-out chair that served as a seat to look at the rest of their group. Everyone was wearing dark fatigues and harnesses, straight out of an action movie.

“Alright! Everyone, get ready!” the witch said.

“Please put your seat in the upright position and fasten your seatbelts,” Harry heard Seamus whisper, which prompted a chuckle from the other Resistance members near the Irish wizard, and a glare from Hermione.

“Check your gear again - we’re not getting back on the plane if you forgot something!”

“Yes, Mum!” another quipped, though the humour sounded a little forced to Harry. He let his gaze wander and noticed that, in contrast to the flight to the Bahamas, the Resistance members seemed to be more nervous than the Order members. Understandable, of course - they were about to enter the houngans’ country.

“Ah, finally!” Ron said in a low voice next to him. “I can’t wait to leave the plane! There wasn’t even a movie or a snack bar this time!” He looked honestly eager, too.

“No cute flight attendant either,” Sirius chimed in from his other side. Vivienne, next to him, rolled her eyes.

“And we’re about to jump out of a perfectly good plane,” Harry said. No one laughed. Instead they nodded.

“Good,” Ron said. “Hermione told me that the take-off and landing were the most dangerous parts of a muggle flight. I’d rather ride my broom.”

Harry could agree with that.

“I prefer to fly myself,” Vivienne cut in. The Veela looked rather smug.

“Ten minutes to drop location,” the pilot announced.

“Won’t the muggles wonder about this?” Remus asked, nodding towards the cockpit. He was still looking a bit worn from the full moon a few days ago.

“No. They think we’re muggle mercenaries doing a parachute drop,” Ron said. “Hermione hired them through the Major.”

“What’s a parachute?” Sirius asked.
“A muggle invention to safely fall from great heights,” Harry started to explain.

“Imagine a giant umbrella,” Ron cut his explanation short.

“Ah!”

“Everyone, put on your backpacks!” Hermione ordered. “Remember: If you get lost, home in on our beacon!”

Those who hadn’t put on their backpacks - made-up to look like parachutes to fool the muggle flight crew - hastily did so, including Harry. While Hermione and Justin went down the aisles and checked the straps, he again patted the pocket where the Elder Wand was stored. He was certain he would have to use the wand soon. Rookwood was a dangerous enemy, having survived so long while being hunted by entire countries, and the houngans… he shivered, remembering what Reid had done. If they met that houngan again they’d make him pay.

The co-pilot entered the compartment and walked down to the back of the plane. “We’ll reach the drop zone in five minutes,” he announced. “I’m lowering the ramp now.” The man pushed a button at the back, and the ramp started to descend, revealing the dark night sky outside.

“Line up!” Hermione yelled over the howling of the wind that filled the compartment.

Harry was the first at the ramp, with Ron at his side. If he squinted he could just make out the contours of the land below. Or so he thought. He recalled once again how the landing zone looked from above - it was near an inland lake, supposedly easy to find from the air.

“We’re above the drop zone!” the pilot announced.

“Go!” the co-pilot shouted. “Go! Go! Go!”

Harry didn’t hesitate and ran down the ramp, flinging himself into the air. As soon as he was clear of the plane he pulled out his shrunken broom and straddled it. The moment he felt the Firebolt react to his commands, turning his freefall into flight, he wanted to yell with delight.

This was flying!

He twisted and rolled a little, before pulling up and slowing his descent. Ron appeared at his side a few seconds later, on his own Firebolt, grinning widely. Sirius and the rest of the Order followed quickly afterward, with the two Veela in their transformed forms, gliding with their wings. Under a nearly full moon, the Order formed up with them, followed by the Resistance members.

The Resistance were not as used to such manoeuvres, and Harry saw one of them lose his grip on his broom. Harry dived after the screaming, flailing wizard, hand outstretched as if he were chasing the snitch. He only took a few seconds to reach the man - Gary - but it took a few more seconds for Gary to stop flailing, and grab Harry’s hand.

“I lost my broom!” the wizard yelled into Harry’s ear as soon as he was seated behind him on the Firebolt.

“I saw!” Harry responded, already pulling up. He couldn’t see the others, not at this distance and in this light, but… there was Ron!

His friend flew towards them, holding out a second broom. “Here’s your broom,” he said. “I managed to summon it.”
He could have summoned Gary’s backpack, and Gary with it, instead of diving after him, Harry realised, feeling a bit sheepish. But as long as everyone was safe… Gary managed to switch to his own broom without taking another dive, at least.

“We got Gary,” Harry reported via the radio. He looked up, but even though the moon was still almost full, he couldn’t spot the rest of the group.

“Good,” Hermione answered crisply. “Disillusion yourselves and proceed to the landing zone!”

*****

Near Moneague Lake, Jamaica, April 25th, 1997

Hermione Granger followed Justin’s marker as they made their way to the landing zone near the Moneague Lake. At least, she was reasonably certain that they were on the right course; none of them had been there before, but they had studied the maps and the lay of the land beneath her corresponded to what she had memorised. She was still relieved when they flew over the lake, confirming that they were on course.

A few minutes later, they landed in a small clearing. Justin was already casting Muggle-Repelling Charms, as planned. Hermione dismounted, stored her broom, and started to count the people present as they formed a perimeter. Three were missing. She pushed the button of her radio. “Harry? Ron? Where are you?”

“We’re coming. We’ve had some trouble navigating,” Harry answered.

“Do we need to use the radio beacon?” That would probably get the attention of the muggles too, Hermione knew. They would be gone before any muggle force could reach them, but reports might draw attention from the houngans.

“No, no. We’re following the road south; we’ll find it as soon as we reach the lake.”

“Alright.” Her voice didn’t betray how relieved she was that Harry and Ron had managed to save Gary. They had trained for this, but obviously not enough if Gary had panicked like that, and forgot to simply summon his broom back to his hand while falling. Maybe they should have landed in the plane… no. The risk of getting spotted by spies - compelled muggles, or disguised wizards - was too great. After two attacks by Rookwood, the houngans would be on high alert. They would be focusing on covering the coast, since smugglers tended to use ships and boats, according to her information, but they would also be observing the airports - even if only to spot muggleborn children of tourists to kidnap, if the latest complaints to the ICW were to be believed.

Hermione took a look at the markers floating around the clearing. “Memorise this location! It’s Rally Spot Lake One!” she ordered. They needed a few locations they could apparate to, in case they were split up or had to retreat from a fight.

“Justin, Sally-Anne - centre of clearing.” She was sounding like the Major, she realised, frowning.

Her friends’ markers converged on her. She lowered her voice. “We’ll establish the caches with the Zodiacs and the aid station next.” Those would be Justin and Sally-Anne’s responsibilities respectively. She hoped they wouldn’t need either, but she doubted that they would be that lucky.

“I bet Brown is taking notes,” Sally-Anne mumbled.

Hermione thought so too. That was why they would be establishing another set of caches and an alternative aid station, too, without Brown knowing about them.
Just in case the Unspeakable was captured. Or tried to backstab them and escaped their prepared response.

She heard Harry on the radio again. “We’ve got visual of the landing zone,” he announced.

She was too relieved to see her friends arrive - in a manner of speaking - to be annoyed at him quoting some action movie, again.

*****

Near Guanaboa Vale, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

There was a rat nearby. Padfoot could smell it as he circled around their temporary camp to check the ‘perimeter’. The huge dog growled - he hated rats. One rat in particular, but others were not any better. But he could not track down the creature; he had a task to do. An important one. He had to check for enemies hiding in the underbrush. Enemies whom spells might miss, but his nose wouldn’t.

Growling softly, he ignored the trail of the rat and continued his sweep instead. Apart from more rats and one snake, he didn’t smell anything else. No humans. And no rotting corpses, nor buried bones. Unlike the rats, he tracked down and killed the snake, just in case it was spying for a parselmouth.

Padfoot changed back into Sirius Black before he stepped out of the underbrush and into the area where the group had put up concealed wizard tents. Not many - just four. And one of them was reserved for Brown and Aberforth. He spotted Remus sitting in front of the ‘Order Tent’ as if he was watching the sunrise. His best friend was looking less haggard now, or so Sirius thought - it always helped when he had a task, something to care about.

“All’s clear,” Sirius announced. “Just some rats and a snake around. I killed the snake.”

Remus nodded. Sirius glanced over at the tent of the Unspeakable. “What’s he doing?”

“Resting, same as everyone else,” Remus answered. “Hermione and the others don’t want to start tracking Rookwood with tired troops.”

“Ah.” Sirius grunted. He understood and agreed with the reasoning, but he hated waiting. Hated waiting inside the tent even more. He wouldn’t be able to spot anyone sneaking up on them. “I’ll inform the others.” He nodded at Remus and walked over to the ‘command tent’, as Harry had called it.

He stepped inside the tent, the slight tingle informing him that he was passing through a ward, and found Harry and his friends inside, staring at a table. At a map on a table. “Perimeter’s clear!” he announced, saluting like a muggle. Only the other witch, Sally-Anne, giggled, though. But Harry at least grinned.

“Good.” Hermione pointed at the map. “We’ve chosen the locations for tonight. Given the range of Brown’s spell, this array will allow us to cover the entire island with the minimum number of spells.”

“I’m certain that he hasn’t told us how powerful his spell really is,” Sirius said. Unspeakables never revealed their secrets; everyone knew that.

Hermione shrugged. “We’ll still achieve the results we need. And,” she added with a grin, “it gives us a few more opportunities to study his spell.”

“And it will give him a few more opportunities to stab us in the back,” Sirius retorted.
“Aberforth will be watching him.” Harry shrugged.

Sirius hoped that that would be enough. He and his friends knew just how dangerous Dumbledore’s brother was, but many still thought the man was a wastrel, and a stain on his family.

Not unlike how many had seen, and still saw, Sirius himself.

*****

Dry Harbour Mountains, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

Sighing, Augustus Rookwood had to admit that the houngans knew how to protect their Library of Souls. It had taken him a week to unravel the wards guarding the area enough to slip through them without alerting anyone, and that had been with access to the mambo’s mind. But now he was faced with a veritable maze of magical plants and animals, ready to mangle and tear any unwary intruder to shreds. And the wary intruder, noting the absence of Anti-Apparition Jinxes, might be tempted to use that apparent weakness to evade those defences, only to trigger a reactive ward, which would cover the area with those jinxes and alert the houngans. Very clever, but not clever enough.

The wind spells ready to force down anyone on a broom - or carpet; Jamaica hadn’t banned them, of course - were a bit better hidden. If he hadn’t assumed that there would be such defences he wouldn’t have discovered them, and even now he was not quite certain if they were not simply a decoy set up to hide the real defences. All he knew for certain was that using his broom would be suicidal.

Which left passing through the jungle, and all its guardians, which would include buried skeletons and Inferi, in addition to plants that would give Sprout trouble and animals that would make Kettleburn back off. It was a good thing that Augustus was made of sterner stuff, and smarter than either.

He had a potion to negate his scent, which, in conjunction with a Disillusionment Charm, would render most animals unable to detect him. But the plants… they did not use just scent or sight to find their prey, but also pressure - and of the air, even, not just on themselves. To pass that gauntlet, he would have to move as if he were but a leaf in the wind - or so slowly as to not be detected at all.

And to avoid the Inferi and skeletons he knew were lying in wait beneath the soil, patient and unmoving as only the undead and constructs could be, he would have to avoid setting foot on the ground at all, and mask his body’s heat as well.

But first he would need to plot a path that would avoid most of the plants and traps - and he would have to infer most of their locations.

He snorted. Yes, the houngans knew how to guard their most sacred place.

*****

Near Ulster Spring, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

Ron Weasley watched Brown prepare his ritual, his wand in hand, though pointed at the ground. He didn’t trust the Unspeakable. Not really. Who knew what the Department of Mysteries’ goals were? Did they want to capture Rookwood, or silence him forever? Or might they see this as an opportunity to kill Harry, Hermione and Sirius before they could change Britain further, and blame it on Britain’s traditional enemies? Not on Ron’s watch.

He watched as the man used his wand to form a runic circle on the ground. As far as Ron could tell -
and he had paid a lot of attention - it was identical to the one Brown had used, unfortunately unsuccessfully, earlier in the evening near Grange Hill. Brown looked utterly collected, as if he was merely doing an exercise in Ancient Runes, and not preparing to cast a ritual spell in the middle of Jamaica, where houngans might stumble upon them at any moment. Ron wished he had that sort of composure.

He wasn’t the only one, he knew - most of the Resistance members guarding the perimeter were nervous, and Justin had had to remind a few of them to keep their eyes on the jungle around them, not on the Unspeakable behind them. And yet, Ron was keeping an eye on the perimeter as well - Moody’s lessons were hard to forget, and the Resistance members, apart from Hermione, were not among those Ron would blindly trust to guard his back.

Brown finished creating the circle, and stepped into its centre, carefully avoiding smudging any of the lines. He moved his wand in slow, controlled motions, the tip trailing motes of light that were steadily growing brighter. Ron couldn’t quite catch what the Unspeakable was mumbling, but that wasn’t new either.

Soon the man was surrounded by a thick band of glowing, floating lights as his wand rose above his head until, with a loud “Vena!”, he stabbed the wand towards the sky. For a moment, the floating lights glowed even brighter, then they dimmed, and Brown blinked.

That hadn’t happened the last time - the lights had winked out. Ron tensed up as Brown smiled.

“I found him.”

*****

A minute later, everyone was on their brooms, following Brown. They were flying at a decent pace, though with their Firebolts, Ron and Harry could have made much better time - but Brown was the only one who knew Rookwood’s location.

He looked over his shoulder, checking the markers behind him, and the brooms he could see in the moonlight. Even though they were not disillusioned, they were surprisingly hard to spot thanks to their dark grey colour. They would be even harder to detect from below, disappearing against the night sky - provided anyone in the jungle below could even see the sky from the ground.

Though that cut both ways, Ron reminded himself - all he could see was the tops of the trees below him, and the few hills and rocks that broke through the canopy. No wonder Rookwood was hiding here.

 Suddenly, in front of him, Brown’s marker started to descend, and Ron followed the Unspeakable, descending in a shallow arc until they were almost touching the treetops. Behind him, the Resistance members were spreading out to cover their flanks - and to make it harder to hit several of them with a single spell.

Brown’s marker slowed down even more, almost coming to a complete stop, before disappearing into the treetops. Ron sighed, cast a Shield Charm, and dove into the canopy himself, his spell forcing the branches away as he broke through to the ground. He kept an eye out for other markers - if the Unspeakable were about to betray them, then this would be the perfect opportunity to lure them into an ambush. Which was why half the force would stay in the air, as a ‘reserve’, and the other half would spread out on the ground.

He landed next to Brown’s marker and dismounted, but kept his broom in hand, just in case. Other markers touched down nearby.
“As of ten minutes ago, he was straight ahead of us, at a distance of five hundred yards,” Brown said over the radio.

“Straight ahead?” Harry’s voice cut in.

“Ah.” The Unspeakable became visible and pointed. “I could lead you there.”

Hermione shot the proposal down, as she had shot down his earlier offers. “That’s too dangerous. You’re the only one who can find him, should he manage to escape. Do the ritual again and inform us if his location has changed. Remus, Tonks, stay with him.”

“Alright.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ron thought their acknowledgements came a bit grudgingly - Tonks’s certainly sounded sarcastic - but then, he knew exactly what the two thought about guarding Brown instead of doing the fighting. But someone with more experience with magic than most muggleborns had to keep an eye on Brown.

“Everyone else - advance carefully. Ground force, expect traps and wards! Flyers - stay behind the ground force.”

Ron didn’t bother with calling out his acknowledgement. He simply started off towards Rookwood’s last known location as others, including Hermione, rose above the canopy again. Harry’s marker followed him as Ron took the lead. Moving through the jungle was different from moving through the woods in Britain. The underbrush was denser - though that soon changed - and the hot and humid air, as well as the softer ground, made it more exhausting. But the worst thing was the darkness. The moonlight wasn’t bright enough, not here on the ground, to be able to walk without stumbling over roots and rocks, and the faint light at the tip of his wand didn’t help that much. But anything brighter would give them away to their enemy.

He thought they were almost in range of their detection spells when he heard Brown’s voice over the radio: “Rookwood hasn’t moved.”

“Flyers, fan out and start to encircle him before moving into range,” Hermione ordered. “Sirius, scout ahead.”

Since Ron and Harry were in the centre of their formation - if you could call it a formation - they didn’t have to move, though Harry stepped up next to him. Then a big black dog - Padfoot - moved past them, briefly poking his nose at the disillusioned Harry before trotting ahead. The animagus wasn’t trailed by a marker from Ron’s spell, so any spell Rookwood had cast wouldn’t reveal him either. Or at least not as a wizard. Another marker joined them, and Ron tensed up. He hated not knowing who was near him - someone needed to create a better spell to detect humans.

“’Arry? Ron?” He knew that voice.

“Yes,” Harry answered Vivienne.

“Waiting again,” he heard Harry mutter. “So close…”

“Won’t be long,” Ron whispered. He hoped he was correct.

“Anyone have a good...” someone - Ron didn’t recognise their voice - started on the radio.
“Don’t talk unless it’s important!” Hermione’s sharp voice cut the bloke off. He heard Harry chuckle, and grinned himself.

A few minutes later, Padfoot returned. Once he reached them, the dog turned back into Sirius. “If Rookwood’s there, then he is behind strong wards. Very strong wards, not just Muggle-Repelling ones,” he said into the radio. “About two hundred yards ahead of us.”

Ron winced. He could think of a few reasons why the Death Eater was protected by strong wards - and all of them meant that their task had just grown far more dangerous.

Dry Harbour Mountains, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

Hermione Granger clenched her teeth as she heard Sirius’s report. Very strong wards? Either the Death Eater had created a fortified hideout, which would have taken a long time, longer than she thought he would have had, or he had taken over another houngan’s manor. Or, she added silently, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, this was the Library of Souls.

Astride her broom, she drew a hissing breath. If this was the Library of Souls, then Rookwood couldn’t be allowed to proceed. What he could do with the knowledge of the Library, if he managed to breach the Library’s defences... She shook her head. But to stay and go after Rookwood meant that the houngans would see their presence as an attack against the Library - or a houngan’s manor, if her gut feeling was wrong. They would blame all of Rookwood’s actions on Britain. Could they risk that?

She scoffed. Even if they left right now, the houngans would blame them for the intrusion, and they wouldn’t have anything to show for it. They’d be not just abandoning the mission, but the victims of the Withering Curse as well.

She pushed the button of her radio. “Seamus, start preparing a ward breaching charge. I’ll check the ward’s strength.”

She gripped her broom more tightly and flew ahead, descending as she did so. After about a hundred yards, she stopped and cast a detection spell. There was no ward above the jungle’s canopy. She scoffed - she should have expected that; the houngans would not draw attention to the Library like that. She noted the four markers beneath her and used her radio again. “Sirius, I’m descending on your position.”

Her Shield Charm fended off foliage and branches as she broke through the treetops, before she dismounted near Sirius - and Ron, Harry and Vivienne, or so she assumed. “Show me to the wardline.”

“Follow me!” she heard Harry’s godfather say, then one marker and a weak Wand-Lighting Charm - she really needed to find a spell that showed your allies’ names on their marker - started moving towards Rookwood’s last position.

It didn’t take them long to get close enough to the wardline, and one glance at the wards was enough for her to know that this was no houngan’s manor. Nor had Rookwood created those wards. “We’re at the Library of Souls,” she announced on the radio. “Rookwood must have slipped through the outer wards already.”

Curses filled the channel until Harry restored radio discipline while she analysed the wards’ strength. “Bloody hell,” she muttered under her breath, prompting a snort from Sirius near her while she
calculated the amount of explosive needed to take these wards down.

Everyone would need to cast a Silencing Charm, just in case.

*****

Augustus Rookwood studied the area in front of him again. There had to be a way to get past that Devil’s Snare without alerting the skeletons buried underneath the plant - and without catching the attention of the Blood Apes in the trees nearby. A way that didn’t involve using the path on the ground, since that one would be trapped as well. Maybe if he skirted the extreme range of the plant’s tentacles; even if the Blood Apes detected him, they would not venture too close to the trap...

The earth shook suddenly and he found himself on the ground, thrown down by a shockwave that left him struggling to breathe. He scrambled on all fours, whirled around, and saw smoke and fire cover the jungle behind him. Clumps of earth and rocks and wood started to rain down, bouncing off his Shield Charm. What the hell had happened?

He spotted the Blood Apes moving towards the explosion, swinging from branch to branch - it had been an explosion, he realised, at the wardline! Someone had just torn down the wards protecting the outer area around the Library of Souls! No, blown them away! But who would… the mudbloods! The houngans wouldn’t do this, and no one else would dare to. Even for the mudbloods, this was madness!

He clenched his teeth. But why would the mudbloods attack the Library of Souls? His eyes widened. They were after the same knowledge he sought! But their bomb would have alerted the houngans. Were they really expecting to stand against the might of Britain’s ancient enemy while assaulting the Library’s inner defences?

It didn’t matter - he wasn’t prepared to take on the mudbloods. Who would have expected them to dare invade Jamaica while still reeling from the devastation of the last war? He had to flee before he got caught between the houngans and the mudbloods! All his work for nothing! He focused on his hideout, then realised that he couldn’t apparate. Had someone triggered the reactive ward already? Because why would the mudbloods block Apparition? The houngans wouldn’t apparate directly into the area anyway, and such an act would only hamper their own…

He gasped. They wanted to prevent others from fleeing! And he was the only one present! They were here for him! He had to flee! He had to escape! His broom! No - that would be suicide! No broom, no Apparition, and they would be encircling the area… he had to evade them on foot. He started to run, away from the explosion. Away from the traps, too! With the enemy so close, if the Devil’s Snare caught him he was as good as dead!

He hadn’t made it further than a few dozen yards when his Human-presence-revealing spell showed three people moving towards him. He fell back, hoping they hadn’t spotted him - but they gave chase! No!

He gripped his wand tightly. He could take three mudbloods! He had taken three houngans, after all, and he was prepared for more!

Before he could cast his first curse, though, he found himself reeling again. And his Disillusionment Charm gone.

Someone had triggered the wind trap.

*****
“The wards are down. Ground forces, move in and take out Rookwood! Flyers, keep an eye out for escape attempts, and reinforcements! Everyone, watch out for traps!”

Ron Weasley heard Hermione’s orders over the radio and started advancing at once, to and then past the giant crater Seamus’s bomb had left. That crazy Irishman had gone overboard, he just knew it - even if Hermione hadn’t said anything. He reached the area where the wardline had been, and held his breath crossing it, even though Hermione had already confirmed that the wards were down. Who knew what magic the houngans could do? Dumbledore had been fatally cursed in Jamaica!

A month of training against another crazy Irishman made him look up regularly as he moved on, and, when he saw something move above him, his reflexes took over. He threw himself to the side at once, just in time to avoid a monster slamming into the ground where he had been a second ago. A hairy, screeching monster, larger than himself, with four flailing arms. A Blood Ape, he remembered from one of Hagrid’s lessons.

“Blood Apes in the trees!” he yelled into his radio while flicking his wand. His Bludgeoning Curse hit the monster right as it was getting up, and tossed it head over heels into a tree trunk behind it, leaving it dazed for a moment. He was about to finish it off when he caught sight of two more in the branches above him, and he managed to hit one of them with a Reductor Curse while rolling to the side. The other, though, smashed into his Shield Charm, shattering it with its sheer mass, and clipped him in the leg with a swipe of its claws.

Ron yelled with pain and kicked out with his good leg, catching the creature in the stomach. It didn’t do anything but give it pause for a moment - but that was long enough to whip his wand around and drill a hole in the ape’s head with a Piercing Curse.

He rolled around, grunting when he felt his leg flare up with pain, and managed to get up on one knee, just as the first monster charged him. A swish of his wand conjured a stone wall right in the ape’s path, too close for it to stop in time, and Ron grinned when he heard it smash into the wall. His next Blasting Curse turned the wall into deadly shrapnel, and he heard the monster scream again. It wasn’t down, despite bleeding from multiple wounds, but it was hampered and reeling, and a Cutting Curse beheaded it.

Panting, he ran a hand over his wounded leg, feeling the blood soaking his trousers. Then he saw his leg - something, someone had ended his Disillusionment Charm. He dropped despite the pain, and rolled under the next brush, frantically conjuring more walls to break the line of sight of whoever had made him visible.

“There are Anti-Disillusionment spells active! Watch...” he heard Seamus yell through the radio, before more screams cut the Gryffindor off.

Ron looked up, and saw the treetops above him shake. He blinked, wondering what was happening, when he saw a broom rider crash through the canopy, smashing into several branches before hitting the ground.

Ron gasped, ran his wand over his wounded leg and closing the wound, then ran over to the fallen wizard before a monster could get to him. A glance told him that Harry was casting at another ape.

“Everyone, land at once!” he heard Hermione over the radio. “The winds will make you crash!”

He reached the flyer, his wand moving, already casting, when he noticed the sightless eyes staring ahead. The wizard - Sinclair, Sinclair Thompson, he recognised him - was already dead.

*****
Sirius Black had changed into Padfoot when he passed the crater, trying to track Rookwood by scent. He hadn’t had any success, though, before apes started dropping from trees, followed by muggleborn flyers, whereupon he had other things to occupy his attention. Like staying alive and protecting his family. But for that, he had to get back to them first - he had taken the vanguard, to scout ahead, and had left them behind.

He killed two of the beasts with Blood-Boiling Curses - they went mad with the pain, and attacked each other, allowing him to slip past - before he spotted Vivienne. The Veela had transformed and was grappling with an ape, the two opponents slashing at each other with claws. He tried to get a clear shot off with a curse, but by the time he was close enough, her wings had already battered the ape down, leaving it broken on the ground next to the burning carcass of its companion.

He quickly closed her wounds while she thanked him in the screeching voice of her current form. When he spotted Harry and Ron nearby, mopping up the last of the apes that hadn’t been driven off he smiled with relief. “Harry!” he yelled, making his way over to them, past a smouldering tree trunk.

The two boys turned around, separating to catch him in a crossfire before they recognised him. “Sirius!” Harry exclaimed, meeting his eyes for a moment before glancing around again. “We need to press on, or Rookwood will escape!”

Sirius wanted to tell Harry to hold, and fall back - but they were here for Rookwood, and he knew Harry wouldn’t listen. Not as long as they could fight. So he nodded, and turned around. “Follow me!” he yelled, retracing his steps.

While they moved further ahead, the radio channel’s chatter painted a grim picture. They had lost, according to his count, which might be off, at least three of the muggleborns - dead or wounded after being caught on their brooms by a wind spell or trap. Fortunately, Hermione, who was doing her best to reorganise the rest, hadn’t been airborne at the time. The witch’s dislike of flying might have saved her life, Sirius thought with a chuckle. And Bill and Fleur were fighting a wizard who had to be Rookwood!

Sirius reached the spot he had been when the trap had been sprung, and looked around. He didn’t see anyone nearby. A quick transformation revealed that Padfoot didn’t smell anyone either. He heard someone, though - helped along by the fact that, as Padfoot, he wasn’t wearing a radio that filled his ears with screams and orders.

“Someone’s coming!” he whispered when he had changed back, pointing down the path.

Harry, Ron and Vivienne immediately moved to hide in the underbrush. If this was Rookwood, he would be caught in the crossfire before he could react.

It wasn’t Rookwood. It was a muggleborn - Gary something; the man who had almost fallen to his death when they had arrived on the island. He must have fallen again, since he was limping and looked rather battered.

“Gary!” Sirius heard Harry yell. “Over here!”

The young wizard stopped, looking around, and Sirius saw him smile when he spotted Harry. “Harry! I’m so…”

Whatever he had been about to say turned into a scream when a thick arm broke through the ground from below and grabbed his leg. Before anyone could react, Gary was pulled to the ground, and his screams cut off when a dozen more arms grabbed him and literally tore him to pieces.
Harry Potter blinked. One moment, Gary was smiling at him, the next, he was but blood and gore on
the ground. Then rage filled him and his wand - the Elder Wand - rose.

“Inferi in the ground!” Ron yelled, to them and into the radio.

Harry didn’t pay any attention. He already knew that. A Fire Whip shot out of his wand, the
complex spell appearing to be much more effective than he remembered as it lashing out at the
undead creatures digging themselves out of the ground. Where his spell touched them, they were cut
apart and set aflame. Within seconds, all that was left of the dozen monsters were burning pieces
scattered around. Some of them were still moving, Harry noticed - one lower body with one leg still
attached was even dragging itself over the ground.

He lashed out with his spell again, torching the twitching remains, when he saw that the plants near
the Inferi’s location were moving as well. No, it was just one plant - Devil’s Snare! He grinned,
flashing his wrist, and sent the Fire Whip at it.

But where the whip touched the tentacles, they didn’t recoil as he had expected. Instead, they started
to grow, wrapping themselves around his spell - and growing towards him and Ron as well!

“What is that?” he heard Ron yell. “Fire doesn’t harm it!”

It wasn’t Devil’s Snare, then, Harry thought. But fire wasn’t the only way to kill - destroy - a plant.
He cast a Cutting Curse, bisecting the closest tentacles. The cut pieces kept wriggling, but… no, they
were reconnecting with the rest of the plant!

“Merlin’s balls!” he heard Ron curse. “What does it take to kill this plant?”

“Fall back!” Sirius yelled. “We can bypass the plant!”

“Skeletons!”

Vivienne’s yell made Harry glance over his shoulder. Dozens of skeletons and Inferi were encircling
them from the rear - and even above, in the trees.

“Releasing a special Bludger!” Ron announced, “Watch out for the tentacles!” He pulled out one of
the twins’ enchanted iron balls and tapped it with his wand, then sent it towards the approaching
undead. While Harry cut down more tentacles, stalling the plant, the Bludger flew into a row of
skeletons, tagging several of them. They started to fall apart at once, both the ones knocked down as
well as the ones seemingly untouched, while the Bludger continued on, smashing into an Inferi.

Harry turned his attention back to the plant-monster. He briefly felt the urge to keep cutting it,
grinding it to pieces until only dust was left, but controlled himself. Or the wand. Brute force wasn’t
the answer. What would Dumbledore do?

He chuckled, shaking his head when the answer came to him. A swish of his wrist directed his wand
towards the plant, and he started to transfigure the tentacles into wood. Soon - much sooner than he
expected - instead of a wriggling, growing plant, he was facing a wooden sculpture of a Devil’s
Snare.

And this wood burned easily.

“Good work!” Sirius said as Harry turned around to help dispatching the remaining undead
creatures.
“Let’s get Rookwood now!” he replied.

“Bill! Where are you?” Ron asked over the radio. There was no answer.

Harry glanced at Ron and nodded. They had to hurry.

*****

Augustus Rookwood muttered the worst curses he had heard Greyback use under his breath while he retreated further down the path leading to the Library’s entrance. He had been prepared for houngans, fanatical enemies rushing in, trusting their own traps and guards not to hurt them. That was why he had laid down wards that would confuse the creatures in the area, making them attack anyone.

But his enemies were mudbloods; they were expecting guards and traps. They even had a Veela with them, whose fireballs had come uncomfortably close once already. But he was far from being helpless!

He ducked behind a massive tree and took a few deep breaths - the running and the humidity were getting to him, too. When the tree shook slightly under the impact of a curse, he nodded. They had seen him and now they would be flanking him. Predictable!

He flicked his wand, and the ground beneath him rose, forming a pedestal, quickly carrying him up to the branches five yards above him. A Colour Change Charm turned his robes brown-green, and he slid around the trunk onto the branch. There! He saw movement to the side, someone using the underbrush beneath three smaller trees as cover. Grinning, he flicked his wand, turning the vines hanging from the branches into tentacles.

He didn’t see the results of his actions, though, as almost immediately his tree shook under the assault of several fireballs - the Veela must have spotted his spell. That the creature managed to fly in the area of effect of the wind trap… he couldn’t dwell on that. He had to escape. The other mudblood would be flanking him right now.

Clenching his teeth, he dropped to the ground, a Cushioning Charm breaking his fall enough to avoid further injury. Up ahead beckoned the entrance to the Library. He wouldn’t be able to enter, but he would be able to use its concealing enchantments.

And there were a few particularly nasty guard beasts in the area as well he could lure his enemies into - he doubted that they had removed their scent.

*****

They were close to where Bill and Fleur had been at the start of the battle when the radio went out. Harry tapped the button, but he heard only static. Ron blinked, then quickly hurried back a dozen yards, then tapped his radio again.

“It’s a ward!” he yelled.

That would explain Bill and Fleur’s radio silence, Harry thought as Ron rejoined them. But where were… An explosion ahead provided the answer. The four rushed on, though no longer on the path. Not since they almost fell into a pit of animated bone spikes. If not for the enchanted Bludger that would have ended badly.

Another explosion, followed by screams. Harry pushed himself to run faster, jumping over a rock in the way, then turned around a giant tree trunk. There! A flash of black fatigues between two smaller
trees! “Hey!” he yelled, closing with the figure. He had almost reached them when he noticed that they were not standing there, but hanging from a tree, held up by a vine wrapped around their throat, their feet dangling a foot above the ground. As he stared, the figure slowly turned around, and he recognised Anna’s battered, blue face.

A strangled scream escaped him, passed his clenched teeth, and he set the entire tree ablaze before shattering it with a Blasting Curse. Another one dead, and he hadn’t been able to help her. A flick of his wand transfigured the body, now lying crumpled on the ground, into a small stone figurine, which he picked up and put in his pocket. At least they wouldn’t leave her behind.

They went on, destroying the trees in front and to their sides, not caring if they were vine-covered or not. Harry was responsible for most of the destruction - his wand made it easy. They found Bill and Fleur, both wounded and surrounded by what looked like jaguars - if jaguars had matted fur, red eyes, and green ichor dropping from their mouths. Bill was waving his wand in complicated patterns, seemingly uncaring of his bleeding legs, while Fleur, transformed, was throwing fireballs at the monsters, though all she seemed to accomplish was to keep them dodging instead of charging.

“Bill!”

Ron’s yell was followed by a barrage of curses, and caught between Fleur and their group, the creatures quickly either died or fled, Harry’s Fire Whip accounting for three of the kills.

“Bill!”

Ron rushed towards his brother, but Fleur stepped into his way. “Stop! He’s been cursed! Don’t distract him, or he might die!” the Veela yelled, wings spread wide.

Harry would have offered his help, but he was no Curse-Breaker. And Bill didn’t seem to have the time to explain what curse he was fighting - the wizard was pale and shivering, sweat running down his face. His slowly turning blue face.

Harry muttered a curse under his breath. “Where’s Rookwood?”

Fleur pointed to the side, towards a large rock. “Bill said, before he got cursed, that he had warded the area. Rookwood, that is.”

Harry nodded, exchanged a glance with Ron, and then went left as his friend went right.

*****

Augustus Rookwood was panting and trying not to scream with pain and give away his position. That could have gone better. He had managed to lure the remaining two enemies - one must have fallen to his Strangling Trees - into the pack of Rock Jaguars, but even after he had used the distraction to throw a vial of Mummy Rot spores into their midst, they had not been overwhelmed. The damned Veela had gone mad and covered the entire area with fireballs, forcing him to retreat further down the path, while the wizard had countered the spores! If he had known that he wasn’t facing a mudblood, but a skilled Curse-Breaker he wouldn’t have wasted his vial!

And now he was trapped between the inner defences of the Library, and the Curse-Breaker and the Veela outside - he could see their markers floating above the rock. They were waiting there, waiting for him to break cover and run the gauntlet of fireballs, and whatever curses the wizard had laid down by now.

Augustus looked around. If he had an hour, he could probably slip through the entrance here. But he didn’t have an hour. The houngans would arrive soon, even if the mudbloods didn’t charge his
position. He had to find a way out! He was Augustus Rookwood, a genius! He could do this!

He pulled out his box of vials. He still had some potions left. Nothing major, but… maybe the Burrower’s Acid would be enough to get through the sealed entrance? Or…

He stopped moving when a black shadow appeared on the path leading towards him. A Grim! He thought, before correcting himself. There were no Grims. It was a huge, black dog. And it was trying to find his scent - not knowing that he had masked it. And he was hidden by the concealing enchantments on the entrance to the Library.

Grinning, he pointed his wand at the beast, but before he could cast the Killing Curse, the animal jumped back and darted behind the next rock. Had the beast noticed him? Or something else he had missed? And where was it now?

He stepped out of the entrance, leading with his wand, turning to face the rock, when the ground beneath his feet exploded and he found himself thrown into the wall to his left with enough force to shatter his Shield Charm.

He was recasting it as he dropped to the ground, and scrambled to his feet - he had to get back into the entrance, to find cover and hide. And find his enemy. There! A marker floated at the right corner of the rock. He sent a Killing Curse at it, to make them dodge and seek cover while he rushed to back to the entrance.

His curse was blocked by a conjured wall, though - and so was his path. Dropping to the ground and rolling to the side, he dispelled the wall - or tried to. It didn’t disappear. He gasped. Who could…

Before he could finish the thought, his shield shattered again as a volley of Bludgeoning and Blasting Curses converged on his position. He was thrown around like a rag doll in a storm, smashed against the stone walls with enough force to break bones, and dozens of rock shards sliced into his skin.

But, bleeding and broken, he had managed land inside the Library’s entrance. Chuckling at his luck, he moved his wand to seal his wounds and heal his broken bones… his wand! Where was his wand?

“Accio wand!”

He pushed his hand out, summoning it wandlessly - without success. He quickly drew another wand he had taken from a dead houngan. He wasn’t helpless. He was prepared. For anything! He was…

The ground shot up underneath him, throwing him out of the entrance, into the air, and before he could react, his body was hit with another volley of Bludgeoning Curses, and this time the pain was great enough that he passed out.

*****

Harry Potter stared at the Death Eater in front of him - he had caught him with a Levitation Charm in the air after his stone lance had thrown the man out of his hideout. It was Rookwood. The wizard was alive, though the broken bones protruding from his bleeding skin showed that he was seriously hurt. Harry didn’t care. The man was a mass murderer, and deserved death once they were back in Britain.

“I’ve got him!” he yelled, before he stunned the man for good measure, then stripped him naked and wrapped him in magical ropes. He wouldn’t take any risks there.

When he found the skull in the man’s enchanted pocket, he smiled widely. Mission accomplished, he thought - they had all they had come here for.
His radio crackled to life - someone must have dealt with Rookwood’s ward - and he heard Hermione’s voice.

“The houngans are here, more than a dozen of them. Rally at the crater!”

*****
Surrounded

Chapter 64: Surrounded

‘When considering the mission that the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance undertook to Jamaica in 1997, one cannot help but wonder why almost the entire leadership of both organisations took part in that incursion. The risk of leaving the progressive factions decapitated - and that just weeks after Augustus Malfoy’s plan to murder them had spectacularly failed - should all of their leaders be among those heading to Jamaica had to have been apparent even in the mission’s planning stages. So, knowing this, why did people like Hermione Granger, Sirius Black and Harry Potter all enter Jamaica as part of the same mission?

Some historians point out that these individuals were among the most capable wizards and witches in Britain at the time, and therefore the only ones able to handle such a mission, and that they had left others behind to follow in their footsteps, should they not return. But while the skill and experience of the individuals in question is not in doubt, it would nevertheless be incorrect to conclude that they were therefore indispensable to a mission of this nature. Even after two Blood Wars, Britain was not entirely bereft of capable wizards and witches - certainly not to the extent that both the leader of the Muggleborn Resistance and the leader of the Order of the Phoenix and the majority of the Wizengamot needed to personally take to the field.

Others claim that, just as Gellert Grindelwald was defeated in a duel with Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort was killed by Harry Potter in personal combat, these extraordinary individuals were needed for a similar feat - or at least were not able to exclude such a possibility, and therefore had to go on the mission. But since there is no known prophecy linked to such an event, and nothing else supports this notion, it can be safely discarded.

No, in my opinion, the people mentioned went on the mission because, their portrayal in various media notwithstanding, they were not coldly calculating strategists and politicians, but people - teenagers and an older wizard deeply traumatised by the events that concluded the First Blood War and his subsequent time in Azkaban - who would not let their loved ones face mortal danger without them, and whom no one else could tell otherwise.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

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Dry Harbour Mountains, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

Hermione Granger heard the wind before she heard the alarmed screams from the flyers above her. Suddenly, there was a roaring storm above the jungle - and it was blowing straight down, shaking the treetops above her, tearing leaves and small animals off the branches and slamming them into the ground. Then she saw a broom rider crash through the foliage, hit a thick branch with a sickening crack she heard even over the roaring storm, and spiral down until he crashed on to the soil.

When he started screaming, she recognised him - Timothy Meyers. He was still alive, though badly hurt. Broken bones for certain, she thought, as she saw Sally-Anne race towards the wounded wizard.

“Everyone, land at once!” she yelled into the radio, overriding the screams from others. “The winds will make you crash!”
Her order was too late though - she heard more screams over the radio. Eric and Celia. They had crashed as well, but she didn’t know where. And Seamus and Tania were in trouble, too.

This was all her fault. If she hadn’t been so rash… but there was no other choice. They couldn’t let Rookwood enter the Library of Souls. But she should have increased the Resistance’s training. Made them prepare for traps and creatures, not just houngans. Though they there hadn’t been enough time for that - no one became a Curse-Breaker in a week or two.

Hermione shook her head, telling herself not to berate herself for past mistakes any more. She had to focus on avoiding further mistakes. Trying to sound as cool and collected as possible, she keyed her radio again, overriding the cacophony of screaming and yelling. “Sally-Anne, set up a first aid station at the crater. Justin, Mary-Jane and Emily, cover her. Seamus, Tania - look for Eric and Celia. Everyone else, converge on Bill and Fleur’s position, east side. Do not go through the centre.”

She glanced to her side, where Aberforth was standing, looking unruffled. “We’re securing the crater area for the wounded,” she said.

The old wizard simply nodded and started towards the jungle bordering the fresh crater on the northern side, where the Library would lie. He flicked his wand, and a screaming four-armed ape taller than Goyle fell out of a treetop.

“Blood Apes,” he commented.

The ones of which Ron had warned them. Hagrid would probably love them, Hermione thought, blowing up a treetop with a Blasting Curse and killing another at the same time. She heard gunfire - assault rifles, and a light machine gun. Tania and Seamus must have found one of their missing members, then. The fire went on for far longer than she had expected, though, until suddenly, a small cluster of trees to the west erupted in fire.

“Bloody plant monsters, soaked up bullets without trouble!” she heard Seamus complain over the radio. “Need to burn them!” Then she saw him and Tania break through the underbrush, with a floating Celia between them, running straight towards the shelter Sally-Anne had created in the crater.

“Undead! Zombies! My leg’s broken, I can’t move!” Eric’s voice sounded on over the radio. “Oh, god! I can’t move! Bullets don’t hurt them! Help! Help me! Please!”

“Burn them!” Seamus yelled into the radio. “Use grenades!”

“Use the Bludgers!” Tania added in a yell.

“They’re too close. Too cloARGH!”

Hermione clenched her teeth. Another one dead, she thought, and it was her fault. Out loud, she said: “We need to deal with those undead.” She turned to Aberforth. “Handle the northern side, and focus on plants and creatures.”

Then she headed west. “Seamus, Tania - on me!” The two fell in, forming an inverted V-formation with her at the head.

They saw the zombies - Inferi, she recognised them right away - before they reached the edge of the crater. Dozens of them, with more behind. She pulled out one of the enchanted Bludgers the twins had created, and threw it towards the advancing ranks of undead. “Frag grenades!”

Seamus and Tania were happy to comply, and two grenades, followed by another two, arced
towards the undead, although coming up a bit short due to the wind from above. They still peppered
the undead with metal splinters - some bouncing off Hermione’s Shield Charm too - and bowled the
closest ones over. And - which had been the point of the attack - exposed the bones inside the Inferi
to the aerosolised potion the Bludger was spreading. Soon the majority of the undead were looking
far more like puddles of flesh than humanoid figures. The skeletons behind them were faring even
worse, crumbling to dust in seconds.

“Burn them!” she ordered, turning back to check on Aberforth.

On the way, she received word of Gary and Sinclair’s deaths. Two more, she told herself. But Harry,
Ron and Sirius, as well as Vivienne, were moving to flank Rookwood and support Bill and Fleur. Or
avenge them - they hadn’t heard anything from them, nor from Anna, over the radio for some time.
She couldn’t dwell on that though - she needed to keep their force together and ensure the wounded
were taken care of.

The northern side - or front - was a wasteland. Aberforth had either burned or vanished the trees near
the crater, and was in the process of eradicating a Devil’s Snare when she reached him.

“Fire-resistant variant,” he grunted, “needs to be transfigured to be destroyed.”

She nodded, watching their surroundings, and pushed the button of her radio again. “Don’t try to
burn any Devil’s Snare you may spot, it’s resistant to fire. Transfigure it into wood before burning
it!” The curse she heard in response sounded like it had come from Seamus, but Tania didn’t
comment, so they were probably not fighting one.

“Nasty traps here,” Aberforth said. “I had to deal with buried animated bone spikes, all the undead
you could think of, and the nastiest plants I’ve seen in a while.”

He didn’t sound as if he was criticising her, but she felt the sting anyway. She should have prepared
better for such dangers and enemies, not focused on battling houngans and their minions. But she
wouldn’t have been able to prepare for either enemy if she hadn’t focused on one.

“What about the eastern side?”

She shook her head. “Mary-Jane and Emily are covering that flank. But Harry and Ron went there
first, so it should be safe.”

“For the moment,” he grunted.

“For the moment,” she agreed. Something caught her attention at the southern edge, and she raised
her Omnioculars to her face. A flick of her thumb focused them and started zooming in.

She felt her stomach drop for a moment, then used her radio.

“The houngans are here, more than a dozen of them. Rally at the crater!”

*****

She rushed forward to the shelter in the crater. Or, bunker now - the conjured steel walls had been
reinforced with earthworks. She spotted Celia and Timothy right outside, rifles at the ready - Sally-
Anne must have mended their broken bones and closed their wounds already. Mary-Jane and Emily
had taken up a position to the east.

“Transfigure some of the earth below into steel!” she ordered over the radio. “In case they have
undead burrowing through the soil.” There had been too many buried skeletons and Inferi in that
jungle not to consider that possibility.

“We’ve captured Rookwood and secured the skull. We’re all safe, but Bill’s wounded.”

Harry’s announcement over the radio made her smile with relief. They had done what they had come for. It had cost them too much, but they had done it. Remus reported that his group had managed to avoid the houngans by apparating to a rally spot before the Anti-Apparition Jinxes covered them. So at least she wouldn’t have to worry about them.

Now they just had to survive the houngans. They couldn’t fly away, and they couldn’t apparate. That left marching. As the Sergeant used to say - no matter where, soldiers had to walk. She stuck her head inside the shelter. “We’re pulling out, to the east!”

Stepping back, she waved her wand and started to turn the southern edge of the crater into a ditch with a wall behind it while Justin and Sally-Anne, followed by Celia and Timothy, started to move east - and north. She pushed the button of her radio. “Sirius, we’re pulling out of the crater, towards the east, meeting up with you on the way.” They had to get out of range of the Anti-Apparition wards.

“Alright,” she heard Sirius answer.

Movement to her right drew her attention, and she turned around, wand rising, until she recognised Tania and Seamus, heading towards her from the west. “Move on and set up a pillbox at the northeastern corner!” Hermione ordered. They could cover their retreat if necessary.

As they passed her, following the others to the edge of the crater, Hermione pushed a lock of hair out of her face - the winds above were still pressing down, making moving just that little bit more exhausting - and studied the approaching lines. No sign of the houngans, yet. But that didn’t mean much.

“Are we going to fight them?”

Aberforth had caught up. She turned her head to look at him. “We don’t need to. We came here for Rookwood, and we have him.”

“Well, lass, might not be up to you to decide that.” He chuckled, though without any humour.

“Indeed.” She shook her head as she watched the first row of the undead tumbling down into the ditch. “I still have to try, though.”

“Not from so close, though.”

“No, I think not.” She tried to sound cool, unconcerned even. Like some of the officers in those old movies.

The two of them fell back, creating a few more ditches and walls, before they reached the edge of the crater under the guns of Tania and Seamus. Aberforth transfigured the earth into stairs and, a few seconds later, both of them stood at the edge of the crater. A swish of his wand removed the stairs.

The undead had overcome the first obstacle, and some had entered the first aid post while the rest surged onward. Hermione studied the edge of the crater, though - were those wizards there? They were alive, at least. She hoped they were houngans, and not zombies, as she pointed her wand at her throat and cast an Amplifying Charm.

“Houngans! We are not here for the Library! We are not here to fight you. We are here to catch the
Death Eater who has been killing your people. We have caught him before he could enter the Library, and now we will leave.” Her voice rang out over the crater.

The undead didn’t stop, climbing over themselves to reach the top of the second wall, but the figures at the edge of the forest halted in their advance. For a moment, Hermione felt hope that they could avoid further fighting.

Then spells flew from those people towards her position, impacting on the crater’s slope, and blowing up chunks of earth - and globs of acid. She almost ducked behind the walls Tania and Seamus had erected, but kept standing. At that range, they couldn’t really hit her with a spell.

Hermione tried again. “We are not here to fight you. We are withdrawing. You can check the Library - it’s untouched. We only came here to catch a fugitive criminal. A Death Eater.”

“They’re coming through the jungle, trying to flank and cut us off!” Tania informed her.

She didn’t curse out loud, not with her Amplifying Charm still active. “If you keep attacking us we will be forced to defend ourselves! Stop attacking! Call back your zombies!” More spells flew at her position, some getting close.

“Bastards must be thinking we’re weak!” she heard Seamus mutter nearby. The undead in the crater were at the third ditch and wall.

She canceled her charm and pushed the button of her radio. “They’re not listening to us. Seamus, place a few bombs at our position here! Tania, suppress the houngans at the forest’s edge!” Tania didn’t bother with acknowledging her order; she simply started firing. Hermione saw the tracers from the light machine gun hit the houngans facing her, and a number of them collapsed. She expected them to retreat at once, but they stood their ground until a few more were hit enough for their shields to shatter, before retreating back into the jungle.

Turning to Aberforth, she pulled out another enchanted Bludger. “That’ll occupy the ones advancing in the jungle.” She hoped Justin was watching their flanks as well - if they were to be cut off...

The old wizard grinned, then waved his wand and a dozen wolves rose from the torn up soil of the crater. “These will help.”

As the transfigured animals sped into the jungle, towards the zombie line there, the undead in the crater broke through the final obstacle, and advanced on the slope.

“Fall back!” Hermione ordered, flicking her wand to turn the slope into mud, making the Inferi slip and fall, slowing them to a - sometimes literal - crawl.

Tania fired another burst, then picked her machine gun up and kicked Seamus, who was moving wired packs of Semtex around with his wand. “Get moving!”

He cursed, but didn’t otherwise argue, moving past Hermione with Tania on his heels. “Move until you catch up with Justin’s group!” she yelled, “I’ll tell you when to detonate the bombs!”

“Should be the last to leave, lass,” Aberforth commented.

She refrained from answering that she wasn’t; he was. He was right, after all. So she turned around and ran into the jungle, keeping an eye on her right side. Howls from the wolves told her that they had met the undead.

After a few dozen yards, she turned around. No movement at the crater’s edge yet. Another dozen
yards later, she saw the first undead climbing over the abandoned firing position. She pushed the button of her radio. “Seamus, blow it now!”

A second later, the pillbox and the edge of the crater vanished in a fireball.

*****

“We’ve captured Rookwood and secured the skull. We’re all safe, but Bill’s wounded.”

Harry Potter released the button on his radio and turned to the rest of his group. Ron had Rookwood’s broken, stunned and bound form floating behind them, and Fleur was propping up Bill while Sirius and Vivienne were keeping an eye out for more animals. Both Veela had transformed, their inhuman heads moving like raptors’.

Hermione’s voice rang out over the radio. “Sirius, we’re pulling out of the crater, towards the east, meeting up with you on the way.”

Harry’s godfather acknowledged the message, then turned to the group. “We need to move.”

“Just give me a minute and I’ll be able to walk,” said Bill, before anyone could ask.

“You’ve beaten the curse?” Ron asked, his strained voice betraying his concern.

“Wasn’t a curse. It was Mummy Rot spores, and a few caught me before I could vanish the cloud. I didn’t have a counter-agent on me, so I had to deal with them with my wand.” Bill was still breathing heavily, his face covered with sweat. He didn’t look like he was fully cured, but he might just be exhausted, Harry thought. Either way, he’d slow them down, unless they levitated him as well. Which meant another wand would be occupied while they moved.

Bill groaned, closed his eyes, and took a few more deep breaths before shaking his head. “Alright, I can walk.”

“Can you run?” Sirius asked.

Bill grimaced, then pulled a vial out of his pocket and downed it. He shuddered for a few seconds, then sighed. “Yes.”

Harry glanced at Ron. His friend was frowning, but didn’t comment.

“Let’s go!” Sirius pointed towards the path they had come through. “I’ll follow the path we took here, so we won’t walk into another trap.” Without another word, the wizard changed into his animagus form and the large black dog trotted off, with Vivienne close behind.

Harry looked at Ron. “I’ll bring up the rear.”

His friend nodded at him, then started after Sirius, followed by Bill, who was still a bit shaky on his feet, and Fleur, who was levitating Rookwood.

“They’re not listening to us. Seamus, place a few bombs at our position here! Tania, suppress the houngans at the forest’s edge!” Harry heard Hermione over the radio. So, they would have to fight the houngans. He had expected that.

Harry was actually glad that Bill was not that quick on his feet, even with the potion he had taken - it made it easier for him to keep an eye on their flanks and rear while moving. They might be able to avoid traps thanks to Padfoot’s nose, but animals could move. And so could houngans and their
zombies.

He was tempted to leave a few traps of his own - pit traps, mainly - but if Hermione wanted to move the entire group back this way then that would be a bad idea. Even if it would be very easy to create such traps with his wand.

Movement to his left, up in the trees, made him whip his wand up - more of those animals? Blood Apes? Something was moving there, hidden by the foliage, but he couldn’t tell what. No houngans though - his spell would have noticed them. He flicked his wand, a Cutting Curse slicing through the nearest tree at an angle. The entire treetop fell down, and he could see several human-sized figures smashing into the ground. Almost out of reflex, he cast a Fire Whip, then flicked his wand, the magical flames lashing out at the figures, cutting them apart and setting them ablaze.

They didn’t scream, but one of them kept moving. Undead, then.

“Inferi to the southeast of our position,” he announced over the radio.

“How many?” Hermione asked.

“Can’t tell,” Harry answered. “They’re in the trees.”

He caught up to the rest of the group, who were now glancing to their left. Fleur, still transformed, tried to take to the air, but as soon as she rose higher than a yard or two, the wind pressed her down again - with enough force to send her sprawling. The Veela screeched with anger and frustration, before getting up and peppering the treetops to the southeast with fireballs. Harry couldn’t tell if she hit anything, but at least it would hinder the enemy some. Vivienne followed her example.

They crossed the path leading to the library several times as Sirius led them through the jungle, until they heard gunfire in front of them.

“We can hear your shots,” Sirius announced on the radio, “we’re close - watch your fire.”

A minute later, the first markers were showing up - and Harry tensed up. He was reasonably certain that those were the rest of their group, but… if houngans had managed to get between them…

But he had to cover the rear. He hadn’t spotted any undead or animals near them for several minutes, but that could change at any moment.

“If that’s you in the trees,” he heard Sirius say over the radio, “then conjure a flock of birds!”

Harry didn’t see any birds, but apparently there were some since Sirius led the group further ahead, and soon he saw Justin, Sally-Anne and most of the new recruits - Timothy, Celia, Mary-Jane and Emily. They were looking a bit ‘wild-eyed’ - this was their first real battle. And they had already taken casualties as well.

“Hermione’s bringing up the rear,” Justin said, erecting a few walls with his wand. “She tried to talk to the houngans.”

“Merlin’s balls! Zombies to the east!” Ron yelled.

Harry whirled around, and his eyes widened. There was a line of zombies moving through the jungle, straight towards them. Dozens, no, hundreds of them. And they were more of them coming from behind them - they had caught up to their group.

*****
Ron Weasley wanted to push on, towards the southwest. Towards Hermione. The jungle was crawling with zombies, and if she was cut off and surrounded… but she’d call for help in that case, and she was with Aberforth. He clenched his teeth and sent a tree toppling with a volley of Cutting Curses, blocking the approach of another group of Inferi. “Vivienne! They’re bunching up behind the tree trunk there!”

The Veela didn’t hesitate, sending a dozen fireballs into the undead, setting them afire and adding to the smoke covering the battlefield. If not for his Bubble-Head Charm, Ron would be retching from the stench of burning flesh.

He glanced around, but couldn’t spot any new enemies right then. The foliage above them had been ripped apart by spells and the wind spells were making flight impossible, so there wouldn’t be any enemies taking to the treetops… unless someone disillusioned them.

Frowning, he cast a few more Blasting Curses at the canopy. Better safe than sorry. Not that he could tell if, among the branches and tree fragments falling down, there were enemies caught by his attack anyway. Vivienne left to rejoin Sirius, a bit further to the south.

Was that movement to the east? More Inferi? How many had the houngans created? Had they raised all the dead of the island? Markers appeared floating above the figures. No zombies, then. Not the Inferi variant, at least. “Houngans to the east!” he yelled into his radio while he crouched behind a tree stump.

A flick of his wand transfigured the wood into steel. Another raised the earth nearby, forming a low wall. Two Resistance members - Timothy and Celia - sprinted towards him, rifles in hand, and took cover to his left.

“Suppress them!” Ron yelled.

The two hesitated a moment, then rose with their rifles and started to fire short bursts at the houngans, who had advanced in the meantime. He saw one of the enemies fall before thick black smoke hid all of them.

Ron scoffed, and blew the smoke away with a gust of wind, exposing two houngans crouching near the fallen. Timothy and Celia quickly shot the two, their Shield Charms not standing up to the rifle fire. He blinked - that was too easy. Those were too weak…

He glanced up, already rolling to the side, but no enemy was pouncing at him from above. So, not a distraction, then. Or not for that. “Change position!” he yelled, standing up to send a few curses at the enemy - more to make them dodge and keep their heads down than with any hope of hitting one of them - while Timothy and Celia sprinted towards a tree a little way behind him.

They set up a firing position there, and it was Ron’s turn to sprint back. Just as he was starting to run, the earth beneath him exploded, and he was thrown forward, and into a fallen log, hard enough for his Shield Charm to shatter. He felt something in his shoulder break, and pain laced his entire left side as he rolled over the rocky ground.

Gritting his teeth, he raised an earthen wall to grant him cover, then dragged himself further back, towards the others, trying to ignore the pain. “I’m hurt!” he yelled, clumsily pushing the button of his radio with his right hand while holding his wand. “We need reinforcements here!” Timothy and Celia couldn’t hold off the houngans. Not by themselves.

“On the way!” he heard Justin yell, and a few seconds later, he saw the former Hufflepuff appear to his right, followed by Sally-Anne and Mary-Jane. Sally-Anne waved her wand, and Ron felt himself
pulled towards her while the other two passed him. He grunted through clenched teeth at the pain it caused as he was pulled through the underbrush, before being deposited at the first aid station they had prepared earlier.

“Sorry,” Sally-Anne mumbled, without sounding as if she was, as she waved her wand over him. “Broken shoulder… Hold still.”

He refrained from snapping at her - it wasn’t as if he wanted to move, considering how painful that was. Then his shoulder felt as if it was on fire, and he yelled with pain.

“Hold still!” Sally-Anne jabbed her wand at his shoulder once again, and the pain started to subside. “There! Almost as good as new!”

He panted while he clutched his shoulder, squeezing it while the pain slowly faded. “Thanks.”

She nodded at him, then stood up. “Now where did your stupid brother go?”

She sounded remarkably like Pomfrey, Ron noted. Probably something about healing people. “I don’t know,” he answered. “Probably with Harry at the rear.” Which would soon turn into the front.

“Ron!”

He knew that voice! Hermione! He whirled around, heedless of the pain that caused to his freshly mended shoulder bones, and saw her standing at the entrance, staring at him.

“I’m alright!” he said, looking her over. Her fatigues were covered with mud, but she didn’t look hurt. She was fine. Safe. Here. He took a step towards her, opening his arms.

But before he could embrace her, screams filled the radio channel.

*****

Hermione Granger jerked when she heard the screaming. That was… Timothy? She wasn’t certain. But someone, probably Celia, was trying to talk over the radio as well. Throat microphones were needed, she thought. That would solve this problem.

She keyed her own radio and was about to tell them to use a Silencing Charm when the screaming suddenly cut off, and she heard Justin’s clipped voice: “A dozen houngans are advancing on our position. Timothy got cursed, bad. We’re falling back. Need reinforcements.”

Sally-Anne gasped, already moving.

Ron passed her as well. “Follow me!”

For a moment, she wanted to tell him off - he had just been healed, after all. But she didn’t, and followed them instead. The others needed them.

“Start falling back towards the northeast!” she ordered over the radio while ducking around a broken tree trunk. They couldn’t stay and let the houngans encircle them - they had to punch through the lines and move out of range of the Anti-Apparition Jinxes. As fast as possible. Aberforth, Tania and Seamus would have to serve as rearguard.

She followed Sally-Anne through some underbrush, and had to dive to the ground at once - they had almost stumbled into the enemy lines. A flick of her wand raised earth walls as cover while she glanced around. Where were the others?
Then she spotted them and wished she hadn’t. Timothy - she thought it was him - was writhing on the ground, about twenty yards away from her. His limbs had rotted off, and he was waving his stumps around, screaming without making any sound. Someone, probably Justin, had cast a Silencing Charm on him.

Sally-Anne screamed as well, and started to crawl towards him. Hermione saw a yellow spell pass over her friend’s head, and another spell turned a bush behind her to stone. She thought about pulling out her rifle, but… she needed her wand more in such close quarters. And Celia was already firing her own rifle, up ahead, while Ron was busy dealing with an attempt to flank them from the south. They needed to get moving before they lost contact with the rest and ended up cut off.

Hermione sent a volley of Blasting Curses at the closest houngans - thirty yards, she estimated. The explosions sent them sprawling, one of them not getting up while the other two hastily retreated behind two thick trees which had fallen, one ending up over the other, forming a barrier on the ground. She had to change position herself to avoid the curses raining down on her from a houngan who had managed to climb a tree to the northeast, and after a particular close near-miss, she had to recast her Shield Charm behind a hastily conjured stone wall. She crawled through a bush while the wall was slowly eaten by acid spells.

Ron was falling back towards her, taking out the houngan in the tree with a Reductor Curse that blew up the branch the other wizards was crouching on, filling him with splinters and sending him tumbling down ten yards. He didn’t get up afterwards.

The two who had taken cover behind the logs hadn’t changed position - she could see their markers floating above them. She was tempted to cast a few more Blasting Curses, turn the logs into shrapnel… but they’d expect that, wouldn’t they? Instead, she turned the earth beneath the logs into water, turning the entire area into an impromptu pool which rapidly became a mudhole. Then she pulled out a Molotov cocktail and banished it over the now floating logs after which she turned the water into petrol.

The screams of the two houngans caught in the mud didn’t last long, the floating markers above them quickly winking out. She clenched her teeth, turned a bush into a spreading cloud of thick smoke, and made her way towards where Sally-Anne was treating Timothy.

Or trying to, she corrected herself when she reached them - Timothy had been reduced to a head set on a rotting mound of flesh and bones and shriveling skin. To Hermione’s horror, he was still alive, still screaming soundlessly, blood pouring out of his mouth. Sally-Anne was crying while she tried to stop the curse, casting spell after spell.

“Hermione! Nothing is working! I can’t stop the curse!”

And they couldn’t stay here, not with the jungle filling with houngans and their creatures, and the main force already moving.

They couldn’t save Timothy. Hermione knew it. There was only one thing left that they could do.

“Stupefy!”

The red spell hit his forehead, and she saw the wizard’s eyes close. “Move!” she yelled at Sally-Anne.

“But…”

“Move! We can’t stay. Go to Justin!”
Sally-Anne stood up, tears running down her cheeks, and started running towards Justin and Celia, who had fallen back further, to the north. The witch was moving as they had trained to, sprinting from cover to cover, Hermione noticed.

Where was Ron? There! He had just blown another tree apart, the crashed treetop blocking the line of sight to the advancing enemy, and was running towards her. She swished her wand, creating a few pit traps behind Ron.

He jumped behind the earth wall she had created, panting. “Are the others already… Merlin’s balls!” She saw him staring at the remains of Timothy. There was nothing left but some amorphous mass of rotting flesh and some bone and skin fragments.

She wanted to hold him, reassure herself that he was unhurt, alive. But there was no time. “We need to move.” She conjured a few smoke clouds - red and green ones, to make the houngans think they were poisonous - and nodded towards the north.

He was muttering curses behind her as they rushed through the underbrush, towards where the others were waiting for them.

*****

Harry Potter flicked his wrist and his Fire Whip Spell cut another Inferius apart. The burning pieces dropped to the ground, where they’d flop and twitch around until they turned to ashes - he didn’t watch, but instead focused his attention on his next target, after a quick glance upwards, to check for enemies above him.

Near him, Padfoot suddenly changed back into Sirius, waving his wand while yelling: “Disillusioned Inferi ahead of us!” A cloud of red smoke appeared between the treetops and the ground, around fifty yards away.

At once, Harry raised the Elder Wand and sent a Blasting Curse at the ground beneath the cloud. Dust and earth were thrown up, briefly obscuring the area, and an already damaged tree toppled over. A second later, Sirius dispelled the Disillusionment Charm, and five dozen zombies appeared - three of them on the ground, missing limbs.

Vivienne, in her raptor-form, screeching what Harry thought was a French battlecry, buried all of them in fireballs, leaving the entire area burning. Harry hissed - they had to move through that area, unless they wanted to brave more traps to the west, where the Library lay, or face the enemies trying to close with them from the south. He flicked his wrist and sent streams of water at the burning area.

Sirius changed into Padfoot, sprinted ahead, then changed back. “I don’t smell any other Inferi around,” Harry heard him report over the radio.

He wondered why the houngans hadn’t disillusionsed more of their undead zombies - they would have been far more effective that way. Maybe most of the Inferi they were fighting had been stored underground, like the others, and not brought in by houngans after they had been alerted?

He shook his head, moving quickly to catch up with Sirius and Vivienne. This was no time to dwell on such things. Not when they needed to break through the enemy line. Behind him, Bill and Fleur were securing their flank - and setting fire to other parts of the jungle. And Ron, Hermione and the Resistance would be moving west of them. Except for those who had already been killed.

They passed the area where the remains of the Inferi they had just destroyed were still smouldering. Harry’s Water-Making Spell had turned part of the ground into mud, and he had to struggle a little to
keep up his pace. The humid air wasn’t helping either.

Movement ahead of them drew his attention and he stepped behind a tree, pressing himself against the burned bark. Figures moved through the woods. The markers floating above them confirmed that that they were not Inferi. “Houngans ahead. Fifty yards!” he informed the others. They were moving cautiously, from cover to cover, conjuring some where it wasn’t available. If not for the markers, Harry wouldn’t have seen half of them.

“Bill, Fleur - move up and flank them from the south!” Sirius ordered. “We’ll hold them in place. Conjuration and Transfiguration.”

Harry wanted to blast the enemies apart - his wand almost moved by itself - but if he did that, he would ruin Sirius’s plan. So he conjured a dozen venomous snakes. He ignored their grumbling about how vile humans tasted and sent them against the houngans while staying in cover. With a bit of luck, they wouldn’t be detected in the underbrush before they bit someone. He sent a few more after them.

Sirius, of course, choose to conjure something flashier - Harry heard lions roar, and saw the houngans spread out, spells flying from their wands as they reacted to the attacking cats. Harry saw a huge thing drop down from the trees ahead, straight on a houngan. Too big for a Blood Ape, but of similar shape - and quickly killed, it seemed. More might have been in the trees - but the houngans set them on fire.

Then Harry’s snakes entered the fray. One of the houngans collapsed, screaming loudly. The rest started to send curses at the ground. Harry was grateful that the snakes were too far away for him to understand their pained words as they were killed.

Nevertheless, they had done their task - Fleur and Bill were in position now. While the Veela threw half a dozen fireballs at the centre of what was left of the houngans’ formation, Bill cast curses Harry didn’t recognise.

“Now!” Sirius yelled, standing up behind the rock that served as cover for him, his wand weaving. Harry slid around the tree trunk, smearing more ash on his clothes, and unleashed curses of his own at the disarrayed and partially exposed enemies. One of them decapitated a houngan who was trying to put out the fire licking at his clothes, another missed his target, but caused the witch to jump away - straight into a curse of Sirius’s that dropped her to the ground in a cloud of blood.

Vivienne’s fireballs joined Fleur’s, and the remaining houngans didn’t last long in the crossfire, their shields shattering under the assault. The last of them tried to run, but Harry caught him in the back with a Bludgeoning Curse that broke the man’s spine as it smashed him into a fallen tree trunk.

Sirius changed to Padfoot and raced ahead, quickly covering the ground between them and the fallen houngans. Harry was close on his heels and threw himself into cover as soon as he reached him, almost ending on top of a charred corpse. He fought not to retch at the sight and rolled over, peering over the rock that hadn’t saved the dead enemy. The area ahead of them seemed clear, and through the wrecked foliage, he could see a slope rising a few hundred yards ahead of them. That should take them out of range of the wind trap so they could outfly the Anti-Apparition Jinxes, Harry thought.

Bill and Fleur were already moving past him, towards a tall, thick tree northwest of their position.

“I don’t see any enemies,” Harry said, pushing the button of his radio.

“Seems clear here too,” Sirius added.
“Nothing here ei-Fleur!”

Harry whipped his head around. Fleur was on the ground clawing at her throat, barely protected by a stone wall Bill must have conjured. The Curse-Breaker was frantically casting at the Veela while the wall shook under the impact of more curses coming from the trees at the base of the ridge.

Harry added a cloud of smoke to obscure them from their enemies’ sight, then started to dart from cover to cover, sending Blasting Curses at the enemies’ positions.

“It’s a Strangling Curse! But I can’t dispel it!” Bill yelled over the radio. “I don’t know why!”

Harry clenched his teeth, conjured a stone wall between himself and the enemy, and then rushed over to their position, sliding the last few yards over the ground.

“I can’t dispel it!” Bill repeated himself while Fleur looked like she was trying to tear out her own throat. For a moment, Harry thought about punching a hole in her chest, into her lung. He had seen that on a TV show, once. No, he had no idea how to do that without killing her. He pointed his wand at her instead.

“Finite! Finite! Finite!”

He was shouting the Incantation. It had worked when Ron had been cursed by Voldemort. It should work here as well - none of the houngans were a match for the Dark Lord!

“Finite! Finite! Finite!”

He saw Fleur gasp, taking a deep breath, and smiled with relief.

Then the earth around him erupted, and he found himself flying through the air, with Bill, Fleur and the remains of the stone wall and several trees - right into what felt like a hurricane.

For a horrible moment Harry felt as if he were inside a giant blender. The wind was throwing him around, head over heels, stone and wood fragments were smashing against his Shield Charm, and he lost all sense of orientation, barely managing to hold on to his wand before he crashed into the ground. The impact knocked the breath out of him and shattered his shield. He rolled on the ground, frantically waving his wand to recast his Shield Charm as larger rocks and parts of trees hit the ground all around him.

One rock hit his shoulder, and the pain wrecked his casting. He grit his teeth and tried again, finishing the spell despite something hitting his leg. A wave of his wand conjured a stone shelter, protecting him from the deadly rain, and he finally could tend to his wounds.

The shoulder was easy - bruised and dislocated. He had had the same wound in Quidditch training, or with Moody, often enough, and it took no more than two spells to set and numb it. The splinter piercing his leg was more difficult. When he summoned the shard, it didn’t slide smoothly back out of his leg but ripped an even worse wound on its way out. Staunching the bleeding took half a dozen spells, and he felt so light-headed afterwards, he had to quaff a Blood-Replenishing Potion.

But he could walk again and he could cast again. But Sirius, and the others… He reached for his radio, then noticed that he had lost the headset. He tried to summon it, but failed - it must have been destroyed. Cursing, he crawled out of the shelter, wand ready, and gasped at what he saw. The storm above had abated, but the ground had been torn up by rocks and parts of trees. Where were his friends? And where were the houngans?
A volley of curses flying at him answered the latter question. He threw himself forward, dodging two yellow curses which hit the ground behind him, into a roll. His Shield Charm flared up as it deflected another curse, and he jumped behind the remains of a tree, reinforcing it with conjured stone before he came to a stop.

And just in time - a wave of fire washed over his makeshift cover and, despite his shield, he felt the heat on his exposed skin. Snarling, he sprinted back the way he had come, sending two Blasting Curses at the closest enemy’s position before diving behind his shelter. More curses pelted the stone walls, and he ducked low, then rose and lashed out with a Fire Whip Spell that cut down the last tree that had survived the enemy’s onslaught - and caught a houngan out in the open. The wizard’s shield failed to protect him and he fell down. Harry saw the marker floating above the man disappear before he ducked behind the stone walls again.

More curses flew over his head. Too high to hit him - by design. Another curse hit the ground behind him, turning it into a fizzling, smoking puddle. He vanished the entire area, then pressed himself against the wall when spears and arrows rained down on his position, two splintering against his shield. Someone was trying Banishing Charms, but couldn’t aim well enough. But if they used them on bottles of poison or acid...

He couldn’t stay here - the houngans could fix him in place, and reduce his cover or flank him. Or both. They probably were trying to do so already, outside his view. But where were Sirius and the others? He saw two markers to the west, above the remains of a group of trees. By his estimate, they were outside the range of the enemies’ Human-presence-revealing Spells. But if he ran towards them, he’d give away their position.

He couldn’t stay, he couldn’t go west, there were more enemies to the east… Harry snorted. They wouldn’t expect him to charge straight at them, and if he covered the ground between his position and theirs in smoke… He just had to be quick enough, and lucky enough, to get within their ranks…

Shots fired nearby interrupted his plans. Shots fired at the houngans.

*****

Ron Weasley rushed forward while Tania laid down covering fire with her light machine gun, supported by Celia and Emily with their rifles. Harry was lying behind the crumbling remains of a stone shelter, and by the looks of the devastation around him, the houngans had bombarded his position with dozens of Blasting Curses - the ground looked like it had been ploughed up by giants.

He was casting a few spells himself as he navigated the treacherous ground, toppling a tree with a Reductor Curse, then slid into cover next to Harry. “Mate! Are you hurt?” His trousers were covered with blood and mud.

“Not any more,” his friend answered, shaking his head. “Those are experienced houngans, not curse fodder. Bill and Fleur were in the middle of this, when it blew up…”

Ron hissed. His brother had been… He looked around. There were two markers floating above some downed trees, and other markers closing in on them, from his own group. But Harry had been with Bill, Fleur, Sirius and Vivienne… “Let’s fall back, before we get hit here!”

“We can’t stay here,” Harry continued. “But with the others rolling up their eastern flank, we can hit them from the west.”

They conjured smoke clouds, raised a few walls to provide hard cover, then sprinted back towards the treeline. Not towards the markers there - they wouldn’t lead the enemies to them. The shelter
blew up behind them and Ron changed direction, heading more eastwards, then turning south again. Something started to break through the soil in front of them, something made up of bones. Ron hit it with a Reductor Curse and sped up some more.

He reached the treeline before Harry - who wasn’t quite as unhurt as he had claimed, as Ron should have known - and slid behind a rock there, pulling out his rifle to cover Harry. His friend broke through the underbrush, then veered west. Ron followed him at once, slinging the rifle on his back and covering their right with his wand. It wasn’t far.

“Sirius!”

“Harry! Stop! He’s wounded!”

That was Hermione! Ron slid around the fallen tree Harry had jumped over, and saw that the witch was standing between Harry and Sirius - and Vivienne. They were lying on the ground, not moving, and Sally-Anne was waving her wand over them. Justin was there as well - apparently, he was the one now levitating Rookwood’s bound form.

“How…” Harry didn’t finish his question.

“They’re alive, but badly hurt. No curses, but… broken bones, bleeding…” Sally-Anne looked briefly at Hermione before returning her attention to the two on the ground. “I’ll need more time to fix them here.”

Ron saw Hermione bite her lower lip. “Can you transport them?”

Sally-Anne drew a hissing breath. “Not right now.” She kept casting, and her expression didn’t change.

“Alright.” Hermione spat out orders over the radio. “We need to hold here until we can move the wounded. We’re facing experienced houngans - probably their leaders - in the northeast. Seamus, Tania, Emily, Mary-Jane - fall back and secure our rear! Justin, Celia - cover Sally-Anne and the wounded! Keep an eye on the west as well. Everyone else - we need to find Fleur and Bill and push the houngans back!”

Where could his brother be? He wasn’t answering on the radio. Ron followed Hermione to the edge of the treeline, and looked around. He couldn’t spot any sign of the missing couple. Maybe… no. He had to keep his hopes up. They would find them.

Hermione created a trench in front of the treeline, and slid down into it, pulling out her rifle. Ron joined her, and saw a few curses already flying towards them, although none came close - they were too far for anyone to reliably hit them using a wand. A decent range for rifles, though.

“So… fire and move?” he asked, quoting the Major.

“Yes, but we won’t advance,” Hermione answered as Harry joined them. “We’ll fix them and move to the northwest, so we can catch them in the flank should they cross the open area.” She nodded towards the south. “They’ll be distracted.”

Ron turned his head and gasped when he saw the wizard who stepped out from the treeline. Was that… impossible! No, it was Aberforth - but he had coloured his beard and robes!

“Move!” Hermione said, standing up to fire at the houngan positions. Ron and Harry dashed along the trench, Harry elongating it with his wand as they advanced. After a dozen yards, Ron stood up and started firing, using short bursts, as the Sergeant had taught him. He doubted that he hit anyone,
though - not that it was needed; it seemed every hougan was casting at Aberforth. The old wizard was moving back and forth in front of the treeline, deflecting curses with conjured obstacles while sending spells of his own back at the houngans. Ron saw several trees starting to move, their branches growing and flailing like the Whomping Willow’s. At least one body was hit by them, and sent flying.

Ron’s rifle ran out of ammo and he slid down into the trench to reload. Hermione had passed him, and was now behind Harry, getting ready to fire again.

He took a deep breath, and was about to dash towards her when a shriek cut through the noise of the battle, and multiple fireballs exploded ahead of them. Ron froze for a moment. That had been Fleur, and she had sounded as if she had just… no!

He shook his head and started to run.

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Chapter 65: Endgame

It is quite ironic that, upon closer investigation, the battles fought by the Order of the Phoenix and the Muggleborn Resistance disproved the very ideals for which they claimed to be fighting, namely the equality of all witches and wizards. For the most crucial battles were not decided by the masses that formed the rank and file of either organisation, but by the actions of extraordinary individuals. I would even go as far as to postulate that the vast majority of the forces of any of the factions involved in the Second Blood War could have been removed without significantly altering the outcome. Even the Battle of Dry Harbour Mountains does not deviate from this pattern since it too was decided when the houngan leaders met the leaders of the British force.

- Excerpt from ‘Wizarding Britain in the 20th Century' by Albert Runcorn

Dry Harbour Mountains, Jamaica, April 26th, 1997

Ron Weasley spotted two markers floating in the forest before they had cleared half the distance to the treeline, but he still almost climbed over Harry and dashed the last twenty yards when his friend wasn’t quite as quick to enlarge the trench they were moving through. He held back, though - breaking discipline like that got people killed. Your people.

Although he had gone through three magazines already, and was banishing grenades at the enemy lines. Or simply in the enemy’s direction. Ahead of his group, Fleur hadn’t let up. Half the forest seemed to be on fire, and she was still screaming, or rather screeching.

Ron raised a wall when they were close enough as Hermione transfigured the rest of the trench into a ramp, and then they were sprinting the last yards into the forest. A slew of curses reduced the wall to rubble, but they were already inside the trees by then, and a few conjured rocks added cover to the concealment the underbrush granted.

He slung his rifle over his shoulder again - a dense forest was a place for wands, not long guns, and he was far more comfortable with a wand to begin with - and hurried ahead, towards the closer marker. He stumbled over a root when he glanced upwards a bit too long, to check for animals or Inferi, but caught himself and dashed on. Behind him, Harry was moving northwards, to secure their flank, but Hermione was following him.

Ron forced his way through a particularly dense bush that left him with bleeding scratches on his face and throat and finally reached the first marker. It was Bill. On the ground, unmoving, and looking like a corpse. If not for the marker, Ron would have thought him dead. “Merlin’s balls!” He crouched down, flicking his wand over his brother.

He winced when he finished his casting. Bill was in a really bad way. An arm and a leg smashed - the bones shattered to pieces - three ribs broken, one lung pierced… and those were just the results given by the few spells he knew. Bill probably had internal injuries which were even worse. He might be bleeding inside, even if his open wounds had been closed by Fleur. He certainly looked pale enough, under the blood and mud.

Ron dug a Blood-Replenishing Potion out of his enchanted pocket, unstoppered it, and reached out for Bill’s head to pour it down his throat.
“Watch out! He could have spinal injuries!” Hermione exclaimed behind him, and Ron froze for a moment.

Then he shook his head. “Those can be healed. I won’t let him bleed to death! Open your mouth, Bill!” he added, even though his brother couldn’t hear him, then pulled his mouth open and fed him the potion.

“We need to get him back to Sally-Anne and the others!” Hermione whispered, crouching down next to him. “We can’t treat him here.”

Ron nodded. “I can transport him back, if… No.” He whipped his head around to look at Hermione. “Take him back!” When she opened her mouth to contradict him, he shook his head. “Sirius is down. You’re in command. You can’t be on the front lines.”

He could see her clench her teeth, then nod. “Don’t die!” she whispered.

“I won’t,” he whispered back, before leaning over and kissing her briefly.

Then he was up and running towards Harry and Fleur. And hoping he wasn’t too late - or a liar.

*****

Harry Potter ducked when another curse hit the tree stump he was using as cover and more wooden splinters filled the air behind him - one of them pinging off his shield. He conjured a smoke cloud on his left side, then, when half a dozen curses flew into the cloud, he slid to the right of the stump and rolled over towards a small rock that had been broken off a larger one a minute ago. He rose high enough to cast over the rock and sent a Blasting Curse at the canopy above the enemies’ position. Branches and fragments - most of which he turned into green-coloured water - rained down on the houngans.

One houngan in the middle of the affected area jumped up, screaming about poison, and Harry broke his shield with a Piercing Curse right before Fleur incinerated the man with two fireballs.

But that had cost both of them time and given away their latest positions. Harry barely managed to raise a wall in time to absorb another half a dozen curses before scrambling towards a still-standing tree five yards behind him. The wall exploded before he reached the tree, and his shield shattered when two particularly large fragments hit it.

Harry dropped to the ground, vanishing the earth underneath him, and fell two yards, landing on his stomach - but since the curses passing overhead missed him, he considered himself lucky. A twist of his wand turned the walls of his hole into stairs, a swish broke the enemy’s line of sight with more walls, and he scrambled out of the hole before someone filled it with real poison.

This time the obstacles lasted until he found better cover, and he was finally out of range of their Human-presence-revealing Spells - since his own now only showed Fleur’s marker. Taking a few deep breaths, he numbed his aching side then moved towards the Veela. They had to fall further back, or they’d be outflanked!

The French witch was standing between two tall trees, and launched another volley of fireballs westwards. Harry hoped the enemies there were Inferi, left over from the traps guarding the Library, and not houngans. If they had managed to get around their flank that easily already…

Fleur jumped behind the next tree, closer to Harry. “More enemies west of us!” she yelled at him. “We can take them!”
“We need to fall back!” he retorted.

She shook her head. “Bill needs more time!”

Bill needed his fiancée, Harry thought. But he understood her feelings. And help should be arriving soon - Ron and Hermione wouldn’t let them down. “Alright. But we need to move anyway.”

The enemy’s spells had let up for a few minutes now, but that didn’t mean they were giving up. They were probably circling around them outside the range of their detection spells.

Fleur slid around the tree, a fireball in her hand, but, before she could launch it, the ground beneath her broke open and a claw reached for her leg. The Veela jumped back, but the ground she landed on gave way as well, and she toppled over with a scream.

Harry was tempted to let loose his last Bludger, but… the enemy had been proved to be good at targeting them, and if Fleur was wounded to the bone… he couldn't risk it. Instead he waved his wand, and vanished as much of the ground between himself and Fleur as he could.

His spell revealed the fallen Veela - and a dozen monsters which must have burrowed through the earth to reach them. As his wand rose to help Fleur, Harry realised the monsters looked like a cross between giant voles and jaguars.

The Veela was in dire straits. She had managed to push off the monster she had landed on, but hadn’t escaped unscathed - the jaguar-sized monster had raked her back, and Fleur was bleeding heavily as she torched it and its closest companion.

Harry blew up two more with a Blasting Curse, before jumping into the hole his spell had left. He had to reach Fleur before she was swarmed by the remaining creatures. One pounced on him, but slid off his recast Shield Charm, and a Piercing Curse to the chest took it out. Another charged at him, but he stopped it with a conjured stone wall, which he blew up right afterwards, the stone shards killing the dazed monster and one more who had come up behind it. That still left half a dozen, and most of them were attacking Fleur.

Harry sent one of those flying with a Banishing Charm, but the others were already too close for him to cast without risking hitting Fleur. He was dashing forward, to get closer, when three of them pounced on her, bringing her down. He saw blood fly, before they and Fleur vanished in a fireball.

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Harry cut down the other monsters with a Fire Whip without thinking about it as he raced ahead, then cast Piercing Curses into the smoking carcasses surrounding Fleur, just in case. He knelt down next to her - she was alive, but seriously injured. Not as burned as he had expected - though her clothes had suffered - but the creatures’ claws had gouged deep gashes in her body, and she was bleeding heavily. Probably bleeding out.

He waved his wand frantically as he dug into his pockets for another Blood-Replenishing Potion.

“Episkey! Episkey! Episkey!”

Ron Weasley broke through the underbrush, jumped over a curved root, and landed in a text-book roll on the ground, coming to a stop behind the broken remains of a tree. A bit further ahead he spotted two markers - floating above a hole in the ground. He thumbed his radio. “Fleur? Fleur?”

No answer. Had she lost her radio, or… There was no time to speculate. He couldn’t see any other markers around, which meant he was relatively safe from enemy spells. He took a deep breath, then
sprinted forward. The rifle on his back hit his side as he ran, annoying, if not really painful. A Sticking Charm would stop that, but would mean he couldn’t draw it in a hurry.

A spell grazed his shield and he dropped to the ground, moving some of the earth beneath him into a small wall - which crumpled at once under another spell. A curse - it left sizzling remains. One of them landed on his arm, and started to eat through his sleeve. He banished it with a flick of his wand and deepened the trench, then covered the area in smoke.

It didn’t last - a strong wind blew it away before Ron could start to run towards the next cover. In response, he transfigured the earth on the side nearest the enemies into stone and threw up a few thick walls to break the line of sight before he started to run. He still couldn’t see their markers, so they couldn’t detect his position either.

Behind him a cloud appeared over the trench, quickly descending, and where it touched the ground, the remaining grass wilted. Ron hissed - he was certain he wouldn’t fare much better if that touched him, and he didn’t want to find out if it could go past a shield.

He disillusioned himself, then conjured a few flocks of birds and sent them back as a distraction. He didn’t see whether the wind trap or another cloud got them - he was close to the two markers now and threw himself down into the large hole ahead of him.

He landed on the bloody carcass of some monster - or part of it - and cursed. More such creatures were strewn around the hole, some burning, others ripped apart. But there, under a stone shelter, he could see Harry and Fleur! His friend was whirling around, wand rising, and Ron froze. “It’s me, Harry! Ron!” he shouted as loud as he could, and Harry stopped whatever spell he had been about to cast.

“She’s badly hurt,” he said as Ron closed, “we need to move back - the houngans here are much more dangerous than the ones we fought before.”

Harry didn’t look that well either, Ron thought, but he nodded. They had to fall back before the houngans spotted them, and buried them under their curses. He raised his own wand. “Levitate her, I’ll cover you.”

Harry opened his mouth, probably to argue, but Ron stepped out from the shelter and started to transfigure the earth around them into lions, then disillusioned the pack and sent them against the enemy lines. Keeping an eye out for more enemies, he used his radio to inform Hermione and the others. “Harry is taking Fleur back to the first aid station. I’m covering him. The enemies here are very strong!”

“Watch out for flanking enemies!” Harry yelled. He had already disillusioned himself and Fleur, so Ron could only tell where he was by their floating markers.

“Alright!” he yelled back and sent a few more invisible lions to the west.

He looked back when he climbed out of the hole - which was the size of a large crater, now that he considered it - and saw that his lions hadn’t made it halfway to the enemies’ positions. Nor had their Disillusionment Charms held. Judging by the number of spells cast, there had to be two dozen enemies there, entrenched and ready, blocking off the northeastern route.

They had to find another way out of this trap. And fast.

*****

Back with Sally-Anne and the others, Hermione Granger listened to Ron’s report on the radio and
barely refrained from rushing off to help him and Harry. She couldn’t break ranks like that, though - she was needed here, in command. Not that she was doing that well in that function, either. Five dead, four wounded - and most of it her fault. She should have been prepared for such a trap - more prepared, at least. And she needed to find a way out of their current predicament. To the west lay the library, and its defences. Traps and monsters. They had dealt with a number of each, but there would be more - and they wouldn’t bother the houngans. So trying to head west would be suicide. The escape route she had planned to take, to the northeast, was blocked by powerful enemies, according to Ron’s report over the radio. And the rest of the houngans were pushing up from the south and east.

“How are Sirius and Vivienne?” she asked Sally-Anne.

“Stable, but… they won’t wake up for a while yet,” the witch answered.

Hermione bit her lower lip. Push through as planned, or turn around and charge at the enemies south of them? They seemed to be the weakest, mostly composed of undead and some houngans, held at bay by Seamus, Tania, Emily and Mary-Jane.

She looked east, where Aberforth was still keeping the houngans focused on him with a display of skill and power worthy of his brother. But how long could he hold out by himself?

Noise and movement in the underbrush made her turn around and raise her wand. Justin took a step to the side, behind a tree, setting up a crossfire. Celia was still covering the west. They were expecting Harry, but she couldn’t be certain.

It was Harry, dragging a floating Fleur behind him. Hermione hissed through clenched teeth when she spotted the Veela - Fleur looked like she had been put through a blender, with her robes torn and scorched, and covered with blood.

“I’ve done what I could but…” Harry explained, setting her down. Sally-Anne was already moving, casting, her wand flashing.

“How’s the situation up north?” Hermione asked, trying to sound crisp and calm. Panicking would be fatal.

“Bad,” Harry answered. “The houngans there are experienced, and entrenched. They sent burrowing monsters at us - those ambushed Fleur - and kept their distance.”

Hermione mumbled a curse. If they pushed on… their entire position could easily be overrun. “Can we break through their lines?”

Her friend winced. “They have cleared an area from cover - we’d have to charge their position over open ground.”

Even without the Major’s lesson Hermione would have known what that meant. She didn’t want to reenact the Battle of the Somme. She could call Remus, Tonks and Brown to attack the enemy from the rear, but… they would take too long to get into position.

“I’m almost there!” she heard Ron over the radio. As before, she still aimed her wand at the figure coming through the underbrush - which was now pretty trampled all around - before she recognised him. He looked better than Harry - not quite as beaten up. But if she didn’t find a way out of this trap…

He crouched down next to her and Harry, glancing at Bill before looking at them. “I sent a few distractions at the enemy. I don’t think they’ll be quick to pursue, as entrenched as they are. But they
won’t wait forever.”

She knew that there was no time to waste, but they couldn’t rush off blindly. She bit down on her lower lip and took a deep breath. “We need to reverse course and push through the enemy line in the south.”

“It’ll take us longer to push past the wind trap there,” Ron pointed out.

“The enemies there are the weakest. Mostly undead and some apprentices, I think.” They certainly hadn’t used the curses and tactics Ron and Harry had seen. “Aberforth holds our eastern flank, Tania and Seamus cover our rear - they can mine the forest with explosives to hold them back, or at least delay them - and we push through in the front.”

“We?” Harry asked.

“Us three, Celia, Mary-Jane and Emily.”

“And we’ll transport the wounded?” Justin asked, gesturing at Sally-Anne and himself.

“Yes.” Hermione nodded at him. “You can stick all of them and Rookwood on a transfigured palette and levitate that.” It would be difficult, but they had trained for that. Not as much as Hermione had wanted, but… it would have to do.

Justin opened his mouth, probably to argue, but then closed it, nodding. He knew that he couldn’t leave Sally-Anne alone with the wounded, Hermione thought. She glanced at Harry and Ron. Neither looked happy to leave their family under someone else’s protection, but they must know that they had no choice. They were needed in the van, to break through, just as Justin was needed with Sally-Anne - if Hermione fell, he would be able to replace her.

She pushed the button of her radio. “Tania, Seamus - fall back to the aid station, then cover the northeast! We’re breaking through in the south. Mine the forest as you follow us. Aberforth - hold our eastern flank. Mary-Jane and Emily - hold position! We’ll be right there.”

She waited for the others to acknowledge the orders, then nodded at her friends. A moment later, the three of them and Celia were sprinting southwards, passing Tania and Seamus going in the other direction.

A minute later, they spotted two markers - Mary-Jane and Emily. The two witches looked very relieved to see them arrive, and quickly filled them in on the encroaching positions of the enemies.

“Alright. Everyone - we’ll release the last of our Bludgers.” They wouldn’t last that long - the houngans had learned to take them out quickly - but they would at least serve as a distraction. “Celia, Mary-Jane, Emily - you fix them in place. We’ll swing around them from the west, and hit them in the flank.” She looked around. “Everyone got this?”

She saw them nod, the three new recruits not managing to hide their nervousness - or fear. They would do, though, she told herself. She looked at her friends, then keyed her radio.

“We’re attacking now!”

*****

Harry Potter watched the Bludgers speed towards the enemy line. One Inferi was exposed and hit by the Bludger before they disappeared into the jungle. Shots from the three witches who had released them followed, which should draw more attention from any houngans in the area not dealing with
the flying iron balls. He hoped it would be enough of a distraction that he and his friends could cross the area between them and the enemy without getting cursed.

Disillusioned, he slid around the tree he had been using as cover and sprinted along the crater left by Seamus’s latest bomb. Ron and Hermione were hot on his heels. Weaving around broken trees and shattered rocks, they reached the treeline occupied by the zombies, and he saw two markers appear in his line of sight - they were in range of the houngans.

He cast a Blasting Curse at the closest marker and it vanished in a cloud of earth and rocks and didn’t reappear. Ron moved to his right to cover their southern flank and Hermione crouched down behind a tree trunk - transfigured into steel, he noticed - on his other side. “Celia, Mary-Jane and Emily - we’ve reached the enemy lines. Hold your fire and move up!” he heard her order.

The second marker had retreated out of range. That was a good sign - the enemy might be breaking. He couldn’t see any Bludgers, but at least a few should still be around. Time to push on.

He jumped up and rushed towards a tree peppered with splinters. Halfway there, a figure stumbled out from behind the tree - an Inferius missing an arm - no, an arm missing its bones. He blew the monster’s head apart with a Reductor Curse, and it started to collapse in on itself, its bones vanishing. He set it on fire anyway.

“Blimey!” he heard Ron curse nearby, “We better not get cut to the bone ourselves!”

Like in second year, Harry thought, before spotting another undead - this one dragging itself along the ground with its arms, its legs having been turned into flipper-like appendages. He turned the ground beneath it to petrol, then lit it up. When he stepped through the thick smoke rising from the doomed zombie, he held his breath despite his Bubble-Head Charm.

The Bludgers had been working better than he had expected - he saw and dispatched two more crippled Inferi while they pushed eastwards, rolling up the enemy lines.

“He, Hountans ahead!” he heard Ron yell. A second later, three markers appeared in range and a tree between him and his friend shattered, the splinters bouncing off their Shield Charms. Harry raised a stone wall in front of the enemy, blocking their line of sight while he moved to the left.

Predictably, the wall was blown apart almost instantly, but the resulting dust cloud obscured them from the enemies a bit longer. Long enough for Harry to conjure half a dozen snakes inside the cloud.

Ron had moved further south, and was casting several spells at the houngans - colourful, flashy ones, meant to draw their attention. When they answered with curses of their own, driving Ron into cover, Harry rushed forward at an angle, raising an earth wall to cover himself. Halfway to the enemy position he heard the snakes scream obscenities as they attacked - and he noticed more markers. Half a dozen, in total.

His wall shuddered as spells impacted it, and Harry threw himself behind a new one before it crumbled. He rolled over the muddy ground, transfiguring a tree in the way into a cloud of smoke. A flick of his wand turned it bright green, and a swish blew it towards the houngans. He could see markers - and in some cases houngans in their white clothes - moving back, away from him and the cloud, to the east. They were breaking.

Snarling, he sprinted towards the enemy lines, past dead snakes, and caught a straggler with a Fire Whip. His spell shattered the man’s shield and cut him apart. Ron came up from the south, his Reductor Curse decapitating another houngan who had come out from cover.
One witch broke from cover and ran to the east. Harry sent a curse after her, but missed. Then shots rang out from north, and the witch’s shield flared as the bullets smashed into it. A few steps later, the shield failed and the witch toppled over, struck by more bullets. Hermione appeared behind a tree, waving at Harry before vanishing a large rock and exposing another houngan. The three witches with her killed him with several bursts.

Harry spotted movement to his right - another houngan making a break for it. Ron missed him with a Cutting Curse. Harry’s next Fire Whip - he was starting to really like that spell - didn’t and her head and part of her shoulder flew through the air as the rest of her crumpled.

The remaining houngan rushed southwards. Harry tried to line up a shot, but there were too many trees between him and the fleeing enemy. Mary-Jane and Emily were closer, though, and gave chase. Harry heard them fire, but he saw all three markers still moving through the jungle.

“We’ve taken their position!” Hermione yelled into her radio near him. “Everyone, move south, we’re breaking out! Mary-Jane, Emily - fall back…”

Her words were drowned out by a horrible noise as trees, earth and rocks were thrown into the air, into a hurricane forming above. Like before, when Fleur had been cursed. “Take cover!” he shouted, conjuring a stone shelter around his friends and himself. Soon wood and rock fragments rained down on them, smashing against the stone walls and ceiling protecting the small group.

It didn’t last long, less than a minute, but when Harry rushed out again, he found the area to the south razed, the jungle turned into a broad no-man’s land more fitting the Somme - or the northern area Fleur had almost died in.

“They were waiting for us. Those houngans were just curse-fodder,” Ron muttered.

An amplified voice rang out over the area as the last remnants of the hurricane died down: “You cannot escape! Surrender!”

Harry hissed. He knew that voice. Reid.

*****

Ron Weasley stared. A whole strip of the jungle had disappeared, turned into a wasteland covered with rocks and broken trees. Mary-Jane and Emily had been in the middle of it, chasing that fleeing houngan, when the area had erupted, but he couldn’t see any trace of them… there! A green speck. He pulled out his Omnioculars and zoomed in. There was a figure, near a rock, dark hair… “I see Mary-Jane!” he yelled, and pointed out her position. He saw one of her arms move slightly. “She’s still alive!”

“We need to get her!” Harry yelled. Ron’s friend was already moving forward when Ron saw a curse hit Mary-Jane. The witch blew up in a cloud of blood and fragments of bone and flesh.

“Reid,” Harry spat, ducking back behind a tree, while Ron swallowed, watching the red cloud cover half of a rock and the earth around it.

“The wounded are on the way to us,” Hermione said near them. “We can’t reverse direction again - we don’t have enough space left to reform our formation. We have to break through here.”

“They’ll already have monsters burrowing towards us,” Harry told her. “We need to block them with steel barriers underground.”

“Do it!” Hermione ordered.
“It’s a killing ground,” Ron said, studying the field and looking for Emily. “We can’t cross that in the face of their curses, not quickly enough to avoid getting hit - or running into traps.”

“We have to,” Hermione replied. “We can’t stay here.”

Seamus’s voice over the radio interrupted them. “I’ve placed a bomb in the path of the enemy, but the radio detonator isn’t working - none of them are!”

Hermione hissed, then spoke into her radio: “They must have placed wards to block electronics as they advance.”

“Shite!” Ron heard Seamus curse, then scoff. “I’ve got an idea about this!”

“What?” Hermione asked after he didn’t go on. “Seamus?”

“So what?” Tania yelled over the radio. “Seamus! Come back!”

“He must already be inside the ward,” Hermione said.

Ron turned to look northwards. What was Seamus planning? Ron didn’t know much about explosives, but the Irishman was the closest to an expert the Resistance had. Apart from Hermione.

Before he could ask her, a massive explosion erupted in the north, smoke rising into the hurricane zone, where the winds rapidly dispersed it. It had been bigger than the one which had taken down the houngans’ wards, Ron thought. “Could he have…”

“Tania, can you see Seamus?” Hermione asked in a clipped tone.

“No. He rushed forward, reached the explosives, and a moment later they blew up. No marker.” Tania’s voice seemed to lack any emotion, or so Ron thought. He could hear her machine gun firing over the radio. “They seem to have stopped advancing, but I cannot hold them back by myself.”

“Fall back to us!” Hermione ordered. She turned to Ron again. “That means we can’t banish a bomb at their lines to blow a hole into them.”

“There’s something moving to the west of us!” Celia yelled.

Ron turned around and studied the area through his Omnioculars. There definitely was something moving there. A few Inferi, probably.

“Aberforth has joined us,” Justin announced over the radio. “He’s wounded, but can walk and cast. We’re almost at your position.”

That meant that the eastern side was collapsing as well, Ron knew. He hissed through his clenched teeth.

“There can’t be that many houngans left,” he heard Hermione say. “This island only has two and a half million inhabitants. The British Isles have almost sixty-two million. The magical populations should be proportional, even accounting for the houngans’ past kidnappings and the losses Britain suffered in two wars. They have always depended on zombies and voodoo curses to hold their own against their enemies.”

“But it looks like all of the houngans are here,” Harry replied. “At least the ones who can fight.”

“It’s their most sacred place,” Hermione nodded. “But they’ll have spent most of their forces. And they have to hold a long line. We can break through here. We have to.”
“We’ll take casualties charging over that open, broken terrain,” Ron said. “And we can’t use Fiendfyre on their position - it’d burn down the whole jungle.” Including them. And bombs would be useless as well. But, he added silently to himself, if he was the last one standing, and about to die, he’d leave it as a parting gift for the damned houngans.

Ron heard Hermione call Remus and Tonks and tell them to get ready to attack the houngans in the rear - they could apparate to the location where Brown had done the ritual; the houngans were north of it.

“Brooms.”

He turned to Harry. “What?”

“Brooms.” Harry repeated and looked at him. “We have two Firebolts. Best broom on the market. We’ve flown in a storm before.”

Ron hissed. That had been a Quidditch match to remember, and the storm hadn’t been as powerful as the one waiting above their heads. But… it was possible. They just had to stay roughly on course, and a Firebolt might be powerful enough to push against the wind trap. Might be. He nodded.

“Can you do this?” Hermione was staring at them, biting her lower lip. Behind her, Ron could see Justin moving through the underbrush. They were running out of time.

“Yes.” Harry sounded certain.

Ron met her eyes and nodded. “Yes.” They had to. He stepped up to her and kissed her, tasting blood - she had bitten her lips bloody.

He hoped it wasn’t an omen.

*****

Behind a conjured barrier of steel and stone, Harry Potter pulled out his Firebolt and mounted it then took a deep breath. He glanced at Ron and Hermione. The two were still kissing and he fought the urge to tell them to hurry. This might very well be the last kiss they shared… he shook his head. He would make certain it wouldn’t be. He looked out, over the broken terrain separating the houngan line from their position. Rocks and tree stumps formed obstacles, some high enough to reach the wind trap above them, faintly visible by the dust and ashes blowing around. They couldn’t hug the ground, he knew. The slightest mistake would see them smashed to the ground, beaten against the rocks and wooden shards jutting from the soil.

No, they had to brave the hurricane, trusting their brooms to carry them through. Harry knew they could do it - the Firebolts were the best brooms on the market, miles beyond any competition. They could fly against a storm - but could he and Ron keep them on course, and compensate for the changing forces of the wind trap?

They’d find out in a moment. Ron stepped back from Hermione and Harry found himself in a tight hug. “Don’t die,” she whispered into his ear before releasing him.

Ron had already mounted his own broom and disillusioned himself. “Ready.”

Harry nodded and cast a Disillusionment Charm and Sticking Charm himself. “Let’s go.”

They shot up over the barrier, straight into the wind trap waiting above. As soon as they reached it, his Firebolt slowed down so much that, for a moment, Harry felt as if he had flown into a wall. The
wind tore at him, and if not for his Shield and Sticking Charms, would have torn him off the broom. He gritted his teeth and started to force the shaft down a little, towards the enemy line. He started to move forward - but also lost altitude at the same time.

Pulling up again, he stalled a few times, and almost ended up smashed to the ground when the wind shifted right when he overcompensated. But he managed to recover and pull up in time. And he started to get the measure of the wind - there was a certain rhythm to its attacks. He bared his teeth in a feral grin. He could do this!

He glanced around, spotting his friend’s marker some yards away, but also still in the air. They could do it. Pushing the tip of his broom’s shaft down a little, he started to accelerate towards the houngans’ position, weaving and bobbing above the broken terrain, sometimes being thrown around like a leaf. It would make hitting him with a curse more difficult, he thought with sudden humour.

Then he entered in range of his Human-presence-revealing spell, and half a dozen markers appeared behind the enemy’s walls. A target-rich environment, indeed.

Hermione Granger held her breath as she watched her boyfriend and her best friend fly into the hurricane above them. If this didn’t work… she gasped when one of the markers dived down, and only sighed in relief when both markers started to stabilise - as much as one could call their chaotic course stable - and make their way towards the enemy.

She healed her bloody lips almost absentmindedly with a flick of her wand and turned around. Justin and the rest of their force had arrived. Aberforth looked like he had been mangled by one of Hagrid’s more interesting animals, but the old wizard was grinning. “The eastern flank should be secure for a little longer - I’ve left a few surprises for the houngans.”

She was relieved to hear that - they needed to hold together for a little while longer, so they could break out of this trap. “Good. Keep an eye on our flanks and rear, Aberforth! Tania, help him!”

The witch nodded with a grim expression. She didn’t look as if she expected to survive, Hermione thought.

“Sally-Anne, keep watch over the wounded and the prisoner. Move up as soon as we have secured the enemy’s position!” She turned around and looked southwards. Harry and Ron were almost there. She saw curses fly towards them, and forced herself not to gasp. She had to present a confident, unflappable facade for the rest of their group. “Everyone else, get ready - we’ll attack in a moment.”

She could have done without Justin’s mumbled “half a league, half a league, half a league onward” quote, but this wasn’t the time to rebuke him. Not when it was just her, him and Celia who’d lead the ground attack. And, despite the myth, the Charge of the Light Brigade had cost the British brigade fewer soldiers than were lost to sickness during the campaign.

She keyed her radio when she saw Harry and Ron’s markers reach the enemy lines. “Remus, Tonks - attack now!”

Then she vanished part of the barrier in front of her and started to run towards the enemy.

Ron Weasley saw three curses pass underneath him as he closed in on the enemy position. Apparently, the houngans assumed that Harry and he were flying far closer to the ground - quite understandably, of course; who would have expected them to be so mad as to brave the storm? Well,
anyone who knew what crazy things they had gotten up to as kids at Hogwarts.

Harry was ahead as usual - he was the better flyer - but Ron wasn’t too far behind his friend. He looked at the markers from his Human-presence-revealing Spell. Half a dozen were hiding behind what looked like massive walls. The blighters had learned their lessons, he thought as he forced his Firebolt a bit further up, gritting his teeth at the effort it took to keep the broom somewhat on course in the face of the storm tearing at him.

He saw Harry’s marker crest the wall and dip down, straight at the closest enemy, and followed suit. Harry wasn’t landing though - he didn’t even slow down, but seemed to fly straight into the enemy. A moment later, Ron saw a figure appear, sliding down the wall they had been thrown into. He finally dropped below the wind trap’s area of effect himself and cancelled both the Sticking Charm holding him fast to his broom’s shaft and the Disillusionment Charm - he didn’t want to risk friendly fire; especially not from Harry.

Harry had already done the same, and before Ron managed to store his broom, his friend had rushed ahead to a gap in the wall. There was a houngan behind that, and Ron saw a curse miss Harry as he reached the gap. A flick of his wand, and an explosion shook the wall, bits of earth and rocks thrown through the gap, hitting Harry’s shield. The marker vanished a moment later.

“One down!” Harry yelled.

Ron looked around. “I spotted five more...” Movement on his other side drew his attention - no marker; Inferi or monster, then. He swung his wand around in time to catch the charging skeleton with a Reductor Curse that left it in twitching pieces on the ground. More of the ugly monsters appeared behind it though. “Reid,” he muttered, remembering the houngan’s flight from Hogwarts as he cast a Blasting Curse that destroyed two of them and scattered the rest. He was tempted to bury them under conjured stone, but they’d dig themselves out, so he dispatched them with a volley of Reductor Curses as he fell back to Harry. “I’ve spotted five of them,” he repeated. He tried to use his radio, but as expected it wasn’t working here.

“Three of them are coming at us in front!” Harry yelled. “And more appear behind them!”

Ron swore and raised a wall to cover their rear before moving to Harry’s left side. The houngans had divided the area with several walls, and the ground in front of him was littered with the remains of more skeletons, which had dug themselves out of where they had been buried. A killing ground. They had to clear it before the rest of their force arrived. “Let’s remove some of the walls!” he said. He pointed his wand at the base of the wall in front - the one behind which the houngan markers were advancing towards them - and vanished the earth there. Unfortunately, the houngans had anchored the walls far deeper than he had thought - the thing didn’t topple. It didn’t even shake.

This would be an even closer affair, as the Major would have called it, than Ron had expected. But he had a few tricks left, too. He transfigured the ground in front of the gaps in the walls to petrol, and when the hulking figures of Inferi arrived, he set the ground afire. The monsters kept advancing despite burning, but Harry cut half of them apart with his Fire Whip Spell, and Ron vanished enough earth to trap the other half in a pit.

But the undead had kept them busy long enough for the houngans to clear the gaps, and Ron had to drop to the ground when the first volley of curses flew at him through the smoke from all the burning corpses and petrol. He rolled to the side and returned fire with a Blasting Curse, but none of the markers winked out - not even the one suddenly flying a yard to the side.

A near-miss showered him with dirt - and parts of burning Inferi - and he hastily conjured some cover for himself and changed position. At this range, it didn’t help much - he was certain they had
their own markers floating above him - but even tagged, a moving target was harder to hit. A wave of acid - or poison - splashed against his shield, and he rolled even further to the side, further away from Harry. They were boxing him in, herding him into a corner, he realised - he had a wall at his back, and on his left side.

Clenching his teeth, he swung his wand and cast an Earth Wave. The ground rippled in front of him, then rose six foot and rushed towards the two houngans firing curses at him. He hadn’t aimed it well, and his spellwork hadn’t been as precise as he would have liked, but he still clipped one of the enemies - their marker suddenly dropped six feet - and the other fled behind the next wall.

He saw an explosion to the south of them. Remus and Tonks he thought - but that meant, he realised, that there were even more of the buggers that he had thought, if they were fighting Remus and closing in on Harry and him at the same time.

Before he could move skeletal hands shot out of the ground, grasping for him. They slid over his shield, but that wouldn’t last too long. He had to move! He jumped up, transfiguring some of the ground into stone and trapping a few limbs, then rushed back towards Harry. Before he had taken more than a few steps though, the ground gave way under him, and he found himself in a pit filled with skeletons; far too close to use any Blasting Curse on them.

He swept his wand around, casting a Fire Whip Spell. It wasn’t his favourite spell, nor was he particularly skilled with it, but he managed to cut down half of them before he lost control of it and the whip fizzled out. And that bought him enough time to conjure a pillar of stone right under his own feet and propel himself out of the pit.

He had barely cleared the edge of the pit, though, when his shield shattered and he was flung backwards, sliding over the ground. The other houngan had moved out of cover! Ron had managed to keep his wand and was whirling around when his leg was hit with a curse and he screamed in pain.

Panting, he flailed around. Another curse missed him by a hair’s width, and the pain grew even worse as he rolled behind a mound of earth. Screaming again, he pushed his hand into his enchanted pocket and pulled out the self-shaving flying razor Dumbledore had left him, flinging it at the enemy’s marker.

He saw several spells miss the small, harmless thing as it flew towards the enemy, and used the time to numb his leg until the pain was bearable. Merlin’s balls, the curse had not just ripped off his trousers’ leg, but his skin as well!

Snarling, he rolled out of cover, his wand aimed at the enemy. Two Blasting Curses later, the enemy marker winked out and he saw the broken body of a witch in blood-soaked white linen appear. He tried to stand up, but even numbed, his leg would not cooperate.

And he could see more markers floating above the walls. Approaching.

*****

Hermione Granger hated not knowing what was happening to Harry and Ron, even though she had expected to lose radio contact to them. And her group was not even halfway to the enemy lines themselves - it took more time to navigate the broken terrain than she had expected.

“Watch out for burrowing enemies!” she called out to Justin and Celia. She didn’t know how fast the houngans could move their creatures, but the closer they were to the enemy lines, the greater the danger of attacks from underground.
The area really looked somewhat like the fields of the Somme in some of the movies she had watched in Britain. Just without many craters. Uprooted trees lay next to displaced rocks and even boulders. She was moving around a particularly large tree stump when Celia called out: “Oh my god! It’s Emily! Emily!”

Hermione looked back and saw the other witch sprinting towards the east. She sighed - the other witch was breaking formation and had apparently forgotten their objective, even though it was a natural reaction to seeing a friend’s body.

“She’s alive!”

Hermione’s first impulse was to signal Sally-Anne and tell Celia to press on. But the Major had told her repeatedly never to give an order that she knew wouldn’t be obeyed. So she moved towards Celia as well, with Justin covering their flank. Emily was unconscious, and looked more dead than alive - Hermione could see a branch stuck in the witch’s abdomen, blood soaking her uniform at several other spots as well, and at least one leg and one arm were broken - but she was breathing. Celia was casting spells on her already, though Hermione couldn’t tell if they were helping much.

“We’ve arrived, and we’re fighting houngans!” Remus sounded over the radio. At least that was going according to plan.

She keyed her radio. “We found Emily. She’s alive. Sally-Anne, proceed to our position.” She released the button of her radio and turned to Justin. “We need to sink steel walls into the ground, to defend against burrowing creatures as we wait.”

They had managed to place two walls, forming a corner, when one of them shook from an impact - below the ground. The creatures had arrived. At least there were no houngans in range. But would the creatures burrow deeper, or up? They couldn’t risk them coming up below Celia and Emily. She swished her wand and turned the ground to steel, then stepped to the western edge of the wall.

Nothing was appearing on that side of the wall. “Enemies below!” she signalled the rest of the force. “Careful when crossing the no man’s land.”

“They’re underneath us!” Celia yelled. “I can hear them scratching at the ground, and bumping against it!”

Hermione increased the transfigured area. Depending on their orders, the creatures might continue northwards… or follow them south. That would endanger Sally-Anne and the others. But they couldn’t dig them out, not before Emily was safe.

Finally, she saw Sally-Anne approach. She regretted her annoyed thought at once - the witch was levitating the wounded and Rookwood, and making good time given that handicap. But they were exposed here, with an unknown number of monsters underneath them, trying to break to the surface to attack them, and they had to move to support Harry and Ron!

And yet she couldn’t leave Emily here. Or Sally-Anne. The latter rushed towards Emily and Celia and shooed the other witch away before casting spells of her own. “She’s… oh god, that’s bad!”

“How long until you can move her?” Hermione asked, forcing herself to sound cool and collected, no matter how she wanted to press on and leave this area.

“A few minutes at least… that branch needs to come out before we can move her, and once it’s out I need to stop the bleeding.” Sally-Anne wasn’t looking up from Emily’s stomach, probing the skin around the wood lodged in there.
“They’re breaking through!” Justin yelled.

Hermione whipped around. Monsters with large claws - like oversized moles - were breaking through the earth behind them. For a moment, she froze. Then she drew her rifle and started firing. They had no shields, so bullets would work best.

*****

Harry Potter cursed his own stupidity. He had allowed himself to be cut off from Ron by some conjured barriers when the houngans had charged them, and now he was facing two of their enemies, with no support of his own. And he had no radio either.

Though he had the Elder Wand, he thought to himself as he blocked another curse with a quickly conjured slab of stone. It vanished in an explosion, and the splinters harmlessly bounced off his Shield Charm. Another wall rose behind him as he moved - they were trying to hem him in - and the attacker took cover behind a stone and earth wall. They were too wide to blow through, Harry had found, but he had other options.

He flicked a Fire Whip to his left, driving the other houngan into cover as well, and conjured several large rocks. A flick of his wand sent them upwards, angled so they’d crest the wall - and the wind trap triggered straight away, sending them down at the hiding houngan.

The rocks wouldn’t kill them, but they didn’t need to. Harry was already moving when they hit. A swish covered the ground in a fine sheen of mud, and he slid around the corner without losing speed. The houngan there was too slow to react to that and their curse went wide. Harry’s volley of Piercing Curses didn’t, and he saw a tall man appear, still clutching at the hole in his chest as he toppled over.

The other houngan screamed at the sight, and Harry had to block two curses with another slab of stone. His enemy was exposed though, and had no cover nearby. They tried to duplicated Harry’s trick, but he wasn’t aiming at them - he was aiming at the wall behind them. His Blasting Curses might not be able to break the wall, but they could break enough of it to shower the houngan with deadly stone shards. Their shield collapsed after the third volley, and the fourth ripped them to shreds.

A few skeletons appeared, but Harry’s Fire Whip cut them down before they could even get close. He was getting really good at that spell, he noticed. Far better than in training - but then, he always performed best under pressure.

He looked around. There was one marker floating where Ron had been. Either his friend had taken both of the houngans there down, or... he saw one more marker south of him, but he had to check on Ron. He turned around, trying to find a way back, when wall next to him suddenly toppled over.

Harry’s shield saved him, giving him enough time to jump back before he was crushed. The shield shattered though. He conjured an earth wall reflexively, then had to duck when it blew up right away, clumps of dirt pelting him. If that had been a stone wall...

Concealed - or so he hoped - by the dust cloud, he dropped to the ground and recast his Shield Charm. More curses flew past him, and the ground where they hit was covered with sizzling liquid. Acid.

One of the curses hit him, and covered his shield with acid. He rolled over the ground, wiping it clear - and avoided another curse, a Blasting Curse this time. Before he could retaliate, two more spells flew at him and once again only a hastily conjured earthen barrier saved him.
Whoever he was fighting was good. Probably Reid, he thought as he conjured a thick cloud of smoke, obscuring him from view - but also his enemy. But he vaguely knew where the houngan was, and conjured a few snakes nearby.

His smoke cover was literally blown away a second later, and Harry caught a glimpse of a houngan in white robes before walls appeared between them, followed by a dozen Skeletons and Bone Walls advancing towards him. It had to be Reid.

He blew the skeletons and Bone Walls apart with a volley of Reductor Curses while the marker floating above his opponent moved eastward. A gap suddenly opened in the wall his enemy was hiding behind and more curses flew at him. The spells went wide, but the gap closed before Harry could answer with a curse or two of his own. He would have to be on his guard and wait for the next gap to appear - but he was also certain that more monsters were burrowing towards him right then. He couldn’t stay either, then. That left only two options - retreat, or…

Harry rushed towards the enemy’s position, his wand weaving a pattern in front of him as he raised the earth to form a ramp for him. He reached the top and was already casting again as he threw himself over the wall, triggering the wind trap. Even as the wind roared and smashed him down, his Fire Whip lashed out. He saw Reid’s eyes widen in surprise an instant before his spell slashed through the houngan’s shield and body, splitting him diagonally from shoulder to hip. A moment later, Harry slammed into the ground hard enough to shatter his shield, and he felt his arm break.

******

Ron Weasley had seen the markers wink out - Harry’s work, he thought. But more were coming. He had to help his friend. Even with his leg useless. He pulled out his Firebolt. He might not be able to walk, but he could fly.

Panting and with his leg numbed, it took him two tries to straddle the broom. Then he stuck himself to it once more - if he fell off, he wouldn’t get up again. “I’m wounded, but I can still move,” he said, pushing the button of his radio. It still wasn’t working. He tried a Repair Charm, just in case, but that didn’t help either. No matter - they were going to get out of this cursed trap. He just had to get to Harry now.

Ron considered flying over the walls, but quickly dropped the notion - he was in no shape to manage that again. Instead he guided his broom around the walls, trying to ignore the pain from where the shaft pressed against his skinned leg.

The houngans had created a veritable maze of walls, he found - riddled with skeletons and other monsters, though they were too slow to catch him even though he was hugging the ground on his broom. He blew a few of them apart, but focused on getting to Harry. Just a few more corners… There!

Harry was standing there, holding his shoulder, but had his wand aimed at him. And there was Reid on the ground, cut in two. “How are you?” Ron asked.

“Fine.” Harry answered. “You?”

“Fine.”

His friend snorted, then turned to the south. “I’ve heard a few more explosions. They weren’t coming closer - looks like Remus and Tonks are stalled.”

Ron bared his teeth.
“Let’s go give them a hand, then!”

*****

The battle was over. Hermione Granger was exhausted, most of her friends were hurt, and they had lost too many people, but they had made it - they had broken through the houngans’ lines. They could escape now. And they could use their radios again.

“Justin, Sally-Anne - portkey out with the wounded and the prisoner!” she said.

Justin looked at Ron and Harry, then at her.

“The unconscious ones,” she clarified - she knew her friends wouldn’t leave until the last of their force were safe, even though they were hurt. Gravely hurt, in Ron’s case - his entire leg had been skinned! She couldn’t imagine how much that had to hurt.

Justin wasn’t about to argue either, and touched Sally-Anne and the unconscious wounded with a piece of string. A second later, all of them vanished.

She turned around and glared at Harry and Ron. They acted as if they didn’t notice. Neither did Remus, even though he had been cursed too. Idiots.

She bit her lower lip. Where were Tania and Aberforth? If they waited too long, the houngans might catch up, and trap them again. They had killed all the houngans here, but there were more to the north and east.

There! She saw Tania and Aberforth stagger around the remains of a conjured wall. They looked even more battered, especially Aberforth, but they were alive and - unlike others - able to walk.

“Come on!” she yelled, pulling out her own Portkey. “Gather round!”

A minute later they were safe.

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‘At first sight the casualties of the British expedition to Jamaica in April 1997 would seem to indicate a catastrophe: Of the twenty-three witches and wizards who took part in the mission, seven were killed and seven more were hurt seriously enough to require extended care by Healers. Almost everyone else was hurt as well, if not to a degree that the healer of the force, Sally-Anne Perkins, couldn’t deal with. This view, however, would be doing the operation an injustice. Those twenty-three witches and wizards had faced not just the last Death Eater, Augustus Rookwood, one of the most dangerous dark wizards of the time, but also the most powerful houngans of Jamaica - an island feared by its neighbours. Outnumbered and surrounded, they managed not only to escape, but also crippled the houngan forces in the process - a feat that removed all doubt that even without Albus Dumbledore, Wizarding Britain was still one of the most powerful nations of the Magical World. That, of the seven dead, all but one were inexperienced members of the Muggleborn Resistance further demonstrates this - none of the most prominent veterans of the Second Blood War were lost on this raid. And this distribution of fatalities was something that the remaining opponents of Sirius Black’s coalition tried to use against him and Hermione Granger during the run-up to the 1997 election that marked the end of the Second Blood War.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War’ by Hyacinth Selwyn

North of Jamaica, April 27th, 1997

Sitting on a folded seat in the cargo plane, Hermione Granger wanted, more than anything, to close her eyes and sleep. But she couldn’t. She was in charge, and an officer couldn’t rest until everyone under their command was taken care of.

And there were a lot of people in need of care. Sirius, Vivienne, Fleur, Bill and Emily were still unconscious, strapped to cots in the middle of the fuselage. They hadn’t been struck by dark curses, but their wounds were so severe that Sally-Anne hadn’t been able to do too much beyond stabilising them and treating the worst of the wounds. Remus might lose his arm - though no one knew what curse had struck it, so a Healer at St Mungo’s might know a counter-curse. And Ron… she glanced at her boyfriend, sitting next to her, his leg wrapped in so much gauze, it looked like a cast. They had to be able to regrow the skin on his leg at St Mungo’s! If not… she could think of a few ways to avoid amputation, but none of them would be easy or too comfortable. And they’d take some time to implement.

Celia and Tania weren’t hurt, not physically, at least. But Celia was a textbook case for battle fatigue, as the Major would call it. The brutal battle with so many of her friends dying had been too much for her. She and Emily were the only two of the new recruits who had survived this battle - Hermione shouldn’t have taken them with her to Jamaica. They hadn’t been ready. Not for such a battle. But who else could they have taken?

And Tania… Hermione couldn’t remember her saying a single word since reporting Seamus’s death. She’d have to deal with her, and soon. But not now.

At least Harry and Tonks were finally resting, instead of uselessly fretting over Sirius and Remus.

Sally-Anne was moving from Sirius to Vivienne, waving her wand in the by now very familiar
pattern of a diagnosis spell. The witch had been up for close to twenty-four hours now, and Hermione feared she’d collapse any moment. “Get some rest, Sally-Anne,” she said.

“I can’t. If their condition worsens…” Hermione’s friend shook her head. “I’m the only one who can treat them.”

Brown had offered his help, but had been politely rebuffed. No one wanted the Unspeakable to cast unknown spells on them. Especially not when anything could be blamed on a houngan’s curse. Brown must have realised that as well, since he had spent the flight so far apart from the rest of the force, with Aberforth keeping an eye on him.

“Their condition hasn’t worsened in hours,” she retorted. She glanced at Justin, who should be backing her up, but her second in command had fallen asleep about an hour, no, two hours, ago.

“That could change any moment. We can’t be certain, not with all those curses flying around, and the poison they used.” Sally-Anne shook her head.

“You need rest, Sally-Anne,” Hermione insisted.

“So do you.”

“I’ll rest after you.” As a good officer should.

“And if you fall asleep? Who’ll stand watch over the wounded?” Sally-Anne put her hands on her hips, but Hermione could see that she was swaying on her feet.

She pulled out a vial. “I won’t fall asleep.” It would keep her going for a few more hours.

“Even with that, you won’t be much use either,” Sally-Anne retorted. “I’ll wake up Justin instead.”

Hermione decided to chalk that up as a win, and leaned and against Ron to rest her eyes.

She didn’t wake up until they landed in the Bahamas.

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Atlantic Ocean, April 27th, 1997

Inside the chartered plane, Harry Potter leaned back in his seat and tried to sleep. Most of the others on board were asleep already. Or still, in the case of those wounded who hadn’t woken up since Jamaica. Like Sirius.

He clenched his teeth. He should be happy - they had accomplished what they wanted. They had captured Rookwood and secured the skull. Reid had been brought to justice, too. And they had taught the houngans a lesson. But so many of their own were dead or seriously hurt. And Harry himself was barely scratched - his broken shoulder had been easily mended by Sally-Anne, without even needing to use Skele-Gro. At least Sirius and the others hadn’t been wounded by a dark curse. Unlike Remus. Harry had tried to dispel the curse on his arm, but it hadn’t helped. Not even using the Elder Wand.

His wand. He pulled it out - Brown was sitting at the very back, out of sight, under the eyes of Aberforth - and rolled it between his fingers. He wasn’t certain if it was only his imagination, but the wand felt alive in his hands. Content, even. It hadn’t felt like that before, not even after the Battle of Diagon Alley.
He remembered what Ollivander had told him: ‘The wand chooses the wizard.’ That implied that a wand was more than a simple tool, that it had a sort of will, at least. And this was the Elder Wand. A legendary wand, one of the three Deathly Hallows, passing from one owner to the next in ‘a history drenched in blood’, as one tale about the Hallows called it.

On the other hand, reading too much into Ollivander’s words was foolish. Dumbledore certainly hadn’t mentioned anything like this, or he would have warned Harry about it. But Harry was certain that the wand made casting curses very easy - almost too easy. How had Dumbledore handled this temptation?, he wondered.

Sighing, he slid the wand back into his enchanted pocket and pulled out his old wand. Not that wielding the brother wand to Voldemort’s made him feel much better, despite the phoenix feather forming its core.

He snorted. It would be both foolish and cowardly to avoid taking responsibility for his actions by blaming them on a wand. He had chosen to fight. He had chosen to kill. And he would do it again, in a heartbeat, if he needed to protect his friends and family.

Holstering his wand, he looked forward, where the wounded had been put up on conjured beds - the air crew had had to be confunded to accept that without questioning it. His gaze slid past Sirius and Vivienne, past Bill and Fleur, until he reached Emily.

The witch had been badly hurt in the battle, but she would recover, according to Sally-Anne. Harry had been relieved to hear that. But that was all. He didn’t feel particularly anxious about Emily’s wounds. He hadn’t felt any urge to be near her, to watch over her, to be there when she woke up.

He really didn’t love her, he realised. And he didn’t feel any disappointment about that, either. He shook his head, then closed his eyes and leaned back. Maybe now he’d manage to sleep for a few hours.

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Ron Weasley woke up with a start from another nightmare composed of bleeding trees, roaring hurricanes and undead houngans killing his family and friends. He forced himself to calm down, taking deep breaths. The battle was over. They had won. His family were safe. Hurt, but safe. Then he felt guilty for his relief. Many had died, but he hadn’t known them that well. Not even Seamus - either the war had changed the bloke a lot more than it had changed Hermione, or he and Ron hadn’t been that close despite spending five years in the same dorm.

Next to him, he felt Hermione, who was leaning against him, his arm caught in hers, stirring in her sleep, and he quieted down even more. He didn’t want to wake up his girlfriend - she needed the rest. She had run herself ragged trying to handle everything, from taking care of the wounded to organising the planes and dealing with the muggles. And, of course, she had managed. She always did, even if it almost killed her. Like in their third year.

Her hair tickled his cheek, and, once again, he missed her thick mane. He sighed and shifted his weight a little, then winced when his hurt leg flared up in pain. He should numb it, or take another Pain-Relief Potion - the effects of the latter were starting to fade. But either would require him to move Hermione so he could free his wand arm from her grip and reach his holster or enchanted pocket. And that would wake her up.

So he closed his eyes and bore the pain. It wasn’t that bad, actually. Not yet, at least. He’d had worse after the Battle of Diagon Alley, in the muggle hospital. And he might have worse again, he added silently, if his wound was the result of a dark curse and no one at St Mungo’s knew the counter-
curse. Aberforth hadn’t recognised the curse, and Harry hadn’t been able to do much about it either. Hermione had mentioned more muggle procedures, something about transplanting skin… he shuddered. They wouldn’t do it with magic, but with knives! At least his dad would be intrigued, and if it meant he could keep his leg, Ron wouldn’t complain. Much.

But he wouldn’t be sad if he didn’t see any battle again for the next few decades. That had been a horrible battle. And to think that at the end, he had been saved by another item Dumbledore had left to him… he fought not to chuckle. In hindsight, anything could have served as a distraction. A flock of birds, another Bludger- if he had had one left - or even a banished rock…

But then, the houngan would have been expecting those things. A flying razor, though… He chuckled. Harry had been gifted the Elder Wand, Hermione books, but the items left to him had been surprisingly useful so far. Or not so surprisingly, given who had left them to him. He would have to consider how to use the remaining ones.

He was likely to have a lot of free time, too, while he healed up, he thought with a glance at his bandaged leg.

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Hogwarts, April 28th, 1997

When Sirius Black woke up, the first thing he noticed was the familiar smell of the infirmary at Hogwarts. He was in a bed, his robes folded on a chair next to him. And his...

“Accio wand!” His wand flew towards him and he caught it easily. That calmed him down a little. He seemed to be safely back in Britain, and not dying in some jungle - or, worse, in the hands of the houngans.

But why had they brought him to Hogwarts, and not St Mungo’s? And, more importantly, where were the others? Harry, Vivienne, Remus, Nymphadora? A quick glance showed him that the beds next to him were occupied as well. He could spot Vivienne even though he only saw the back of her head - he’d recognise her hair colour anywhere. And… that was Fleur, over there, next to Bill Weasley. And one of the muggleborn witches he didn’t know well.

“Finally awake, Mister Black?” Pomfrey had arrived in the doorway. She sounded and looked as annoyed at him as she had been during his school years - the Hogwarts matron took a dim view of perfectly Gryffindor behaviour, in his opinion, at least.

He didn’t quip back, but simply nodded instead. “Yes. How long was I asleep?” Asleep. That sounded better than ‘unconscious’. Or ‘half-dead’.

“I would need to know when you were hurt to answer that. But, according to my information, you were unconscious for close to two days. Despite having received magical healing on two separate occasions.”

“You fixed me, though.”

“I did.” Her lips formed such a thin line that he almost couldn’t tell where her mouth was. Oh, yes, the matron was not amused, he thought.

But he wasn’t a student any more. “Thank you.” He turned his head towards the others in the room. “How are they doing?”

“They’re sleeping, but their wounds have been taken care of.”
He smiled, relieved to hear that, even though he had known that they wouldn’t be at Hogwarts if they couldn’t be treated here. “And the others?”

“You will have to ask your friends about them.” Her face seemed to lose any expression and she turned away.

That wasn’t a good sign. He flicked his wand and summoned his communication mirror. He had to know what had happened to everyone else.

“Harry? Harry?”

The time until the mirror lit up and he saw his godson’s face couldn’t have been longer than half a minute, but it felt like an eternity to him.

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“So, Moony is in St Mungo’s?” Sirius Black asked while looking Harry over.

“Yes. Ron too.” Harry nodded, shifting a little on the chair next to Sirius’s bed, before glancing at the other three who hadn’t woken up yet. “We brought everyone who Sally-Anne said didn’t need to be treated at St Mungo’s to Hogwarts.”

Sirius snorted. “Hiding how badly we were hurt in the battle?”

“Yes.”

“Good. If the houngans think they didn’t manage to do us much harm they won’t start a war.” And would be more likely to give in during negotiations.

Harry sighed. “We lost too many though. Seamus, Eric, Mary-Jane, Anna, Gary, Sinclair and Timothy.”

Sirius remembered Seamus. A bloodthirsty lad, according to Hermione. The rest of the dead he had trouble matching faces to their names. He didn’t say that, of course, but nodded as solemnly as he could while trying not to show his relief that no one he really cared for had been killed. Although…

“What did the Healers say about Remus?”

Harry sighed again. “Not much. They’re looking for a counter-curse in their records. The last war with Jamaica was a long time ago, and so the counter-curses to their curses have not been needed for decades.”

That didn’t sound too promising to Sirius, but there was still hope his best friend wouldn’t lose his arm. A three-legged werewolf would look odd. “And Ron?”

“His leg was skinned by a curse. It wasn’t the standard Flaying Curse, or so they say, but the treatment is working, if not as quickly as expected. Hermione mentioned some muggle method, but we’re trying spells first.”

Sirius shuddered. Muggle methods… they cut you up to heal you! That was just sick! He took a deep breath. “Enough of others. How are you doing?”

“I’m…” Harry trailed off and cleared his throat, then sighed. “So many were hurt, and I’m fine.”

Sirius winced. Survivor’s guilt. “I can hex you, if that makes you feel better.”
“What?” His godson was staring at him.

“See how stupid that sounds? Your friends wouldn’t want you to be hurt, just as you didn’t want them to get hurt.”

Harry scowled at him. “It’s not that simple.”

“Of course it isn’t. But beating yourself up over it won’t help either. We’ll get better.” He gestured at himself, then at the others in the room. “I’d already be up and running if Pomfrey had not threatened me with dire curses if I moved without her permission.”

Harry chuckled. “Ah, yes.”

The two of them reminisced about their various encounters with the matron for a while, until Vivienne started to stir.

Sirius was out of his bed and at her side in a moment, Pomfrey’s threats be damned. The first thing she would see would be his smiling, relieved face.

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London, East End, April 29th, 1997

“‘One more such victory and we’re undone’, “Hermione Granger quoted Pyrrhus under her breath as she finished her breakfast in the Resistance’s headquarters. Fairfax Corbyn hadn’t touched his food the whole time she had been there, and she doubted that he had taken a sip from his tea either. Pam Roberts looked like she hadn’t slept for even an hour, and many of the rest of the new recruits hadn’t shown up for breakfast at all.

“They’ll be alright. Just give them time.”

She turned her head and glanced at John, who had taken a seat to her left. “Really?” Celia, who had been the only one of the new recruits to return unscathed, had held it together better than the other recruits when Hermione had told them about the Battle of Dry Harbour Mountains.

“They’re shocked, but that will pass. Most of them haven’t known the others that long, and the way everyone is celebrating the mission as a huge victory will make them see things in another light soon enough.”

“It was a huge victory,” Hermione said. “But it came at a huge cost.”

“That’s a good thing for them to realise. It might make them a bit less eager to start a new war.” John shrugged. “Some of them complained about being left behind. That was before you returned, of course.”

“Ah.” They should have known better, Hermione thought - the Resistance had lost half their original members in the battles against Voldemort, after all. But then again, none of the muggleborns had seemed to take the houngans as seriously as the purebloods did. Including herself, she admitted guiltily. Even after the incident at Hogwarts. “If all goes well we won’t be fighting such a battle again in the near future,” she said.

“Yes.” John didn’t say it, but his expression told Hermione that he wasn’t as optimistic.

Neither was she, if she was honest. She sighed. “I’ll be out for the day.” She nodded at the stack of letters on the table. “Visiting next of kin.”
John winced.

“I led them, it’s my responsibility,” Hermione said. She had been their officer. After getting them killed, the least she could do was inform their families in person.

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London, Ministry of Magic, April 29th, 1997

“Good morning, Amelia!”

“Good morning, Sirius.” Amelia Bones didn’t quite glare in response to Black’s cheery greeting, but she came close. The man acted as if he was just visiting for a chat, and not to discuss the country’s diplomatic situation!

She pressed her lips together when Black sat down in his usual seat, without waiting for an invitation, and crossed his legs. As if it already was his office.

“Good to be back,” he said, grinning. “Travelling abroad was tiresome.”

“Tiresome? Half a dozen were killed and the rest of your group wounded.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “Ah? Your spy’s been busy.”

She scoffed. “You blundered into a trap and almost lost your entire force.” If that was an example of how he would lead Britain...

“‘Almost’ but not quite.” He wasn’t grinning any more, just baring his teeth. “We caught Rookwood and we taught the houngans that even without Dumbledore, they can’t afford to mess with Britain. In addition to that, we recovered the skull Voldemort stole from them. As far as the casualties are concerned...” He shrugged. “They volunteered. Everyone knew that the mission was dangerous.”

Amelia knew that. If Black, Potter and Granger had been among those killed... well, they weren’t, and so such thoughts were just idle speculation. “A mission you undertook without my knowledge.”

“We couldn’t risk a traitor revealing our plans to the enemy.” Black was smiling thinly.

Amelia clenched her teeth. Was he accusing her or simply talking about the Ministry as a whole? She hadn’t exactly hidden Rookwood’s offer. “Both diplomatic and military actions fall within the purview of the Ministry.”

He snorted. “And the Ministry answers to the Minister, who serves at the pleasure of the Wizengamot.”

Which Black controlled. “Are you planning to replace me, then?”

“Eventually.”

He was baring his teeth again. Enjoying the power he had over her. She resisted the urge to draw her wand and hex him. “Pius is more patient than I thought.” With these ‘general elections’ looming, she would have expected her nominal subordinate to push to become Minister sooner rather than later.

“If you wish to step down no one will stop you. But you won’t, will you?”

She didn’t have to answer that. She wouldn’t shirk her duty. He and his friends would have to force her out of office.
Black chuckled at her expression. “You’re a bloody stubborn witch, but you’re predictable. And you won’t bend to anyone. Other than the Wizengamot, of course.”

Amelia just stared at him, not dignifying that with a response.

He sighed. “Well, what’s the status of Rookwood?”

She didn’t blink at the rapid change of subject, but took a moment to answer. “He’s proving to be quite resistant to interrogation.”

“To Veritaserum?”

“He claims that he would die should that be used on him. The Department of Mysteries admitted that it was possible.”

“So the Unspeakables have taken precautions against such methods.” Black shook his head. “Quite convenient, isn’t it? And yet Rookwood managed to betray them.”

Amelia had her own doubts about the Unspeakables’ claims, but, ultimately, it didn’t matter much. “We have enough proof to try and sentence him without his own testimony.”

“An outcome the Unspeakables certainly would prefer.” He shrugged again. “At least he’ll get a trial.”

She ignored that remark. She hadn’t been in charge when Black had been thrown into Azkaban without a trial.

“What’s the latest from the ICW?” Black leaned forward.

“Jamaica has submitted a protest against ‘Britain’s unprovoked act of naked aggression’ to them,” Amelia answered. “It isn’t expected to go anywhere though.” Fawley had been gloating about the goodwill Black’s stunt had generated for Britain among most of Jamaica’s neighbours. “They also demanded that everyone who took part in this ‘atrocity’ was handed over to them.”

Black chuckled. “Empty words. By my count, we killed half their leaders and more of their rank and file. They can’t afford a war.”

As much as she would have liked to deliver Black and Granger to the houngans, she hoped he was correct. “They’re sending an envoy to Britain.”

“Good.” He grinned. “I’m looking forward to discussing matters with them. You’ll be present as well, of course. Wouldn’t want to encroach upon matters which fall within the purview of the Minister.”

Amelia clenched her teeth and nodded. If only Black had been killed, or at least cursed, in Jamaica.

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London, St Mungo’s, April 30th, 1997

Ron Weasley had his wand pointed at the door as soon as he heard the knock. “Yes?”

“It’s me.”

He knew that voice by heart, and with a flick of his wand, opened the door, revealing Hermione standing there. She was wearing casual clothes. Muggle ones, not robes.
“Hey.” Her greeting sounded far too shy for her in his opinion. Almost timid. The same went for her smile.

“Hi.” He took care not to frown. She looked as if she had bad news to tell him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She walked over to his bed and bent down to hug him.

He used the opportunity to wrap his arms around her and pull her down to sit next to him, ignoring her surprised protest. On the side of his good leg, of course. His other leg was held aloft by a spell, still covered in bandages. It was getting better though - the skin was growing back, inch by inch, and the Healers had managed to make the process almost painless too. He hadn’t had any feeling in it for days, but that was a small price to pay to be free of pain. “So… what’s bothering you?” he asked. “Trouble with the Ministry?” He didn’t trust Bones.

“No.” She shook her head with a slight pout after abandoning her efforts to extract herself from his arms. “It’s just… So many died or were wounded…”

He caught her glancing at his leg and shook his head, frowning. “It’s not your fault.”

“I was in command.” She narrowed her eyes in that familiar way he knew meant she was digging her heels in.

“And you did your best.” He squeezed her lightly.

“It wasn’t good enough.”

“The hell it wasn’t! We made it out of that trap, and we did what we went for.” When she whipped her head around to stare at him, startled by his outburst, he didn’t flinch.

She shook her head. “I made too many mistakes. I should have expected a trap. I should have been prepared.”

“You can’t be prepared for everything. Sometimes there is no good solution, just the least bad.” Moody had been quite clear about that.

“That’s no consolation for the dead, or their next of kin.”

Of course it wasn’t. “Nothing is.” He blinked. “Did you meet them? The next of kin, I mean.”

“Yes.”

He hissed through his clenched teeth. That explained her state. Instead of saying anything else, he just held her close.

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London, Diagon Alley, May 1st, 1997

“Hello! Might you be interested in the upcoming election? I’m a member of the Muggleborn Popular Party.”

Bess Cox was certain that she hadn’t ever smiled as long and as hard as she had this afternoon. But, she thought to herself, as the muggleborn wizard she had approached shook his head and turned away, it hadn’t helped much. Apparently, there wasn’t as much interest in their party as Randall and she had imagined when they had founded it. Or, as Randall had put it: they had to work harder on the ‘Popular’ part.
Much harder, she thought while she walked back to the stand Randall had conjured next to Winston’s. “The population seems to be lacking any interest in politics,” she said, sitting down next to him and dropping the stack of leaflets on the small table.

“They are still focused on the events in Jamaica,” her friend answered.

Bess scoffed, but didn’t otherwise comment. She was glad that the Resistance had captured Rookwood, and that they had found a lead on a cure for the Withering Curse, but the close cooperation with the purebloods, and with the Ministry…

“Smile! There’s a couple headed towards us,” Randall whispered, poking her side under the table.

Bess started smiling before she spotted the two Randall had indicated. They seemed to be about her age. Both muggleborn, she guessed - their muggle clothes fit and were not out of date. “Hello!” she said, beaming at them. “Are you interested in politics?” She gestured at the leaflets on the table. “We’re members of the Muggleborn Popular Party.” The only members so far, but she didn’t have to mention that.

The two picked up a leaflet and read it. Randall waited a few seconds, then said: “We want to offer an alternative to the Resistance. They have done a lot for us, fought and won the war, but that doesn’t mean that they know what’s best for Britain in peace.”

Bess noticed that both tensed up when the Resistance were mentioned, and wondered silently if the two had had trouble with them. Maybe they were purebloods who knew how to act like muggleborns. Agents, maybe…

“They’re very violent,” the woman said. “We could have talked to the houngans, sorted this out. Rookwood was attacking them. Instead the Resistance attacked them.”

“A friend of ours died in that battle. Mary-Jane,” the man added. “If the Resistance hadn’t invaded Jamaica she’d still be alive.”

A friend of theirs had fought the houngans? And had been killed? Bess had heard there’d been casualties, but not any details. “I’ve lost friends in the war too,” she told them.

“And now they are talking anyway - the houngans are sending an envoy to Britain, to meet with the Ministry,” the witch continued. “Should have done that from the start.”

“I only know what was written in the Prophet about the battle in Jamaica,” Randall said, “but we certainly shouldn’t resort to violence too quickly.”

Bess almost frowned at that. There was a place and time for violence, for fighting back. But the elections weren’t it. “I don’t like that the Resistance is working so closely with the same Ministry that did their best to oppress us not even a year ago.”

Randall took over. “The Resistance and Black’s Order of the Phoenix are closely tied together. Too closely. That’s why we want to present an alternative for muggleborns. Choices and options are good.”

The couple nodded. “Yes,” the witch said, “We can’t let one group - especially not a group of soldiers - determine our future. Ah! I’m Liz, and he’s Marc, by the way.”

“I’m Bess.” Until the rumours that there was an amnesty being prepared for people like her were confirmed, Bess wasn’t giving out her full name.
Liz and Marc hadn’t put the leaflet back, Bess noted. And they didn’t look like they were about to leave either. Maybe the Muggleborn Popular Party might double their membership today.

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Hogwarts, May 3rd, 1997

Once again, Harry Potter felt more than a bit odd as he returned to Hogwarts. A week ago, he had been battling houngans in the jungles of Jamaica, fighting for his life in a maze of traps and ambushes. And now he was supposed to care about Defence lessons?

But he didn’t have any excuse not to return to school. He could travel to London for the Wizengamot sessions easily enough, and, unlike Ron, who was still in St Mungo’s, his wounds had been easily healed. Well, it wasn’t as if he loathed going to school. It just felt weird, after everything he had gone through.

He shook his head and approached the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmaster’s - Headmistress’ now - office.

“Transylvanian Tackle.”

As Harry climbed the moving stairs, he wondered if picking themed passwords was a requirement or simply a tradition at Hogwarts. Hermione would probably know, he thought.

“Please come in, Mister Potter.” McGonagall sounded as crisp as he remembered from his earlier years. Though not quite as annoyed as she had usually sounded when talking to him in her office.

“Good afternoon, Headmistress.” He sat down on one of the chairs in front of her desk. The office hadn’t changed much compared to his last visit.

“Good afternoon. It’s been a while since you’ve graced the halls of Hogwarts.” She wasn’t smiling, but she didn’t look that annoyed either - certainly less than after some of his past adventures.

He made a point of shrugging as casually as he could manage. “Matters of state required me to be elsewhere, ma’am.”

Now she was frowning. “A thoroughly regrettable state of affairs. To think we had to send you off to war, again…” The old witch shook her head. “If Albus was still alive, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Well, of course.” That was rather obvious, in his opinion, and his tone made clear what he thought of the statement.

She narrowed her eyes, not quite glaring at him. After a moment, she sighed. “Yes, of course.”

Harry slowly nodded. He felt a bit bad for his cheek, but… McGonagall hadn’t been out there fighting Death Eaters, Voldemort and houngans.

The Headmistress went on: “Well, you have missed quite a few lessons, Mister Potter. Although since this is your sixth year, I gather you’re not quite as concerned about how that will affect your grades.”

He grinned at that. As if he cared about his grades after what he had gone through. “No, ma’am. I
reckon that I don’t need to worry about how my grades might affect my future career.”

“No, I don’t think so either.” Once again she shook her head. “Although Miss Granger might not agree with such a sentiment.”

He winced at that, then he reconsidered. Hermione had changed too. “Maybe, ma’am. We’re not the students who took our O.W.L.s any more.”

She looked rather sad to hear this. “No, you’re not. I would even say that you and your friends have already started your careers. Orders of Merlin, First Class, members of the Wizengamot, war heroes… not many adult wizards and witches ever come close to your achievements.”

“At least we didn’t receive our awards for something our parents did,” Harry retorted. They had had help, of course. All the other brave Resistance and Order members who had fought as well, many of them dying in the war. But he didn’t feel as if he had done nothing to earn this.

“Indeed. You have earned it, no doubt.” She leaned forward, folding her arms with her elbows propped on her desk. “However, here at Hogwarts, you are still a student. You can’t be seen to flout the rules.”

“We won’t be seen, Headmistress.” He grinned. “Ron and I, I mean.” Her frown deepened, almost turning into a scowl, so he continued in a more serious tone. “But as I said – we’re not the same students who took our O.W.L.s any more, and it would be pointless to pretend otherwise. How many of your other students have fought and killed in a war?”

She didn’t flinch, but her expression grew a little softer, or so he thought. “A bit of normalcy can be very helpful in dealing with such experiences. At least I found that to be true.”

She had probably fought Grindelwald, Harry thought. Or Death Eaters in the First Blood War. But he wasn’t her. “I’ve found that normalcy is overrated, ma’am. My relatives wanted to be normal at any cost. I wanted to be normal, to be ‘just Harry’ as well.” He shook his head. “But I’m not normal. I have never been normal. There was even a prophecy about my birth.”

“Divination is not reliable.”

“It might not be reliable, but Voldemort did want to kill me since I was born. Which led to me becoming the Boy-Who-Lived. I wasn’t a normal student at Hogwarts either, as you know, probably best among the current staff. And now I’m the Vanquisher of Voldemort, according to the Prophet. And many will see me as the next Dumbledore.” That had been one of the goals, after all, of their plan to force the houngans to back down.

“That seems a tad … presumptuous, Mister Potter.”

He shrugged. “I don’t claim to be the next Dumbledore. But I didn’t claim to be the Boy-Who-Lived either; others called me that. And I’m rather certain that I will have to deal with a lot of trouble as a result of my reputation. My friends as well, I think. We certainly have in the past.”

“Entirely. To McGonagall’s credit, she didn’t try to claim that this wouldn’t happen. “If that is the case, then I wonder why you want to return to school at all, Mister Potter. You seem to think that you do not need to, and that you wouldn’t fit in at Hogwarts any more.”

He chuckled. “Well, to be honest, I didn’t plan to return. But Sirius convinced me to. He told me to consider it a vacation. Hanging around with friends, playing Quidditch, relaxing in one of the safest places in Britain…” He smiled. Hogwarts had been the first home he remembered, too. He had never wanted to leave it in order to return to Privet Drive. Something Sirius understood far better than
anyone else.

“I do hope that you do not follow all of your godfather’s advice, though.” It was hard to tell if McGonagall was truly concerned, or if - as Sirius claimed - she secretly approved of pranks. “While most of the Slytherin students who fled Hogwarts last year have gone to Durmstrang, a few have returned to Hogwarts. I wouldn’t like to see them scared away. I’ve impressed that on the other students as well.” She didn’t approve, then.

Harry shook his head. “I’m not my father, Headmistress, nor my godfather. Nor is Ron following the twins’ example.” Certainly not now. If there hadn’t been a war, if Malfoy had been a git instead of a murderous Death Eater who had been killed while fighting for Voldemort, then things might have been different.

But there had been a war.

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“What’s going on, Neville?” Harry asked an hour later, gesturing at the noticeable space the rest of their house was giving them in the Gryffindor common room. “I’d have expected them to mob me with requests to tell them all about the battle in Jamaica.” They were Gryffindors, after all.

“Ah, that.” Neville nodded. “Well…”

Harry caught him glancing around as he trailed off, and narrowed his eyes at the other wizard. “What?”

“Well… Ginny told everyone not to annoy you. She reminded them that a lot of people died in that battle.”

“Ah.” Harry rubbed his chin. “That didn’t stop them before.”

Neville coughed. “Well, you’ve defeated the Dark Lord, and you’ve defeated the houngans. People call you ‘Dumbledore’s Heir’. Would you annoy Dumbledore?”

Harry didn’t think Dumbledore could have been annoyed by students. The Headmaster probably would have liked it if the students had dared to ask him questions, even annoying ones. “I see.” It made sense, though he wasn’t certain if he liked it.

“They still would love to hear all about the battle, of course,” Neville said, scowling. “And most of them won’t care that Seamus died in it.”

“Not many of them have fought,” Harry said. “They don’t know how it is.”

“I haven’t fought either,” Neville pointed out, snorting.

“You were almost killed in an ambush,” Harry retorted.

Neville grumbled something in response that Harry didn’t quite catch. He could guess its meaning though.

“You wouldn’t want to have been there, trust me,” he said. “It was a bloody mess, with hordes of undead, and curses, and traps. We were surrounded, we couldn’t apparate, couldn’t even fly away, and people were dropping left and right…” Harry clenched his teeth and drew a hissing breath as he remembered particularly gruesome moments. Shaking his head, he stood up. “I’ll get some air.”
“Sorry.” Neville hunched his shoulders.

“Not your fault.” Harry nodded at him, and left the common room.

Outside the dorm, he found himself at an impasse. He could take his broom and go flying a little, until dinner, but… that also would bring up memories. Especially if the weather was windy. No one would look for him in the library, but that would be hiding. And he wasn’t about to hide from students.

He heard the door behind him open, and he had turned around, his wand in his hand, before he recognised who was stepping out of the dorm. Ginny.

“Hey.” The witch smiled at him, seemingly ignoring the fact that his wand - not the Elder Wand - was not quite pointed at her.

“Hey.” Harry’s response wasn’t the smoothest, or most eloquent. “I heard you told the others not to annoy me,” he added quickly.

She nodded. “I hope I wasn’t presumptuous, but… I spoke with Ron, and he didn’t want to tell us anything either.”

“Yeah.”

“His leg is doing better. He should be back at Hogwarts in one or two weeks,” Ginny went on.

“Good.” He had known that already, but there was no need to mention it.

“So… where are you going?” She cocked her head slightly as she asked, looking at him.

He almost told her to pay more attention to her surroundings. Instead, he shrugged. “I don’t know… maybe the Black Lake.” He almost turned it into a question.

“Luna’s there. She’s feeding the giant squid.”

“Ah.” The image of Luna feeding the giant creature as if it was a duck made him snort.

Ginny frowned. “She’s been doing it for years.”

“I wasn’t making fun of her. Just the image of her at the shore, throwing bits of… what exactly does the squid eat?” He didn’t think Hagrid had ever mentioned that.

“Fish mostly. She enlarges them, or so she told me.” Ginny shrugged.

“Ah.” That made sense. “And where are you going?” Turnabout was fair play.

She hesitated for a moment, then raised her chin slightly. “I was looking for you.” She raised his eyebrows at that. “You looked like you might want to talk. I mean…” She pointed back at the door behind her. “My brothers were there, as well. And both were hurt. I understand that you don’t want to talk about it. But if you wanted…”

She wasn’t making much sense, Harry thought. Unless… He briefly hesitated, then reminded himself that he was a Gryffindor. “Ron told me that you fancy me.”

Ginny reddened as her eyes first widened, then narrowed. “He did, did he?” she all but hissed.

Before the war, Harry would have feared for Ron. But now? Who’d care about a Bat-Bogey Hex,
after what they had gone through? He smiled. “Well, is it true?”

“Yes.” She almost glared at him, then pouted. “I wanted to tell you myself. Once you were feeling better.”

“Ah.” Harry nodded. “Well, you just did, kind of.”

She snorted. “I didn’t want to tell you while you were still pining for Hermione.”

Harry hadn’t pined for her. Not for that long, anyway. “I’m not.” He was over her. Not that it mattered much, anyway. She was with Ron.

“But I didn’t want to tell you while you’re feeling guilty about the war and everything, either.”

Just what had Ron told her?, Harry wondered. He frowned. “Everyone’s telling me not to feel guilty.”

“And is it helping?” Her tone told him that she didn’t think that was the case.

“A little.”

She sighed and leaned back against the wall. “I don’t want to be second best. Or someone you only like because you need someone to hold you.”

“I wouldn’t like that either,” Harry said. That would feel rather dishonest. As if he was using a girl.

“Well, now you know. And where does that leave you, me, us?”

He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. Her expression was… guarded, but there was something in her eyes… He started to shrug, but stopped, turning the movement into an awkward gesture with his left hand. “I don’t know.” He had known her since… He started to quickly calculate. Their first meeting at the station didn’t really count. And he hadn’t spoken to her in his second year. Third year… she had been ‘Ron’s sister’ for quite some time. “We didn’t talk to each other that much before last year.” When she had helped him organising the map watch, and the Gryffindors in general.

“Yes?” She was frowning again.

“So… I mean…” He didn’t exactly know what he wanted to say. Only that he wanted to say something to her. “During the Resistance celebration, I flirted with a witch. Or she was flirting with me. She was a few years older. But… she just wanted the Boy-Who-Lived.” It was likely, at least - he hadn’t really talked to Emily since that evening, and she hadn’t approached him either.

“Ah.” She was still frowning.

“So… I don’t want that. I want something serious.” Something like Ron and Hermione had.

“Me too. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you while you were… ‘emotionally vulnerable’.” Ginny sighed and looked rather miserable.

“Well, Ron and Hermione made it work, and they were in the middle of the war,” Harry said. “At least now the war’s over.” He wasn’t going to say it out loud in case he was rejected.

Ginny nodded slowly, so it looked like she understood what he meant. Taking a deep breath, she looked him straight in the eyes. “So, want to take a walk around the Black Lake?”
He nodded. “Sounds good.” It was better to give this a try, instead of waiting until it was too late.

“I’m still going to hex Ron,” she muttered as she took his hand.

He shrugged. Ron had taken worse. And he had spilled her secret, after all.

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“This is an outrage! You invade my country, and then have the gall to blame us for it? Do you truly wish to go to war again? Have you forgotten that every war between our two countries has ended with your defeat?”

Larmar Grant, the envoy from Jamaica, had his act down pat, Sirius Black thought. All the righteous wrath an innocent victim of foreign aggression might feel, coupled with not so veiled threats of dire retribution formed an impressive display. It was all blustering, of course - the houngans would never send an envoy if they could actually make good on their threats.

Sirius leaned back in his seat in the conference room of the Ministry and folded his hands behind his head. Bones, sitting next to him, was probably wishing she could scold him for such a breach of decorum, but he couldn’t care less. Harry, on his other side, coughed, but Sirius ignored that as well. And Hermione was too far away.

“Have you forgotten how the last three ‘visits’ of British wizards to your island went?” Sirius asked. “Let me refresh your memory. Dumbledore killed half a dozen of your worst leaders without trying. Rookwood, a wanted criminal who fled our country, killed several of your leaders, ransacked their homes, and was about to break into your most holy library when we arrived to stop him - something you were obviously unable to do. And when you ambushed us we broke out of your trap, killing half your best in the process, before returning to Britain.” He grinned at the houngan. “Jamaica’s record in this century isn’t exactly impressive,” he added with a sneer.

“Dumbledore died to our traps! And we were about to capture Rookwood ourselves, when you interfered. And you lost half your number fighting our apprentices.”

Hermione scoffed. “Dumbledore died to a curse Voldemort had cast on your library when he stole a skull from it. You didn’t even notice the theft.” At least that was what Rookwood claimed. Sirius didn’t care much if it was true or not - it made a good argument in these negotiations. The witch went on: “And Voldemort was killed by Harry Potter in single combat.”

He saw Harry nod on cue, and took over again. “You started this when you attacked Hogwarts and murdered a dozen people to find the stolen skull - which you failed to do.”

“You attacked our delegate! He had to flee for his life!”

Bones scoffed. “We investigated the case. Reid was a murderer and a dark wizard, plain and simple.” The witch probably still felt as if she was an Auror, Sirius thought. Which was her main problem.

He shrugged. “You can save your lies and boasts. No one believes them - least of all your neighbours.” Did the houngan just flinch a little? Sirius couldn’t tell for certain. He leaned forward again. “So, let’s talk about the real reason you’re here. You want your skull back before our Unspeakables crack its secrets.”

“That skull is a crucial part of my country’s heritage. To steal it, and tamper with it, is intolerable. My
nation is not the only one appalled by such a crime.”

He wasn’t entirely wrong, Sirius had to admit - even though those countries only cared about the possible threat to their own secrets such a precedent might set. “We recovered it from the thief - and foiled another attempt to steal from you.”

“If you admit that it was stolen then give it back to us!” Grant had risen from his seat and was now yelling at them.

“We’re willing to,” Sirius said with a smile. “We’d love to hand the skull back, actually. But it contains knowledge crucial for our efforts to break the Withering Curse.” He saw the houngan open his mouth and quickly cut him off before he could shout even louder. “But we’re willing to part with it - if you help us break said curse.”

“You expect us to help you, in exchange for the safe return of stolen good? That’s… that’s… that’s extortion!”

Sirius shrugged. “So?” He scoffed. “You lost most of your best wizards and witches, and a significant number of your brightest apprentices facing a few of our wizards and witches. You managed to kill a few of our recruits in return - and they are easily replaced.” He saw Hermione stiffen at that, but it had to be said. This was diplomacy, after all. “You can’t afford a war. You can’t even afford to try anything and risk having your weakness exposed, not with half the Caribbean waiting to settle a few old disputes with you. So stop the posturing. You’re not fooling anyone.”

The envoy pressed his lips together, and Sirius was certain that the man wanted nothing more than to curse everyone in the room.

His grin widened. They had the bastards by the balls, and the houngans knew it. They could either play nice, and get their skull back - after the Withering Curse was cured - or they could try to keep this charade up, which would lead to Britain revealing just how weak Jamaica had become - and letting slip that the British forces wouldn’t interfere any more. The houngans’ neighbours would jump at such a chance to even the score.

Sirius didn’t care either way. And Grant probably knew that as well.

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“You’re making a dire mistake! You’re sacrificing your cursed friends and family!”

Amelia Bones shook her head as she watched Rookwood struggle with his guards in front of the Veil. The Death Eater had to know how futile his efforts were - she had personally informed him that the houngans had agreed to help finding a cure for the Withering Curse. And at his trial, an hour ago, he had been told again - though that had been aimed as much at the Wizengamot, who might have balked at sentencing the scum to death without such reassurances, as at him.

“I’m the only one who can save them!” Rookwood was screaming now.

“Can’t you silence him?” Black asked next to her.

“Any condemned wizard has the right to have his last words be heard and recorded,” she answered, without taking her eyes off the dark wizard.

“That must make for some weird transcripts. How do you write down incoherent screams?”
She rolled her eyes and gritted her teeth. This was an execution, not a play! “Have some respect!” she hissed.

“Why? He’s not showing any respect either. Not that he deserves any. The things he admitted…” Black made no attempt to hide his revulsion.

In the meantime the two Aurors had manhandled Rookwood in front of the Veil. For a man with his hands bound behind his back, the Death Eater put up an impressive struggle, literally kicking and screaming. It didn’t help him, though - one of the Aurors cast an Impediment Hex.

“I curse you! I curse you all! The Dark Lord will return, and you will pay for this! Your agony will be endless! Your souls will fuel his rituals! Your children will…” Amelia made a gesture with her hand and Rookwood’s threats were cut off when he was thrown through the Veil.

“Good riddance!” Black commented. “He really thought you would make a deal with him.”

“He was wrong.” Amelia didn’t make deals with criminals.

“Was he?” Black looked at her. “If a deal with him had been the only way to save the curse victims, would you have thrown him through the Veil anyway?”

“It wasn’t the only way to save them, so that is entirely hypothetical.”

“And the Wizengamot would have never sentenced him to death in that case anyway.” Black chuckled. “Well, the current Wizengamot. But after the elections...Who knows?”

She didn’t dignify that with a response and left the Execution Chamber without a further word. It was rude, but she didn’t care any more. Amelia already knew that she wouldn’t stay in office once the Wizengamot was replaced. She didn’t want to, either. Not when many of the seats would be held by criminals who should be on trial, not in the Wizengamot.

At least once she was replaced, she’d have more time for Susan.

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London, Diagon Alley, May 20th, 1997

“You shouldn’t vote for the Reform Party because we fought and won the war against those who wanted to murder us all. You should vote for us because we will make Wizarding Britain a better place - for us, and for our children. Not just a place where we can live in safety, but a country we can be proud of! A country where blood doesn’t matter!”

Hermione smiled as the crowd took up her last words, yelling them repeatedly while she stepped down from the stage. The election campaign was going well, in her opinion - and she was more certain than ever that her refusal to call their party ‘the Resistance Party’ had been correct. That would have tied them to the past, instead of to the future. And Churchill had shown how little winning a war against a genocidal monster could matter in British politics. Hermione had no intention of following his example.

Of course, she thought as she passed Fairfax and Pam, who were standing guard at the rally, there was nothing wrong with reminding people just who had won the war for them, as long that wasn’t all she did and said. There were other parties out there, after all. They might not be as organised and famous as her own, but the war had taught her that she couldn’t afford to underestimate any
opponent. The yells started to die down, now, with Justin taking the stage. His upper-class accent and origin was generally popular with many muggleborns - even with some of those who were enthusiastically yelling ‘Blood doesn’t matter!’. Hermione shook her head at the irony.

“A word, Miss Granger!”

She turned around, her wand in hand. Two young people were approaching her. A couple, probably, wearing badges with the logo of the Muggleborn Popular Party. Which wasn’t that popular, last she had heard. Fairfax had noticed them as well, and was moving a bit to the side, just in case, she noted.

“Yes?”

“I’m Liz, Liz Vance. He’s Marc Upton,” the woman said. She seemed to ignore Fairfax. “We were friends of Mary-Jane Milton.”

Ah. Hermione’s smile slipped. “My condolences.”

Upton nodded slowly, but Vance frowned. “That’s a bit hypocritical, seeing as she died following your orders.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “She died fighting for what she believed in - a free, safe country for everyone.”

“And how did invading Jamaica serve that goal?” Vance sniffed.

One of those, Hermione thought. She kept her cool, though - she had had lots of opportunities to practise doing so during the election campaign so far. “We went there to catch one of the last Death Eaters and to find a cure for the Withering Curse. A curse which, incidentally, had struck down a friend of hers.” That was stretching the truth - technically, the two had both been members of the Resistance, although Mary-Jane hadn’t been freed from the Imperius Curse before Dennis had been put under the Draught of Living Death, though Hermione didn’t doubt that Mary-Jane would have liked him. However, Hermione wasn’t about to let some idiot who hadn’t even fought in the war berate her.

But the witch wasn’t letting it go. “Those goals could have been achieved without so much bloodshed. You negotiated with Jamaica afterwards. Why didn’t you start negotiating right away?”

‘Because they were a bunch of murderous dark wizards who enslaved muggles to serve as cannon fodder and only understood force’ wouldn’t probably go over well, Hermione thought. “They had attacked us, murdered several muggles and rebuffed all attempts at handling the matter diplomatically through the International Confederation of Wizards.”

“So, you really think that you needed to attack them? To curse them to negotiation table?”

Hermione shrugged. “I cannot say for certain if it was absolutely necessary - we went there to arrest Rookwood - but it is a fact that the houngans didn’t start to negotiate until we had demonstrated that violence wouldn’t help them.”

“That’s a justification after the fact.”

“No. It is a possible explanation. We couldn’t know for certain when we made the decisions that ultimately led to the battle in Jamaica.”

“And cost Mary-Jane’s life.”
Hermione had to struggle to simply nod, instead of glaring at the witch.

“And do you plan to resort to violence on the next occasion as well?” Vance folded her arms under her chest and sniffed.

“Only as a last resort. But as the recent war has proven: Sometimes violence is the only way to deal with evil people. I, for one, will never risk an innocent life just to avoid a fight. Mary-Jane agreed with me - she fought in the war as well.” Hermione nodded at them. “Now please excuse me - I have other obligations.”

She left them standing there before she lost her temper.

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London, Diagon Alley, May 24th, 1997

Diagon Alley had changed, Daphne Greengrass noticed after leaving the Leaky Cauldron with Tracey. It seemed that every wall was covered with posters, and at some spots you couldn’t see the ground beneath all the leaflets. And all because of the elections.

“Can’t they vanish the rubbish?” She shook her head at the sight. “Someone will slip on all that paper.”

“I read in the Prophet that when some wizards started doing that, others accused them of trying to silence their competition,” Tracey answered. “Almost started a riot, or so I heard.”

Daphne could believe that - the muggleborns were going crazy about these elections. Not just muggleborns, though - the half-bloods and even purebloods were caught up in this madness as well. She sighed. “What a stupid notion, changing the Wizengamot every few years. No one will get any experience that way. And they’ll all cater to those who yell the loudest, without any care for the future past the next election!”

“Where did you get that from?” Tracey asked.

Daphne didn’t admit that she had read a muggle article about elections. She shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? People will never be content, and they’ll blame the Ministry and the Wizengamot. Of those two, they can replace the Wizengamot, so that’s what they’ll do.”

“And just like the members of the current Wizengamot mostly care about themselves, they new ones will do the same, and cater to their voters?” Tracey didn’t hide her amusement, and Daphne’s glare had no effect.

“At least hereditary positions grant stability. People know who will succeed a member,” she shot back.

“But the only way to replace a Wizengamot member who’s unfit is to kill them.”

Daphne glared at her friend, who had the grace to look sorry, and they walked in silence for the next few minutes.

“They’ve finished rebuilding,” Tracey said when they were passing the Weasley twins’ shop.

“Yes.” Daphne could see that herself. She stopped and looked up at the spinning, glowing sign above the entrance.
“It’s bigger than last time. I think,” Tracey added.

“Could be.” Daphne wasn’t certain.

“Let’s go in!”

“What?” Daphne stared at her friend.

“Let’s go say hello.” Tracey grinned. “It’ll probably unnerve them as much as you.”

Daphne pressed her lips together but she walked towards the entrance. She knew that tone - Tracey would do it alone if Daphne didn’t join her. And she wouldn’t leave her friend alone.

Daphne opened the door, and was hit in the face by a dozen fishes.

She shrieked before glaring at her giggling friend as she rubbed her face until the slimy feeling was gone.

“How do you like our ‘Fish Breeze’? The fishes aren’t real, of course, nor conjured,” Daphne heard a familiar voice from the back of the shop. Apparently, her shriek had been heard that far back.

“It’s pure spellwork and the slime evapor…” The way his voice trailed off upon seeing them, this had to be Fred, Daphne thought.

So did Tracey. “Good afternoon, Fred.”

“What are you doing here?”

The former Gryffindor’s wand was aimed at them and Daphne did her best to ignore it. “Is George here?”

“What do you want with him?”

Daphne could hear Tracey roll her eyes as her friend answered: “What do you think? We want to ravish him and trap him in a loveless marriage.”

Her sarcastic tone reassured Daphne. The flirting with the werewolf had been bad enough. If Tracey started to flirt with the twins…

She heard George’s voice from somewhere back. “Fred? Are you scaring away paying customers again?” Daphne heard him call out from the backroom.

“They aren’t paying customers. They’re snakes.”

“Snakes?” George appeared next to a large shelf blocking the view to the left side of the shop. “Ah. Good afternoon, Miss Greengrass, Miss Davis.”

“Good afternoon, Mister Weasley.” Daphne wouldn’t be rude, no matter what.

“Hello.” Tracey waved, and for a moment, Daphne feared the twins would mistake it as an attack. A hundred and fifty years ago there had been an assassination attempt on a Greengrass with a disillusioned wand, Daphne recalled.

Neither Fred nor George overreacted though. George even smiled - though Daphne doubted that it was sincere. “Are you here to buy something?”
“We were walking past outside and decided to come in and say hello,” Tracey explained with a grin.

“Really?” George sounded… sceptical, Daphne decided.

“Really,” Tracey shrugged. “After all, thanks to Black’s scheming, everyone thinks we’re best friends.”

“And you want to keep up that facade, so others will not bother you, lest they suffer our vengeance.” George nodded while Fred scowled.

That was an excellent justification, Daphne thought. “Yes.”

“We aren’t best friends though,” Fred said.

“Of course not. Your friends killed our families,” Daphne retorted, fighting the anger that rose inside her at the thought of her dead, murdered parents. She couldn’t lose her temper. She had to set an example for her sister. Astoria had barely accepted that things would never be as they were, and if she heard about Daphne cursing a blood traitor, or, worse, being cursed...

“And you tried to murder my family,” Fred spat.

“You don’t disobey the Dark Lord’s orders.” Daphne glared at him. It wasn’t as if they had had any choice.

“You don’t join the Dark Lord’s forces,” the wizard shot back.

“You also don’t sabotage Quidditch stands and try to kill students,” Tracey cut in. “But the war’s over and we’re all still alive. I’d like to stay that way. Alive that is.” She nodded at Daphne. “She’s right. Too much happened to make up. I can’t look at Granger without remembering my dead parents, and she’s about to marry into your family.”

“Oh, that’s not going to happen that soon,” George said with a chuckle, though it felt a bit forced to Daphne. “Hermione’s not the kind of witch to marry early and have sprogs so quickly.”

“Whatever.” Daphne snorted. “We just came in here to say hello. Nothing more.”

“Well, you said hello.” Fred scowled at her.

“That we did,” Tracey admitted. “So… bye?”

“Bye.”

Once they had left the shop, Daphne sighed. “That could have gone wrong.”

“It didn’t,” Tracey retorted.

They made their way past a stand with muggleborns. None of them offered the two witches any leaflets, though - nor anyone else in robes, as far as she could see. Apparently, the Muggleborn Popular Party didn’t care for pureblood votes, Daphne thought.

Once they were further away, Daphne turned to Tracey. “You know, once the elections are over, I think I’ll head to the continent for a while.”

“A Grand Tour?” Tracey asked. “Those haven’t been done since…”

“Since the last war.”
Time to revive the custom, Daphne thought. It wasn’t just a pureblood tradition. It would also keep her away from Britain for a year or two.

She really didn’t want to see how the mudbloods would ruin her country.

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London, Diagon Alley, June 15th, 1997

“... and that’s why you should vote for the Progressive Party! We don’t discriminate against anyone - we stand for equal rights for everyone!”

Sirius Black smiled as widely as he could while he put both hands on his hips and stared at the crowd gathered in front of his stage in Diagon Alley.

“I know from personal experience how dangerous a corrupt or inept judicial system is.” And everyone knew what travesty of justice he had suffered. “You can count on me making damn certain that what I suffered will not happen to anyone else. No longer will a bunch of rich Old Families judge everyone!”

“You’re from a rich Old Family!” someone from the back yelled.

Sirius scoffed. “I spent my gold in the war against Voldemort.” He noticed how the crowd cringed at his mention of the Dark Lord’s name, and had to fight not to sneer at them. “I personally fought Voldemort at the spot we are standing. What did you do? Hm?”

“You’re in bed with the French purebloods!” Another heckler shouted. Someone had prepared them for his speech.

But not enough. Sirius grinned shamelessly. “Every night, I’m in bed with the most beautiful French Veela, yes.” That earned him laughter while he threw a kiss to Vivienne. “And she, as well as her family, came to help us during the war, and many of them gave their lives for us.” There was no need to get into the rather complicated current situation with the French, Sirius thought. According to the Delacours, the Duc was scared of a muggleborn rebellion, and they had barely managed to keep him from starting one with his latest ham-fisted attempt to prevent it.

“The Progressive Party is not a pureblood party - you know that any party that’ll have me will not turn anyone away!” He flashed his best roguish grin, and was rewarded with another bout of laughter. “More seriously though,” - his pun didn’t get such a reaction, alas - “we’re a diverse lot, and our membership reflects this. Although many of our members do have red hair,” he added with a gesture at Arthur and Percy, who were waiting at the side. “But our diversity is our strength - we all know what blood purity did to our country. And you know what we did to save our country. And you know that we will do it all over again, if it’s needed!”

As the crowd cheered, Sirius waved and stepped off the stage, making way for Arthur. He was smiling widely - between his party and Hermione’s Reform Party, they had this election locked down.

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London, Ministry of Magic, July 7th, 1997

“I, Harry Potter, do swear that I will uphold the law and protect the inalienable rights of the people of Wizarding Britain.”
Harry lowered his wand and stepped forward to hand the cue card back to Percy, who was manning the despatch box, then returned to his seat. Since he was the youngest member of the Wizengamot - Neville had been born a few hours earlier than he - he was the last to take the oath.

“Where did we get a despatch box from anyway?” he asked under his breath while sitting down.

“Apparently, the Department of Mysteries had one in storage,” Hermione answered.

“Compared to finding a wording for the oath that suited everyone, that was a breeze,” Ron chimed in.

Hermione frowned. “It’s still missing a number of crucially important parts.”

“We went over this,” Ron retorted. “It’ll work well enough. It’s not as if it’s an Unbreakable Vow anyway.”

Hermione huffed. “Some of the members should have made such a vow.” Harry didn’t have to check to know that she was looking at the members of the Pureblood Party.

“Bloody Death Eaters,” Ron mumbled.

Harry disagreed - they had been checked for Dark Marks, after all - but their stated goal of ‘protecting the traditions of Wizarding Britain’ was a thinly-veiled blood purity agenda. “It’s just four people.” Even with a sizeable number of purebloods who had been hiding among muggles returning to Wizarding Britain instead of emigrating, there simply weren’t that many idiots around willing to vote for blood purists.

“Four too many,” Hermione said. “It’s almost an argument for a first-past-the-post system. That would have prevented the two Muggleborn Popular Party seats as well.”

“That’s democracy.” Harry ignored her frown. Between Sirius’s Progressive Party and Hermione’s Reform Party, they had a solid majority anyway. And Bones had resigned as soon as the results of the elections had come in; to the surprise of Sirius, who had expected her to stay in office until she was forced out.

Elphias Doge, the oldest member of the Wizengamot and so by default the Chief Warlock until either confirmed by the Wizengamot or replaced by someone else, stood up and raised his wand. “The first session of the Wizengamot of 1997 is now open,” he announced. “The Chair recognises Mister Black.”

Sirius stood up with a wide grin on his face. “Honoured members, honoured new members of the Wizengamot, we stand here as the first democratically elected representatives of Wizarding Britain. A new era has begun. For the first time the fate of our country is not in the hands of a few families, but in the hands of its people. Muggleborns, half-bloods, and purebloods - all are represented here.”

His next words were drowned out by the loud applause and cheers from the vast majority of the members. Harry was cheering and clapping as well, together with his friends.

They had done it. They had reformed the Wizengamot.

Now they had to reform the country.

*****
‘I’ve been asked many times, especially by historians, why I have not yet written this book. Many even seemed to expect me to write the definitive history of the Second Blood War a week after it had officially been declared over.

Such expectations were based on several incorrect assumptions. First, the fact that I was directly involved in the war in a central role does not automatically make me an expert on that topic. On the contrary, it makes me a biased observer. In order to be able to at least attempt to objectively chronicle the events of that pivotal time of Wizarding Britain’s history, I needed to hear other perspectives and to research the matter myself.

Second, I lost several close personal friends in the war. Back then, I lacked the emotional distance needed for this work - something, I must point out, that several of my colleagues lacked as well, but which did not keep them from writing their books anyway.

Third, I lacked the time to do such a book justice. My work in the Wizengamot, and later in the Ministry and in research, took up far too much of my time to allow a project of this nature.

And fourth, as this book will reveal, much of what happened during the war has been deliberately kept secret until now, since revealing what had really happened shortly after the war would have potentially had far-reaching consequences. Now, though, decades later, this book’s time has finally come, and I hope my work will help to correct several of the glaring mistakes made and perpetuated by some historians in the years since the war.’

- Excerpt from ‘The Second Blood War: A History’ by Hermione Granger-Weasley

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London, Greenwich, February 1st, 2002

“Ron! It’s time! We need to go now!”

Hermione Granger-Weasley didn’t tap her foot impatiently, but she really wanted to. They had to leave their house now if they wanted to be on time for the ceremony - and early enough to give the location a brief once-over, to ensure that it was safe.

“Calm down! They won’t start without us!” she heard Ron yell from the first floor. A moment later, he appeared at the top of the stairs, grinning at her.

She huffed. “That might be so…”

“It is so - we’re the guests of honour. They can’t celebrate Voldemort’s defeat without us.” Ron interrupted her with a hug.

“Some of them certainly would like to.” She scowled, remembering the latest debate in the Wizengamot.

“Bah. Their proposal was soundly defeated.” Ron scoffed. “Putting Malfoy and his ilk on the memorial, next to those who died fighting Voldemort? The ‘Unholy Alliance’ is certainly trying everything to live up to their name.”
“Their nickname,” she corrected him - though privately, she felt that the Prophet had nailed it perfectly when they coined that term for the situation where both the Pureblood Party and the ‘Muggleborn Alternative’ supported the same proposal. It was not surprising that Liz Vance, one of the founders of the ‘Muggleborn Alternative’, had left the Muggleborn Popular Party after less than a year, taking her seat with her. According to rumours, only Randall Martens’s intervention had saved her from being cursed by Bess Cox. The press had had a field day over that.

“If the boot fits…” Ron shrugged. “But let’s go now, or we’ll be late.”

“Oh, you!” She glared at him, but he simply kept smiling until she chuckled.

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London, Diagon Alley, February 1st, 2002

“There you are! We were about to leave without you!” Fred greeted them as soon as they stepped out of the fireplace in the twins’ shop.

“Don’t listen to him - we’d never even contemplate leaving without our most famous family members!” George cut in.

“Yeah, you two never think before you do anything,” Ron retorted.

Hermione chuckled at the twins’ fake outraged expressions, though Ron’s comment contained more than a grain of truth. That they married two French witches they had met at Bill and Fleur’s wedding - a day after that wedding - proved this, in her opinion. Molly had certainly agreed with her. Loudly. Especially after she heard about the duels.

Although, Hermione thought, not for the first time, when she greeted Laura and Noelle, she could understand why the twins had fallen so quickly for the two witches - they were not only very beautiful, but also witty and charming. If only Fred and George didn’t keep claiming that they had met their wives before, with that infuriating grin that told everyone they were hiding something.

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“Blimey, that’s a big crowd,” Hermione heard Ron mutter when they stepped out of the twins’ shop. He was correct - Diagon Alley was packed full of people. Even years after the war, and more than a year since the last incident related to it, Hermione didn’t like crowds. Even when they appeared to be friendly, even cheering for her when the passers-by recognised her - it was just too easy for an assassin to hide in such a crowd.

She glanced up to check if the Magical Militia, as the Hit-Wizards were now called, after her proposal of naming them the ‘British Armed Magical Forces’ had been shot down, were at their posts, covering the Aurors responsible for crowd control, with wands and guns at the ready. Tania was in charge today, so the soldiers had better stay on their toes - Tania still treated every mission and exercise as if they were at war. It was probably her way of coping - not everyone in the Resistance had responded equally well to the therapy Hermione had pushed on them and her other friends.

“Hey! Hermione!”

Some of them, of course, Hermione thought with a smile as she saw Dennis standing on a roof next to the twins’ shop, waving at her, were not intimidated by Tania at all. “Hi, Dennis!” She waved back. Looking at the smiling young wizard, one would not imagine that he had spent a year under
the effects of the Draught of Living Death, until the Unspeakables had finally managed to create a counter curse, she thought.

“The M&Ms are out in force,” Ron said next to her. Hermione glared at him - the Militia weren’t fond of that particular nickname.

He shrugged. “Hey, I’m one of the few professional officers; I get to make fun of the rank and file.”

Sometimes Hermione wondered if Ron wasn’t a bit too much like his next eldest brothers. “Harry would disagree. And he’s your superior officer.”

“He won’t.”

“Well, he should.” She shook her head, but she was grinning.

Although her grin diminished when she passed a gaggle of French muggleborns - easily recognisable by the mix of French and English they spoke. The numbers of French muggleborns moving to Britain had risen steadily over the last few years - since they couldn’t vote in France, many of them were voting with their feet. And usually added their voices, and later votes, to those demanding a more robust policy towards the oppressive regime of the Duc, as some members of the Wizengamot called it. As if Britain wasn’t already putting pressure on the French! Sooner or later the Duc would see reason - without Britain having to go to war. Or the French starting a civil war.

After all, Britain was widely recognised as the strongest country in Europe, not least thanks to her and her friends’ efforts, but no one sane wanted to start another war.

Unless a country decided to murder muggleborns.

*****

The place where Voldemort had been killed, and where the ceremony would be held, was cordoned off. The Aurors manning the entrances let Hermione and Ron pass, of course - but she noted with satisfaction that they were ready to act in case the Thief’s Downfall installed at the gate should reveal anything. The area inside was limited to invited guests, and so the crowd here wasn’t quite as large - nor as densely packed. A necessity, Hermione thought, so that the various Wizengamot members and high-ranking Ministry employees were not forced to literally rub elbows with their political rivals. Which, unfortunately, didn’t mean they couldn’t accidentally meet someone they’d rather not. Like Alfons Runcorn and his family.

She’d as soon curse the man as greet him, but appearances had to be maintained - Hermione knew the member of the Pureblood Party would be only too glad to denounce her as an uncouth barbarian.

“Mr Runcorn, Mrs Runcorn.” She even nodded at their baby. Ron grunted something that, if one were extremely charitable, could be called a greeting.

“Madam Granger. Messrs Weasley,” Runcorn barely inclined his head, and seemed to ignore the twins’ wives entirely. His wife nodded, but kept fussing over their baby - apparently named ‘Albert’.

“I must again protest the biased nature of this ceremony. The memorial should honour all victims of the war.”

Hermione’s urge to curse the idiot grew stronger. Five years in the Wizengamot had taught her to hide her emotions, though, and so she refrained from acting on her desires. Instead she smiled thinly at the man. “The Wizengamot’s decision was quite clear, Mr Runcorn. Followers of the Dark Lord and their allies have no place on the memorial.”
“Not everyone who died in Malfoy Manor was a follower of the Dark Lord!”

“You’re correct - there were two muggleborns who had been captured and imprisoned in Malfoy’s dungeon. Their names are on the memorial.” Hermione’s smile showed her teeth. “If you’ll excuse us - we’re expected to join the other guests of honour.”

“Bloody tosser,” Ron said as they walked away - just loud enough to carry to Runcorn, Hermione thought. “I wonder why he even attends the ceremony if he likes Death Eaters so much.”

“So he can claim he doesn’t, of course,” Hermione said. The Pureblood Party was quite careful to loudly distance themselves from Voldemort, even though their actual proposals and speeches were almost identical to those given by the Dark Lord’s allies in 1996.

It wouldn’t avail them anything, though, she thought with some satisfaction - with the compensations and fines levied on the Death Eaters’ estates, their fortunes had been substantially diminished, and there were simply too few purebloods left who supported the Old Families. Moreover, the muggleborn population was growing thanks to a sizeable number of immigrants, mostly from France and the rest of Europe.

The Old Families’ time would not return.

*****

The stands for the guests of honour - and the assorted hanger-ons, as Ron called the Wizengamot members and various worthies - had been under close observation for the entire time since they had been conjured. Even the ground below had been regularly patrolled. Hermione cast a few spells anyway, to check for traps and curses. The last attack by a disturbed wizard or witch who hadn’t let go of their grudges from the war had been more than a year ago, and had been foiled by the Aurors, but Hermione wasn’t about to become careless - she knew just how much many of the Old Families hated her.

“Snakes ahead,” Ron whispered, nodding towards the first row of guests. She turned and narrowed her eyes. It seemed Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis had returned to Britain for this occasion, after spending years away on their ‘Grand Tour’. Greengrass’s sister had apparently stayed in France. “Cocky of them,” Ron went on. “Is that Greengrass’s husband behind them?”

“Yes. The dear Monsieur Marbot,” Fred replied from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that he was baring his teeth.

“He wasn’t involved in your duels, was he?” Hermione asked sotto voce. The last thing Britain needed right now was a diplomatic incident with the French.

“No, no.” George shook his head, wrapping his arm around his wife’s waist. “But we’ve met. In France, last year.”

“He didn’t like it when we tried to give him some advice, husband to husband, about how to survive a Slytherin marriage.” Fred chuckled.

Hermione drew a hissing breath. “Don’t create an incident today.”

“We won’t,” George said. “We have an understanding with them.”

“You have one. I never claimed to understand witches, least of all Slytherins,” his brother retorted. Laura and Noelle giggled at that - but then, the two French witches had agreed to marry the twins, so Hermione couldn’t expect any help from them when it came to reining in the two troublemakers.
She resisted the urge to rub her forehead. “Just behave.”

“Of course!” the two chorused. Marriage definitely hadn’t made them any wiser, she thought. On the other hand, it was nice to see that they hadn’t let the war affect them too much.

Unlike so many others.

*****

Other important guests were already present as well, like Neville, one of the more prominent members of Sirius’s faction in the Wizengamot. Justin and Sally-Anne, recently married - having become a fully-qualified Healer apparently had endeared the witch to his parents, though Hermione was certain that Justin would have married Sally-Anne anyway - waved at them. At least her own parents had accepted Ron without hesitation - much more easily than they had accepted her own actions in the war. But that was in the past.

Aberforth was not in attendance, as those who knew the old wizard had expected. But Antoine Delacour greeted them with a smile and a bow fit for the French Court. “Madame Granger-Weasley. Mesdames et Messieurs Weasley.”

“Monsieur Delacour,” Hermione nodded at him. The formal greeting let her know that he wasn’t here as a friend - and in-law - of the family, nor simply to honour the fallen Delacours and d’Aigles, but as a representative of the Duc d’Orléans. Who, apparently, was hoping that gracing this event with an official envoy and reminding everyone that French purebloods had fought and died against Voldemort would placate some of the more vocal muggleborns in his and her countries.

It wouldn’t, of course - or not for long. But Antoine’s presence at this ceremony would also make other countries wonder if the ties between Wizarding Britain and Magical France were growing stronger - which would be a source of some concern for many. Wizarding Britain was acknowledged as one of the premier powers in the Magical World, after all - and rightfully so, these days at least. Together, France and Britain could easily dominate the ICW - if the Duc were willing to reform the country, of course. Hermione suppressed a sigh - Britain’s relationship to France was aptly described by the term ’complicated’.

Ron and his brothers greeted the wizard, Laura and Noelle curtsying even before exchanging pleasantries in French. Nothing beyond that, of course - this was neither the time nor the place for more serious talk with the French envoy.

“Hermione! Ron! Fred! George! Laura! Noelle!” Luna hugged each and every person she named with great enthusiasm.

“Luna!” Hermione smiled widely. “Are you covering the event for The Quibbler?”

The blonde nodded rapidly, then pulled out a press badge… which seemed to have been made by carving letters into a slice of apple. “Yes!” She turned serious in an instant and narrowed her eyes at Hermione. The effect was rather cute. “Madam Granger-Weasley, would you be available for an interview later today?”

“Certainly,” Hermione agreed at once. Luna was a rather eccentric journalist, but unlike others, she had no agenda.

“Fantastic! Your opinion on the platypus controversy will carry great weight!”

A very eccentric journalist, Hermione corrected herself while Ron chuckled - she had no idea what their friend was talking about.
However, before she could ask Luna for an explanation Hermione wasn’t entirely sure she would understand anyway, they were interrupted by the arrival of the rest of the guests of honour, and the excitement that caused among the crowd - at least those who were wizards or witches; most of the parents of the fallen muggleborns who were attending the ceremony looked either confused or less enthusiastic.

“The Boy-Who-Lived!”

“Dumbledore’s Heir!”

“The One-Who-Won!”

Hermione felt a small pang of jealousy. Whereas Harry was seen as one of the most powerful wizards - a reputation he couldn’t live up to, not yet at least, especially since he still needed to keep the Elder Wand a secret - and Dumbledore’s worthy heir, she was seen as the cunning and ruthless - or perfidious - ‘Purebloods’ Boggart’. She knew it wasn’t entirely undeserved, but it still felt unfair to her. And Ron was mostly seen as Harry’s best friend, not as the hero he was in his own right, which was even more unfair.

She forced those petty feelings away. Everyone had done their part in the war, after all, and they hadn’t beaten Voldemort for fame, but to save the country.

Harry hadn’t arrived alone, of course. He was walking arm in arm with Ginny, and right behind him walked Sirius and Vivienne, and she could spot Remus and Tonks standing with the Aurors. Remus looked rather tired - the full moon had been but four days ago - and they still hadn’t found a counter-curse to cure his arm.

A single wizard didn’t rate as much effort by the Department of Mysteries as the victims of the Withering Curse, so she didn’t expect that to change any time soon. Especially not when the houngans claimed that whoever had cast the curse had taken its secret with them to their grave, and with the Unspeakables making an effort to find a way to destroy the Dementors. At least the enchanted metal sleeve Remus was wearing was working as well as an enchanted prosthetic, which was better than nothing. It certainly didn’t stop him from hunting Pettigrew whenever there was a new clue to the traitor’s whereabouts - although that didn’t happen too often. Which was a good thing, since he was needed at Hogwarts, being the first Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher in decades to hold the post for, so far, three consecutive years.

And, as Sirius was fond of describing, with a lot of imagination and speculation about metamorphmagi, Remus was also very happily married to Tonks. They had one son, with a second child on the way. And, Hermione thought as she greeted her friends, he was alive.

*****

“... and we shall never forgot this fateful struggle, and the tragedies that filled those days…”

While Pius Thicknesse droned on, Hermione saw Ginny lean towards her. “That’s what I love the most about playing Quidditch for a living: We don’t have to listen to such speeches all day long,” the other witch whispered.

“You have to listen to your coach, and to your fans,” Ron retorted before Hermione could comment.

“They’re not as bad as the Minister,” his sister said. “How could you elect him of all people?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her friend - Ginny knew very well why Thicknesse had become Minister for Magic. Her own father and brother had been involved prominently in that deal as well,
after all. “On the other hand, you have to deal with both the Prophet and Seeker Weekly speculating about your love life.” She tried not to smile when the redhead’s grin turned into a scowl. While the relationship between Harry and Ginny had its ups and downs, it was nowhere near as volatile as the press made it out to be.

Harry reached over and patted his fiancée’s arm, and Ginny sighed and leaned into his side. Hermione smiled at that - her friend was happy, at last - it had taken a while for him to get over the war. For everyone, including her, of course.

And some were still not over it, she added to herself with a glance at Bones. The former Minister for Magic was a guest of honour as well - her role in the war demanded no less - but she was looking as bitter as she had when she had been forced out of office. Hermione doubted that that would change, not even if the witch succeeded in her bid to be elected to the Wizengamot this year. Bones was just unable to let go and accept that a war wasn’t a criminal investigation.

Although Bones had at least given some praise to the changes to the judicial system Sirius and Hermione had forced through - even she could see that the new judges were working better than the Wizengamot, old or new.

Thicknesse had finally finished his speech, and now Scrimgeour was taking his place. The Head of the DMLE was the Minister’s main rival these days, as Hermione knew only too well thanks to both trying to curry favour with her. Personally, she favoured replacing Thicknesse with Arthur, but her father-in-law wasn’t quite ready yet - or so he claimed. As long as Hermione and Sirius controlled the Wizengamot, she didn’t much mind who was Minister - the reforms hadn’t touched the Wizengamot’s primacy over the Ministry.

“... and I think that all of us who fought the Dark Lord agree that those of our comrades who made the ultimate sacrifice should never be forgotten, which is why this enchanted memorial here was built.”

Hermione wasn’t the only one who glanced at the veiled monument in response to those words. Although she was, to her knowledge, the only one who knew that the spells which made the names of all the fallen appear in random order on the golden plaque on the marble monolith had been modified slightly. By herself.

It might be a petty gesture, but Allan Baker didn’t deserve to have his name appear on this memorial. ****

It was surprising just how quiet the large crowd was, Hermione thought as she watched the names appear and disappear on the golden plaque on the black marble monolith.


She kept a mental tally of her friends and comrades amidst the flood of names. Friends, comrades, strangers. All of them killed in the war, fighting against Voldemort and his followers. Now united on this memorial.

So many dead… She pressed her lips together and squeezed Ron’s hand. They owed it to them to ensure that such a war would never be fought again. To keep Britain safe. And to continue turning
her into a country of which they could be proud.

Hermione would do all she could to repay that debt. She would not let them have died in vain.

*****

The End.

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Author’s Note: I wish to thank my betas for their help, especially fredfred. He has spent an incredible amount of work on correcting my mistakes and oversights, and provided invaluable feedback - even when my drafts were late. Without him, this story wouldn’t be what it is.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!